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### **Younger Volunteers in Sweden**

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#### **Abstract**

*This article reports the findings of a study of volunteering by younger persons (age 16-24) in Sweden based on an analysis of data from a 1998 Swedish survey. As in the U.S., half of younger persons volunteer based in Sweden, although the context of Swedish volunteering differs significantly. After discussing the Swedish context of volunteerism, the article presents the differences in background between volunteers and non-volunteers, as well as areas of volunteer participation, activities and tasks carried out, motives for volunteering, and ways by which volunteers become involved. A summary of the results, including a discussion of volunteer commitment by younger Swedes and an agenda for future research follows.*

#### **Key Words:**

volunteers, youth, young adults, Sweden

#### **Introduction**

Volunteerism among young people in Sweden provides a conceptually interesting comparison with the United States: while the proportions of those who volunteer are similar in both countries, their distinctive traditions, political structures, and access to volunteer opportunities appear to spawn volunteer participation in different activities and areas. An understanding of how this context shapes the meaning and practice of volunteerism provides insights into the comparative differences in volunteer

behavior among younger persons. Specifically, this paper reports the findings of an investigation of volunteering among young persons (16-24) in Sweden and addresses the following general question: Given the character of the Swedish context, what is the nature and extent of volunteerism by young persons in Sweden?

#### **Swedish Society and Volunteerism**

In order to understand youth volunteering in Sweden, it is first necessary to appreciate its larger context and meaning. During 1998, over half

(51%) of the Swedish population, ages 16 and over, volunteered at least once to an organization, i.e., "work and activities which are carried out on a voluntary basis, unremunerated (or in exchange for token remuneration) during one's free or leisure time. In some circles this is also called charity work." This proportion ranks among the highest in European countries (Wijkstrom, 1997) and is slightly less than the U.S. (56%) in 1998 (Independent Sector, 1999). The definitions of volunteering in the two studies differ with specific reference to helping behavior in the Independent Sector surveys, e.g., "not just belonging to a service organization, but actually working in some way to help others for no monetary pay" (Independent Sector, 1997). Also, the Independent Sector includes informal volunteering as part of its overall measure of volunteering, i.e., "helping a neighbor or a friend, or organization on an ad hoc basis; spending time caring for elderly person or babysitting children of a friend, but not part of an organized group or for pay", while the Swedish research practice separates formal and informal volunteering.

For comparative purposes, one can identify three broad elements that differentiate Swedish volunteering: (1) the role of the welfare state, (2) the significance of organizations and associations in society, and (3) the volunteer roles of members in these organizations. A distinctive feature of Sweden's nonprofit sector flows from the country's large and comprehensive public social welfare program. Because of the expectation that Sweden's government programs will meet its citizens' social and economic needs, "...there is little room left for service-producing in nonprofit organizations" (Anheier & Salamon, 1999). Instead, they are more likely to be found in the areas of culture and recreation, education (e.g., folk and adult schools) and research, policy advocacy, business and labor, and housing (Wijkstom, 1997).

A second feature of Swedish society is the numerous nonprofit organizations, popular social movements, interest groups, and associations devoted to representing the interests of their members, providing services and mutual support, and/or making available members' leisure opportunities (Lundstrom & Wijkstrom, 1997; Jeppsson Grassman & Svedberg 1996). See Lundstrom and Wijkstrom for a more detailed description of the Swedish nonprofit sector.) For example, among associations where young people volunteer, members of a sports organization receive training and play on the club's team (K. Nissfeldt, personal communication, June 22, 2000); a temperance group promotes public policy restricting the use of alcohol (F. Wijkstrom, personal communication, June 21, 2000); and a cultural arts group affords its members an opportunity to participate in theatre productions (K. Rosenbach, personal communication, June 16, 2000).

The state encourages the growth of these voluntary associations (Jeppsson Grassman & Svedberg, 1996), including subsidies to 62 non-governmental youth organizations in the areas of religion, temperance, politics, disability, immigrants, and general activities (National Board for Youth Affairs, 1999). Also, most local Swedish associations are part of national organizations that serve as umbrella groups, such as the Swedish Youth Council which consists of 94 youth organizations, which provide support

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and representation at the national level (Jeppsson Grassman & Svedberg, 1996). For example, the Swedish Sports Confederation includes 67 federations, each organizing one or more sports, and 22,000 local clubs, and serves as the largest and most comprehensive network of local groups affiliated with a national organization (Swedish Sports Confederation, n.d.).

