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# Adolescent Civic Involvement and the Great Recession of 2008: Testing the Certainty of Employment

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## Abstract

This study employs data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 to investigate the relationship between the voluntary civic involvement of high school students and their subsequent employment status during the Great Recession of 2008. It also examines whether volunteering with a specific type of community organization relates to future employment. Such youth civic involvement offers experiential learning in which students use academic knowledge and skills to address specific community needs. Along the pathways to employment, students achieve learning objectives while experiencing real-world issues. Using SPSS, the authors conduct a logistical regression, and discuss the results using odds ratios. The authors also include gender, ethnicity, family composition, parents' highest level of education, and family income as demographic variables.

## Introduction

Engagement in volunteer service during adolescence is linked to many important qualities that facilitate the transition to adulthood and, ultimately, the workforce, including increased personal and social responsibility (Hamilton & Fenzel, 1988) and the development of a professional demeanor (Gonzalez & Golden, 2009). For decades, researchers have noted the connection between volunteerism and favorable job search outcomes, in that volunteer service can demonstrate character through actions to better society, facilitate career exploration, develop skills, and build a network of professional contacts (Ellis, 1993). In the wake of the Great Recession of 2008, the national unemployment rate doubled from 5% to 10% from January 2008 to October 2009, and unusually high unemployment rates continued to prevail into 2013 (Spera, Ghertner, Nerino, & DiTommaso, 2013). Using data from the Educational Longitudinal Study (ELS) of 2002 (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.), which describes the academic performance and social development outcomes of a high school cohort 10 years after their sophomore year (i.e., 2002 to 2012), this study sought to understand how young people fared with respect to employment after the Great Recession of 2008. Specifically, this study emerged out of a desire to understand if a relationship existed between volunteer service in adolescence and future employment. This has important implications for educational equity, as this study seeks to understand how volunteer partnerships can facilitate future employment, which can impact economic mobility.

## Literature Review

This study builds on recent literature that tests the statistical relationship between volunteerism and employment (Spera et al., 2013) and addresses a gap in the literature by examining adolescent volunteering in high school and future employment. The literature linking volunteerism and employment coalesces around the following areas: (a) civic engagement and the transition to adulthood (Chan, Ou, & Reynolds, 2014; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Larson, Wilson, & Mortimer, 2002; Youniss, Bales, Christmas-Best, Diversi, McLaughlin, & Silbereisen, 2002); (b) volunteering and the development of social capital (Bourdieu, 1985; Flanagan, Kim, Collura, & Kopish, 2015; Oesterle, Johnson, & Mortimer, 2004; Spera et al., 2013); (c) cultivating human capital through service (Larson, Wilson, & Mortimer, 2002; Morrow-Howell, 2006; Spera et al., 2013); and (d) the acquisition of job skills through service (Hart, Donnelly, Youniss, & Atkins, 2007; Raskoff & Sundeen, 1999; Spera, Ghertner, Nerino, & DiTommaso, 2015).

As high schools are increasingly held accountable for producing college and career-ready graduates, researchers have pointed out that this emphasis overlooks the mission of schools to prepare students for civic life (Baumann, Millard, & Hamdorf, 2014). Recognizing that school and community settings are legitimate sites of learning, Baumann et al. (2014) argue for readiness that encompasses college, career, and civic life. Furthermore, problem-solving experiences in the volunteer setting can advance development along the several fronts of Conley's Four Keys to College and Career Readiness, which are cognitive

strategies, content knowledge, learning skills and techniques, and transition knowledge and skills (Darling-Hammond, Wilhoit, & Pittenger, 2014).

Civic engagement, as a form of experiential education, has emerged as a learning opportunity that offers many of the competencies that can lead to favorable employment outcomes, such as field knowledge and experience and organizational socialization (Eyler, 2009). Because of current economic upheaval caused by technology, global competition, and workforce changes, many employers from various fields require much more from their entry-level employees (Ramson, 2014). New hires must possess sophisticated core competencies (e.g., tools from civic engagement experience acquired in secondary schools) to help safeguard employers' viability.

Service learning, another dimension of civic engagement, can facilitate a college-bound mentality among students of color and students from low-income backgrounds (Cress, Burack, Giles, Elkins, & Stevens, 2010). However, while research indicates benefits in the long-term, opportunities for civic engagement, generally, are not evenly appropriated by class or ethnicity, making the pathways to secured employment more uncertain (Flanagan & Levine, 2010).

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

(RQ1) Did 10th graders who performed unpaid volunteer/community service work from 2002 through 2004 have a higher likelihood of attaining employment in 2012?

(RQ2) Did 10th graders who performed unpaid volunteer/community service work from 2002 through 2004 with a particular service organization have a higher likelihood of attaining employment in 2012?

