



Final Comment

Our report is deliberately sub-titled 'Making a Start' as that is currently where we are at in terms of understanding the nature, influences and impact of youth volunteering on young people and their communities, as they progress from adolescence and compulsory schooling into adulthood and changing forms of education and training, including the world of work.

The construction of a robust evidence base for youth volunteering will be crucial if the vision and rhetoric behind the 'Big Society', and in particular the ambition to increase the role and influence of the Voluntary and Community Sector in public life, is to be transformed into real and meaningful voluntary opportunities and experiences for young people.

Above all, knowing more about youth volunteering across time should help to reduce the nature and size of any 'implementation gap' between policies and actual practices in this area at all levels of society, from schools and local communities all the way through to national agencies and government. Enhancing the volunteering knowledge base can only be positive for young people, communities and society, and for those organisations and individuals with a commitment to youth volunteering.

¹ For more information, see www.nfer.ac.uk/cels

² DISCLAIMER - The BHPS data used in this publication were made available through the ESRC Data Archive. The data were originally collected by the ESRC Research Centre on Micro-social Change at the University of Essex (now incorporated within the Institute for Social and Economic Research). Neither the original collectors of the data nor the Archive bear any responsibility for the analyses or interpretations presented here.

³ CELS covers the period 2002 to 2009 and follows young people age 11 to 18, while the BHPS data which we analysed runs from 1996 to 2009 and covers young people age 16 to 25.

⁴ Hill and Stevens (2010). *Measuring the Impossible: Scoping study for longitudinal research on the impact of youth volunteering*. London: v The National Young Volunteers Service.

Measuring the Impossible? - Making a Start:

Exploring the impact of youth volunteering through existing longitudinal research data

Joana Lopes

David Kerr

Julie Nelson

This is a summary of the key research findings and recommendations arising from NFER’s study about the long-term impacts of youth volunteering. It is based on a preliminary exploration of data from two existing longitudinal datasets – the Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study (CELS¹) (11 to 18 year olds) and the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS²) (16 to 25 year olds) - now renamed Understanding Society³. The study was commissioned by v, The National Young Volunteers’ Service, to enhance the knowledge base for volunteering, and to facilitate greater discussion among policy-makers, researchers and practitioners about how to take this forward. Its findings and recommendations, presented below, are relevant in the context of the coalition Government’s ‘Big Society’ vision for greater civic and community involvement in society.

Background to the research

In ‘Measuring the Impossible’, a recent scoping study commissioned by v⁴, the authors provide a rationale for a methodology based upon secondary analysis of existing longitudinal datasets. One advantage of such datasets is that they make it possible to measure the outcomes of interest after volunteering experiences took place, which helps to disentangle questions concerning influences and relationships between variables.

The authors comment that there is currently a lack of research on the long-term impact of volunteering that specifically takes place among people during their youth years (i.e. age 16 to 25), and stress that there are three types of impact that should be considered. These are:

- **social and political impact** - whether young people go on to participate in politics, society and/or their communities, or whether they are apathetic to such activities
- **economic impact** - whether young people go on to successfully participate in education, training or employment, or whether they face unemployment or inactivity; the type of employment and their level of income is also relevant
- **personal impact** - whether or not young people secure health and well-being, or whether they face illness, disadvantage or even involvement in anti-social behaviour.

In light of the scoping study, NFER’s study considers the incidence of volunteering among young people between the ages of 11 and 25 and the extent of any relationships between volunteering experiences and volunteering outcomes. Given that all the impacts outlined above are potentially influenced by a wide array of factors: socio-economic, familial, community- and school-level, all such factors have been taken into account in the analyses that support this report. The key question that we begin to answer in this exploratory analysis is:

‘Are youth volunteers a priori different to non-volunteers, or can any differences that we observe after volunteering has taken place be attributed, at least to some extent, to youth volunteering experiences?’

Given that the analysis is a starting-point, the report makes recommendations regarding the development and further exploration of existing longitudinal studies and their datasets.

Research Objectives

NFER’s study has four overarching objectives:

1. to assess variation in the extent to which young people volunteer, and in their attitudes towards volunteering and civic engagement, between the ages of 11/12 and 17/18 (CELS data)
2. to assess variation in the extent to which young people volunteer over the later youth years (ages 16/17 to 24/25) (BHPS data)
3. to establish whether school-age volunteers have different outcomes at age 17/18 compared to non-volunteers (CELS data)
4. to establish whether youth volunteers have different outcomes later in life (at the age of mid to late 20s) compared to non-volunteers (BHPS data)

The outcomes measured in objectives 3 and 4 are: **social/political outcomes**; **economic outcomes**; and **personal outcomes**.

