

myths about low-income volunteers

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Ask a 4-H agent to name what the most critical problem was during the last year and the answer will probably be “finding volunteers.” Since volunteer leaders spread many of the ideas and concepts of Extension, volunteer recruitment continues to be among the highest priorities facing most 4-H agents.

Study

Because low-income volunteers are believed to be both difficult to recruit and retain, this study looked at several aspects of the volunteer experience among low-income volunteers who work with low-income youth in 4-H programs. Data were collected from selected low-income volunteers as well as from their county Extension agents in an effort to determine methods used to recruit the low-income volunteers in this sample and the length of time these volunteers were involved.

Method and Sampling Techniques

Two states in each of the four Extension regions participated in the study.¹ A state 4-H representative in each of these 8 states selected 6 counties where Extension personnel could readily identify low-income volunteers working with 4-H youth programs. Equal numbers of rural, suburban, and urban counties were chosen.

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County Extension staff were asked to select 10 current and 10 former adult low-income volunteers, in their respective counties, who met certain low-income criteria.² Agents were to determine the volunteers' income status using the following criteria: (1) place of residence, (2) employment status of volunteer or head of household, (3) type of job held by volunteer or head of household, and (4) evidence of family living on public assistance. In this way, 960 low-income volunteers were identified. Questionnaires were distributed to each of these volunteers. Of the 629 instruments returned, 590 were usable—a 61.5% return.

Two staff members from each of the participating counties were also asked to complete questionnaires. These instruments were similar in content to those given to the volunteers. This approach allowed for comparisons between the volunteer and county staff samples.

The volunteer questionnaire consisted of 48 forced-choice items and two open-ended questions. The questions dealt with a variety of volunteer characteristics and activities, such as demographic characteristics, recruitment methods used, motivation to volunteer, length of time as a 4-H volunteer.

The staff questionnaire, which was sent to 96 and returned by 59 staff in the selected counties, consisted of 45 items of which 39 were forced-choice and 6 were open-ended. These items reflected the staff members' perceptions of the low-income volunteer; for example, how long they volunteered and why and how they were recruited.

Our findings indicate low-income volunteers have been shown to be similar to other 4-H volunteers. They often become volunteers because their own child is in the group and they're more likely to volunteer if they're asked by someone—even their own child. . . .

Results

A low-income volunteer profile was developed. The "typical" volunteer was female between the ages of 30 and 39. She usually was married with 2 children and had lived in a rural community for more than 20 years. She had at least a high school education and was unemployed at the time of the survey. Table 1 shows the distributions of a number of important volunteer background variables. These characteristics were similar to the findings of other studies on volunteers.³

Table 1. Description of the volunteers.

	Volunteer sample N=590	
	N	Percentage
Age		
18-29	146	24.8%
30-49	306	52.0
50 and over	136	23.1
Marital status		
Married	343	58.1
Single	113	19.2
Divorced	61	10.3
Separated	20	3.4
Widowed	51	8.6
Sex		
Male	83	14.1
Female	502	85.1
Race		
Black	282	47.8
White	239	40.5
Other	67	11.3
Kind of community lived in		
Rural	368	62.4
Urban	216	36.7
Educational level		
High school or less	316	53.5
More than high school	265	44.9
Length of time lived in community		
8 years or less	168	28.5
9 to 20 years	141	32.3
More than 20 years	227	38.5
Number of children		
0	111	18.8
1 to 3	270	45.7
4 to 6	152	25.8
More than 6	52	8.8
Occupation		
Unskilled	35	5.9
Skilled	133	22.5
Clerical	50	8.5
College graduate	61	10.3
Not employed or retired	270	45.8
No response	41	6.9

Volunteer respondents were asked why they volunteered for 4-H youth work and how long they'd been 4-H volunteers. County staff were asked similar questions to try to determine if their experiences with volunteer recruitment methods and retention times were reflected by the sample of volunteers. The results of these comparisons led to several unexpected findings.

When volunteers were asked to indicate the way in which they were attracted to 4-H volunteer service (Table 2), the most common responses were a staff member asked them (45%) or that they were asked by their own or neighborhood children (41%). Substantially fewer volunteers listed 4-H leader (26%) or 4-H volunteer (26%) contacts as being crucial in their decision to participate. County staff, however, considered all four of these methods to be highly successful in their own recruiting of low-income volunteers. In each case, the percentage of positive responses exceeded 60% (Table 2).

Table 2. Low-income volunteer recruitment methods.

Method	Percentage responding that method was successful	
	Staff N=59	Volunteer N=590
Staff contact	62.7%	45.6%
4-H leader contact	76.3	26.9
4-H volunteer contact	76.2	26.6
Own or neighborhood children contact	72.9	41.6

Discrepancies between volunteer experiences and staff experiences were even more pronounced when volunteer retention times were considered. Response by staff indicated that volunteer attrition was widespread, with the average length less than one year for low-income volunteers. Only 8.5% of the staff said that the low-income volunteer served for more than 3 years. In the sample of current and former low-income volunteers, however, 25% said they served 1 to 3 years and another 24% said they'd been working with 4-H for more than 3 years. Thus, lack of long-term commitment wasn't as widespread a problem (at least in this sample of volunteers) as staff responses alone would seem to indicate (Table 3).

Table 3. Low-income volunteer length of service.

Service time	Percentage indicating this service time	
	Staff N=59	Volunteer N=590
Less than 1 year	54.2%	37.3%
1 to 3 years	23.7	25.4
More than 3 years	8.5	24.2

Conclusions

Our findings indicate low-income volunteers have been shown to be similar to other 4-H volunteers. They often become volunteers because their own child is in the group and they're more likely to volunteer if they're asked by someone—even their own child. Having a child in the group has been a strong motivator in moving adults into 4-H leader roles through the years and it continues as we work with low-income audiences.⁴

The notion that low-income people don't volunteer or volunteer for only short periods of time is more myth than reality. Low-income people, especially parents of children in a club, will become volunteers and will stay in that role. The study showed low-income volunteers to be much like any other volunteers—they have similar reasons for volunteering, the same recruitment methods work with them, and in many cases volunteer for long periods of time. When county staff members recognize these similarities, income level won't be a deterrent to increasing the ranks of their volunteers.

Footnotes

1. These states included: California, Oregon, Ohio, Massachusetts, New Jersey, South Carolina, Mississippi, and Texas.
2. U.S., Bureau of the Census, "Average Poverty Cutoffs" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974).
3. John M. Foskett, "Social Structure and Social Participation," *American Sociological Review*, XX (August, 1955), 431-38; Murray Housknecht, *The Joiner: A Sociological Description of Voluntary Association Membership in the United States* (New York: Bedminster Press, 1982); Mirra Komarovsky, "The Voluntary Associations of Urban Dwellers," *American Sociological Review*, XI (December, 1946), 686-98; and Charles R. Wright and Herbert H. Hyman, "Trends in Voluntary Association Memberships of American Adults: Replication Based on Secondary Analysis of National Sample Surveys," *American Sociological Review*, XXXVI (April, 1971), 191-206.
4. Karla A. Henderson, "Motivating the Adult 4-H Volunteer," *Journal of Extension*, XIX (January/February, 1981), 19-27 and Mary Lou Fuhry, "Recruiting 4-H Leaders: What Tips the Scale?" *Journal of Extension*, XX (May/June, 1982), 15-20.