



Young People's Views on the Barriers to 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, 10th August 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 'practitioner paper' to highlight the key findings from "Barriers to volunteering" – a key chapter in James's thesis, which is 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 highlights, with the specific objective of making them accessible to a practitioner audience.

Background to the research. The evidence underpinning "Young people's views on the barriers to 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 young volunteers and non-volunteers in the age range 12 – 18. Interviews were also conducted with volunteer coordinators. For the purposes of this report the names have been anonymised. 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 are interested in these findings and would like to learn more about James's research can access further publications through this link: [Youth volunteering in deprived areas](#).

The evidence on barriers has been structured under the following sub-sections:

- Social networks
- Peer pressure
- Institutional barriers

2. Social networks

Lack of social capital

Young people in deprived areas often suffer from a lack of both bonding and bridging capital relevant to volunteering. For most of the non-volunteers consulted this is typified by a social capital environment where their friends don't volunteer; their parents or guardians don't volunteer; and they are not involved with clubs or charities involving volunteers. As a consequence they are not mixing with people who can inform, influence and support them to volunteer. This can act as a major barrier to volunteering.

Specific examples include:

- **'No one asked me'** – none of the current or ex-volunteers in James's fieldwork sought opportunities on their own. This reinforces Volunteer Scotland's finding from the 'Young People in Scotland'¹ research across secondary school pupils that only 6% 'started on their own'. Young people need to be asked. Unfortunately, young people from deprived areas are typically exposed to non-volunteering social networks where the likelihood of being asked is low. This was evidenced in the participants' accounts of not speaking about, or having been spoken to about volunteering:
 - “*This is the first time I have ever thought about it*” (Brad, non-volunteer)
 - “*When someone comes in and makes you aware of it, what you can do and then you start actually thinking, 'Oh well, if you can go and do that, then I would', but they never tell [you].*” (Stu, non-volunteer)
- **Dearth of information** – information about volunteering is not prominent in the social networks of those living in areas of multiple deprivation. As a consequence, these young people do not have access to information channels that can signpost them to volunteering opportunities.
- **Information failure** – the consequence of this lack on information on volunteering is that the non-volunteers consulted tended to have a very poor understanding of what volunteering entails. The consequence is that they are likely to be less receptive to volunteering opportunities, especially if they perceive any stigma associated with volunteering.

¹ 'Young People in Scotland 2014', Volunteer Scotland <http://www.volunteerscotland.net/policy-and-research/research/young-people-and-volunteering-in-scotland-2014/>

- **‘My friends don’t volunteer’** – if peer groups are not involved in volunteering (bonding capital) it can inhibit a young person’s willingness to start or continue with volunteering. Callum (15, ex-volunteer) acknowledged that there can be an opportunity cost from volunteering and that he was ‘missing out’ when he realised his friends were socialising without him.
- **‘I’m not a member of a club’** – James’s research on ‘starting volunteering’ has highlighted the importance of young people’s involvement in clubs or charities as an important ‘stepping stone’ towards volunteering. For participants with limited social capital relevant to volunteering, the chances of having such links to volunteer involving organisations was often remote.

In contrast to the experience of young people from deprived areas, young people living in middle class areas experience greater exposure to volunteering to such an extent that it has been found to become a routine and expected activity².

Spatial Barriers

There are spatial barriers specific to the geography of the deprived areas where young people live. These relate to both the young person’s relationship with the neighbourhood; and the impact of the neighbourhood on the young person. Specific barriers include:

Impact of the young person’s relationship with the neighbourhood	Impact of the neighbourhood on the young person
<p>Willingness to travel Participants raised issues concerning the extent to which they felt willing or able to travel to volunteering opportunities outside their neighbourhood. Fundamentally this relates to an issue of confidence. Factors which inhibit movement include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling safe with people with whom you are familiar: <i>“I know everybody [...] so nothing’s going to be strange about it.”</i> Callum (15, ex-volunteer) 	<p>Limited opportunities to volunteer Participants demonstrated a lack of knowledge about places they could volunteer and believed that there were few volunteering opportunities in their area. However, it is quite likely that this could be perception rather than reality. Evidence from England and Wales suggests there are more charities with higher income in the most deprived decile of the Index of Multiple Deprivation than any other, although one cannot assume that this</p>

² Dean, J, (2016). Class Diversity and Youth Volunteering in the United Kingdom: Applying Bourdieu’s Habitus and Cultural Capital. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 45(1), 96-113

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants' anxieties over entering new social settings and interacting with strangers. Nicky, a project manager of a charity, believed the people she worked with were anxious about going to different projects because <i>"people know them here and know who they are; it's like a safety blanket thing."</i> 	<p>necessarily means there are more volunteering opportunities.³</p> <p>Gang culture and safety concerns</p> <p>Participants discussed the possibility of conflict between different housing schemes. <i>"Well there's lots of gangs and that and like some people can't go into this, like, fae [...] just over the bridge, can't come over to here without getting chased back over because of like gangs and where they're from."</i> Matt (15, volunteer)</p>
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Volunteer Scotland's 'Young People in Scotland' research⁴ complements and further supports the barriers facing young people in deprived areas. Of the top six things which would encourage young people across Scotland to volunteer, volunteering with friends was ranked first at 56% of respondents and *'If I could volunteer close to where I live'* was 3rd equal at 29%. Clearly, providing volunteering opportunities with a high degree of visibility in the immediate locale of the young person is very important, which is allied to the confidence issue of being able to volunteer with a friend.