The role of the member in associations and voluntary organizations is a third characteristic relevant to volunteerism in Sweden. The expectation that members devote time to their organization and are "active rather than passive" (Wijkstrom, 1997) serves as the basis for understanding the Swedish concept of volunteering. Unlike the numerous volunteers in the U.S. who frequently give time to organizations to which they do not belong and which provide service to others who also may not be members, e.g., health clinics, homeless shelters, or food kitchens, nearly 85 percent of all Swedish volunteers belong to the organization to which they volunteer.

### **Implications for Young Persons' Volunteering**

Given this Swedish context of volunteering, we turn now to a specific focus on volunteering by young persons. Research on volunteering in the U.S. suggests that (a) dominant statuses, such as parent's occupation, income, and education, (b) family variables, including whether or not one's parent have volunteered, and (c) size of community are often statistically associated with whether or not a person volunteers (Smith, 1994; Sundeen, 1988; Sundeen & Raskoff, 1994). Also, more altruistic and prosocial attitudes tend to be associated with volunteering among

U.S. teenagers (Sundeen). Further, as a reflection of the Swedish context, we expect volunteering to be greater in recreational, cultural, and political activities and less in social services, health care, education, or more adult oriented activities, as well as to be greater in performing organizational maintenance tasks than direct service provision. Because older persons dominate many associations and organizations, we expect younger volunteers to carry out tasks, reflecting less responsibility for the actual governing of organizations.

### **Research Processes**

The 1998 Swedish national household survey on volunteering (N = 1,104) serves as the source for the data and the statistics we report. The survey sample includes 216 persons between the ages of 16 and 24 who participated in face-to-face interviews in Swedish. The Swedish principal investigators provided a copy of the data set and codebook and an American, who received his Ph.D. in sociology in Sweden, translated the codebook.

We compare younger volunteers and non-volunteers in terms of socio-demographic background and attitudes toward volunteerism. We examine the distribution of volunteers in over 30 types of organizations, the organizational tasks carried out, reasons for volunteering, and how they became involved in the organization. We compare subgroups of volunteers in order to determine whether significant differences exist between volunteers to different types of organizations. As a means of comparing either groups or responses within groups, we employed Chi Square, which is interpreted as a measure of whether or not there is a

statistically significant association between two variables. Also, tests of significance are used in comparing the differences between proportions in the two groups.

In order to supplement the survey data with a more textured understanding of youth volunteering, one of the authors carried out interviews in Stockholm during June, 2000 with fourteen persons (recommended by a Swedish researcher). The interviewees included representatives of 8 types of organizations to which young persons volunteer and two Swedish researchers in the nonprofit and voluntary field. These semi-structured, open-ended interviews were carried out in English, tape-recorded, and lasted between 30 and 90 minutes.

## **Findings**

### **Extent of Volunteering**

Fifty percent of Swedish young persons (16-24 years old) indicated that they volunteered at least once to an organization or association in 1998 and devoted an average of 12 hours per month. An additional 1.4% of young persons did not volunteer to an organization but carried out informal unpaid work for others, e.g., "do you regularly carry out unpaid work (for example driving, buying food, carrying out yard work, cleaning for persons you don't live with or other people you are not related to?"). Fifty-one percent of young persons in Sweden volunteered either to organizations or informally, in contrast to approximately two-thirds of U.S. teenagers in 1996 where 23% carried out some form of informal volunteer work and over half (58%) volunteer to an organization (Independent Sector, 1997).

### **Differences Between Younger Volunteers and Non-volunteers**

The comparison of volunteers and non-volunteers reveals that dominant status does not contribute significantly to the explanation of volunteering, while community size does make a difference. Volunteers are more likely than non-volunteers to live in a middle sized town (as opposed to smaller or larger cities). This suggests that smaller and larger cities may be slightly less conducive to volunteering among young persons than middle-sized cities. In smaller cities, there may be less apparent need or opportunity. In larger cities other leisure activities may attract young persons. There is a comparatively lower level of social capital that connects people to organizations, and/or city life spawns a higher commitment to individual interests and pursuits.

