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## Who Is Volunteering for the Maine 4-H Program?

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NEXT ARTICLE



## Who Is Volunteering for the Maine 4-H Program?

### Abstract

The study reported here was designed to identify the people who are most likely to volunteer for the Maine 4-H Youth Development program and determine how they became involved and why they continue to provide service to the organization. Volunteer demographics can then be used to shape marketing and volunteer recruitment efforts, ultimately enlarging a currently dwindling volunteer base for the Maine 4-H program. Although demographic profiles of 4-H volunteers haven't changed much in 50 years, Extension staff should use this information to put new focus on recruitment, retention, and recognition.

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## Literature Review

Volunteer leaders have been central to the success of the 4-H program since its inception (Wessel & Wessel, 1982). Yet recruiting and keeping volunteers can be very challenging. To deal with the shortage of volunteers in youth development programs, efforts could be made to recruit more men, adults over age 65, and retired adults (Rouse & Clawson, 1992). Even though 4-H programs rely heavily on volunteer leaders, little research has explored the nature of a volunteer's experience as a 4-H leader (White & Arnold, 2003), and little research has been conducted focusing on the demographics of 4-H volunteers (Culp, 2005).

Becoming familiar with social background characteristics and their relationship to volunteer participation provides information on who is most likely to volunteer (Rohs, 1986). A need exists for more information about volunteers so that better strategies can be developed for helping volunteers reach their personal goals and the goals of the organization (Henderson, 1980). One of the unique characteristics of 4-H is the level of family involvement. 4-H is perhaps one option in today's culture that provides a way to bring the families of volunteers closer around the focal point of the 4-H program (Henderson, 1980).

## Introduction

The study reported here was designed to identify characteristics of people who are volunteering for the Maine 4-H youth development program and determine how they become involved and why they continue to provide service to the organization. By creating a profile of current volunteers in the state of Maine, we can then use volunteer demographics to shape marketing and volunteer recruitment efforts, ultimately enlarging a currently dwindling volunteer base for the Maine 4-H program. Interestingly, the study revealed that the profile of the typical 4-H volunteer has changed very little over the past 50 years.

## Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of the study was to gather data from current volunteers, in order to improve recruitment efforts and thus enhance program quality.

The objectives were to:

- Develop a demographic profile of the typical Maine 4-H volunteer.
- Determine what role past experience with 4-H plays in becoming a 4-H volunteer.
- Determine how current volunteers became involved with the program.
- Determine why current volunteers continue to be involved with the program.

## Procedure

The population for the study included 2004-2005 enrolled 4-H adult volunteers. Each of the 16 University of Maine Cooperative Extension county offices in Maine submitted their mailing list for currently enrolled volunteers. The sample comprised 592 individuals. Each study participant was mailed a survey consisting of 22 questions, 20 of which collected quantitative data and two of which collected qualitative data. In an effort to boost the response rate, a postage-paid postcard was also included. Participants were encouraged to return the postcard separately after completing their survey, so their name could be entered into a drawing for a gift certificate.

Follow up postcards were mailed out 4 weeks later to non-respondents. A third and final mailing that included another copy of the survey was mailed out 3 weeks later to any individuals who still had not responded. The final response rate was 72%.

## Findings

### The Survey Data

The following questions from the survey revealed these data about Maine 4-H volunteers.

- Who volunteers?
  - 85% are females between the ages of 36 and 45.
  - 80% are married.
  - 60% have two to three children.
  - 71% have an education beyond a high school degree.
  - 52% have a household income of \$40,000 or greater, as compared to the median Maine household income of \$39,212 (U.S. Census Bureau 2000).
  - 90% have lived in Maine for more than 10 years.
  - nearly 80% give up to 10 hours per week to the program.
  - 40% hold more than one additional leadership role in the community.
- Is there a history of 4-H in the family?
  - 44% of the individuals surveyed were members of 4-H as youths.
  - 13.2% of current volunteers had mothers who were in 4-H as youths.
  - 12.2% had fathers who were in the program as youths.
  - 21% of volunteers had mothers who were 4-H volunteers.
  - 12% of volunteers had fathers who were 4-H volunteers.
  - 18% of those surveyed (75) had at least one parent who participated in 4-H as a youth and as an adult volunteer.
  - 11% of respondents were members of 4-H as youth and had at least one parent who participated as a youth and as an adult volunteer.
- How did current volunteers become involved as 4-H leaders?
  - 48% of the currently enrolled 4-H volunteers self-initiated their involvement.
  - 20.8% were personally invited to join.
  - 15% were asked to get involved by a family member.
- Why did current volunteers become involved?

