

8-1-2003

## Volunteerism, Community Service, and Service-Learning by Ohio 4-Hers in Grades 4-12

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### Recommended Citation

Safrit, R., & Auck, A. W. (2003). Volunteerism, Community Service, and Service-Learning by Ohio 4-Hers in Grades 4-12. *The Journal of Extension*, 41(4), Article 15. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol41/iss4/15>

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August 2003 // Volume 41 // Number 4 // Research in Brief // 4RIB6



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## Volunteerism, Community Service, and Service-Learning by Ohio 4-Hers in Grades 4-12

### Abstract

This study reported here investigated volunteer service by Ohio 4-H'ers ages 10 to 19. The study's population was randomly sampled by each age category: 66,345 4-H community club members ages 10-14 and 18,233 ages 15-19. Study findings suggest that nearly 100% of 4-H'ers in both age categories are involved in community service. Respondents spent an equal amount of time volunteering through school, out of school, on their own, or through 4-H youth development experiences. The researchers conclude that 4-H youth development has an impact on 4-H'ers performing service but that it is not the only way members are helping others.

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### Introduction

America's youth need to be actively engaged in their communities through volunteerism and service that allows them to actively participate in decisions affecting themselves and their families, schools, workplaces, and communities. Brendtro and Bacon (1995) suggested that such active involvement in decision making assists teens in developing both responsibility and commitment. Swinehart (1992) defined youth engagement as having four components:

1. Including youth in significant decision making;
2. Youth participating in activities that satisfy a genuine need in their community;
3. Youth developing collegial relationships with adult partners and mentors; and
4. Youth reflecting on their work and learning skills related to it.

Numerous contemporary authors have emphasized the need to engage youth not just as program recipients in community-based programs, but rather as active partners and volunteers in community-based youth education and development (Calvert, Zeldin, & Weisenbach, 2002; Safrit, 2002a, 2002b; Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, & Lorens, 2001; Zeldin, Camino, Calvert, & Ivey, D., 2002). The Ohio 4-H Strategic Plan (Ohio State 4-H Office, 1993) indicated that 4-H should provide broader community service opportunities for youth.

Most recently, the Preliminary Results of The National Conversation on Youth Development in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (National 4-H Council, 2002, March) challenges Extension professionals to:

. . . reorganize around [youth]. Consider what it would take for youth to become fully engaged as equal partners. . . . Ensure that we are gaining and utilizing the unique perspectives of youth as well as transforming the relationships we have with them, especially in designing, delivering, and governing youth development programs (p. 3).

Volunteerism, community service, and service-learning are viable and meaningful hands-on approaches through which 4-H may fully engage youth.

Youth providing service to others has gained much of attention with the national interest in youth service and service learning (Benson, 1997). Service is valuable to the community and to the young person who serves. Youniss and Yates (1997) indicated that students who participated in community service projects are more likely to vote and join community organizations than are adults who were nonparticipants during high school. Safrit and King (1999) reported that a majority of the Ohio youth respondents in their study reported having helped people or their neighborhood or community in the past year without being paid.

## **Purpose and Methodology**

While much data exists describing volunteerism among American youth in general (Independent Sector, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2001; Youth Service America, 1994), little (if any) contemporary data exist regarding levels of volunteerism, community service, and service-learning specifically among 4-H members. The purpose of the study described here was to investigate current and future levels and types of volunteerism, community service and service-learning by Ohio 4-H'ers between the ages of 10 and 19. The researchers replicated an earlier study by Safrit and King (1999) utilizing a descriptive methodology and a mailed questionnaire to collect data.

### **Population and Sample**

The population consisted of 89,490 Ohio 4-H members enrolled in community clubs as of July 1, 1997 (Ohio State 4-H Office, 1998). This included an accessible population of 84,578 after duplications and incomplete addresses were removed. The population included 66,345 members ages 10 to 14 and 18,233 members ages 15 to 19 enrolled in 4-H community clubs.

Based on Cochran (1985), the researchers calculated the appropriate sample size of 504 4-H'ers from each of the two age categories. The researchers used an alphabetical listing of members by last name, established a starting point utilizing a table of random numbers, and selected every 174th name starting at 29,661 for ages 10 to 14, and every 49th name starting at 371 for ages 15 to 19.

