

Who Will Serve as Youth Leaders?

**Substantial numbers of people are willing
who have never served in any
youth leadership capacity**

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ANNUALLY over two million adults serve in voluntary leadership capacities for educational youth organizations in the United States. Such groups as Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Campfire Girls, 4-H Clubs, farm youth organizations, and young adult church groups rely almost exclusively on lay people in the community to provide adult leadership for their organizations. Professionals in these youth organizations constantly express the need for additional volunteer leaders in order to provide maximum opportunity for all interested youth to participate in their program.

The youth leadership function within specific organizations has been the subject of a number of studies. Such studies have revealed that youth leaders, in general, are younger adults (married and have an average of two to three children), have high socio-economic status, and are active in community affairs. However, little is known regarding adult interest in accepting leadership responsibilities in various youth organizations. For example, it is not actually known whether people serve as youth leaders because of a sincere desire and interest or whether it is because of other factors.

The question of who will serve as youth leader is an important concern of professionals working with youth organizations. Also, it seems important to know whether younger people are more willing to serve as youth leaders than older people,¹ whether women are

¹ In referring to interest in youth leadership, the phrases "willingness to" and "interest in" are used interchangeably.

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more interested in becoming leaders than men, whether it is possible to differentiate the interested from the uninterested in terms of educational attainment and organizational participation, and whether previous experience as a youth leader increases interest in becoming a leader in the future or whether it decreases interest. These and similar concerns prompted a study of adult interest and participation in leadership for youth organizations.² The results of this research are summarized here.

Data were obtained from a survey conducted in Columbia County, Wisconsin.³ The overall purpose of the survey was to acquire more information about the problems, needs, and concerns of the people of the county. More specifically, an attempt was made through the survey to (1) determine the individual and community needs, problems, and concerns as perceived by the population; (2) determine the extent of participation in educational, social, economic, and civic organizations, agencies, and activities available to the population; and (3) determine pertinent personal, economic, and social characteristics of the people of the county.

Columbia County is located in the central part of the state and has a total population of 36,708. Of these people, 42.7 per cent are classified, by census definition, as rural non-farm, 26.5 per cent as rural farm, and 30.8 per cent as urban residents.⁴ There are two cities in the county with populations over 2500—Portage with 7822 and Columbus with 3461. Over the past few years unemployment has averaged about six per cent and the average weekly wage has been about \$63. The median family income in 1960 was \$4874.

From a strict probability sample of 532 adults, information was obtained regarding the adults' interest and participation in youth organizations. Data were also collected regarding such characteristics as age, sex, marital status, number of children, formal education, participation in organizations, and participation in educational activities.

LEADERSHIP INTEREST

Of the 532 adults included in this study, 47 per cent expressed

² See Eleanor L. Wilson, "Characteristics of Adults Associated with Leadership Participation and Interest in Youth Organizations" (unpublished M.S. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1963).

³ This survey was part of the Ford Urban Studies Program financed with Ford Foundation funds. Data were collected and coded through the facilities of the University of Wisconsin Survey Research Laboratory.

⁴ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census of Population, Wisconsin, 1960. General Social and Economic Characteristics* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1961).

interest in becoming leaders in various youth organizations. The remaining 53 per cent indicated no interest in youth leadership. As shown in Figure 1, a little over half of those expressing interest are now or have been leaders at some time in the past. One-fourth of those who indicated no interest in youth leadership are presently leaders or have been in the past.

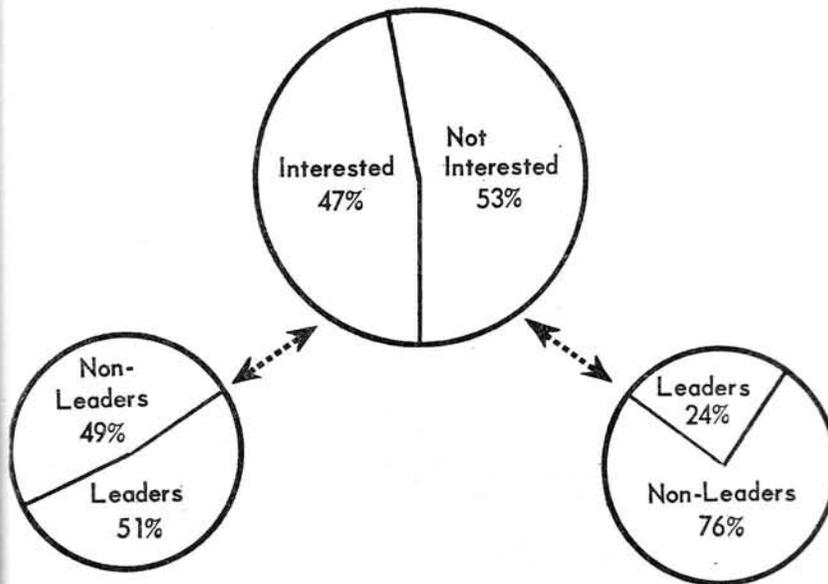


Figure 1. Adults' interest in youth leadership, Columbia County, Wisconsin.