Conclusions and Recommendations

NFER’s exploration of the CELS and BHPS data relating to youth volunteering is preliminary and marks a starting point in examining the impact of youth volunteering through existing longitudinal research data. Nevertheless, the analysis allows us to draw a number of overarching conclusions:

- **Incidence of volunteering** – significant proportions of young people (almost 60 per cent) do not become involved in youth volunteering between the ages of 16 and 25
- **Outcomes of volunteering** – volunteering in the youth years is associated with positive outcomes in the social/ political and economic spheres later in life, particularly with regards to obtaining a higher education qualification.

Our exploration of the data also indicates that:

- **the non-involvement of young people in volunteering** between the ages of 11 and 25 may be detrimental to their participation in the social/political and economic spheres of life, both now and later in life
- **the habit of volunteering**, both in and out-of school, may be developed among young people during compulsory education (age 11 to 16/18). Learning about, and taking part in, such activities may influence this process but there is a need to be aware of a potential ‘Key Stage 4’ dip in young people’s motivation and involvement in in-school activities between the ages of 14 and 16
- **there can be a decline in participation** in voluntary activities among young people between the ages of 16 and 21 as they move from compulsory education into other forms of education and training and the world of work, where there are not as many planned voluntary activities in which they can participate
- **involvement in volunteering stabilises** around age 20/21. Some young people seem to have the motivation and resources to continue volunteering beyond age 16, but they remain a core minority in relation to the majority of their peers who do not participate in such activities at this age.
- **the analysis of existing longitudinal datasets** that contain questions concerning volunteering is a worthwhile exercise in helping to strengthen the evidence base for youth volunteering
- **the need for more exploration** of existing longitudinal datasets in order to help inform decisions about what are the most appropriate questions concerning youth volunteering in longitudinal studies that will provide the most robust outcome measures for this area going forward.

These conclusions lead to **four main recommendations** concerning the exploration of the impact of youth volunteering through longitudinal research data.

Recommendation 1 - Conduct further exploration of existing longitudinal datasets

Both the CELS and the BHPS datasets have a wealth of variables that are, as yet, unexplored.

An exploration of such data has the potential to enhance the evidence base for youth volunteering and to inform the factors that work both for and against youth volunteering as young people progress from age 11 to 25 - i.e. from adolescence into adulthood. Such an enhanced evidence base would also help to inform the practice of those seeking to encourage young people to engage in volunteering because of the associated potential benefits to themselves and to society.

Recommendation 2 - Carry out exploration of youth volunteering in other longitudinal datasets as and when they become available

In addition to CELS and BHPS, including future waves of the surveys, there remain other existing longitudinal datasets to explore, as identified in the v-commissioned scoping study ‘*Measuring the Impossible*’, such as the DfE-sponsored Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE). There may also be potential to explore the data collected by the evaluation of the National Civic Service Pilot Programme (2011 to 2013). Exploring such datasets would provide further evidence about the nature, practices and influences on youth volunteering and strengthen the understanding of policy makers, practitioners and researchers.

Recommendation 3 - Use the outcomes to sharpen the nature of the questions concerning youth volunteering to be included in longitudinal studies now and in the future

The enhancement of questions or modules tapping into youth volunteering in on-going surveys, including Understanding Society, which continues BHPS, should also be considered as a matter of urgency. Our initial exploration of the CELS and BHPS data, reveals that it will be difficult to explore from existing questions certain issues of interest, such as **how** (rather than **whether**) volunteering brings about long-term changes in individuals. It will also be important, as also identified in ‘*Measuring the Impossible*’, to construct questions about volunteering that better reflect the nature and intensity of young people’s involvement in volunteering in order to help better determine the link between volunteering experiences and outcomes.

Recommendation 4 - Promote and publicise the findings from this report in order to stimulate further discussion and to maintain momentum

This report builds explicitly on the earlier report ‘*Measuring the Impossible*’ commissioned by v in that it is ‘making a start’ on exploring the impact of youth volunteering through existing longitudinal research data. It is vital, therefore, that v and other members of the proposed new Volunteering Knowledge Network promote and publicise the findings in order to maintain the momentum of the work started by v and its partners.

One practical suggestion would be to utilise this report and its findings to generate discussion within the Volunteering Knowledge Network. This will enable v and other interested parties to maintain momentum in longitudinal research and involve a wider group of decision makers, practitioners and researchers in developing the evidence base for youth volunteering .