

Volunteer Outcomes and Impact: The Contributions and Consequences of Volunteering in 4-H

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Abstract

Youth development volunteers are relied upon by many youth organizations to deliver educational programming, and consequently, fulfill organizations' missions. Our study explored the consequences of volunteering in youth services by focusing on volunteer outcomes (consequences of volunteering on the volunteer) and volunteer impacts (volunteers' contributions to the organization). We collected 1,245 open-ended responses to 2 questions from adults who served as volunteers in the University of California 4-H Youth Development Program. We applied iterative inductive thematic analysis without a pre-existing coding scheme to each question independently. Volunteers described their impacts on 4-H as expanding and maintaining programs for children, providing support to and teaching youth, and helping to realize youth outcomes. By volunteering, adults reported outcomes including developing skills, improving well-being, and deepening connections with others.

Key words: youth development volunteer, volunteer outcomes, volunteer impact



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Introduction

Volunteering, an activity where one gives their time without expectation of direct financial benefit, realizes benefits for the recipients of the organization's services, the organization itself, and the volunteers themselves. In the United States, individuals volunteer in a variety of domains; the top five are religious, education or youth service, social or community service, hospital and health care, and civic or political (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Research on volunteerism began in late 20th century (e.g., D. H. Smith, 1975) and has grown substantially in the past four decades. While there is abundant research on the motivations for volunteering, and role and satisfaction, there is a lack of inquiry on the consequences of volunteering (Wilson, 2012).

We begin by reviewing the existing scholarship on the consequences of volunteering, although the literature does not generally differentiate between domains on volunteers' contributions to the organization (impacts) and the consequences of volunteering on the volunteer (outcomes). We then turn to the literature of volunteering in education and youth services, the second most common form of volunteering in the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). We identify the need for the present study.

Volunteer Impacts

Organizations recruit volunteers to extend, strengthen, or cover critical roles in fulfilling their missions. Volunteers connect organizations to their communities and enable them to offer services that might otherwise not exist (Cordery et al., 2013). Methods to assess and communicate the value of volunteer contributions can be time consuming, expensive, or unreliable; however, a common assessment is economic impact. The Independent Sector (2018) estimated the value of U.S.-based volunteers at \$24.69 per hour. Organizations may demonstrate the value of volunteer contributions by using this economic figure; however, the Independent Sector noted "volunteers provide many intangibles that cannot be easily quantified" ("How the numbers are calculated" para. 4). Barriers may exist to valuing volunteer contributions, such as resource constraints, organizations being sensitive to who gets counted and what they are worth, and lack of organizational commitment to valuation (Cordery et al., 2013).

Bowman (2009) offered critiques of two common methods for estimating volunteer value and argued that in some cases, volunteers might contribute no direct economic value, but still

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generate additional contributions; “volunteers are not simply replacements for paid workers ... they can work together with paid staff to increase output quantity or quality” (p. 504). Other methods to assess volunteers’ contributions may be communicating how volunteers have improved organizational outcomes and/or achieved broader community and social impacts (Englert & Helmig, 2018). While the needs and roles of volunteers vary, some organizations afford opportunities for their volunteers to make a significant, innovative, or lasting impact. This may be by providing authentic opportunities for volunteers to improve services, change procedures that impact clientele, and otherwise contribute to the organization’s mission. Volunteers may also contribute to broader social impacts, such as strengthening social connections; building strong, safe, cohesive communities; enhancing participation in civic endeavors; or improving delivery of public services (Wu, 2011). Grant et al. (2020) shared that 4-H volunteers reported contributing to the organization beyond the value of their time, for example, providing transportation for youth, supplies, money, and access to networks. Unfortunately, in general, the empirical literature on assessing volunteer impacts beyond economic value is sparse.

Volunteer Outcomes

The consequences of volunteering for the individuals themselves has generated some empirical work. Consistent across the literature is the suggestion that volunteering improves well-being (including self-efficacy, self-esteem, and reduced depression), strengthens physical health, and reduces mortality, although most studies have grouped together volunteerism from divergent domains and differing organizational contexts.

Wilson and Musick (1999) and Wilson (2000) summarized research showing that volunteering (a) promotes good citizenship practices, such as the ability to organize a meeting and improved social trust; (b) reduces anti-social behavior to a modest degree and builds interpersonal skills, empathy, and respect for others; (c) realizes physical health benefits and reduces mortality due to social integration and social support, particularly for older adults; (d) improves mental health and well-being by strengthening social integration, fostering trust, cultivating self-efficacy, and improving sense of agency; (e) sees positive benefits to occupational achievement as volunteers develop social connections. Wilson and Musick concluded that “there are individual benefits to be derived from doing volunteer work that reach far beyond the volunteer act itself and may linger long after the volunteer role is relinquished” (p. 167). Around the same time, Thoits and Hewitt (2001) published an article on volunteering and well-being where they recognized a dearth of research on volunteer work and its relationship with well-being;

