

# **Early Life Experiences and Other Factors In the Social Dynamics of Civic Behaviour:**

Findings from a Series of National Studies in Canada

by

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**June, 2002**

**[Exerpts from a forthcoming paper, “The Role of Early Life Experiences in Giving, Volunteering, and Participating” by Paul Reed and Kevin Selbee, Research Report, Office of the Senior Social Scientist, Statistics Canada.]**

# OUTLINE

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“Civic Participation in Canada: Is Quebec Different? by G. Caldwell and P.Reed. Inroads, 8, 2000, p. 215-222.

“Distinguishing Characteristics of Active Volunteers in Canada”, by P. Reed and K. Selbee. Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 29, 4, 2000, p. 571-592.

“The Civic Core in Canada: Disproportionality in Charitable Giving, Volunteering, and Civic Participation”, by P. Reed and K. Selbee. Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 30, 4, 2001, p. 761-780.

“Volunteering in Canada in the 1990s: Change and Stasis”, by P. Reed and K. Selbee. Ottawa: Statistics Canada Research Report, Office of the Senior Social Scientist, 2000

## Introduction

Interest in volunteering and charitable giving has risen markedly over the past ten years. While governments hoped that volunteer workers and organizations could take over responsibility for providing some of the services lost to program devolution and downsizing, there has been a broader concern about civic engagement, of which volunteering and giving are prime components. Understanding of the social dynamics of volunteering, giving, and civic participation — what kinds of people engage in these behaviours, for what reasons and in what ways — was found to be rudimentary. In Canada, work was initiated in 1997 specifically to build a formal body of empirical and conceptual knowledge about these social dynamics using data from four national sample surveys. These surveys were the 1987 Volunteer Activity Survey, the 1997 and 2000 National Surveys of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating by Statistics Canada, and the 1996 survey “Individuals, Institutions and the Social Contract” in Canada conducted by R. Breton and P. Reed. To date, more than 20 studies have been completed using data from one or more of these national surveys.

In the first and largest of these studies, “Distinguishing Characteristics of Active Volunteers in Canada” (Reed and Selbee, 2000), several thousand logistic regression models were estimated in a systematic search for the structure of correlates of active volunteering. Early life experiences (ELEs) of various kinds related to volunteer and other civic activities were consistently prominent in many of these models. This pattern was repeated in subsequent analyses of charitable giving and civic participation, indicating the need to probe in greater detail just how ELEs were connected to these three forms of civic behaviour. To this end, a number of analyses utilizing data from the three STC surveys have been partially completed, generally driven by two questions: on what forms of civic engagement do early life experiences have greater or lesser effects, and which particular types of ELEs have greater or lesser effects? Two other questions remain to be probed in prospective analyses: what is the magnitude of effects of ELEs relative to other major variables, and how and why do ELEs lead to an elevated incidence

and magnitude of civic and contributory behaviours? Answers to these latter two questions will be developed using path analysis.

## **Data and Analyses**

Our analysis uses data principally from the National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (NSGVP) in 1997 (N=18,300) and in 2000 (N=14,750). Incidental use is made of the 1987 Volunteer Activity Survey (N=22,100) and the “Individuals, Institutions and the Social Contract in Canada” national survey (N=2015).

The two NSGVPS were conducted as supplements to Statistics Canada’s monthly Labour Force Survey in November of 1997 and 2000. The data file in each instance contained detailed information from household-dwelling individuals aged 15 years and older, of whom in 1997 31.4 percent, and in 2000 26.8 percent, reported they had given time as an unpaid volunteer to a nonprofit organization at least once during the preceding 12 months. From these data files, we selected 47 variables covering a wide range of social and economic characteristics. In addition to volunteering, giving, and participation in civic organizations, and the standard variables of age, gender, marital status, education, employment status, occupation, income, ethnic identification, language, religious affiliation, and household size and composition, we also included others such as early life experiences in civic activity, reasons for giving and volunteering, religiosity, satisfaction with life and other self-assessment measures, years of residence in present home, and community size. The full set of variables used in the analysis is described in detail in Reed and Selbee, 2000 (Appendix).

The analysis comprises two separate components. Part A uses bivariate distributions to identify the general patterns of connection between ELEs and each of the three types of civic behaviour. Part B present four logistic regression models that identify in finer, more accurate detail the effects of ELEs alone and in combination with socioeconomic variables.

## **Types of Early Life Experience Measured**

The NSGVP question, “Did you do any of the following things when you were in grade school or high school?”, permitted the following responses:

1. Participate in an organized team sport?
2. Belong to a youth group?
3. Do some kind of volunteer work?
4. Personally see someone you admired helping others?
5. Go door-to-door to raise money for a cause or organization?
6. Helped in the past by others?
7. Active in student government?
8. Active in a religious organization?
9. Did one or both of your parents do volunteer work in the community?