- 62% became volunteers for the sake of their own children.
- 23% initiated involvement based on past experience.
- Why do current volunteers stay?
  - 22% of volunteers stay with the program for the benefit of their own children or grandchildren.
  - 15% stay because they believe in the values connected to the 4-H program.
  - 10% believe in the philosophy of 4-H.
  - 10% stay involved because they love children and enjoy seeing growth in individual youth.
  - 5% cited reasons such as fun, family-oriented, and rewarding.

### How Much Are Maine 4-H Volunteers Worth?

Based on figures released in March 2005 by the Independent Sector, a privately funded research institute, the value of volunteers working with youth service-related organizations can be calculated \$17.55 hour. The net worth of volunteers supporting the Maine 4-H program in the 2004-2005 was more than \$677,709. Actual worth could be as much as 25% higher, because the total number of hours was based on responses from 72% of enrolled volunteers who responded to the survey, and calculations were based on an average range of hours reported.

**Table 1.**  
Number of Volunteer Hours/Month

<b>Volunteer Hours</b>	<b>Volunteers</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
0—5 hours/month	198	46.37
6—10 hours/month	144	33.72
11—20 hours/month	58	13.58
21—30 hours/month	16	3.75
31—50 hours/month	4	0.94
More than 50 hours	2	0.47
No Answer	5	1.17
<b>Total:</b>	<b>427</b>	<b>100.00</b>

### How Does Maine Compare With National Volunteerism Trends?

Maine 4-H volunteers tend to be in line with national trends of volunteerism as compared with data from the United States Department of Labor (2005).

**Table 2.**  
Comparison Between Maine 4-H Volunteers and National Volunteerism Trends

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>National (2004)</b>	<b>Maine 4 H Program (2005)</b>
Age group with highest rate of volunteerism	35—44	36—45
Gender	25% of total male population 32% of total female population	Male: 15% Female: 85%
Marital status	Higher rate among married persons	80% married
Total annual hours	52 hours/year	79.7% averaged between 36 and 84 hours/year
Main organization	Religious or educational/youth-service related	In addition to 4-H: Religious affiliation 83% Scouts 60%
How volunteers became	40%: own initiative	48%: own initiative

involved with main organization	42%: asked to join	20.8%: asked to join
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## Has the Typical Volunteer Profile Changed Over the Past 50 Years?

Data from the study reported here is remarkably similar to results reported by Clark and Skelton (1950), Banning (1970), Denmark (1971), Parrott (1977), and Culp (1996). 4-H volunteers appear to be similar across time and geographic locations. A small decrease in marital status over time can be noted, while perhaps the only major change between 1950 and 2005 is the decrease in the number of homemakers, which can be attributed to the current larger number of women in the workforce.