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“surprisingly little attention has been paid to the actual consequences of volunteer service for individuals’ physical and/or psychological well-being” (p. 115). They found that those who invested more hours in volunteer service also had greater levels of happiness, life satisfaction, self-esteem, sense of mastery, physical health, and lower depression. Wilson (2012) provided an updated literature review summarizing volunteer outcomes in three areas: (a) mental health and illness, (b) physical health, and (c) socioeconomic benefits. Wilson argued that volunteering protected against symptoms of depression while augmenting psychological resources (e.g., buffering against stress, enhancing mastery experiences), improved social connections/friendships, and was associated with lower levels of morbidity and mortality. More recently, Stukas et al. (2016) found, from a survey of Australians, that those who were motivated to volunteer for other-oriented reasons, such as reaffirming relationships or to learn more about other people, had higher levels of social connectedness, self-esteem, trust in others, self-efficacy, and well-being (e.g., relationships, health, achievements in life). Those who volunteered for self-oriented reasons, such as advancing their careers or distracting themselves from personal problems, were more likely to have lower levels for each indicator. Few empirical papers focus on outcomes realized by those who volunteer in youth development, even though this form of volunteer is very common in the United States. Questions remain about if, and how, volunteers may experience similar or differing outcomes in a youth services context compared to other domains of volunteer activity.

Youth Development Volunteerism

Youth development volunteers are relied upon in a variety of organizations, including Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, 4-H Youth Development, and Camp Fire (Wymer, 1998). In many organizations, volunteers deliver educational programming, and in doing so, mediate youth development outcomes, and consequently fulfill the mission of these youth organizations (O’Brien, 2017). Due to their critical role and given the number of volunteers utilized in this sector, there is a need to better understand volunteerism in youth development organizations for purposes of recruitment, retention, support, and acknowledgement.

The 4-H Youth Development Program relies on more than 369,000 adult volunteers to serve nearly six million young people annually across the United States (U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2018). The 4-H Youth Development Program is administered by Cooperative Extension, a partnership among the USDA, 100 public land-grant universities, and local governments (USDA, 2016). Volunteers are relied upon to design, facilitate, and deliver educational youth programs and complete administrative tasks (Fritz et al., 2003; White &

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Arnold, 2003). 4-H volunteers report spending an average of 1 to 5 hours per month in direct contact with youth (Larson Nippolt et al., 2012) providing youth development experiences that otherwise would not have been offered. Larson Nippolt et al.'s (2012) survey research found volunteering in 4-H provided opportunities for personal growth, increased self-confidence, improved social skills, increased community connections, learning new subject matter, and building social capital with their community. Hutchins et al. (2002) calculated an average value of a New Mexico 4-H volunteer at \$5,284 annually and a total economic value of New Mexico 4-H volunteers' time at 6.5 million dollars. The University of California 4-H Youth Development Program (n.d.) estimated the total dollar value of California 4-H volunteers at \$49,667,801. Little other empirical research focuses on the consequences of volunteering, but rather on the antecedents and motivations of volunteer roles, experiences, and satisfaction.

Need for the Present Study

In the present study, we focused on two areas of need for further investigation: utilizing qualitative methods to allow for emergent themes and focusing on youth development volunteers (one of many domains). What little empirical literature exists exploring the consequences of volunteering generally does not differentiate between volunteer domains and has instead merged outcomes, including volunteering in religious, education or youth service, social or community service, health care, and social and political domains (e.g., Wilson, 2012). Not all domains that utilized volunteers' roles are equivalent. The consequences of volunteering on both the volunteer and the organization will vary depending on the context. For example, one would not expect a volunteer helping as a ticket collector at a 1-day sporting event to realize the same types of outcomes or have the affordances to make the same types of impacts as a volunteer helping in a leadership role for 3 years in a healthcare nonprofit. Documenting outcomes of volunteerism in general is important; however, it overlooks important environmental factors leading to contextually bound outcomes. We sought to fill a gap and explore the consequences of volunteering in youth service, particularly in a 4-H youth development context.

We employed qualitative research methods, in contrast with previous research which utilized quantitative methods (e.g., Stukas et al., 2016; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). Our emergent themes were generated qualitatively from participants themselves rather than being defined *a priori*. Our qualitative approach allowed volunteers to respond with any number of outcomes they wanted to communicate and thereby were not limited to pre-identified items. This allowed participants to share their lived experiences through their own voices.