Also, a greater proportion of volunteers than non-volunteers participate in informal helping activities and express agreement with two pro volunteerism attitudes: (1) "[volunteers] . . . give something other than what paid professionals offer" and (2) ". . . engagement in voluntary work leads people to taking a more active role in democratic society." These three findings must be interpreted with caution, because the causal direction of the associations is not clear. For example, informally helping others may bring the young person into interpersonal networks that result in opportunities for formal volunteering or vice versa. A third variable, such as parental volunteer behavior, leads to both informal and formal volunteering. Similarly, the causal direction of the relationship between volunteering and the two pro-volunteer attitudes — the importance of providing something

Table 1  
*Percentage Difference Between Younger Volunteers and Non Volunteers (16-24 years old)*

<b>N (total number)</b>		<b>Volunteers</b>	<b>Non Volunteers</b>
		<b>107</b>	<b>109</b>
Males		52.3%	55.0%
Education	Basic	33.6	33.9
	High School	61.7	61.5
	University	4.7	4.6
Household Income	(Median Category)	175-224,999 kr/yr.	150-174,999 kr/yr.
Place of Birth	Sweden	87.9	88.1
	Other Nordic Country	0.0	2.8
	European Country	3.7	3.7
	Non-European Country	8.4	5.5
Parents Raised in Foreign Country	None	77.6	83.5
	One Parent	9.3	6.4
	Two Parents	13.1	10.1
Place of Residence	City (large)	18.7	24.8
	Town	32.7	22.0
	Smaller Town	48.6	53.2
Extent of Parents' Volunteering	Not at all	15.0	21.1
	Limited Extent	25.2	29.4
	Certain Extent	30.8	26.6
	Great Extent	29.0	22.9
People in Household	Median, standard deviation	29.9 (1.6)	2.9 (1.5)
Children in Household	Median, standard deviation	.07 (1.2)	.07 (0.9)
Informal Volunteering		9.3**	2.8
Member of Organization (to which you volunteer)		78.9	n/a
Attitudes	Give Something (agree)	75.7**	60.7
	Moral Obligation (agree)	43.9	42.1
	Active Democracy (agree)	86.0**	72.0
	Government Has No Need (disagree)	74.8	68.2

Levels of Statistical Significance for tests assessing differences between young Volunteers and young Non-Volunteers:

\*p<=.10; \*\*p<=.05; \*\*\*p<=.01; \*\*\*\*p<=.001 a August 2002 exchange rate: US\$-SK 9.45

b 1. Voluntary workers give something other than what paid professionals offer.

2. Everyone has a moral obligation to carry out voluntary work at some point in his or her lives.

3. Engagement in voluntary work leads to people taking a more active role in a democratic society.

4. If the government took its full responsibility, there wouldn't be the need for voluntary work.

Table 2  
*Frequency of Volunteering in Types of Organizations, 16-24 Year Olds*

Type of Organization	%
Sports	24.5
Cultural	10.6
Student Associations	8.8
Religious (combined)	5.1
Hobby	4.2
Political Parties	3.7
Humanitarian	3.2
Immigrant	2.8
All other areas	Less than 2.0
Informal volunteering (not to an organization or family member)	6.0

other than what professionals offer, and the significance of volunteering for citizenship in a democracy — can be either way. If treated as independent variables, we would conclude that younger persons volunteer because of these attitudes while, if dependent variables, we might conclude that one's volunteer experience provides the younger person with a greater appreciation of volunteering. Clearly, these are areas needing further research.

### Volunteer Areas

Table 2 presents the frequency of volunteering by types of organizations among 16- to 24-year-olds. The most frequent areas of volunteer activity among young persons are in sports, cultural, student, and religious organizations. As in the general Swedish population, the area of sports clubs and associations accounts for the largest proportion (24.5%) of young volunteers. Examples of the myriad of sports clubs include football (soccer), equestrian, ice hockey, floor ball, swimming, and

tennis, with football being the most popular among young persons.

