

Leading, Giving Back, and Self-Development: What Powers the Volunteer Drive?

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This study looks into three questions: (1) what most motivates youth volunteers in general, (2) if youth with leadership roles are more motivated to volunteer, and (3) if youth who volunteer to cope with personal challenges exhibit higher overall motivation. Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI)¹, a validated survey that categorizes motivations for volunteering was used to collect study data. The VFI has six functions: Values, Understanding, Social, Career, Protective, and Enhancement. Unlike most past studies done with the VFI survey, which have mostly focused on adults, this study focuses on the youth in Montgomery County, Maryland. Data was collected through a Google form from 21 randomly selected schools in Montgomery County, Maryland, through school outreach. Results showed that youth were most motivated to volunteer to help others or to learn new skills. Furthermore, with a p-value of 0.0137, it was found that youth in leadership positions were significantly more driven to volunteer for altruistic values. Additionally, those who volunteer as a way to cope with personal challenges demonstrated higher motivation across all six VFI functions, with the p-value being less than 0.001 for all six functions. Based on the findings, it is suggested that youth nonprofit organizations host skill workshops, offer leadership opportunities, and encourage supportive environments.

Keywords: youth volunteer motivation, Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI), statistics, nonprofit engagement

Introduction

Research indicates that young people report a mix of motives for volunteering. The Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI), a widely used framework, identifies six primary functions: values (helping others), career (skills and résumé building), social (belonging and friendships), understanding (learning and gaining knowledge), enhancement (personal growth), and protective (coping or reducing guilt)^{1,2}. In youth and student samples, values- and career-related motives are particularly prominent, often accompanied by social motives tied to peers and school contexts^{3,4}. Qualitative studies with diverse youth also highlight purpose/meaning, community identification, and flexibility/autonomy as practical motivators^{5,6}.

Leadership opportunities have been linked to greater engagement and persistence, largely by fostering autonomy, competence, and the internalization of a "volunteer role identity," which sustains motivation over time^{7,8}. Leadership roles tend to amplify intrinsic motives (e.g., purpose, mastery, relatedness), which more strongly predict long-term commitment compared to extrinsic requirements such as mandatory service hours. While relatively few studies have examined youth leadership specifically, evidence from broader volunteer psychology consistently suggests that authentic leadership experiences (youth-led,

skill-building, and supported) enhance volunteer motivation and retention⁹.

Coping motives, corresponding to the VFI's protective function, involve volunteering to manage stress, negative affect, or life challenges. Many adolescents report such motives, often in combination with values- and growth-oriented goals^{1,10}. However, findings on whether coping predicts higher overall motivation are mixed. Coping motives may spark initial engagement, but values- and identity-based motives are more reliable predictors of sustained involvement^{7,10}. Importantly, research also shows that volunteering is associated with improved well-being among adolescents, which may in turn reinforce ongoing participation^{11,12}. From a practical standpoint, if coping is a salient entry point, programs that also cultivate purpose, competence, and belonging may help transform short-term coping into durable, self-determined motivation.

Overall, the literature suggests that while established motivational frameworks such as the VFI are applicable to youth, their use with adolescents remains underexplored. This gap underscores the need for further research examining whether volunteering as a coping strategy predicts differences in motivation, retention, and psychological outcomes. Specifically, this study examined the following research questions: 1) Which motivations did youth report as most important for participating in volunteer work, as measured by the six VFI function scores? 2) Did holding a leadership role influence the motivation levels

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of youth volunteers? 3) Did youth who report volunteering as a way to cope with personal challenges-operationalized as a Protective function score ≥ 4 -exhibit higher motivation across the other five functions compared to those who do not?

Methods

The Method section is organized under several subheadings: (1) Research Design, (2) Sample, (3) Data Collection, (4) Measures, (5) Procedures, and (6) Data Analysis

Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to examine the factors that motivate youth to volunteer in Montgomery County, Maryland, and to assess whether leadership roles and personal challenges influence their motivation.