Methodology

We explored what volunteers said about their impacts and outcomes by volunteering in the University of California 4-H Youth Development Program. Specifically, we used inductive thematic analysis to analyze responses to the following open-ended questions: (a) *Please share what you felt was the most important contribution you made to the 4-H program since being a volunteer (impact); and (b) Please share the biggest effect 4-H has had on your personal development (outcome).*

These two questions were part of a larger study to learn about the experiences and attitudes of 4-H adult volunteers. The larger investigation utilized a 24-item survey informed by a previous study assessing 4-H volunteer competencies, experiences, and attitudes (Junge et al., 1999). Our adapted survey asked respondents to report their volunteer involvement (number of years volunteering and roles), training they received (including in-person and online), their experience volunteering (perceived changes in the organization, its leadership), and demographic information (including age, gender, race, and level of education completed). The survey was reviewed by paid staff and revised based on feedback; this served as a check on face validity. The final survey was sent electronically using Qualtrics to 4-H adult volunteers during the end of the 2016 program year. We received responses from 2,107 volunteers; the entire volunteer corps (total 9,714) was invited to participate (22% response rate; note that many adults shared the same email address so only 7,953 email invitations were sent). The mean age of respondents was 48 years with 84% female and 16% male. The primary roles served in the 4-H organization were as a project leader (86%), on a club or county committee (44%) and as a 4-H club leader (39%). The mean number of years volunteering in 4-H was 9 (range from 1 to 73 years). Participant demographics are summarized in Table 1.

We analyzed responses from 1,245 individuals who answered either one or both open-ended questions. We applied iterative inductive thematic analysis without a pre-existing coding scheme to each question independently (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We applied separate codes for each distinct idea or concept contained in the response. Specifically, to begin, we selected a representative subsample consisting of 2% of the sample based on six factors (age, gender, years volunteering, race/ethnicity, level of education, and geographic location). The first three authors independently reviewed and created low inference codes anchored to the data, i.e., initial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). We came to agreement on these initial codes, code definition, relationships between codes, and application of codes to the data. When disagreements arose, we discussed until reaching consensus. We repeated this process twice

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more with a second and third subsample. In each iteration, the coding scheme was modified with codes added or merged. Next, we each coded a separate subsample of 80 responses, and co-coded approximately 20% of these responses from the other two coders. The final step was to code the remaining responses. Each coder also coded approximately 10% of another's block. Our process relied on intercoder agreement, including "intensive group discussion, 'dialogical intersubjectivity,' coder adjudication, and simple group consensus as an agreement goal" (Saldana, 2016, p. 37). We discussed disagreements and conflict and revised code definition; twice during the process, each coder then went back through their assigned responses to affirm code application. After every response was coded, we reviewed relationships between codes and grouped similar codes, which became our emergent themes. We checked for, but did not identify, difference across demographic variables (sex, years volunteering, and educational attainment) by comparing the proportion of code applications within each demographic variable code-by-code. For example, 28% of responses were coded with "*sense of gratification from working with youth and adults.*" Of those code applications, 42 responses were from males (16% of the total male responses) and 253 were from females (18% of the total female responses).

Table 1. Participant Demographics and Relationship to the 4-H Youth Development Program

Demographic	Sample percentage (%) (<i>n</i> = 2,107)	Population percentage (%) (<i>N</i> = 9,714)
Gender		
Female	84	73
Male	16	27
Ethnicity		
Non-Hispanic or Latino	93	91
Hispanic or Latino	7	9
Race		
White	85	87
Black or African American	1	1
Asian	3	2
American Indian or Alaska Native	4	3
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	1	0
Other/Undetermined	6	6

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Table 1. (continued)

Demographic	Sample percentage (%) (<i>n</i> = 2,107)	Population percentage (%) (<i>N</i> = 9,714)
Education level		
High school/GED	4	8
Some college	21	30
2-year college degree	19	13
4-year college degree	36	32
Graduate degree	20	17
4-H roles served		
Project leader	94	
Club administrative leader	42	
Club or county committee	49	
Camp chaperone	30	
Youth leadership team advisor	21	
Resource key leader	20	
County council or management board	26	
Sectional or regional council	12	
After-school or mentoring leader	9	
Other	12	
Mean age in years (<i>SD</i>)	48.2 (11.3)	45.4 (11.7)
Median age in years	48	45
Mean years as a 4-H volunteer (<i>SD</i>)	8.7 (8.8)	7.4 (21.8)
Years as a 4-H volunteer (median)	6	5

Findings

Responses demonstrated variegated richness of contributions made to the program (impacts) and outcomes experienced from their service.

Volunteer Impact

In total, 1,219 volunteers shared what they felt was the most important contribution they made to the 4-H Program since being a volunteer (average word count was 15; median word count

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was 11). Sixty percent of responses were marked with one code, 30% with two codes, and 10% with three or more codes. Volunteers reported contributing by taking an action to improve the program (45%, labeled “Program Focused Practice”), through one-on-one interactions (32%, labeled “Youth Focused Practice”), or by serving in a role (21%). Fewer reported contributing to supporting youth outcomes, including knowledge and skills (26%), youth development (15%), or identity and life trajectory (5%). See Table 2.