Figure 2 shows the kind of youth organizations those interested in youth leadership would like to serve. A larger per cent indicated preference for working with Sunday school groups than any other group. The next largest per cent expressed interest in 4-H, next Boy Scouts, young adult church groups, and Girl Scouts in descending order. Respondents could express interest in more than one organization.

Personal Characteristics

The age distribution of the 532 adults included in this study indicated that 29 per cent were in the 21-39 age category, 38 per cent in the 40-59, and 33 per cent in the 60 years or over age category. Interest in youth leadership seemed to decrease as age increased. See Figure 3. Of those expressing interest, 47 per cent were in the 21-39 age category, 43 per cent in the 40-59 category, and only 10

per cent in 60 years or older. However, over half of those expressing no interest were 60 years old or over, 33 per cent were in the 40-59 category, and 13 per cent in the 21-39 category.

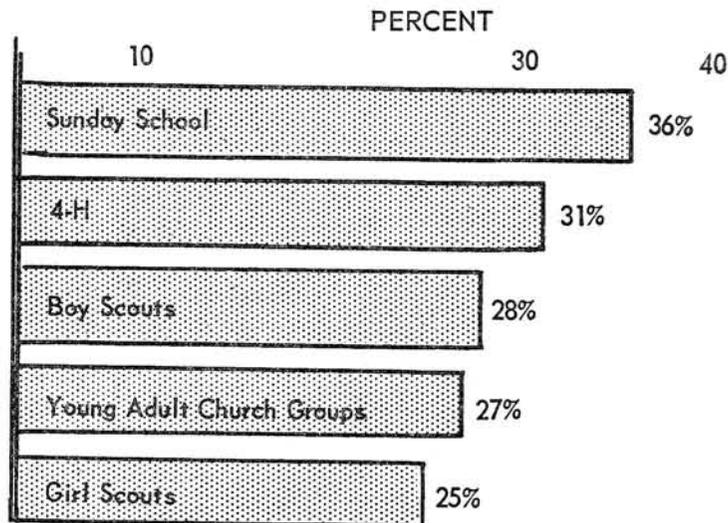


Figure 2. Per cent of Columbia County, Wisconsin adults expressing interest in serving various youth organizations in leadership capacities.

Fifty-seven per cent of those in the sample were women and 43 per cent were men. A higher percentage of those expressing interest were women than men.

Thirty-nine per cent of the sample were classified as rural farm residents, 22 per cent as village, and 39 per cent as city.⁵ A significant difference existed between city, village, and rural farm residents in regard to their interest in youth leadership. Forty per cent of those expressing interest were rural farm compared to 35 per cent city and 24 per cent village. Of those indicating no interest in youth leadership, 43 per cent were city residents, 20 per cent were village, and 37 per cent rural farm.

Since only adults 21 years of age or over were included in this survey the majority (75 per cent) were married. Interest in youth leadership seemed to be associated with marital status. Eighty-five per cent of those expressing interest were married. Among the married, there seemed to be a definite relationship between interest in youth leadership and number of children in the family. As num-

⁵ Those classified as rural farm were those indicating they lived on a farm; those residing in Portage or Columbus were classified as urban; all others were classified as village residents.

ber of children increased, interest in youth leadership also increased. Proportionally, people with no children were the least interested in youth leadership; proportionally, people with four or more children were the most interested.

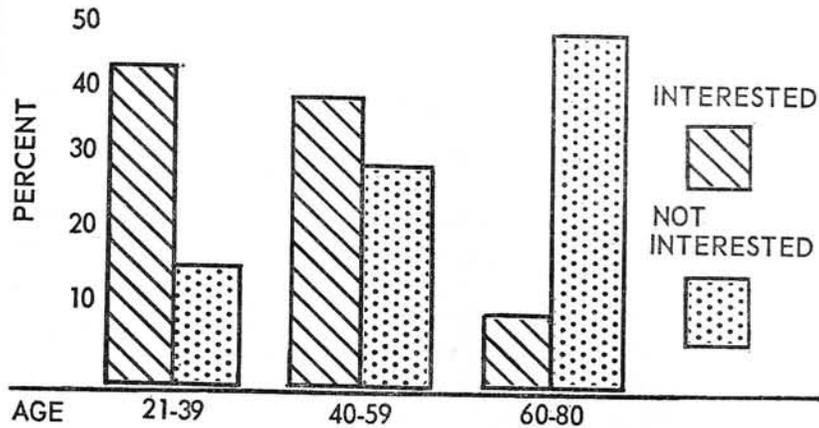


Figure 3. Adult interest in serving as leaders for youth by age groups, Columbia County, Wisconsin.