Sample

Participants were students from 21 randomly selected schools (4 private, 17 public) in Montgomery County, Maryland. A total of 235 students voluntarily completed the survey.

Demographics of sample

- **Age:** 10-18 years
- **Gender:** Of the initial respondents, 69.5% identified as female, largely due to a high number of responses from Holton-Arms, an all-girls school. To reduce gender imbalance and school-specific bias, a resampling procedure was applied. All female respondents from schools other than Holton-Arms, as well as all non-binary respondents, were retained. From Holton-Arms, a random subset of female respondents was selected so that the total number of females across all schools matched the number of males.
- **Final dataset:** 133 participants, including 63 females, 63 males, and 7 non-binary students.

Data collection

Motivations were assessed using the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI), a validated 30-item instrument. Respondents rated each item on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = "Not at all important/accurate for you," 7 = "Extremely important/accurate for you"). Items were grouped into six motivational functions.

Measures

The overall internal consistency of the scale was strong (Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$). Subscale reliability coefficients indicated adequate to strong internal consistency, with alpha values ranging

from .80 to .85. The six motivational functions, corresponding items, and their reliability scores are presented below:

- **Protective** - Coping with personal difficulties or reducing negative feelings (Q7, Q9, Q11, Q20, Q24); $\alpha = .85$
- **Values** - Expressing altruistic and humanitarian concern (Q3, Q8, Q16, Q19, Q22); $\alpha = .81$
- **Career** - Gaining experience relevant to future goals (Q1, Q10, Q15, Q21, Q28); $\alpha = .80$
- **Social** - Developing or strengthening social relationships (Q2, Q4, Q6, Q17, Q23); $\alpha = .83$
- **Understanding** - Acquiring knowledge, skills, and abilities (Q12, Q14, Q18, Q25, Q30); $\alpha = .80$
- **Enhancement** - Promoting personal growth and self-esteem (Q5, Q13, Q26, Q27, Q29); $\alpha = .84$

Each function score was computed as the average of its five items, while the total motivation score was the average of all 30 items. In addition to the VFI, demographic items (e.g., gender, grade, race/ethnicity) and leadership role status (yes/no) were collected.

Procedures

The survey was distributed via **Google Forms** between February 14 and May 23, 2025. Recruitment strategies included school outreach to 21 randomly selected schools. The VFI was selected as the primary instrument because it captures a broad spectrum of motivational factors and provides finer granularity (7-point scale) compared to alternative instruments such as the Bales Volunteerism-Activism Scale.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics (mean, median, standard deviation) were used to summarize VFI function scores. Relationships among the six motivational functions were examined using Pearson's correlation coefficients. To test study hypotheses, independent two-sample t-tests were conducted to compare group means on VFI scores (total and by function). A significance threshold of $\alpha = 0.05$ was applied; results with $p < 0.05$ were considered statistically significant. The assumptions (independence, normality, and homogeneity of variance) were evaluated and deemed reasonably satisfied given the sample size. All analyses and visualizations were performed in R.

Results

Participants

The final dataset included 133 youth participants from Montgomery County, Maryland. Gender distribution was 47.4% females, 47.4% males, and 5.3% as non-binary or other. The mean age was 15.2 years, with a range from 10 to 18. Most respondents were in high school (73.7%). Participants represented a racially diverse population with representation from Asian (55.6%), White/Caucasian (22.6%), Black or African American (13.5%), Two or More Races (5.3%), and Hispanic/Latino (3%) backgrounds. While some groups are more represented than others, the data reflects a degree of racial diversity within the sample.

In terms of volunteering experience, 52.6% had volunteered for less than two years, while 47.4% had volunteered for two years or more. Volunteer frequency varied: 62.4% were classified as frequent volunteers (at least once a month), and 36.8% as infrequent (less than once a month) or never. 60.2% of respondents held a leadership position within a volunteer context, while 39.8% did not.

Research Question 1: Which motivations did youth report as most important for their participation in volunteer work, as measured by the six VFI function scores?