Table 2. Volunteer Impact Themes

Theme and Codes	Percentage of Participants with a Response Containing the Code (<i>n</i> = 1219)
Theme 1: Program-Focused Practice	45
Expanding programming (e.g., initiating new activities)	9
Being dedicated, giving time, and being committed to 4-H	6
Maintaining programming (e.g., ensuring programs continue)	6
Generalized support (non-specific)	4
Providing support with logistics (e.g., organizing meetings)	4
Implementing promising organizational leadership practices	4
Fostering a welcome and inclusive environment	3
Engaging 4-H in the community	2
Other	5
Theme 2: Youth-Focused Practice	32
Engaging and teaching youth	11
Mentorship and guidance to youth	10
Sharing one’s passion and expertise	4
Mentorship and guidance to adults	3
Other	4
Theme 3: Contributing to Youth Outcomes - Knowledge and Skills	26
Content and project-specific	13
Leadership	5
Public Speaking	2
Responsibility	1
Other	5

Table 2. (continued)

Theme and Codes	Percentage of Participants with a Response Containing the Code (<i>n</i> = 1219)
Theme 4: Contributing to Youth Outcomes – Youth Development	15
Supporting youth in realizing their potential	6
Other (e.g., maturity, growth mindset)	10
Theme 5: Contributing to Youth Outcomes - Identity and Life Trajectory	5
Theme 6: Contributing through Roles (position)	21
Project Leader	10
Other (e.g., Camp Staff)	8
Club Leader	4
Theme 7: Contributing to Program Outcomes (Growing Enrollment)	6
Theme 8: Contributing to Other Outcomes	5

The most commonly reported contributions made to the 4-H program were actions volunteers took that influenced, changed, or improved the program, culture, or young people directly. We coded responses into two distinct themes to differentiate actions focused on youth (i.e., when the respondent talked about mentoring or teaching youth directly) versus actions that influenced the program environment, organization, or culture.

Theme 1: Program-Focused Practice

Volunteers reported taking actions that influenced the program environment, culture, or organization. The most common practice was expanding programming, e.g., initiating new activities, starting new clubs, creating new activities. A related code was maintaining programming, where volunteers took on a new role to ensure programs would continue, or to revive an activity when a previous volunteer resigned. Expanding programming differed from the maintaining programming; in expanding programming, volunteers said “started a new club” (Male, 42 years old, 3 years of volunteer service) while in maintaining programming, volunteers reported, “keeping our club going” (Female, 62, 28 years). Both were often co-applied with other codes. One volunteer described her contribution as expanding programming, fostering a welcoming environment, and growing enrollment.

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Starting a club from scratch with the highest percentage of participation in a county speaking event from the smallest club in our first year. As well as accepting all members with varying needs, we allow and welcome and accommodate everybody. (Female, 22, 1 year)

Six percent described being dedicated, giving their time, and being committed to 4-H. Volunteers responded with "my time" (Female, 55, 26 years), "dedication of time to local youth" (Male, 43, 5 years), and "showing up and giving my time to virtually everything my child chose to be involved in" (Female, 52, 9 years).

Volunteers also provided support with logistics, including organizing meetings, securing venues for events, or developing communication tools. Others implemented promising organizational leadership practices, improved organizational procedures, and helped align state guidelines to local programming. A smaller number shared that they fostered a welcoming and inclusive environment, ensuring trust, inclusivity, and safety. Volunteers also shared the practice of helping organize community service activities. Finally, 4% shared some type of generalized support (non-specific) about "just being there" (Male, 70, 5 years) or "helping out where ever I was needed" (Female, 50, 1 year).

Theme 2: Youth-Focused Practice

Volunteers described a variety of actions aimed at supporting and helping youth. Principal among these were engaging and teaching youth, including pedagogical practices, educational methods, and teaching youth specific subject matter. To a lesser extent, volunteers shared how they strengthened youth participation and/or involvement by "helping children learn by doing" (Female, 53, 16 years).

Two codes which commonly co-occurred were teaching youth and a specific skill or content area; for example, "teaching kids leather crafting" (Female, 52, 11 years) and "teaching kids to be safe around horses, help 4-H kids improve their riding skills" (Female, 31, 2 years). Volunteers also reported providing mentorship and guidance to youth, e.g., "being available to be a resource and support to my 4-H kids!" (Female, 64, 4 years). A smaller number shared their passion and expertise. One volunteer described sharing both her expertise and mentorship: "I always try giving the kids my all, my time, my knowledge, being there for them, being open" (Female, 37, 18 years). Many responses coded with an individual practice were

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also coded with an outcome. For example, one volunteer's response demonstrated mentorship, teaching, and the outcome of supporting youth in realizing their potential.

I strongly believe in the 4-H program and mentoring and teaching the younger members is my most important contribution. I spend endless hours all year long working with kids and their projects to help develop confidence in their ability, nurture their abilities, and help provide them with opportunities to succeed.

(Female, 61, 36 years)

Theme 3: Contributing to Youth Outcomes—Knowledge and Skills

Volunteers reported helping youth improve general knowledge and skills including content-specific knowledge, leadership skills, public speaking abilities, and a sense of responsibility. Volunteers reported "helping children learn how to cook and learn about nutrition" (Female, 48, 3 years) or "helping youth to become better leaders" (Female, 45, 27 years). While some responses were coded with only a single youth outcome, many were co-coded; for example: "encouraging youth to develop speaking and leadership skills" (leadership and public speaking; Female, 65, 29 years), or "equine skills and mastership along with lifelong skills in time management and responsibility" (responsibility, content knowledge, and other; Male, 54, 14 years).