### **Instrumentation and Data Collection**

The researchers utilized a modified version of the instruments developed by Safrit and King (1999) to collect data specific to 4-H youth development. Separate questionnaires for grades 4-8 and grades 9-12 were used to collect data. Both questionnaires utilized vocabulary and response categories appropriate for the respective grade levels and were organized into five sections:

- Section I investigated types of volunteerism and service by participants;
- Section II investigated service as part of school work;
- Section III investigated service as part of respondents' 4-H work, an out-of-school club, or on their own;
- Section IV investigated motivations for and barriers to performing service; and
- Section V investigated personal demographics of respondents.

A panel of three experts (consisting of two assistant professors who are also Extension Specialists, 4-H Youth Development, and an associate professor in the Department of Human and Community Resource Development) reviewed the instrument for face and content validity, clarity of wording, and format. As a result, the researcher made minor adjustments to wording, spacing, and the list of reasons for volunteering. The instruments' construct validities had been established previously by Safrit and King (1999).

The researchers conducted a field test of the instruments (Dillman, 1978). Instruments were completed by 20 (in each age group) 4-H members who were not part of the sample. Each 4-H'er independently completed and returned the instrument. The researchers calculated Cronbach's Alpha to measure internal consistency as an indicator of the instruments' reliabilities. For sections collecting non-personal data, Cronbach's Alphas ranged from .7989 to .5495 for the younger age group and .7366 to .2488 for the older age group.

The researchers mailed the appropriate survey questionnaire to sample members on February 20 with a cover letter co-signed by the researcher and the Assistant Director, 4-H Youth Development, along with a self-addressed stamped return envelope and consent form. A code number was used for follow-up of non-respondents. Participants were encouraged to respond by March 5. On March 17, 1999, a second letter and a copy of the appropriate instrument were sent to non-respondents, with a requested response date of March 31. The researchers established April 9, 1999 as the final deadline for accepting responses. The final response rate was 25% for the 4th-8th grade level and 27% for the 9th-12th grade level.

All data were coded, entered, and analyzed using the SPSS 8.0 statistical program to analyze the data generated by the study (SPSS, 1997). Descriptive statistics were calculated to determine the frequencies and percentages of item responses. After all data were entered, the researchers randomly selected 10% of returned questionnaires to check for accuracy. An accuracy rate of 90% was calculated.

## Findings

Ninety-eight percent of 4th-8th grade respondents and 98% of 9th-12th grade respondents reported helping people (other than family members) or their neighborhood/community without being paid for it during the past year. One hundred percent of the 4th-8th group reported that they plan to help others in the next 12 months; 96% of the 9th-12th group indicated that they plan to help people or groups in their neighborhood/community in the next year. Of the 4th-8th grade respondents, 70% indicated their service was part of their school work, 64% as part of 4-H, 56% as part of another out-of-school group, and 69% on their own. Sixty-four percent of 9th-12th grade respondents reported service as part of their school work, 59% as part of 4-H work, 47% as part of an out-of-school group, and 70% on their own.

The respondents who indicated that they had performed service as part of a 4-H project specified the following projects.

### 4th-8th Grade Group

- "Other" project area, 27%;
- Animal sciences, 17%;
- Small animals, 12%;
- Food and nutrition, 10%;
- Natural resources, 8%;
- Health, 6%;
- Clothing, 5%;
- Home environment, 4%;
- Expressive arts, 3%;
- Exploring/discovering 4-H, 3%; and
- Engineering, 2%.

### 9th-12th Grade Group

- Animal sciences, 33%;
- Personal development and leadership, 24%;
- Citizenship and civic education, 15%;
- Consumer and family sciences, 9%;
- Environmental education and earth science, 6%;
- Communications and expressive arts, 6%;
- Healthy lifestyle education, 4%; and
- Plants, 4%.

Respondents identified the types of service they performed regardless of whether on their own, through school, through an out-of-school group, or through 4-H (Table 1).