Considerable lower than sports, the second most frequent volunteer area — cultural arts (10.6%) — includes cultural, music, dance or theater associations, such as local amateur theater groups affiliated with the Swedish National Association of Amateur Theater and local educational programs devoted to providing cultural activities to young persons, such as *Aktiv Ungdom* (Active Youth). Student associations (8.8%), which are an age specific activity, rank as the third most frequent area of volunteering and religious organizations (5.1%), e.g., the Church of Sweden, other Christian denominations/groups, or non-Christians, rank fourth. Although the Church of Sweden traditionally has been a significant part of Swedish society, "membership is only nominal, [and] only a small minority of the population actually attend church regularly" (Lundstrom & Wijkstrom, 1997, pp. 44-45). While nonprofit sector activities of churches are probably closest to what

would be termed "charity work," including social services, health care, international aid, and adult education (Lundstrom & Wijkstrom), young volunteers in Stockholm to the Church of Sweden frequently limit their participation to assisting in confirmation classes of younger persons (Q. von Essem, personal communication, June 7, 2000). Finally, each of all other types of organizations and associations attract less than four percent of younger persons as volunteers.

### Volunteer Activities

Volunteer participation assumes activities beyond solely belonging to the organization (National Board for Youth Affairs, 1999; F. Wijkstrom, personal communication, June 21, 2000). Table 3 presents the frequency distribution of organizational tasks performed by the volunteers. We also compare the young

sports volunteers with all other young volunteers as well as young cultural arts volunteers with all other young volunteers in order to examine the impact of organizational context on volunteer tasks.

As anticipated, young Swedish volunteers tend to be involved in organizational maintenance tasks, rather than direct assistance to clients or members. Most young persons' volunteer behavior focused on assisting (organization) to meet their goals through administrative and practical tasks, such as record keeping, supervising younger members, cleaning, and making coffee. Less frequently, though still accounting for 20 to 25 percent of young persons' tasks, are organizational roles related to leadership, training, fundraising, information dissemination, and other undefined tasks. For example, depending upon their age, younger volunteers to

Table 3  
*Volunteer Tasks of Young Persons and Among Those Volunteering in Sports and Cultural Organizations, 16-24 Years Old*

Tasks	All 16-24 Volunteers (N=110)	Young Sports Vols (N=53)	Other Young Vols (N=54)	Young Cultural (N=23)	Other Young Vols (N=84)
Administration /Practical tasks	31.8%	32.1%	31.5%	34.8%	31.0
Education/training/leadership	25.2	28.3	22.2	34.8	22.6
Collecting money	23.4	35.8 **	11.1	26.1	22.6
Other tasks	21.5	18.9	24.1	13.0	23.8
Information campaigns/public opinion	20.6	13.2"	27.8	26.1	19.0
Governing boards/Decision Making	11.2	7.5	14.8	13.0	10.7
Direct assistance	10.3	5.7	14.8	17.4	8.3

(More than one task could be selected.) Levels of Statistical Significance between young volunteers to specific organizations and other young volunteers: •  $p < .10$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*\* $p < .001$

sports groups assist in training, coaching, and refereeing of younger persons' teams, while others participate in fundraising, such as selling lottery tickets and assisting in flea markets, to support the club. The volunteers to the cultural organization described above (*Aktiv Ungdom*) serve as local board members or leaders of dance, music, clowns, art, and theater activities (K. Rosenbach, personal communication, June 16, 2000).

Younger volunteers are least likely to (1) serve on governing boards or in other decision making activities and (2) provide direct assistance, thus reflecting, first, organizational dominance by older adults, greater leadership experience by older members, or a reluctance to be involved in these roles by younger persons, and, second, the societal expectations that direct assistance is the primary responsibility of public social service organizations, the family, and, occasionally, the church.