Theme 4: Contributing to Youth Outcomes—Youth Development

Volunteers described improving youth development indicators such as maturity, humility, growth mindset, sense of belonging, self-efficacy, confidence, love of learning, or empathy. Only one youth development code was common across many responses: contributing by supporting youth in realizing their potential. One volunteer stated this as "helping kids understand that they are unique and everyone has something to offer and talents to share and develop" (Female, 61, 15 years). Another described program practices to foster a supportive environment that helped youth grow and develop.

Having the opportunity to work with a diverse group of youth and see them develop and change through the work. When they are successful, I feel great to have been part of the process. Success is not winning something, for me it is reaching their goals or overcoming obstacles. (Female, 46, 20 years)

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Theme 5: Contributing to Youth Outcomes—Identity and Life Trajectory

Volunteers also described influencing young peoples' identities and life trajectories. These responses described how volunteers influenced college and career aspirations; sparks, interests, and passions; and expanded young people's horizons. Volunteers described these in different ways, for example, "allowing youth to experience/learn skills they might not have a chance to experience" (Female, 45, 10 years) as well as "igniting a joy of exploration of our natural world in the kids" (Female, 55, 1 year).

Theme 6: Program Contribution Through Volunteer Roles

The roles they served, such as project leader, club leader, camp staff, and event committees were identified by 21% of volunteers as their most important contribution. One volunteer said, "being a project leader. That's where 4-H becomes 'real'" (Female, 50, 5 years). The primary criterion for coding responses into Theme 6 was when the volunteer named a specific and distinct volunteer role established by the organization.

Themes 7 And 8: Overall Program Contributions

Volunteers reported growing youth and adult enrollment. One explained, "[I] took a club that was declining in numbers with enrollment around 45 youth to one that is now active with enrollment of just over 100 youth" (Male, 53, 12 years). Additionally, respondents stated that they improved the enjoyment, excitement, or learning environment of programs. These volunteers depicted their impacts on fulfilling the organization's mission, sometimes in vague terms, such as "engaging kids to have fun and learn something new" (Female, 33, 2 years).

Volunteer Outcomes

In total, 1,060 volunteers shared the biggest effect 4-H had on their personal development (average word count was 16; median word count was 11). Sixty-three percent of responses were marked with one code, 26% with two codes, and 11% with three or more codes. Volunteers reported outcomes such as developing skills, improving indicators of well-being, affection or joy at working with others, and social development. See Table 3.

Table 3. Volunteer Outcome Themes

Theme and codes	Percentage of participants with a response containing the code (<i>n</i> = 1060)
Theme 1: Skill development	55
Leadership	11
Interpersonal skills (e.g., communication, conflict management, teamwork)	10
Pedagogy and teaching, child development	10
Public speaking	9
Organization and time management	7
Content and project-specific	5
Responsibility	2
Theme 2: Well-being (emotional growth, identity, life trajectory)	31
General (non-specific)	10
Confidence (self-esteem, less shy, sense of pride)	9
Space to share knowledge, expertise, and talents	4
Pivotal experience (4-H helps shape life trajectory)	4
Expanding horizons (4-H affording new experiences)	3
Sense of responsibility to be a good role model for youth	2
Theme 3: Sense of gratification from working with youth and adults	28
Theme 4: Social development (deepening relationships with family, friends, community)	24
Theme 5: Relationship with 4-H (sense of belonging, safe place)	7

Theme 1: Skill Development

Over half of the volunteers reported strengthening skills. The most common skill was leadership, in the form of developing leadership skills and being involved in leadership roles or positions. Volunteers used phrases like “4-H taught me to be a leader” (Female, 25 years old, 2 years of volunteer service), “being comfortable taking charge, even in ambiguous situations” (Male, 25, 6 years; co-coded with confidence), and “the program has helped me to become a better leader” (Female, 42, 3 years). Volunteers also shared that they improved interpersonal skills including communication, patience, conflict management, and teamwork. Interestingly, the most common interpersonal skill reported was developing patience: “has taught me more patience” (Female, 72, 32 years) and “improved patience with youth” (Male, 55, 7 years). Not

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surprisingly, volunteers also reported strengthening teaching and child development skills: “how to put together projects that interest the youth members and teach them the right amount in each meeting” (Female, 53, 6 years) and “opportunity to refine teaching techniques” (Female, 35, 2 years). Respondents also described expanding their public speaking, organization, and time management abilities. One participant mentioned all three: “I became a great public speaker ... And the organizational/time management skills are useful outside of 4-H” (Female, 32, 2 years). A smaller number identified content knowledge related to the subject matter for which they worked with youth. One volunteer said, “I have had the opportunity to learn a lot about livestock” (Female, 58, 8 years).