## **A Selection of Findings**

### Part A

1. In three multivariate analyses of antecedents and correlates of volunteering, giving, and civic participating respectively, early life experiences generally but consistently ranked in the top 5 of more than 45 variables. Where they existed, partial correlation coefficients typically lay in the region of  $\pm 0.2$ . (See Tables 1a, b, and c as illustrations.) The other strongest correlates of contributory and civic behaviours were religious affiliation, education level, household size, and occupational type (status).
2. Of the 9 different types of early life experience identified in the 1997 and 2000 iterations of the National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating, the most influential ones were, in approximate descending order:

- being active in student government
- being active in a religious organization
- participating as a youth volunteer
- having a role model for volunteering
- having parents who were volunteers

Table 2, based on 1997 NSGVP data, shows that (i) only 9% of adults who engage in volunteering had experienced none of the 9 listed youth experiences, (ii) more than half of those who were involved in student government became volunteers as adults, and (iii) the different forms of youth experience other than student government all had about equal effects on the likelihood of being a volunteer.

3. Both average and median hours of volunteering, displayed in Table 3, are significantly higher (at .05 alpha) for individuals reporting early life experiences. Involvement in student government and religious youth groups are the most influential modes of youth experience by a wide margin.
4. Youth experiences do not, in general, affect the type of organization people volunteer for (Table 4), but they do make a difference in the type of task performed as an adult volunteer (Table 5).
5. There is a major bifurcation in the link between early life experience and volunteering with respect to the religious-secular dimension (Table 6). While individuals with youth religious group involvement in their background are most likely of all modes of early life experience to volunteer as adults for religious groups, for three of the modes, the impact is negative: student government, team sports, and canvassing as youths.
6. All forms of youth experience are associated with increased levels of charitable giving (Table 7), more so for having been in a religious youth group or in student

government, although the spread in rates between the high and low is not large (between 0.82 and 0.90).

7. Most forms of youth experience have a significant impact on the rate of household giving — i.e., the annual dollar amount of charitable donations expressed as a percentage of annual household income (Table 8). Two do not: being a youth volunteer, and being in student government. Of the 7 that do affect the rate, two have small negative effects: youth team sports, and youth canvassing. By far the most important youth experience influencing rate of giving is youth religious group experience.
8. Different modes of youth experience are moderately associated with different types of organizations to which charitable donations are principally made (Table 9), again with the strongest link being between youth religious group involvement and adult donating to religious groups.
9. Three types of youth experience have a positive effect on the proportion of donations that go to religious organizations (Table 10): principally youth religious group experience, but also, in small measure, having a role model, or parents, who were volunteers.
10. As we might expect, selected forms of youth experience are associated with membership and participation in civic organizations (Table 11) as well as with volunteering and giving.

### Part B: Multivariate Analysis

In the first section of this paper, we examined some descriptive statistics that portray the impact of youth experience on contributory behaviours. As with any basic bivariate analysis, the patterns evident when each youth experience factor is examined on its own may confound both the effects of other socio-demographic factors on contributory



behaviour, and the effects of the correlations among the nine youth experience variables themselves. In the second part of this paper we expand the analysis by examining how the youth experience factors, taken together, affect volunteering and giving, and how these influences change when various socio-demographic traits of individuals that we know from other research are also related to various types of contributory behaviours are taken into consideration. This is done by estimating logistic regression models of the probability of being a volunteer and the probability of being a charitable donor given the type of youth experience (model 1 in Tables 12 and 13) and given both youth experience and other socio-demographic factors (model 2 in those tables).

#### Youth Experience Factors and the Probability of Being a Volunteer.

Model 1 in Table 12 shows the impact of each youth experience factor on volunteering, controlling for the correlations among the factors. These represent the direct effects of each youth factor on the probability of volunteering, net of the indirect effects each might have due to the association between various types of youth experience.

All youth factors have a significant positive effect on the probability of being a volunteer with the single exception of having had a volunteer role model during one's youth. The coefficient for this last factor is not significant ( $p\text{-value} > 0.05$ ).

The first four youth experience variables in model 1 have the largest impacts on the probability of volunteering: all four increase the odds of being a volunteer by about 50 to 60 percent. The other factors are not quite as strong. The rank order of the top four is exactly the same in this table as in Table 2 in Part A, where we examined the probability of being a volunteer for each youth experience factor separately. The impacts of the rest of the youth factors in model 1 are substantially lower than for the first four, although the probability of being a volunteer given each type of experience is quite similar to the first four in Table 2, Part A. This suggests that among these last five factors, the bivariate relationship between the youth experience and being a volunteer confounds some of the association between each of these factors and the others.

Previous research has shown that a wide range of socio-demographic factors also affect the probability of being a volunteer. In light of this, it is important to determine the extent to which the effects of youth experience evident in model 1 of Table 12 are due to the association between these other factors and the different types of youth experience. Model 2 of Table 12 shows the impact of youth experiences on volunteering once a set of socio-demographic factors have been controlled for. Changes in the effects of various ELEs are quite marked.