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the six VFI function scores. Figure 1 displays a boxplot with jittered data points showing the distribution of VFI function scores. Each function reflects a distinct motivational category: Career, Enhancement, Protective, Social, Understanding, and Values. Mean scores ranged from 3.71 (Protective) to 5.61 (Values). Values and Understanding were the highest-rated motivational functions, while Protective scored the lowest on average. Standard deviations (SD) indicate moderate variability across functions, with Protective showing the greatest spread, having an interquartile range of 2 points on a 1-7 scale. Median values are closely aligned with the means in most categories, and interquartile ranges (Q1, Q3) reflect consistent central tendency, particularly in the higher-scoring functions.

Table 1 Summary of the VFI Function Scores

Category	N	Mean (SD)	Median	Q1, Q3
Career	133	4.56 (1.27)	4.8	(3.8, 5.4)
Enhancement	133	4.49 (1.37)	4.6	(3.6, 5.4)
Protective	133	3.71 (1.50)	3.6	(2.6, 4.6)
Social	133	4.40 (1.35)	4.4	(3.6, 5.4)
Understanding	133	5.48 (1.01)	5.6	(5.0, 6.2)
Values	133	5.61 (1.06)	5.8	(5.0, 6.4)

Although Protective had the lowest average score among the six motivational functions, the correlation analysis (Figure 2) re-

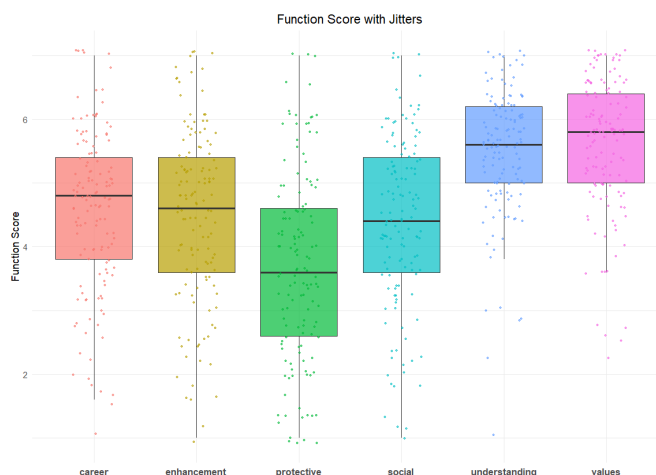


Fig. 1 Boxplot of VFI Function Scores with jittered data points.

veals that it has moderate to high correlations with other function scores, particularly in Enhancement ($r = 0.74$) and Understanding ($r = 0.60$). This suggests that youth who are motivated to volunteer as a way of coping with personal challenges also report high motivation in other areas, such as personal growth or gaining insight. This aligns with our observation that volunteers who have faced personal challenges tend to be more generally motivated than their peers who have not. We will investigate this further in Research Question 3.

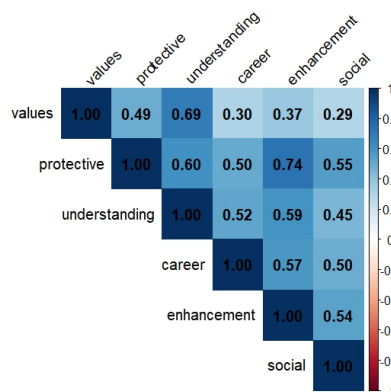


Fig. 2 Pairwise Correlations Among VFI Function Scores (n = 133)

Research Question 2: Did holding a leadership role influence the motivation levels of youth volunteers?

Of the respondents, 80 (60%) reported holding a leadership position. To investigate this question, we compared the VFI motivation scores of youth with and without leadership roles. Figure 3 presents overlaid histograms showing the distribution of scores across VFI total and each function by leadership status. There is a slight difference in the Values, Understanding,

and Protective functions. We conducted a two-sample t-test to determine if this difference is significant.

Conditions for a Two-Sample T-Test:

Random: The data was collected from a wide pool of students across 21 randomly selected schools in Montgomery County, Maryland, using a combination of outreach and voluntary participation.