[4-H] has been instrumental in my communication with youth and adults in difficult situations. I have learned and improved on my techniques in presenting ideas and information. I use these tools every day in my usual workplace.
(Female, 52, 25 years; communication, public speaking, and well-being/general)

Theme 2: Well-Being

Among the volunteers who reported outcomes involving emotional growth, identity, and other indicators of well-being, the most common responses were coded as general (non-specific), which were responses that did not state a specific outcome. A handful were around resiliency; for example, “learning how to stick with something until it was finished correctly, and not get discouraged if things didn't work out well” (Female, 53, 16 years). Most encompassed a wide range of well-being indicators such as “brings out my inner child” (Male, 56, 5 years) and “being a 4-H volunteer reminds me [to] enjoy the small things in life, to be mindful of my surroundings” (Female, 59, 2 years). Building confidence, including related aspects of self-esteem, sense of accomplishment or pride, and becoming less shy, was the most commonly categorized response; “it gave me the confidence to try new things and dream big” (Female, 61, 28 years) and “it has brought me out of my shell” (Female, 53). Fewer volunteers shared other well-being indicators, such as 4-H providing a space to share their knowledge, expertise, and talents; or developing a sense of responsibility to be a good role model. Many responses were coded with both skill development and well-being indicators.

Volunteers expressed that 4-H expanded their horizons by offering new experiences and that volunteering was a pivotal experience in shaping their life trajectory. These volunteers described how 4-H provided exposure to new experiences, activities, events, and people that served to expand horizons and/or life trajectory. Volunteers reported, “4-H has had a huge

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impact on who I am today” (Female, 53, 29 years); “[4-H] shaped my whole world” (Female, 63, 24 years); and “meeting a variety of wonderful people that have taught me about myself and what I want to do with my life” (Male, 20, 2 years). The following excerpt demonstrated this, as well as developing public speaking skills.

Even though my schedule is extremely busy, I do this for my children and others in my community. The biggest effect 4-H has had on my personal development is my ability to comfortably speak in front of others. Without that, I wouldn't be where I am at today or had the opportunities open up for me that I have had over the years. (Female, 36, 14 years)

While uncommon given the entire data set, this volunteer’s sentiment was shared by a handful of others and demonstrated that volunteering had a profound, meaningful and transferable influence.

Theme 3. Sense of Gratification From Working With Youth and Adults

Volunteers described their experience working with youth as enjoyable, wonderful, and rewarding. Respondents said things like, “it is very rewarding and I enjoy seeing the growth and development in the youth” (Female, 34, 6 years), “joy of seeing the youth improve and grow in something they enjoy” (Female, 46, 10 years), and “knowing I can make an impact on a kid’s life” (Female, 44, 2 years).

Theme 4: Social Development

Respondents who reported improving social connections mentioned developing friendships (4%), strengthening family connection (3%), and ties with the broader community (9%). The community connection included instances where volunteers developed values for community service or where 4-H helped increase their community engagement. A handful of volunteers described how their 4-H volunteer experience helped them develop positive values and appreciation for working with diverse groups. In general, however, the most common response was about 4-H improving their social connections (non-specific); for example, “keeping me involved in the community with our youth” (Male, 34, 3 years).

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Theme 5: Relationship With 4-H

Volunteers reported deepening their relationship with the organization itself. This manifested with volunteers saying their experience deepened a sense of belonging, pride in being a member, realizing 4-H is a safe space, and wanting to extend 4-H to others. One volunteer said, “since I am fairly new to 4-H, I have loved learning so much and being a part of something so powerful in kids’ lives. I really enjoy being a leader for 4-H (Female, 48, 1 year).”

Discussion

In response to two open-ended prompts, 4-H youth development volunteers reported in their own words contributions made to the organization (impacts) and personal development (outcomes). Volunteers described their impacts on the organization as taking action to improve, expand, or maintain programs; providing support, mentorship, and teaching youth; and helping to realize youth knowledge, skill, or developmental outcomes. Through volunteering, participants reported outcomes related to developing skills themselves such as leadership, interpersonal, and pedagogy/teaching; well-being outcomes including improved confidence; developing a sense of gratification from working with youth; and developing and deepening connections with others. The variety of outcomes and impacts voiced by volunteers demonstrated the positive value and benefit—the consequences—of volunteering for a youth development organization.

Implications for Research

Volunteer Impact Is Not Only Economic.

In contrast with the large base of literature quantifying the economic value of volunteer labor (e.g., Bowman, 2009; Handy & Srinivasan, 2004; Salamon et al., 2011), no participant in our study explicitly discussed their volunteer contribution as economic value, how they helped the organization’s bottom line, or replaced paid staff labor. Our findings suggest that communicating volunteer value as a dollar figure is inconsistent with how volunteers themselves describe their contribution. Instead, volunteers recognized that they provided important and meaningful service to expand and maintain programs, expand service to clientele that otherwise would not have been served, and help the organization fulfill its mission. Participants described their efforts, time, actions, and/or support to realize the organization’s mission to help youth reach their full potential. Communicating the value of volunteers through their actions may not result in an easy-to-communicate numerical value, but honors and privileges volunteers’ own

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realized contributions, time, efforts, and voices. Describing volunteer contributions through qualitative-derived themes provides a more complete picture for how an organization utilizes, values, and ultimately has amplified capacity to achieve its core mission. Similar to Grant et al. (2020), we argue that organizations should explore alternative, non-economic, methods to communicate the value of volunteer efforts. Doing so will likely assist organizations with volunteer retention, support, acknowledgement and recruitment of new volunteers. Future research might explore multiple methods to document volunteer value, perhaps triangulating responses from volunteers with observations from clientele, paid staff, and organizational senior leadership.

