



Young People's Views on the Benefits of Volunteering in Areas of Multiple Deprivation

Findings from James Davies's PhD research at the University of
Strathclyde

Highlights from the perspective of Volunteer Scotland

Matthew Linning, 27th February 2017

1. Introduction

Volunteer Scotland has provided funding to support the PhD research of James Davies at the University of Strathclyde. His investigation of youth volunteering in deprived urban areas is directly relevant to our wider interests in youth volunteering and the inclusion agenda. We have also worked closely with James and his supervisors for the last three years to provide our support from both a research and practitioner perspective.

Rationale for publication of interim outputs. Volunteer Scotland has written this short paper to highlight the key findings from James Davies's separate report on "[Young people's views on the benefits of volunteering in areas of multiple deprivation](#)". It comprises a major chapter of his PhD thesis due to be submitted in the autumn of 2017. Given the relevance and importance of these findings to the Scottish Government's policy agenda, including a 'Fairer Scotland' and the Community Empowerment Act, Volunteer Scotland wanted to share these preliminary findings now rather than wait till the completion of the full thesis.

Background to the research. The evidence underpinning "Young people's views on the benefits of volunteering in areas of multiple deprivation" is based on qualitative research in some of the most deprived areas of Glasgow. James undertook face-to-face interviews and focus groups with 68 young volunteers and non-volunteers in the age range 12 – 18, the majority of whom were female. Interviews were also conducted with 5 volunteer coordinators. Where relevant, James supplements his primary research with evidence from his extensive literature review.

Please note that the interpretation and views expressed in this paper are those of Volunteer Scotland and not James Davies. Any errors or misinterpretation are the responsibility of Volunteer Scotland. Those readers who have engaged with these findings and would like to learn more are recommended to read [James's full report](#).

2. Social context

The social context for young people living in deprived urban areas of Glasgow is one of constrained opportunities to socialise. This is due to a combination of factors such as:

- Lack of disposable income to fund their social activities
- Limited things for young people to do, which a number of young people commented on
- Possible lack of knowledge about what social activities are available and the benefits such activities could confer (which will be discussed in James's wider thesis)
- Higher prevalence of neighbourhood problems and anti-social behaviour

- Peer pressure not to engage in social activities such as volunteering: “...you'll get a lot of people that'll like, if you say, 'I do volunteering', they'll be like, 'Oh that's pointless, you could be out doing this or that'.” (Donna¹, 14, volunteer)

Interestingly, the prevalence of social facilities, such as outdoor play areas and parks, has been found by researchers (Ellaway et al., 2007)² to be higher in deprived areas of Glasgow. However, young people's capacity to use them may be shaped by their variable quality, especially if subjected to vandalism.

The impact of these constraints is that young people in deprived areas tend to have more limited social engagement opportunities. The possible consequences include spending more time indoors or meeting friends 'on the street'. The perception from some of the young people interviewed was that this can exacerbate problems such as crime, alcohol and substance abuse, and sectarianism. They felt that such problems could be exacerbated by peer pressure from older age groups influencing the younger ones. Some also cited issues relating to policy surveillance and 'being moved on'.³

3. Volunteering – an alternative option

The research interviewed a number of young people from deprived backgrounds in Glasgow, who had taken up volunteering. This was typically through joining a youth club or sports club. They cited a number of advantages which this new space afforded for social interaction:

- **A 'safe space'** – young people value the security of their youth club, sports club, etc. – spaces in which they felt there was no threat of intimidation or danger of violence.
- **Trust** – young people tended to have greater trust in their youth/volunteer leaders than they did for their teachers or other adults in positions of authority. This reflects the scope for volunteer leaders to provide more 1-2-1 personalised support.
- **Respect** – these volunteer involving organisations treated young people as equals and respected them for who they were.
- **Inclusion** – they also have an inclusive culture. This can result in young people being brought together from different parts of the city, cutting across sectarian divides.