While the sizes of the sub-samples are too small for extensive analysis, a comparison of tasks carried out in the two most frequent volunteer areas (sports and cultural organizations) shows that young volunteers to sports are more likely to be involved in collecting money and less likely to carry out information campaigns or provide direct assistance than all other younger volunteers. In contrast, the cultural organization volunteers participate least in governing boards and do not differ significantly from all other volunteers. Compared to sports volunteers, they volunteer to a substantially greater extent in information campaigns and direct assistance. These findings suggest that, similar to the U.S. (Sundeen & Raskoff, 1994), the general category of volunteering, while providing an overall picture, does not reveal important role variations embedded in differing volunteer areas and activities.

Table 4  
*Reasons for Volunteering among Young Persons*

<b>Reasons</b>	<b>All 16-24 Volunteers (N=110)</b>	<b>Young Sports Vols (N=53)</b>	<b>Other Young Vols (N=54)</b>	<b>Young Cultural (N=23)</b>	<b>Other Young Vols (N=84)</b>
My personal interests or particular need	64.7%	72.5% *	56.9	81.8%*	60.0
A desire to contribute to the organization's activities	14.7	19.6	9.8	4.3	17.5
A desire to do something positive for other people	14.7	7.8**	21.6	4.5	17.5
Other	5.9	0**	11.8	9.1	5.0
The situation of a family member or particular need	0	0	0	0	0

Levels of Statistical Significance between young volunteers to specific organizations and other young volunteers: \* p<=.10; \*\*p<=.05; \*\*\*p<=.01; \*\*\*\*p<=.001



Table 5  
*Who Took the Initiative in Carrying out the Volunteer Activities?*

Reasons	All 16-24 Volunteers (N=110)	Young Sports Vols (N=53)	Other Young Vols (N=54)	Young Cultural (N=23)	Other Young Vols (N=84)
I was asked to engage in this work	51.4	58.5	44.4	60.9	48.8
I sought out this work myself	48.6	35.8 ***	61.1	47.8	48.8
I was among the founders who started the organization	6.5	7.5	5.6	4.3	7.1
Don't know	2.8	3.8	1.9	0.0	3.6

(More than one response could be selected)

Levels of Statistical Significance between young volunteers to specific organizations and other young volunteers: \* p<=.10; \*\*p<=.05; \*\*\*p<=.01; \*\*\*\*p<=.001

### Motives of Volunteers

Nearly two-thirds of younger volunteers indicate that personal interests and avocations serve as the basis for volunteering, in contrast to only fifteen percent who wish to contribute to the organization's activities. Apparently, intrinsic and/or individualistic interests in an organization's activities and values, e.g., sports, games, theater, and church, rather than a commitment to the organizational membership or to a greater collective good, serve as the attitudinal bases for a significant proportion of young persons to join and be actively involved. Also, among this group, helping others or one's family does not play central roles in deciding to volunteer. Illustrative of these findings that focus on the importance of meeting individual rather than organizational or community interests through volunteering are the following two observations: "[Young persons] are interested in sports activities, and [active

participation] is another way to be connected to one of the most important aspects of their life" (A Lundin, personal communication, June 8, 2000); "Leadership roles [in a cultural organization for children] enable aspiring young actors to become more involved in theatre activities" (K. Rosenbach, personal communication, June 16, 2000). An additional explanation is that since the majority of nonprofit organizations typically do not serve as venues for the provision of charitable services they are generally not a place to meet one's more altruistic goals.

The data comparing motivation among volunteers to sports and cultural organizations also yield statistically significant and interesting differences. While greater proportions of both sub-groups indicate the desire to follow their own interests compared to all other volunteers, the participants in cultural arts organizations are especially higher.

More than sports, which likely draw numerous young persons out of desire to perfect their individual athletic talents, cultural arts organizations attract young persons pursuing their own artistic and creative needs. Also, a smaller proportion of those providing unpaid labor for sports organizations compared to other volunteers attribute their volunteering to the desire to do something positive for other people.

### **Recruitment of Volunteers**

Few Swedish organizations appear to have formal systems for attracting young volunteers. Typically, young people join an organization in order to participate as a member, and then develop an interest in a more active member role. They may become visible to those in leadership positions who ask them informally to take on a responsibility, such as helping out a sports trainer or coach. Other types of associations with training programs may invite young members to participate in a study circle or short course offered by the organization that will also lead to increased involvement in the group. In the case of the Church of Sweden, young volunteers who assist in the confirmation class have recently completed the previous confirmation class.