Volunteer Outcomes Specific to Education and Youth Development Context

The existing literature categorized multiple outcomes from volunteer service (from all domains), including strengthened civic skills, improved social connectedness, improved physical health, improved mental health, and socioeconomic benefit (Wilson, 2000; Wilson, 2012). We found evidence for some, but not all, of these outcomes (see Table 4). Two of the prevailing themes in our study—developing skills and improving well-being—have generally been combined in the literature as well-being or mental health and included indicators such as self-esteem, life satisfaction and happiness, and mastery (Stukas et al., 2016; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001; Wilson, 2012). Mojza and colleagues (2010) argued that volunteering promotes mastery, learning, and new competencies. Wilson (2012) described mastery as “one component of subjective well-being” (p. 198). In our study, participants were often explicit in the skills they strengthened, such as leadership and interpersonal skills; pedagogy, teaching, and child development; and ability to speak in public. The prevalence to which participants reported skill development suggests that volunteering in 4-H provided significant mastery experiences. A contribution of our study is detailing specific skills developed in the context of being a youth development volunteer. These types of skills may or may not be developed in other types of volunteer domains. Additionally, participants reported strengthening their self-esteem, although we subsumed this concept into a confidence code. Developing confidence was described as trying new things, improved self-image, pride, and becoming less shy. Volunteers also described their volunteer experience as affording space to share their knowledge, expertise, and talents. Developing confidence and being able to share one’s expertise may provide a sense of meaningfulness and fulfillment, an important indicator of well-being (E. E. Smith, 2017). Participants shared powerful narratives describing how volunteering shaped their life’s trajectory or expanded their horizons. These narratives offered a glimpse into a powerful process of life satisfaction and well-being not fully understood. Future research might investigate processes

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involved in affording life-changing outcomes so it may be replicated. Furthermore, three themes captured various aspects of developing relationships with youth, adults, and community. These relationships were a sense of gratification and fulfillment. Relationships can be a strong indicator of well-being, particularly for older adults. Previous research has shown strong relationships between volunteering and health benefits, including lower mortality and depression rates (Grimm et al., 2007), however, no volunteers explicitly stated improving their physical health by volunteering in 4-H.

Specific to youth development, while there is a dearth of research reporting on the consequences of volunteering for youth development volunteers, findings from two previous studies followed a similar pattern to the themes of the present study. Larson Nippolt et al. (2012) shared that 4-H volunteers reported becoming a better person (self-confidence, social skills, increased community connections, learning new subject matter), contributing to the 4-H organization, and building social capital. Grant et al. (2020) reported that volunteers built new relationships with youth, gained skills, and increased confidence as a leader. Neither Larson Nippolt et al. nor Grant et al. reported evidence for volunteers' improved civic skills, improved physical health, or socioeconomic benefit.

The divergence in our findings from Stukas et al. (2016), Thoits and Hewitt (2001), Wilson (2000; 2012), and Wilson and Musick (1999), and the convergence with Grant et al. (2020) and Larson Nippolt et al. (2012) suggests several possibilities. First, it substantiates the idea that consequences of volunteering on the volunteer varies depending on the domain; i.e., the context in which one volunteers. Second, the youth development domain affords several opportunities for personal development. Adult volunteers serve in an educator role and practice relevant skills such as leading meetings, teaching content, and organizing functions (Fritz et al., 2003; White & Arnold, 2003). These were all skills gained or strengthened by the volunteers in our study. Additionally, the nature of youth development work can be deeply connecting; a core element of youth development is having youth form a positive, sustained, and trusting relationship with a caring adult (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016). As expected, youth development volunteers in our study reported developing a sense of gratification from working, and building relationships, with youth. Third, the history of the 4-H youth organization, allows for intergenerational involvement (i.e., volunteers were often involved in 4-H as youth), which may afford prospects for the sense of belonging to and willingness to contribute to the organization. Future research in youth development may want to more deeply explore the two prevailing themes—developing skills and improving well-being, with specific attention to how developing relationships may enhance adult well-being.