**Table 3.**  
Comparison of Findings of 4-H Volunteer Demographic Variables

Demographic Variable	Clark and Skelton 1950 New York	Banning 1970 42 States	Denmark 1971 Texas	Parrott 1977 Oklahoma	Culp 1996 Indiana	Lobley 2005 Maine
Average Age	No data	36—55: 65%	41	39.74	42.51	36—45: 42%
Gender	F: 100%	F: 100%	F: 76.8%	F: 100%	F: 71.86%	F: 85%
Marital Status	M: 100%	M: 100%	M: 95.9%	M: 96%	M: 87.25%	M: 80%
Education	ave: 12+	HS: 86% College: 20%	ave: 12.7	HS: 98.6% College: 37.8%	ave: 13.93	HS: 85% College: 38%
Occupation	Homemaker Teacher	HM: 48.9% Teacher: 28.8%	HM: 61.8%	HM: 55% Teacher: 26.3	HM: 19% Prof: 22% Serv: 21%	HM: 20% Prof.: 18.7%
Income	Above average	No data	5—15K: 64%	No data	ave: \$30—50K	\$40—59,999K: 30%
Years 4-H membership	No data	No data	1.6years: 36.4%	3.5years: 67.8%	ave: 7.83 years	4-H members as youth: 44%
No children	No data	No data	2.8%	2.6%	2.4%	7.73%
Number of volunteer organizations involved with	No data	No data	ave: 2.8	volunteered for at least one other organization 83.7%	ave: 2.48	held leadership positions in other community organizations: 40%

## Implications

### What's It Worth?

The worth of our volunteers can be estimated by tracking the number of hours that they devote to the program. Putting a monetary value on volunteer time can be beneficial in a number of ways. State 4-H foundations can use the data to help solicit donors, and it could be used to leverage funds in grant applications. Estimated value of volunteers could be especially useful with stakeholders such as county commissioners, to leverage funds and demonstrate the value of 4-H youth development programs.

### Building a Volunteer Base

Of particular interest is the percentage of current volunteers' association with religious organizations (83%) and scout programs (60%). Data suggests that recruitment efforts should be focused in these two areas, including investigating potential 4-H collaborations with scouting programs. In addition, nearly 50% of our volunteers self-initiated their involvement with the

program. If this trend continues, in order to avoid missed opportunities Extension staff need to have volunteer materials readily available and easily accessible and should have a process in place that is user-friendly for potential new volunteers.

Research shows that often individuals fail to volunteer for a particular organization simply because they were not asked. Of current Maine 4-H volunteers, 35.8% were personally asked to become involved in the program. If word of mouth is the best form of advertisement, perhaps we should be looking to our current 4-H leaders to help us expand our volunteer base. An incentive system for current volunteers to recruit additional volunteers could be designed and implemented to help expand the volunteer base in a fairly short amount of time.

One of the unique and historic characteristics of 4-H is that it is family oriented. Perhaps county staff can take an active role by examining their volunteer recognition activities and engage volunteers in conversation around how to encourage more family participation.

Certainly it makes sense that our volunteers stay involved with the program for the benefit of their children. Of concern is the fact that less than 5% stated they stayed involved because the program was fun, family oriented, and rewarding. If volunteers are not viewing 4-H as fun and we are not making them feel rewarded for their efforts, then perhaps these reasons are contributing to the dwindling of the 4-H volunteer base in Maine during the past few years.

## Further Research

The initial findings of the project described here have led to more questions about volunteerism. Areas of future study may include deeper exploration with individual volunteers who self-initiated their involvement. Such qualitative research in this area could provide rich and valuable data, allowing the researcher to look for themes that could include the type of experience volunteers had as a youth in 4-H, the type of project they were involved in, the impact of their 4-H leader, and how many years they were actively involved as a 4-H member. For those volunteers who became involved in the program as a volunteer but were not 4-H members as youth, a set of questions looking at why they chose 4-H and what their experience with Extension was like when they initiated interest could prove to be valuable as well. In addition, interviews with 4-H alumni who are *not* currently involved as volunteers with the program could provide insight into how to bridge the gap between youth membership and adult volunteer participation.

## Conclusion

Over the past 50 years, the profile of the typical 4-H volunteer has changed very little. With 84% of current volunteers becoming involved with the program through self-initiation or direct invitation, Extension staff should focus their efforts on retention--including fun leadership development opportunities and strong recognition programs--and create incentives for current 4-H leaders to recruit additional volunteers. Finally, with almost a quarter of the current volunteer base acknowledging that they stay for the benefit of their children and grandchildren, there will be volunteers on the brink of deciding whether or not to exit the program when their children and grandchildren graduate. Attention should be given to exploring new roles for these seasoned but valuable volunteers, so that they can continue to share their gifts and the Maine 4-H program can continue to benefit from all they have to offer.

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