¹ The identity of all contributors has been kept anonymous. The names quoted are pseudonyms.

² Ellaway, A., Kirk, A., Macintyre, S., & Mutrie, N. (2007). Nowhere to Play? The Relationship between the Location of Outdoor Play Areas and Deprivation in Glasgow. *Health & Place*, 13 (2), 557-561.

³ Note: the possible impact of lack of social engagement opportunities is based on the views of some of the research participants. James's research does not 'prove' that this is the case for young people more widely.

Quoting James's report: *"In the context of having fewer structured activities to engage in, volunteering was considered to provide participants with an alternative to walking around the streets, consuming alcohol and staying at home. Opportunities to engage in structured activities were considered particularly important for those who experience difficult home or personal lives."*

In summary, the research evidence shows that the young volunteers valued very highly their volunteering environments and the roles that they performed. The research also identified how the young volunteers benefited from their volunteering experience.

4. Benefits of volunteering

The young volunteers and coordinators cited a range of benefits from volunteering, including:

- **Making friends** – most importantly, volunteering provided the young people with the opportunity to make new friends, outside their immediate peer group. This resulted in them making friends from other schools, other religious groups and other geographical areas.
- **Social skills** – by making new friends and having to work in teams with other young people to deliver the volunteer service, the volunteers were able to develop their social skills. This is particularly important for those who lack confidence and are shy, which is a particular finding from the research.
"You just learn how to socialise with people..."(Niamh, 14, volunteer)
- **Helping others:** *"...knowing that we're going out there and helping someone....rather than just sitting there, like, you know there's people out there that actually need help to do stuff... and now that you are actually helping them you feel like a lot better about yourself..."*
(Donna, 14, volunteer)
- **Enjoyment and fun** – the opportunity for young volunteers to engage with other young people and younger children was often a source of amusement and enjoyment. *".... they could just say something really funny that they just didnae know they said funny."* (Matt, 15, volunteer)
- **Wellbeing** – the relationships and emotional bonds which the volunteers developed with the young people they were supporting appears to enhance their wellbeing. Amy (15, volunteer) fondly recalled the excitement with which the young people would greet her, shouting her name and giving her hugs. *"..if you're having a bad day....they can kinda cheer you up."*

- **More structured lives** – volunteering helps young people live a more structured life.
"I volunteer on a Saturday, now see if I didn't have, I'd probably lie in my bed until three o'clock rather than get up and be out by twelve." (Emma, 14, volunteer)
It also seems to displace the time they could have spent on the street, with possible benefits. For example, some of the young girl volunteers claimed that they were less attracted to alcohol misuse compared to non-volunteers engaging in such activity.
- **Confidence** – the combination of the above factors helps to develop confident young people. The evidence from two volunteer coordinators, Lauren and Tracey, is compelling. Quoting James's report: *"Lauren believed she had seen an 'insane' growth in the confidence and team working skills of the young people participating on the youth charity's volunteer programme. Tracey described a change in the way the young volunteers contributed to group activities and took on roles within the charity requiring leadership and responsibility."*

In summary, the experience of the young volunteers in the research is extremely positive. This is due principally to the opportunities which volunteering affords for enhanced social interaction. They are able to meet new people from different backgrounds, make new friends, develop skills, provide a meaningful contribution to other young people, have fun and in so doing improve their own confidence and wellbeing.

This is very much a 'win win' story. It is a great example of how young people's social capital has been transformed through their volunteering. In particular, it affords them the opportunity to develop not only their 'bonding capital' but also their 'bridging capital' by meeting young people from different schools, religious groups and other geographic areas. The research shows how volunteering can play an important role in challenging the constraints of gangs, conflict between different housing schemes and sectarianism linked to territorial and football related divisions.