Independence: Survey responses were submitted independently by individual youth volunteers. Additionally, the total sample size of 133 is well below 10% of the population of high school volunteers in the county, satisfying the independence condition.

Normal: Each group has a sample size greater than 30, which satisfies the normal condition by the Central Limit Theorem.

As shown in Table 2, among all the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) function scores analyzed, the Values function was the only score that exhibited a statistically significant difference based on leadership status (p -value = 0.0137). The effect size was determined to be 0.42, which, according to Cohen's D, approaches a medium effect size. This finding indicates that youth in leadership roles are significantly more motivated to volunteer due to altruistic or humanitarian values compared to those without such roles. None of the other function scores demonstrated statistical significance ($p > 0.05$), as detailed in Table 2.

Research Question 3: Did youth who report volunteering as a way to cope with personal challenges-operationalized as a Protective function score ≥ 4 -exhibit higher motivation across the other five functions compared to those who do not?

It was noted that there was no widely established or validated cutoff point (e.g., ≥ 4) in the published literature. Researchers typically interpret the midpoint (4 on the 1-7 scale) as indicating that a motivation was at least somewhat important/accurate. A few applied studies use thresholds like ≥ 4 to dichotomize low vs. high motivation for pragmatic reasons in program evaluation, but these are researcher-defined rather than standardized across the field^{10,13,14}.

Of the 133 respondents, 61 (46%) used volunteering as a way to cope with personal challenges. To explore this question, we compared the VFI motivation scores of youth based on their Protective score (Protective score ≥ 4 vs. < 4). Figure 4 displays overlaid histograms for each function. In each category, the distribution for the high Protective group tends to shift toward the right, indicating higher reported motivation levels across multiple VFI functions. To determine whether these differences are statistically significant, we conducted a two-sample t-test for the total and each of the five VFI functions.

All conditions for a Two-Sample T-Test, such as the Random, Independent, and Normal assumptions, are met. As shown in Table 3, all VFI functions and total scores differed significantly

based on the Protective score category at a 5% significance level. Since the p -value (< 0.001) for each category is less than the significance level (0.05), we can reject the null hypothesis. We have convincing evidence that youth volunteers with high protective motivation (score ≥ 4) have significantly higher motivation across other VFI functions compared to those with lower protective scores.

Discussion

Our findings provide valuable insights for organizations striving to recruit and retain youth volunteers. The data reveal that youth are primarily motivated to volunteer by altruistic values and the desire to gain knowledge and skills, as indicated by the Values and Understanding functions. To harness this motivation, organizations can enhance engagement by offering hands-on opportunities that allow volunteers to interact meaningfully with their communities and by providing comprehensive training experiences that facilitate skill development and personal growth.

Furthermore, the study highlights that youth in leadership roles exhibit a stronger motivation driven by altruistic values. To improve retention rates among these individuals, organizations should consider establishing structured leadership pathways, such as roles like event coordinators, team leaders, or positions on youth advisory boards. In addition to clearly defined roles, offering frequent opportunities for leaders to reflect on their experiences through leadership meetings or facilitated discussions can deepen their sense of purpose and strengthen their long-term commitment to the organization.

Additionally, our findings suggest that youth who volunteer as a means of coping with personal stress or hardship, characterized by high Protective motivation, also report increased motivation across other VFI functions. This indicates that volunteer service transcends being merely an outlet for stress and becomes a catalyst for personal growth, connection, and a sense of purpose. Nonprofits should focus on creating supportive and inclusive environments that foster these aspects, and consider offering reflective or wellness-oriented volunteer experiences to better engage and support these individuals.

In conclusion, by understanding and addressing the diverse motivations of youth volunteers, organizations can tailor their recruitment and retention strategies to effectively engage this demographic. By providing meaningful opportunities for interaction, growth, and leadership, organizations not only enhance the volunteer experience but also contribute to the development of empowered and committed young individuals.