For the second research question (RQ2), this study examined eight types of community organizations: (a) youth, (b) educational, (c) conservation/environmental, (d) school/community service, (e) political club, (f) church/church-related, (g) community center/social action, and (h) hospital/nursing home.

### **Methods**

The research questions at issue addressed employment outcomes, which were treated as dichotomous variables. Logistic regression is the most appropriate analytical approach for dealing with binary outcome variables (Thompson,

2006). Using SPSS, the authors conducted two separate logistic regression analyses to investigate if volunteering in high school increased the likelihood of future employment and if volunteering in high school with a particular type of organization increased the likelihood of future employment. A review of the literature recommended the inclusion of additional demographic predictor variables (i.e., gender, ethnicity, family composition, and socioeconomic status) to provide a more comprehensive picture of additional influences on successful employment outcomes and the propensity to volunteer.

### **Data**

The present study utilized data from ELS 2002 conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.). Over 15,000 10th graders within 750 schools were randomly selected by ELS 2002 as a nationally representative sample in 2002. Respondents were first interviewed in 2002 (base year) and then during follow-ups in 2004, 2006, and 2012. Respondents who stayed in school would have been in the 12th grade in 2004 and approximately 26 years old in 2012.

In the base year, respondents received cognitive achievement tests and a self-administered questionnaire that inquired about the students' demographic and family information, school experiences and activities, plans for the future, and "beliefs and opinions about self" (Ingels, Pratt, Wilson, Burns, Currivan, Rogers, & Hubbard-Bednasz, 2007, p. 19). In the first follow-up, respondents provided high school transcripts, took a mathematics assessment, and completed another questionnaire containing similar items to the base year (e.g., updated demographic and family information; school experiences and activities; how students spent their free time; plans and goals for the future; and involvement with community, family, and friends, Ingels et al., 2007). In the third and final follow-up, respondents provided updated education information (e.g., postsecondary transcripts) and completed a self-administered questionnaire. The content of this questionnaire included information about their educational/vocational status and experience, financial information (e.g., income and student loan information), future goals for education/vocation, family status, community/civic involvement, and "life values" (Ingels, Pratt, Alexander, Jewell, Lauff, Mattox, & Wilson, 2014, p. 16).

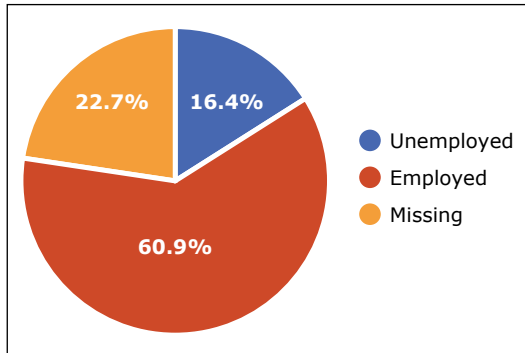
Researchers from ELS 2002 based the majority of questionnaire items from the base year to

the third follow-up on the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 for the purpose of longitudinal comparison (Ingels et al., 2014). They also updated items to address education policy changes as well as to incorporate theoretical changes and advancement (Burns, Heuer, Ingels, Pollack, Pratt, Rock, Rogers, Scott, Siegel, & Stutts, 2003). To establish content and construct validity, the questionnaire in ELS 2002 underwent revisions according to feedback from experts in the field and relevant literature (Ingels et al., 2014). Additionally, in the third follow-up questionnaire, researchers field-tested new items and those of “critical importance” through cognitive interviews (Ingels et al., 2014, p. 14). Reliability estimates (i.e., alpha coefficients) from the base year and first follow-up questionnaire scale items ranged from “a low of  $r = .80$ ...to a high of  $r = .93$ ” (Burns et al., 2003, p. 76). In the third follow-up, a Cronbach’s alpha for scale items ranged from 0.8 to 0.9 (Ingels et al., 2014).

The current study derived variables of interest from the base year data, first follow-up data in 2004, and third follow-up data in 2012. More specifically, information regarding the respondents’ volunteer or community service activity—both the presence or absence of such activity as well as the specific type (e.g., youth, service, church, school, civic, or social action groups)—was drawn from the first follow-up data. The researchers in the present study derived the outcome variable, obtaining future employment, from the third follow-up data. Additionally, important student demographics identified in previous research (Larson, Wilson, & Mortimer, 2002; Morrow-Howell, 2006; Spera et al., 2013) came from either the base year data or the first follow-up data. Those demographics included student gender, ethnicity, family composition, parents’ highest level of education, and family income. A description of the main variables of interest to this study is provided in subsequent paragraphs.