3. Peer pressure

Negative peer group attitudes towards volunteering in areas of deprivation can act as a significant barrier to young people volunteering. Examples of peer pressure, the resilience of individuals and gender are discussed.

Getting 'slagged'

James's research provides evidence as to why certain participants felt disinclined to volunteer due to the stigma they perceived it to carry. For example, the response of a group of non-volunteering females at a further education college is illustrative. When asked whether there had been volunteering opportunities at their schools, they replied:

Taylor "Aye you can get involved but you don't really want to."

Robyn "Aye because you'd probably get like slaughtered."

[...]

James "What would put you off doing it do you think?"

³ NCVO (2017). UK Civil Society Almanac. Retrieved from https://data.ncvo.org.uk/a/almanac17/geography-3/#Distribution_of_voluntary_organisations_across_rural_and_urban_areas

⁴ 'Young People in Scotland 2014', Volunteer Scotland <http://www.volunteerscotland.net/policy-and-research/research/young-people-and-volunteering-in-scotland-2014/>

Zoe "Because we'd get slagged and bullied."

Robyn "Reputation an' all that."

(Taylor 16, Robyn 16, Zoe 15, non-volunteers)

For these participants the costs of volunteering outweighed the benefits. Zoe went on to say that volunteering was 'a pure no go'. Other evidence was cited where individuals who were interested in volunteering got caught up in the 'wrong crowd' and this put them off volunteering.

Volunteering's 'shit'

Hearing about volunteering spoken in disparaging terms was considered to have a negative impact on young people's willingness to participate. Olivia (17, volunteer) believed young people, during their early teenage years, were at an impressionable age and that:

"If someone turns 'round and says, 'Volunteering's shit', someone's like, 'Oh that's really uncool', you're kind of like 'Oh, I don't want to be uncool.'"

Resilience to mocking

Granovetter's (1978) threshold model⁵ is helpful in understanding how young people can become 'resilient to mocking'. The model applies to situations in which an individual is faced with a binary decision, such as whether to volunteer or not, and where there are perceived costs and benefits associated with either choice. He defines a threshold as, 'that point where the perceived benefits to an individual of doing the thing in question [...] exceed the perceived costs'.

James's research identifies the following factors which can impact on an individual's 'volunteering threshold':

- **Social status** – if the young person has an enhanced social standing amongst their peer group then are better able to overcome adverse peer pressure. Examples include Liam (18, ex-volunteer) who was a 'popular' at school and had enough social resources to reduce the 'cost' of negative peer pressure. Similarly, a group of non-volunteering males completing full-time paid apprenticeships indicated that they might be made fun of for volunteering, but this would not be enough to deter them. Their economic independence and status in positions of paid employment meant that they felt immune to name calling in the context of volunteering.

⁵ Granovetter, M. (1978). Threshold Models of Collective Behaviour. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 83(6), 1420 - 1443

- **Volunteering benefits** – for young people who are experiencing a positive volunteering experience, this can increase their benefits to a level which outweighs negative comments and peer pressure from friends. For example, Orla (16, volunteer) had previously thought volunteering was for *'goody-two-shoes'* and questioned why people would do it without getting paid. However, having volunteered Orla found *'the buzz and like the euphoria you get from it like amazing'*, which led her to state *'it doesnae bother'* her that her peers considered volunteering to be not *'what cool people do'*.

Masculinity

The stigma associated with volunteering was considered by many participants to be more pronounced for males. Key points include:

- **A female pursuit** – the perception that volunteering is a more female pursuit: *"Ye think more feminine and all that 'cos there is a lot more girls doing it and I think, teenagers and all that, they're gunnae think, 'Oh whits he doaeen? He's doaeen that', and they're gunna make him embarrassed and then he's no' going to dae it."* (Liam 18, ex-volunteer)
- **Gender stereotypes** – a lot of youth volunteering is associated with helping children and young people which is perceived as a female role; whereas for sports such as football, this is seen as a male domain.
- **The male ego** – some of the feedback from participants suggested that males are not as resilient at handling criticism as females: *"....I think boys tend to, they don't really deal with that kinda slaggin', erm, the name calling, they don't really deal with it as well as girls...."* (Tracey, volunteer coordinator)
- **'One of the boys'** – linked to the 'male ego' issue, is evidence which suggests young males are heavily influenced by their peers and the desire to conform to the group norm. If their peers are against volunteering, then they are against volunteering.
- **Informal sanctions** – males can be worried about signing up to volunteer in an environment where they are in a gender minority: *"Don't know, it's just [brief pause] none of the boys are really interested so you're an idiot because you're the guy with the lassies by yersel kinda thing [...] so you, it doesnae appeal to you."* (Harry 17, ex-volunteer)

The volunteering rate for boys and girls across Scotland⁶ does indicate a gender imbalance in volunteering: boys' volunteering at 46% and girls at 58%. However, based on James's evidence it is quite possible that the gender imbalance is even greater in areas of greatest deprivation.