Table 5 indicates that about the same proportion of young persons are asked to volunteer as are those who take initiative to volunteer. Nevertheless, differences exist in how volunteers become involved in specific types of organizations. While volunteers to sports and cultural groups are both more likely to be asked than other young volunteers, the sports volunteers tend not to take as much initiative in finding the work. This may reflect a tendency of sports clubs to identify promising younger members,

provide them training opportunities, travel, and gifts, such as uniforms and equipment, in order to retain and encourage them to continue up the club's career ladder, and to be more restrictive in allowing others to participate further in the club's activities.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Similar to the U.S., approximately one-half of young persons 16-24 years old in Sweden volunteer. However, volunteering among young persons in Sweden may not be a result of dominant status; rather, volunteering emerges as a result of the social environment, including stronger networks of social relations found in its abundance of nonprofit organizations and associations, particularly in middle-sized cities, as well as the states dominance in the production and delivery of social services. In contrast to U.S. youth, whose volunteering tends to concentrate in the areas of religious, educational, and various social and human service organizations, younger Swedish volunteers participate primarily in sports, recreational, cultural, and student activities. Their responsibilities tend to focus on maintenance of the organization in contrast to broader policy leadership or direct assistance to clients/members. They also attribute their reasons for volunteering to individual interests rather than a desire to contribute to the organization or to help other people and they tend to become involved in volunteer activities either by being asked or taking their own initiative. While these are general tendencies among all volunteers, when broken down into volunteers according to specific types of activities, differences emerge among subgroups which suggest that volunteering is best understood

when seen in the organization context in which it occurs.

While the areas of volunteer activity by younger persons reflect the Swedish socio-political context, the assumed importance of organization commitment by volunteers is not supported by the findings. A recurring theme from the observations of the interviewees is that, among younger Swedes, the traditional emphasis on organizational membership and its commensurate responsibilities, such as volunteering to assist the organization in its operations, has lost some of its importance among many young persons. Referring to a perceived decline in participation in youth organizations of political parties while the general interest level in politics has increased, one observer stated, "They don't want the whole package. They might want to demonstrate, but they don't want to administer" (K. Nissfeldt, personal communication, June 22, 2000).

While the extent of this decline in organizational commitment is not clear, the respondents had various explanations. These include a decline in young persons' discretionary time because of other pursuits and interests (K. Rosenbach, personal communication, June 16, 2000); the increased commitment to narrower, single issues, such as the environment (see Lundstrom & Wijkstrom, 1997); the inability of traditional organizations to keep pace with the emphasis by new organizational forms on horizontal relationships, consensus decision making, informality, two way communication, and linkage to the larger society (F. Wijkstrom, personal communication, June 21, 2000); and the general increase in individualism in Swedish society. For example, over a

decade ago, Boli (1991, p. 116) noted a change among Swedish citizens toward "rejecting established political channels in their efforts to influence policy decisions" and utilizing more individual and autonomous means of influence. More recently, Rothstein (2002, p. 29) has used the term, "solidaristic individualism," in denoting individuals who give support to others but who also "accept that they have other, different values and want to engage themselves for different causes." He goes on to state (pp. 31- 32) that "...choosing an organization may nowadays have more to do with the individual's deliberate creation of a specific lifestyle than with adherence to an established organized ideological collective." According to one interviewee, another sign of this changing relationship to organizations — not unlike the stipends, school credit, and other material forms of remuneration for volunteer work in the U.S. — is that there appears to be "an increase in young persons who want to be paid for their time"(A. Lundin, personal communication, June 8, 2000).

While this paper has described the Swedish context of young persons' volunteering, its findings can also be instructive for the practitioner and researcher in other societies. It suggests that volunteering must be understood in its cultural-political-organizational contexts out of which come multiple meanings of the concept of volunteering, its activities and tasks, motivations, and ways of involving recruits. It also suggests that as social structures and values change so do organizational attachments that require new responses to younger potential volunteers' special interests and needs.

### Author's Note

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