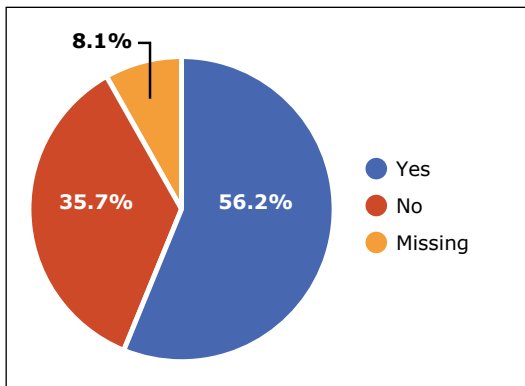
**Employment status.** In the third follow-up, respondents answered a series of questions related to their employment status. Questions inquired whether or not they engaged in the following: full- or part-time work; the military; post-secondary education including 2-year, 4-year, graduate, professional, technical, trade, and vocational schools; or caring for dependent children or adults. Originally, the responses included five categories outlining the amount of work in which the respondent engaged. From these categories the researchers created a dichotomous variable to represent whether the respondent was employed or not employed. This variable served as the outcome variable in

**Figure 1.** Outcome Variable: Employment Status in 2012



*Note.* Those who were unemployed served as the reference group. Recoded from five to two categories. Unemployed=0; Employed=1.

**Figure 2.** Predictor: Performed Unpaid Volunteer Work



*Note.* Adolescents who did not volunteer served as the reference group. No=0; Yes=1.

the analyses. For the present data analyses, unemployed individuals acted as the reference group (employed=1 and not employed=0; see Figure 1).

**Performed unpaid volunteer/community service work.** Students responded to a yes or no question as to whether or not they had engaged in volunteer or community service within the previous two years (2002–2004). If students responded yes, they provided information regarding the types of organizations with which they volunteered. Adolescents who did not volunteer served as the reference group in the analyses (yes=1 and no=0; see Figure 2).

**Specific type of organization.** Students who reported engaging in unpaid volunteer or community service work specified which type(s) of organizations through a yes/no response. The questionnaire included eight different organizations (e.g., youth, service, church, school, civic, or social action groups). For the present data analyses, students who did not volunteer served as the reference

**Table 1.** Predictor: Type of Service Organization (in percent)

Type of Service Organization	Yes	No	Missing
Youth Organization	11.0	81.8	8.0
Conservation/Environmental Group	3.3	86.6	8.0
Political Club/Organization	4.5	87.2	8.3
Church/Church-Related Group	21.6	70.3	8.2
Hospital/Nursing Home Group	9.6	82.1	8.3
School/Community Service Organization	16.0	76.0	8.0
Community Center/Social Action Group	12.2	79.6	8.2
Educational Organization	9.4	82.3	8.2

Note. Students specified type via yes/no responses to eight different organizations.

group, with eight dummy variables representing the different organizations (see Table 1).

## Results

The first research question (RQ1) investigated whether or not volunteering in high school related to future employment. The results showed that on average, adolescents who volunteered had 31.5% greater odds of future employment ( $p < .05$ ) as compared to the odds for adolescents who did not volunteer, holding all other predictors constant (see Table 2).

The second research question (RQ2) sought to determine whether or not volunteering with a specific type of volunteer organization in high school related to future employment. The results indicated that volunteering with particular types of community organizations related to the odds of obtaining future employment. Specifically, this study found that volunteering with an educational organization increased the odds of future employment by 22.9% ( $p < .05$ ). Volunteering with a school and/or community service organization increased the odds of future employment by 26.4% ( $p < .05$ ). Finally, volunteering with a community center and/or social action group increased the odds of future employment by 18.1% ( $p < .05$ ) (see Table 3).

Several covariates also provided results of note. For RQ1, students who were male ( $OR = 1.272$ ;  $p < .05$ ), White (reference group), whose parents completed four years of college ( $OR = 1.144$ ;  $p < .05$ ), and who were from a higher income family ( $OR = 1.050$ ;  $p < .05$ ) were more likely to obtain employment, holding all other independent variables constant. Similar findings emerged for RQ2. Students who were male ( $OR = 1.274$ ;  $p < .05$ ), White (reference group), and from a higher income family ( $OR = 1.052$ ;  $p < .05$ ) were more likely to obtain employment, holding all other independent variables constant (see Tables 2 and 3).

## Discussion

The relationship between volunteering and future employment is consistent with extant literature showing that volunteer service can relate to employment outcomes (Spera et al., 2015). In addition to affirming this relationship, the paper addresses a gap in the literature by examining adolescent volunteering while

exploring the influence of the type of community organization on future employment. The relationship between volunteerism and increased odds of future employment also complements a study by Matthews, Dorfman, and Wu (2015), which found that college graduates who participated in service-learning courses received higher starting salaries as well as their first raises quicker than graduates who had not engaged in service learning.

