

The Myth of the Lazy Teen
Barna Research Group
(Presenter's Notes)

There's been plenty of debate about teens and their social justice "slacktivism," but how much truth is there to the claim that young people are only acting with 140 characters or less? A new study from Barna shows that teens are actively engaged in service and volunteer projects and youth ministry is a primary channel through which they serve. In partnership with Youth Specialties and YouthWorks, Barna conducted a major study on the state of youth ministry in the United States, which included a look at service and volunteering trends among teens. Here are some of the key findings:

Teens Are Active Volunteers

Volunteer and service projects are a foundational element of youth ministry programs in churches across the country. According to their parents, a majority of teens (68%) are fairly active when it comes to volunteering at least once every few months

- a little less than one fifth of teens (17%) volunteer once a week
- one-quarter (25%) volunteer at least once a month
- another one-quarter (26%) volunteer once every few months
- about one-third (32%) say they volunteer less often than that.

Teen Volunteering Focuses on Church Service and Poverty Alleviation

- Teenagers are flocking to the local church when they feel the urge to volunteer.
- The most common forms of service for teens (as reported by their parents) are those associated with church/ministry (42%).
 - Followed closely behind are feeding the hungry/helping the homeless (35%),
 - educational (31%), and
 - environmental/cleanup (28%).
- Less popular are volunteering with animals (20%),
 - service trips (18%),
 - social advocacy/political (11%),
 - or medical or healthcare (10%).

The Church is Central to Teen Volunteering Efforts

- The importance of the church when it comes to volunteering is a testament to the power of local congregations in galvanizing young people to serve their communities and the world.

- When parents of teens who attend youth group regularly are asked specifically whether their teen has participated in a service project with a church, six in 10 (61%) say yes.
- So, what kinds of service projects are youth groups engaging in?
 - Parents of teens who volunteer with a church are most likely to say their kids did a day of service at church (52%).
 - Outside of serving at church, they are most likely to spend a day serving in their town (48%).
 - A little more than one-third of parents say their kids have an ongoing service commitment that they participate in on a regular basis (36%).
- Just over one-third of parents say their kids go on service trips to a destination that could be reached in one day of driving (36%),
- About one in five say they go further than that (19%), somewhere in the U.S. that cannot be reached in one day of driving.
- What about foreign mission trips? Less than one-tenth of parents (8%) say they send their kids to serve at destinations outside the U.S.
- Parental involvement and encouragement seem to be a key factor in teen service.
 - Teenagers who attend church with their parents are more likely to participate in service with their church (60% of teens who attended church with their parent participated in service projects, vs only 16% of those who did not).

The Goals of Service Are to Love and Serve Others

Galatians 5:13 instructs Christians to “serve one another humbly in love,” and for youth pastors and parents, this is the most important goal of a mission trip.

- Loving and serving others (74% for pastors, 56% for parents) is the primary goal for both groups,
- Followed by being the hands and feet of Jesus (56% for pastors, 40% for parents).
- Other notable goals for pastors and parents are discipleship for youth on the trip (41% for pastors),
- Teaching and modeling compassion (30% for pastors, 34% for parents),
- Providing for the poor (30% for parents).
- Explicitly sharing the gospel on these trips is also considered either very important (69%) or somewhat important (23%) by more than nine in ten youth pastors (92%).

Debriefing And Follow-Up Are Important After a Trip

- A common experience among teens who participate in service trips, especially after returning from an international trip and facing stark cultural and economic differences, is culture shock.
- Returning from these kinds of trips often requires some debriefing and follow-up, a practice valued highly among youth pastors.

- A large majority of youth pastors (81%) valued follow-up to a mission trip either extremely important (32%) or very important (49%).
- The types of follow-ups varied, but a majority of youth pastors followed up the mission trip experience by
 - having teens share about the trip with other students (83%),
 - reminding students about continuing service in their everyday life (75%) and
 - by praying for those impacted by the trip (63%).
- Three-quarters (74%) say it definitely made a lasting impression,
- One quarter (24%) say it probably made an impression,
- A small 2 percent say not really.

It's clear youth pastors believe service and mission trips are an important element of youth ministry and teen discipleship, but do these experiences offer long term transformation? Parents seem to think so—among those whose teenager participated in a trip, their belief was that it made a lasting impression.

- Parents also feel the youth leader or pastor adequately prepared their teen before the trip (65% definitely, 31% somewhat), and
- adequately debriefed their teen after the trip (55% definitely, 40% somewhat).

What The Research Means

- On the one hand, our society tells teens that service and volunteerism are important hallmarks of a well-rounded individual,” says Brooke Hempell, vice president of research at Barna Group.
- “College-bound teens know this is an important element of their school application portfolio, and social media reinforces the idea that social justice and activism are “trendy.”
- On the other hand, each generation demonstrates an increasing self-absorption that runs counter to this trend—many Millennials say volunteering is more talk than action.
- “The church, and youth groups in particular, have a unique opportunity to stand out as an authentic example of love through service by being the hands and feet of Jesus to those in need,”
- Hempell continues. “Parents and Youth Pastors alike know the importance of this, and many find service and missions trips more engaging to youth than trying to compete for being “the coolest place to hang out on a Friday night.”
- Further, through these experiences, teens learn firsthand what the Gospel is and have tangible life lessons to reflect on in the weeks, months, or years that follow. It is clear that service is an important element to any successful teen discipleship effort.”