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Table 4. Comparison of Volunteering Outcomes (on the five domains advanced by Wilson, 2000)

Citation. <i>Context.</i>	Wilson (2000); Wilson & Musick (1999). <i>Literature review of all volunteer domains.</i>	Thoits & Hewitt (2001). <i>U.S. national adult sample in any volunteer work.</i>	Wilson (2012). <i>Literature review of all volunteer domains.</i>	Larson Nippolt et al. (2012). <i>Midwest U.S. adult sample in 4-H youth development.</i>	Stukas et al. (2016). <i>Australian adult sample in any volunteer work.</i>	Grant et al. (2020). <i>Midwest U.S. adult sample in 4-H youth development.</i>	Present Study. <i>California adult sample in 4-H youth development.</i>
Domain 1	Good citizenship practices; civic skills						Aspects of skill development may contribute to civic skills
Domain 2	Reduced anti-social behavior; builds interpersonal skills, empathy, and respect			Building social capital and community Contributing to 4-H organization	Improved social connectedness and social trust	Built new relationships with youth; deeper engagement with youth	Social development (deepening relationships with family, friends, community) Relationship with 4-H (sense of belonging, safe place)
Domain 3	Improved physical health	Improved physical health	Improved physical health				

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Table 4. (continued)

Citation. <i>Context.</i>	Wilson (2000); Wilson & Musick (1999). <i>Literature review of all volunteer domains.</i>	Thoits & Hewitt (2001). <i>U.S. national adult sample in any volunteer work.</i>	Wilson (2012). <i>Literature review of all volunteer domains.</i>	Larson Nippolt et al. (2012). <i>Midwest U.S. adult sample in 4-H youth development.</i>	Stukas et al. (2016). <i>Australian adult sample in any volunteer work.</i>	Grant et al. (2020). <i>Midwest U.S. adult sample in 4-H youth development.</i>	Present Study. <i>California adult sample in 4-H youth development.</i>
Domain 4	Improved mental health; improved well-being (social integration, trust, social connection, self-esteem, confidence)	Improved well-being (life satisfaction, happiness, mastery, self-esteem, reduced depression)	Improving mental health (reducing depression, social connections, mastery experiences)	Personal growth; becoming a better person (increased self-confidence; improved social skills)	Improved self-efficacy, well-being, and self-esteem		Well-being (confidence, emotional growth, identity, expanding horizons) Sense of gratification from working with youth and adults
				Learning new subject matter			
Domain 5	Occupational or socioeconomic achievement		Socioeconomic benefit				

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The variation between our findings and the literature (Table 4) might also be explained by the different types of research methods. The three youth development domain studies did not explicitly inquire about improved physical health and/or socioeconomic benefit. Perhaps volunteer participants have realized these outcomes but either had no opportunity to indicate such on a survey (Larson Nippolt et al., 2012; Grant et al., 2020) or did not feel it was the “biggest effect” as asked (present study). Future research on volunteer outcomes in a youth development context should explore the full range of outcomes found in previous empirical work.

Implications for Practice

The findings from our study may be used by professionals to market and recruit volunteers and structure volunteer roles to retain their services. First, youth development professionals now have empirical evidence demonstrating the benefits of volunteering with 4-H (and more generally, working with young people). Several land-grant universities already use these types of messages to recruit volunteers. The results from our study may inform the development of targeted messaging that provide a better fit with a youth development context and are more relevant to potential adult volunteers. For example, while statements such as “individuals who volunteer experience greater health benefits” (Crawson, 2017) is accurate if considering the broader volunteerism literature, health benefits were not one of the outcomes shared by participants in our study. Instead, professionals may want to develop messages around skill development, such as “you will also be able to learn and practice personal leadership skills” (University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources, 2020).

Second, the results from our study may be used to help retain volunteer services, by tailoring volunteer roles and empowering volunteers to make organization impacts, thereby improving their satisfaction and feelings of accomplishment. Motivating volunteers happens by improving feelings of solidarity (interpersonal and social connections) and purposiveness (feelings of satisfaction) (Maehr & Braskamp, 1986; Vroom, 1982). Rouse and Clawson (1992) found that adult volunteers were motivated by purposive incentives like helping their organization, satisfaction from volunteering, and feeling like they made a difference in their community. Tailoring positions so volunteers have opportunities to develop meaningful impacts may also attract and retain volunteers. Seeing how volunteers tend to emphasize the feeling of community belonging, professionals may focus on providing volunteers with those experiences and less on bureaucratic work (e.g., paperwork, policies).

Finally, while the target audience for youth development organizations is young people, we know that learning and development do not cease in adulthood. Youth development professionals and adult volunteers alike continue to learn and grow over the course of their lifetimes. We should recognize

that the beneficiaries of youth development work are everyone involved. Perhaps we should intentionally broaden our programmatic goals, logic model outcomes, and marketing messages and reframe youth development programs as human development programs.

Considerations and Limitations

One aspect we did not fully explore was relationships between contributions and outcomes. Future research might use alternate approaches to fully investigate the relationships between volunteer contributions to the organization and the outcomes experienced by volunteers themselves. As with any self-report methodology, there may be issues with participant honesty, introspective ability, response bias, and selection bias. Additionally, we included only youth development volunteers in the California 4-H Youth Development Program, so applying our findings to other youth development volunteers must be undertaken with caution. Furthermore, we favored occurrence of codes rather than the intensity of the experience upon the individual. In other words, many volunteers reported developing skills (so it become a prominent theme) while others reported their volunteer role shaping their life's trajectory. The latter may have been a deeper outcome, but the methods we employed would not allow this to be assessed.

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