Conclusion

While our research offers valuable insights, there are areas for improvement. First, not all schools in Montgomery County

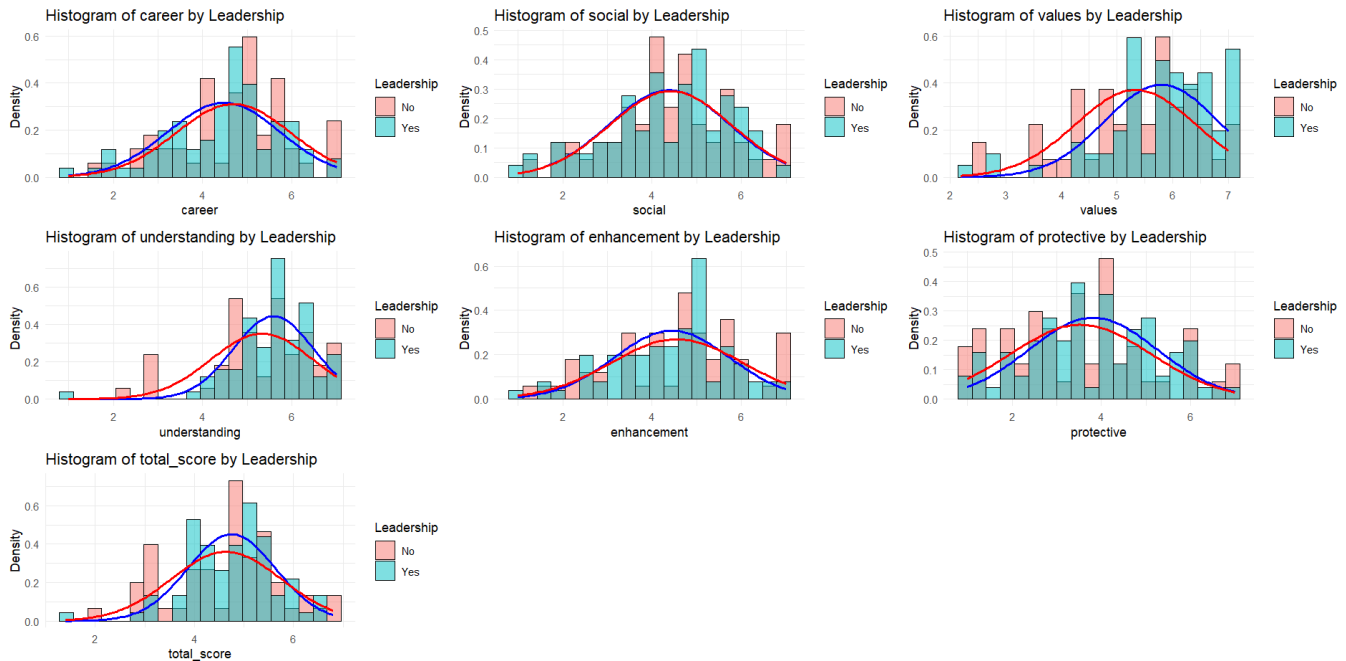


Fig. 3 Histograms of VFI Total and Function Scores by Leadership Status

Table 2 Mean VFI Total and Scores by Leadership Status

VFI	Leadership = Yes (N = 80)	Leadership = No (N = 53)	t_statistic	p_value
Career	4.48	4.69	0.95	0.3453
Social	4.39	4.42	0.11	0.9127
Values	5.79	5.33	-2.50	0.0137
Understanding	5.59	5.33	-1.39	0.1668
Enhancement	4.45	4.56	0.46	0.6485
Protective	3.82	3.54	-1.06	0.2903
Total Score	4.76	4.64	-0.64	0.5216

Table 3 Mean VFI Total and Function Scores by Protective Category

VFI	High Protective Scorers (N = 61)	Low Protective Scorers (N = 72)	t_statistic	p_value
Career	5.08	4.13	-4.64	< 0.001
Social	5.06	3.85	-5.72	< 0.001
Values	6.02	5.26	-4.51	< 0.001
Understanding	5.96	5.08	-5.74	< 0.001
Enhancement	5.31	3.79	-7.82	< 0.001

participated in our study. Expanding participation across a wider range of schools would improve the representativeness of the data. Secondly, the results may be affected by voluntary response bias because respondents chose to complete the survey on their own. Students who are more motivated to volunteer may also be more likely to respond, potentially skewing the data. Lastly, since we conducted seven two-sample t-tests for

the last two research questions, there's an increased risk of a Type I error, i.e., incorrectly rejecting the null hypothesis due to multiple comparisons. This highlights the need to consider multiple adjustments in future analyses.