⁶ 'Young People in Scotland 2016' Volunteer Scotland: <http://www.volunteerscotland.net/policy-and-research/research/young-people-and-volunteering-in-scotland-2016/>

We don't have statistically significant data for the most deprived SIMD quintile, but we do know that for schools where 40 – 100% of pupils are living in the lowest SIMD quintile there is a comparable gender imbalance of 35% for boys and 48% for girls⁷. We also have evidence to confirm the gender stereotypes:

- Sport or exercise volunteering: boys 57% and girls 44%
- Children or young people's groups: boys 30% and girls 46%

4. Institutional barriers

Resource constraints

A number of volunteer coordinators discussed how funding restrictions impacted the roles they performed within their respective organisations. Examples include:

- The coordinator role being reduced from full-time to part-time or removed altogether, with less time to promote volunteering at schools and youth organisations, and support young people into volunteering opportunities;
- The impact such changes have on young people, many of whom lacked confidence. They like continuity – seeing the same faces – and receiving one-to-one guidance and support. They don't deal well with adults '*parachuting*' in and out of their lives.
- The high resource implications for organisations managing volunteers with complex needs.

School issues

In the 'Young People in Scotland'⁸ research, teachers were the second most important route into volunteering at 32% of volunteers, after parent/guardian at 41%. However, James's findings indicate significant perceived problems with the role of schools in supporting volunteering in deprived areas. Issues include:

- **Lack of promotion** – some participants felt their schools offered little to no information on volunteering or opportunities to volunteer.
- **School-leaver focus** – participants perceived schools' engagement to be focused on those who are about to leave school. This means that their engagement with the younger age groups was not considered a priority by the participants. However, we know from other findings in James's research that engaging with younger age cohorts, particularly those in primary schools, is critically important. There is a narrow window of opportunity

⁷ Ibid

⁸ 'Young People in Scotland 2014', Volunteer Scotland <http://www.volunteerscotland.net/policy-and-research/research/young-people-and-volunteering-in-scotland-2014/>

to engage young people before the social networking and peer pressures discussed in this paper come into play around S1 – S3.

- **Restricted access** – a number of participants were concerned that schools can limit access to the more able pupils and ignore those with learning disabilities and other special needs. For example, one charity described being offered pupils who were performing well academically in the fifth and sixth years.
- **School 'buy-in'** – some schools are really engaged and hotbeds of voluntary action, whereas others are not on the radar.

5. Lessons learned

James's research has provided a great insight into the barriers to volunteering facing young people from deprived areas. The barriers are many and significant, and often inter-connected. The research also helps explain why the volunteering rate for young people outside school in the most deprived areas of Scotland is only 16%, compared to the 50% of young people from the least deprived areas. It is ironic that those who have the most to gain from volunteering are the ones least likely to become volunteers.

However, it is important to remain realistic in the assessment of these barriers. They represent major challenges, which are not easy to overcome. Furthermore, they are likely to be directly correlated with the level of disadvantage – the more disadvantaged the young person the higher and more numerous the barriers will be. The resource implications in addressing such barriers are also likely to be significant.

From James's research what are the lessons learned in terms of mitigating such barriers and improving the chances of engagement with some of the most disadvantaged members of our society?

- **Increasing social capital** – the evidence tells us that the more a young person is engaged with society the greater the potential for personal development. Hence, the initial goal is to secure the engagement of the young person in any form of structured activity – volunteering can then be a logical secondary objective.
- **Engaging young people early** – due to the problems of negative peer pressure regarding volunteering, the earlier this engagement process with young people starts the better – ideally in primary school.

- **Targeting young males** – the evidence indicates that the uptake of volunteering amongst boys and young male adults is significantly lower than for females. This is supported by James's evidence which identifies the higher barriers they are facing. There is therefore a case for bespoke programmes tailored to engaging young males into volunteering to achieve a better gender balance and equal access to the opportunities which volunteering affords our young people in Scotland.
- **Engaging the most disadvantaged** – there is a differential between those who are 'disadvantaged' and those who are 'extremely disadvantaged'. The research would appear to have had a greater focus on young people who are from disadvantaged areas but are not necessarily the most disadvantaged in those communities. For the 'hardest to engage' groups we need to be realistic and admit that in some instances volunteering may not be the most appropriate route to engagement – at least not initially.
- **Leveraging school support** – schools have a pivotal role to play in engaging young people in volunteering. However, for those from disadvantaged areas the evidence suggests that their impact is mixed. It would be good to learn more about school performance in areas of multiple deprivation to see what lessons, if any, there are relating to their support for volunteering through the Curriculum for Excellence and the Saltire Awards. Particular attention should be paid to equal access to volunteering taking into account pupils' age, gender, deprivation and disability.

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. 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.

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