First, the effect of having been in student government is virtually unchanged (it still increases the odds of being a volunteer by 56%). The positive effect of having been in student government is not due to socio-demographic differences between those who have and have not had this experience. In contrast, the effect of having been in a youth religious group dropped dramatically — from increasing the odds by 60% to only 24%. This is the single largest change in the impact of any of the youth experience factors. Thus, much of the impact of having been in a religious youth group is due to socio-demographic differences between those who have and have not this experience. Further testing showed that the strength of the religious youth group effect in model 1 is partly due to two characteristics of individuals who have had this youth experience: as adults they tend to be conservative Protestants, and to attend church more often. Both traits are strongly linked to an increase in the probability of being a volunteer.

The impact of having been in a non-religious youth group also declines quite noticeably, but this change is not restricted to one or two factors. Instead, the decline in the youth group effect is due to its association with a mixture of education, ethnicity, religion and frequency of church attendance differences.

Other types of youth experience, such as having been helped as a youth, having been on a sports team, and having canvassed as a youth are not much affected by controlling for the socio-demographic characteristics.

## Youth Experience Factors and the Probability of Being a Charitable Donor.

Model 1 in Table 13 shows the effects of youth experience on the probability of being a charitable giver, net of the correlation among the various types of youth experience. Model 1 shows that having been a youth volunteer has no impact on the likelihood of being a giver. This is contrary to the finding in Table 7 which shows that a significantly higher proportion of those who were volunteers as youths are givers compared to those who were not volunteers. The association at the bivariate level is clearly due to the correlation between being a volunteer as a youth and participation in the other types of youth activity.

Among the ELE factors that positively affect the probability of giving, youth religious group experience clearly stands out: its effect on the odds of being a giver is almost twice that of any other factors. Having been in a secular youth group, while far weaker than the religious group effect, is also substantially more important than the other youth experience factors. While religion itself seems important, there may also be some effect due simply to being in youth groups, whether religious or secular.

Having been helped by others as a youth has a negative effect on the likelihood of giving — though the effect is quite small. Having been helped may be indicative of economic and social distress as a youth that may be carried into adulthood; as adults, these people may be less able to give rather than less inclined to give. In model 2, this effect becomes non-significant when socio-demographic factors enter the equation. Thus for adults in the same socio-economic situation, there are no differences in the likelihood of being a charitable giver.

Model 2 of Table 13 shows some very large changes in the effects of youth experiences once socio-demographic factors are considered. First, the impact of religious group experience is greatly diminished -- it goes from 1<sup>st</sup> in rank to 5<sup>th</sup> of the seven significant youth factors. Examining the socio-demographic traits that affect the size of the religious

youth group effect, we find the largest impact is due to controlling for religiosity, followed by church attendance and then age.

Age is understandable because older people give more, and more often, than younger people, and we would expect older people to have more often been part of youth religious groups than younger people since there has been a general historical decline in religious participation of all types. Thus, those with youth religious group experience will tend to be older than those without. This is true in the sample — those with religious group experience are significantly older than those without: 47 versus 41 years of age on average.

The decline in the youth religious group effect due to religiosity and church attendance frequency suggests that youth religious group experience is an early indication of a person's involvement with their religious community. It is not necessarily the youth experience per se that encourages giving but rather the whole religious environment that carries over from youth to adulthood that does so.

Having been in a secular youth group also shows a sharp decline in its effects on giving. This is not due to any single socio-demographic effect, however. Instead, the large effect deriving from youth group participation seen in model 1 is largely due to the fact that those with such experience tend to be older, wealthier, married, and female, all characteristics that positively affect the probability of being a giver.

Two factors are relatively stronger here than they were in model 1: canvassing, and team sports. This suggests that there are socio-demographic factors that suppress the adult effect of these youth experiences. For canvassing, the important factor is age: those who have not canvassed as youths are substantially older (average age = 47) than those who have (average age = 30), and since age is positively correlated with giving, the canvassing effect is reduced unless age is considered. In fact, for any given age group, having canvassed as a youth has the strongest effect on the odds of giving of all the youth experience factors.

The team sports factor is suppressed by the exclusion of age and gender; team sports is an experience more typical of the young and of males, and both groups have reduced likelihood of being givers.

Two conclusions are clearly supported by this multivariate examination of the impact of early life experiences on giving. First, age is an important qualifier of the effect of youth experience factors. In some cases, such as being helped as a youth, youth group and religious youth group participation, controlling for age reduces substantially the impact of the youth factor — part of the effect these experiences seen in model 1 is simply due to the fact those with each type of youth experience tend to be older than those without, and older people are more likely to be givers. In other situations, the reverse is the case — for canvassing and team sports it is those without such experience who are older and thus the basic youth experience factor effect is suppressed. Second, the experience of religion — at whatever age in life and in whatever fashion — is strongly linked to the probability of being a charitable giver.

To summarize the patterns:

1. The effects of secular and religious involvement in society seem to be mirrored in the comparison of student government and religious group youth experiences.
2. Age is implicated in several youth experience effects.
3. Youth experiences matter for the probability of volunteering but their impact tends to be reduced by controlling for socio-demographic effects.
4. Youth experiences matter for the probability of being a giver, but again, a substantial part of the zero-order effects are actually due to socio-demographic factors.