Academic behaviors—specifically self-monitoring skills (e.g., time management, goal setting, perseverance, and collaboration)—are another dimension of college and career readiness that are among the least assessed in the literature (Lombardi, Seburn & Conley, 2011). Balancing school work with other commitments, such as volunteering, is a measure of persistence that can contribute to postsecondary success (Lombardi et al., 2011).

In considering how schools can support deeper student development, Darling-Hammond et al. (2014) urged the adoption of a broader definition of college and career readiness that encompasses skills such as “critical thinking, problem solving, communication, creativity, and the ability to learn” (p. 13). Adolescent volunteerism can accomplish many of those learning objectives. In fact, as Pittman (2010) asserted, while schools play a decisive role in shaping educational outcomes, they are part of a larger community-wide ecosystem in which there are “people, organizations, and experiences outside of school that play equal and sometimes more powerful teaching roles whose contributions need to be acknowledged, aligned, and supported” (p. 14). Based on this research, it is possible that volunteer experience may merit recognition alongside academic benchmarks for college and career readiness, such as problem solving and self-monitoring behaviors.

**Limitations**

It is important to consider several limitations. First, these data provided no information as to the type of volunteer work completed, frequency of volunteer activity, or whether or not volunteering was a required activity. It should also be noted that the ELS 2002 data set was derived from cluster samples in selected geographic areas around the United States. Additionally, the logistic regression models in this study did not account for the disparate impact of the 2008 recession in these geographic areas, which may have influenced employment outcomes. Similarly, the geographic location of future employment is not known, nor is the duration of employment.

**Future Research**

These limitations notwithstanding, this analysis has several implications for areas of future research. The first is to understand how volunteerism can relate to future employment—namely, to understand how the influences of human capital, social capital, and a nascent professional network may influence the likelihood of a successful job search. Exploring the depth and breadth of volunteer experiences that can best prepare high school students for successful futures in post-secondary education and the workforce can provide additional insight into these questions, as well as understanding in involvement with particular service organizations related to future employment. Despite these favorable factors, it also will be important to attend to: (a) the fact that racial and ethnic background also were statistically significant predictors in this study;

**Table 2.** Does Volunteering Relate to Future Employment?

Predictor	Slopes	SE	Odds Ratio
Male	.241*	.049	1.272
Black	-.197*	.078	.822
Hispanic	-.264*	.073	.768
Asian	-.531*	.076	.588
Multiracial	-.376*	.111	.687
Single-Parent Family	-.004	.063	.996
Two Years of College	.134	.073	1.144
Four Years of College	.134*	.068	1.144
Graduate Degree	-.118	.079	.889
Family Income	.049*	.012	1.050
Performed Volunteer Service	.274*	.052	1.315

\*p<.05

**Table 3.** Are Certain Types of Organizations Better Employment Predictors?

Predictor	Slopes	SE	Odds Ratio
Male	.242*	.050	1.274
Black	-.186*	.079	.830
Hispanic	-.274*	.073	.761
Asian	-.538*	.077	.584
Multiracial	-.371*	.112	.690
Single-Parent Family	-.006	.063	.994
Two Years of College	.137	.073	1.147
Four Years of College	.134	.068	1.144
Graduate Degree	-.116	.079	.890
Family Income	.051*	.012	1.052
Volunteered with Youth Organization	.052	.080	1.053
Volunteered with Educational Organization	.206*	.086	1.229
Volunteered with Conservation and/or Environmental Group	-.028	.052	.972
Volunteered with School and/or Community Service Organization	.234*	.132	1.264
Volunteered with Political Club and/or Organization	-.172	.113	.842
Volunteered with Church-Related Group	.100	.062	1.105
Volunteered with Community Center and/or Social-action Group	.167*	.079	1.181
Volunteered with Hospital and/or Nursing Home Group	-.087	.082	.916

\*p<.05

and (b) the related questions of why and how to account for markers of implicit bias that may influence employers, despite job applicant participation in volunteer service.

With a continuing emphasis on college and career-ready graduates, future researchers also should consider the extent to which volunteering

in high school can contribute to personal and professional development, successfully obtaining employment, and job satisfaction once employed.

## Conclusion

The findings linking adolescent volunteerism with future employment buttress the call to integrate volunteerism into public education efforts, at least in high school, and potentially along the P–20 continuum (along with other indicators of student readiness and success). Beyond the question of student preparation, the present study also surfaces troubling questions around hiring practices. In the present study, non-white race/ethnicity resulted in a lower likelihood of employment. This raises questions around markers of implicit bias that may influence employers, as well as the possibility that participation in volunteer service might increase the likelihood that students of color will obtain future employment. As researchers continue to consider how to reimagine equity and challenge persistent racial and economic inequality, exploring the impact of volunteering in high school and beyond may well have powerful implications for realizing new pathways to educational equity and future economic mobility.

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