The amount of formal education seemed to be another factor influencing interest in youth leadership. Eighty per cent of those expressing interest had at least a high school education; 50 per cent of those expressing no interest had an eighth grade education or less.

Participation

The extent of participation in voluntary organizations in the community was determined for each adult included in the study. This was based on the individual's membership in various organizations, the number of offices or such positions of leadership held, and the frequency of attendance at meetings. Those interested in youth leadership participated to a greater extent in voluntary organizations than those expressing no interest.

Participation in educational activities was based on the frequency of participation in various educational activities made available to the adult population through the Cooperative Extension Service, University of Wisconsin Extension Division, local and traveling libraries, vocational schools, and vocational agriculture and home economics departments in the local high schools. The people who indicated an interest in youth leadership participated in educational

activities to a greater extent than those who were not willing to serve as youth leaders.

SUMMARY

The findings of this study can be summarized as follows:

1. The adult population (based on a strict probability sample) was about equally divided in respect to its interest in youth leadership—there were approximately as many people expressing interest as expressing no interest.
2. A substantial per cent of people who have served as youth leaders expressed no interest in serving in the future.
3. People who have never served in leadership positions indicated willingness to serve.
4. More women expressed interest in youth leadership than men.
5. More rural farm residents seemed to be interested in youth leadership than either village or city residents.
6. People willing to serve as youth leaders were generally young, married, had children, had at least a high school education, and were higher participators in community organizations and educational activities.

Even though these findings are based on data from one county in Wisconsin, they raise questions that should be of interest to those concerned with youth leadership under any circumstances. Among the more important points is the fact that 1 out of every 4 who are presently or who have served as youth leaders indicated no further interest. This can be interpreted in at least two different ways: (1) These people were initially not interested in becoming youth leaders, and reluctantly accepted the responsibility because of some other factors; or (2) they were initially interested but the leadership experience did not meet their expectations, prompting a negative response regarding possible interest in being involved in the future. Either one of these interpretations has significant implications for youth programs. If these adults accepted leadership responsibilities reluctantly and for reasons other than genuine interest (the first interpretation), it is appropriate to ask if people should be recruited for leadership positions regardless of whether they are interested. If they are not interested will they perform leadership responsibilities effectively, or will they consider the job a burden? If these adults were initially interested but later learned that the experience did not measure up to their expectations (the second interpretation), why did these people lose interest? What adjustments in leadership

functions and the program would be necessary in order to maintain leader interest?

Most youth organizations express concern about the inadequate number of available volunteer leaders. The findings of this study indicate there are substantial numbers of people who are willing but have never served in any youth leadership capacities. However, the mere expression of willingness is not adequate assurance that a person will actually serve. Such expressions of willingness may have been motivated by socially desirable elements associated with youth leadership. On the other hand, expressions of interest may have been motivated by genuine desire. Such a possibility suggests that potential leaders who are truly willing to serve youth organizations are not being effectively approached. Therefore, examination and adjustments in recruitment procedures and practices may be suggested.

This study indicates that those not interested in youth leadership are people with less formal schooling, are less involved in community affairs, and are lower participators in educational activities. If youth leadership is an educational experience for the leader as well as youth, then one might ask how the leadership function could be made more appealing to those not interested. Is it possible to adjust the youth leadership responsibilities so as to arouse and maintain the interest of people who indicated no interest in youth leadership?

CONCLUSION

The findings and implications of this study are most applicable to the specific situation from which the data were collected. However, professional personnel may find value in examining and analyzing their leader situation in a manner similar to the approach used in this study. There is also the possibility that similar conditions would exist in other circumstances, even though findings of this study can not be legitimately so generalized. The fact that a sizable proportion of adults seem to be interested and willing to serve as leaders in youth organizations is worth exploring further. It could be enlightening to know more about those who have or are presently serving as leaders but who express a lack of interest. The challenge, therefore, is to recognize those who are interested and provide them with experiences that will maintain and accelerate their interest and to explore possibilities of interesting those who indicate no interest.