**Table 1.**  
Frequencies of Types of Service Performed by Random Samples of Ohio 4-H Members in Grades 4-8 and 9-12

	<b>Grade Level</b>			
	<b>4-8</b>		<b>9-12</b>	
	<b>Freq</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Freq</b>	<b>%</b>
Raking leaves (for free)	36	28	30	22
Serving as a club or group officer	74	58	89	66
Picking up trash	58	45		
Cleaning up your neighborhood/community	36	28	39	29
Planting trees or flowers	39	31		

Fixing up a building (other than your home)	19	15	35	26
Helping at your place of worship	72	56	56	42
Raising money by selling things door to door	76	59		
Shoveling snow (for free)	42	33	34	25
Raising money by selling things at an event	52	41		
Mowing lawns (for free)	30	23	24	18
Raising money by asking for donations	38	30		
Planning some event or activity	45	35	74	55
Working in a food pantry or soup kitchen	18	14	16	12
Helping at your school	80	63		
Taking care of animals (other than your own)	47	37	66	49
Collecting food or clothing	55	43	51	38
Providing transportation to someone	25	20	111	82
Running Errands	39	31	88	65
Helping with reduce/reuse/recycle projects	37	30	43	32
Doing other things not listed	50	39	71	53
Babysitting someone's children (for free)	51	40	58	43
Participating in Student Government			29	22
Fund raising			73	54
Counseling other youth			49	36
Working at a hospital (for free)			9	7
Assisting with a sports team			31	23
Working with senior citizens			23	17
Tutoring			48	36
Working with a theater, music or art group			28	21

Note: Percentages total more than 100 because respondents could select more than one type of activity.
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## Conclusions

The researchers did not anticipate that nearly 100% of the 4-H members responding to this study would be involved in community service. In their 1999 study, Safrit and King concluded that 90% of 4th-8th grade respondents and 85% of the 9th-12th grade respondents had helped others in the past 12 months. As the researchers expected, participation in 4-H encourages members to be engaged in service activities. The current study's findings suggest that, for those youth responding, there is a strong commitment to helping others in their community or neighborhood both currently and in the near future.

The researchers anticipated that a larger majority of youth in the study would be performing service to others as part of their 4-H experiences. The findings suggest that study respondents are performing service on their own, instead of as part of an organized organization or activity.

Respondents spent an equal amount of time helping others whether part of school work, an out-of-school group, on their own, or in 4-H youth development experiences. Of interest to the researcher was that 90% of the 9th-12th grade respondents indicated that service was on their own. It can be concluded that participation in service activities is not strongly related to a 4-H project area or any other source of service. It can be concluded that 4-H youth development has an impact on 4-H'ers performing service, but it is not the only way youth are helping others.

The researchers were also surprised that participation was not limited to a few responses on the questionnaire. A wide variety of service activities are attracting the attention of 4-H'ers responding to the survey. It is important to recognize that the types of service most frequently reported by the 4-8 grade group are not the same types of service most frequently reported by the 9-12 grade group. A significant number of the activities for the 9-12 grade group involved direct contact with individuals instead of groups of people. The researchers might question whether youth should be spending more time helping others in their community.

The review of literature, the findings of this study, and the conclusions led the researchers to make several recommendations for the Ohio 4-H Youth Development program.

1. Ohio 4-H Youth Development program professionals should encourage youth volunteers to conduct meaningful community service activities. Youth should be encouraged to connect their project work to volunteer/service opportunities.
2. Ohio 4-H Youth Development professionals should be more engaged in developing and disseminating community service/service learning materials to 4-H members and volunteer leaders. More structured service project activities should be built into the existing curricula.
3. Statewide Ohio 4-H Youth Development activities and events (such as Youth Expo, Conservation Camp, and Leadership Camp) should include opportunities for youth to learn new things about volunteerism, community service, and service learning.
4. Given that youth perform service almost equally as part of school work, part of an out-of-school group, and on their own, 4-H youth development is in a position to take the lead in the community service, volunteerism, and service-learning areas. Partnerships with schools could be developed to share curriculum on structuring service-learning activities and support service-learning. Community-based groups could also benefit from this sharing of curriculum and the structuring of service activities. 4-H service activities should be open to all youth of a community, regardless of whether or not they are 4-H members.

As Safrit (2002) concluded: "[youth] empowerment is a challenging concept to many adults. . . . effectively empowering [youth] requires . . . an organizational culture that values the contributions of [youth], and our own personal commitment to bringing that culture to life" (p. 3). As 4-H Youth Development professionals, we must both make that commitment and, thus, further transform our organization's evolving culture.

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