Future studies could focus on assessing the validity of the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) for the youth population, considering sub-categories such as age, gender, and race. Addi-

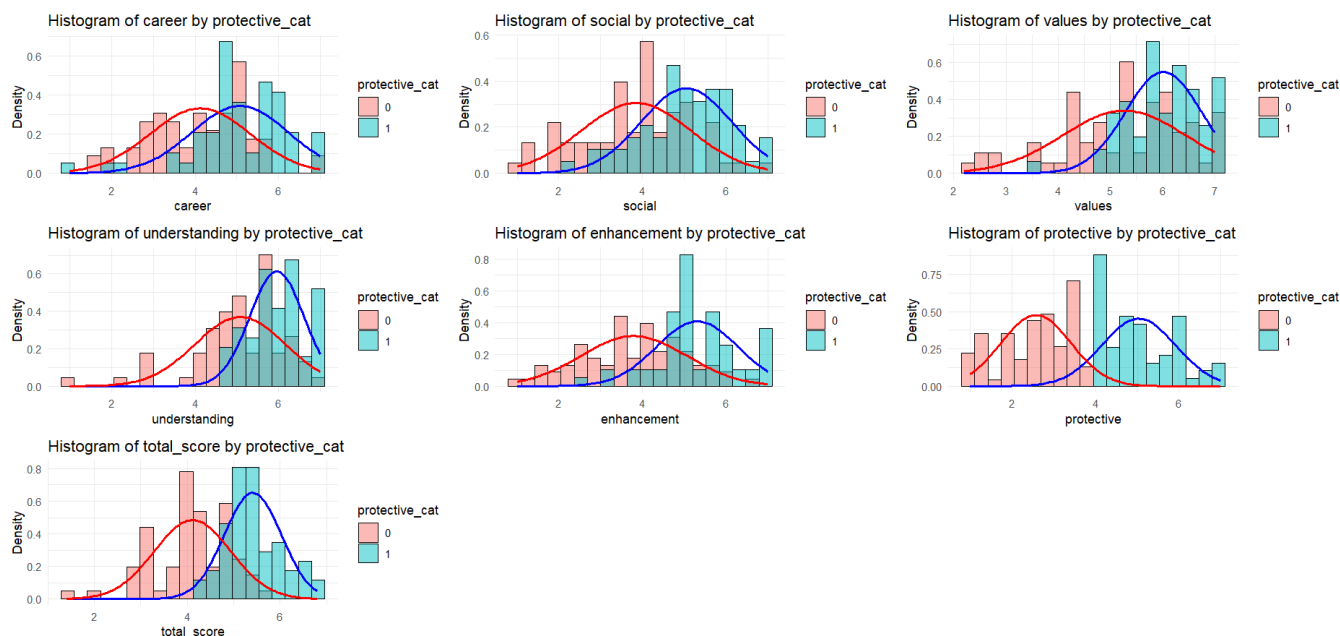


Fig. 4 Histogram of VFI Total and Each Function Score by Protective Category (0 = protective score <4, 1 = protective score ≥4)

tionally, research could explore how interactions between various functions influence the interpretation of distinct motivational drivers. Investigating causal effects through more sophisticated research designs would also be beneficial.

Moreover, future research should delve deeper into the data to examine how the frequency and duration of volunteering impact youth motivation. Expanding the data collection to include a broader range of schools within Montgomery County, Maryland, would help reduce sampling bias and enhance the representativeness of the results for the overall youth volunteer population.

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