Pro-social engagement amongst young people

The evidence sheds a positive light on young people’s engagement in pro-social activities (defined in this report as formal volunteering, informal volunteering, civic activity and group membership). Young people are more likely to engage in these activities than the rest of the working-age population. 83.9 per cent of people aged 16-19 are involved in at least one of these activities, compared to 79.7 per cent of 20-24 years olds, 76.6 per cent of 25-29 years olds and 81.0 per cent of those aged 30-55.

Trends in levels of engagement in these activities over the last decade are also generally more positive than among older age groups. Traditional differences in participation across gender and ethnic groups appear to be narrowing among the young, compared to older age groups. The literature suggests that recent interventions focusing on attracting a more socially mixed profile of young people to pro-social activities are having some impact on this (NatCen et al 2011).

Motivations and facilitators

The data analysis reflects the literature in identifying that instrumental motivations are an important category for young people. Many young people are motivated to engage in volunteering and group activities because they perceive that these activities help with developing skills, confidence and career-building. These are relatively more important for young people than for older age groups. The evidence comparing young people’s engagement with their later education and employment outcomes is consistent with these motivations. There is generally a positive association between young people’s formal volunteering and group activities and their later education and employment outcomes. The secondary analysis also found that engagement is associated with obtaining better qualifications and higher wages. However, this may capture something about the type of young people who choose to engage – and not necessarily any direct effect of the activities themselves.

Barriers to pro-social activity

Our analysis also shows that traditional differences across demographic groups are narrower
among young people. For example, differences by gender and ethnic background, which are present among older age groups, tend to be smaller among those aged 16-19. Perhaps surprisingly, we also found little evidence that health or disabilities are major barriers to pro-social activity among young people. However, barriers to pro-social activity remain for some young people. A lack of education or employment amongst young people would appear to be a barrier to pro-social activity. The literature suggests that NEETs lack the social networks or other routes in, as well as the self-esteem and confidence that can be gained from employment, education or training. In our analysis, pro-social behaviour was found to be significantly lower amongst young NEETs (compared to those in education or employment).

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