5. Lessons learned

It is important not to portray this research as a complete panacea for the problems of excluded youths in areas of extreme deprivation. It is also important to recognise that there may be an element of self-selection bias in the young volunteers who agreed to participate in the research. It is possible that there has been a greater propensity for young people who have had positive volunteering experiences to engage in the research compared to those who have had neutral or negative experiences. To the extent that this is the case, the views expressed in this research may overstate the benefits for the overall population of young people in deprived areas of Glasgow.

However, what the research does demonstrate is that volunteering can play a transformational role in turning round the lives of some of the most disadvantaged members of our society. To help achieve this one must learn the lessons from what works and mitigate any potential barriers.

The key points to highlight are:

- **Youth-to-youth relationships work well** – the provision of volunteering opportunities for young people to help support other young people is a successful formula. This is the environment within which they are most comfortable.
- **The calibre of the youth organisations is critical.** Perhaps the research was fortunate in engaging with examples of good practice, but one is struck by the strong, safe and supportive environments which these organisations have provided for the young volunteers. This is directly attributable to the quality of the volunteer leaders (and any paid members of staff) and the overall positive culture of the organisation.
- **Participation followed by volunteering⁴** – it is easier to engage a young person in volunteering once they are actively engaged in a youth activity. The research highlights how it is easier to ask a young person to volunteer if they have already made the step into the youth club, sports club, charity, etc. Therefore, to engage young volunteers perhaps the biggest challenge is one of participation and social engagement first, followed by volunteering second?
- The **engagement process for volunteers** must be pitched at the right level. In particular, one must not be overly ambitious. There is clear evidence from those at the coalface of volunteer management that trying to sell an 'employeehip' package usually won't work. Quoting James's research from the perspective of Tracey, volunteer coordinator: "*....(the focus should be on) confidence building in terms of helping young people complete routine activities rather than focusing on harder outcomes. Tracey considered volunteering's 'massive focus on employability' to be pitched at a level that only 'a minor percentage of our young people' were at.*"

However, like all good research it raises as many questions as it answers. Some of the unanswered questions in this report include:

⁴ The issue of participation followed by volunteering will be discussed in a separate chapter of James's thesis examining the routes into volunteering.

- What are the barriers and challenges which have to be overcome to engage young people in volunteering? This report on the benefits of youth volunteering has a strong focus on the success stories, but we need to know how difficult the transition process is for those who are 'on the street' and disengaged. This will be addressed in a separate chapter in James's thesis looking at barriers to volunteering.
- To what extent can these findings be used to explain the benefits of youth volunteering more generally across Scotland? Key points include:
 - **Glasgow specific** – can the findings from deprived areas of Glasgow be replicated to other urban deprived areas of Scotland?
 - **Urban vs. rural** – to what extent is there read-across to rural areas subject to significant deprivation in Scotland? Will young people in deprived rural areas be subject to similar benefits and to the same extent?
 - **Gender focus** – the research is heavily focused on females rather than males (this reflects the gender bias towards female participation in youth volunteering with children). What are the implications for young males?
 - **Age demographic** – are there lessons which can be transferred from youth volunteering to adult volunteering in deprived urban areas of Scotland?

Finally, one must understand that by lifting out one chapter from a ten chapter thesis we are only gaining a partial insight into what is a complex area of research. Volunteer Scotland also recognises that some of these questions will be answered in James's full thesis. To that end Volunteer Scotland plans to issue a second 'Highlights' paper after completion of the thesis to ensure that important wider issues such as the 'barriers to volunteering' and 'routes into volunteering' are highlighted.

However, even after submission of the thesis there are likely to be a number of important unanswered questions due to the fact that they lie outside the scope of the PhD research. We therefore welcome the engagement of our partners across academia, the voluntary sector and the Scottish Government to help further develop our collective thinking on how best to achieve a more inclusive volunteering outcome for our young people in Scotland.

Contacts:

Matthew Linning, Strategic Development Manager, Volunteer Scotland

matthew.linning@volunteerscotland.org.uk

James Davies, PhD Candidate, University of Strathclyde, james.davies@strath.ac.uk