

Reaching Youth in Low-Income Areas

NORMAN O. EVERSON AND JEROLD W. APPS

To what extent do youth from rural low-income areas participate in voluntary organizations? And what characteristics of these youth are related to their participation? In an attempt to answer these two questions, the authors studied young people in a rural low-income area of Wisconsin—comparing those from lower socioeconomic levels with those from higher levels. In addition to reporting their findings, the authors present recommendations for educational programs attempting to reach these lower socioeconomic rural youth.

PARTICIPATION studies have shown that most youth organizations do not effectively reach lower socioeconomic youth. Research has been concentrated primarily in urban areas and therefore more is known about lower socioeconomic urban youth than is known about their counterparts in rural America. Consequently, this article will focus on two questions: (1) To what extent do youth from rural low-income areas participate in voluntary organizations? (2) What characteristics of youth from low-income rural areas are related to their participation?

The primary source of evidence concerning these questions comes from a study of 456 youth (ages 10 through 13) in Adams County, Wisconsin.¹ Information was obtained by questionnaire and interviews with these young people.

Adams County is a rural low-income area in central Wisconsin with a population of 7566 (1960 census). Approximately one-fourth of the population lives in two incorporated villages. About 40 per

¹Details of this research are reported in Norman O. Everson, "Participation in Voluntary Organizations by Wisconsin Rural Youth of Differential Socio-Economic Levels" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, 1966).

NORMAN O. EVERSON is Assistant State 4-H Leader and Associate Professor, Department of Community Affairs, University Extension, and JEROLD W. APPS is Associate Professor, Department of Agricultural and Extension Education, and Coordinator of Staff Development, University Extension, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

cent of the land is in farms and less than one-third of the farmland is cropped. The number of farms has decreased and the average size increased. In 1960, 43 per cent of the families had annual income below \$3000.

In order to establish variability in socioeconomic status for these young people, a status score was determined for all youth (456) attending grades five through eight in the public schools.² The score was based upon information obtained from youth regarding the occupation of the head of house, education of the head of house, and specific family possessions and conveniences. Based on scores obtained from this scale, 99 youth were in or near the middle and were classified "average." These 99 with an "average" socioeconomic status were eliminated from further analysis. Of the remaining 357, 7 were not available for interviews. Consequently, 350 were interviewed personally at school. These 350 constitute the population for analysis and represent the total number ("N") for the study. Of these 350, 176 were in the lower socioeconomic group. The remaining 174 were in the higher group.

Based on the information obtained, the father of a youth in the lower socioeconomic group, typically, works in a semi-skilled occupation and has an eighth grade education (13 per cent completed high school). In contrast, the father of a youth of the higher socioeconomic group, typically, is a craftsman, salesman, or foreman and has graduated from high school (82 per cent completed high school). The typical home of the lower socioeconomic group has the following possessions and conveniences: electricity, television, drinking water, hot running water, and a telephone. The typical higher socioeconomic home has all the above plus a daily newspaper, record player, clothes dryer, automatic clothes washer, and a late model automobile. These socioeconomic differences may be characteristic of conditions in rural areas. They are obviously not as great as the diversities found between the pockets of poverty and affluence in urban areas.

EXTENT OF PARTICIPATION

Numerous studies reveal that people who participate in organized groups are of higher social and economic situations than those who do not participate. Based on a review of literature, Duxbury found this to be generally true in relation to youth partic-

²The scale used was devised by the researchers. Each component of the scale contributed almost equally. Maximum points were as follows: 14 for occupation, 12 for education, and 12 for family possessions.

education—those of lower social and economic status participate in few organized groups.³ (The Boys' Clubs of America was the only youth organization with a high proportion of members from the lower socioeconomic families.) In related 4-H studies of 10 Wisconsin communities, Kreitlow and others⁴ reported that 4-H membership was closely associated with higher socioeconomic family status. National studies⁵ of late childhood and adolescent-age youth reveal that one-third to one-half of the young people from lower-status families do not belong to any voluntary organizations.

In the Adams County study, 158 of the 350 youth (about 45 per cent) did not claim membership in a nonschool/nonchurch organization. Of these, 89 were in the higher socioeconomic group and 69 were in the lower. However, the difference between the two socioeconomic levels was not statistically significant (see Table 1). A few youth were deeply involved in activities of several organizations, but substantial numbers were virtually untouched by organized groups. (It should be kept in mind that this study was conducted in a rural low-income area where high- and low-income strata are not widely separated.)

The opportunities for youth to participate in voluntary organizations outside the school and church often may be limited in rural

Table 1. Extent of youth membership in clubs by number and per cent according to socioeconomic status, Adams County, Wisconsin.

Number of clubs to which youth belong	Total		Socioeconomic status			
	No.	Per cent	Lower		Higher	
			No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent
None	158	45	89	51	69	40
One	143	41	65	37	79	45
Two or more	49	14	22	12	26	15
Total:	350	100	176	100	174	100

³Donald E. Duxbury, "A Study of Selected Characteristics of Youth from Low Income Families and Their Implications to Cooperative Extension Service Youth Programs," a seminar report, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, 1965, pp. 64-66.

⁴Burton W. Kreitlow, Lowell Pierce, and Curtis Middleton, *Who Joins 4-H?*, Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 215 (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1959), pp. 9-12.

⁵Survey Research Center, *A Study of Boys Becoming Adolescents* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Boy Scouts of America, 1960), pp. 17-19; *Adolescent Girls* (New York: Girl Scouts of the U.S.A., 1956), p. 164; and *A Study of Adolescent Boys* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Boy Scouts of America, 1955), p. 110.

low-income areas. In Adams County, 4-H was the only club readily available to rural youth—farm and nonfarm. Over two-fifths (152) of the 350 youth in the study belonged to 4-H, and nearly half of those who did belong (47 per cent) were from families of lower socioeconomic status (see Table 2). Only 40 (11 per cent) belonged to a nonschool/nonchurch organization other than 4-H.

CHARACTERISTICS RELATED TO PARTICIPATION

A major purpose of this study was to identify characteristics thought to be associated with the participation of youth in nonschool/nonchurch voluntary organizations. Responses given by youth in individual interviews indicated that those from lower socioeconomic families differed from youth of higher socioeconomic families in several respects. Youth from lower socioeconomic families can be characterized as follows:

1. They are from larger families.
2. They attend church less regularly, and more often indicate no religious preference.
3. They participate less in school clubs and activities.
4. They are more likely to be rural nonfarm than village residents (however, farm youth were divided equally between lower and higher socioeconomic groups).
5. Their siblings participate less in voluntary youth organizations.
6. Their parents hold fewer leadership positions in youth organizations, participate less in community adult organizations, and are less interested in having their children join youth groups.

Table 2. Memberships in youth groups by socioeconomic status, Adams County, Wisconsin.

Youth groups	No. reported belonging	Per cent by socioeconomic status	
		Lower (N=176)	Higher (N=174)
4-H	152	47	53
Little league	45	40	60
Boy scouts	12	50	50
Cub scouts	4	25	75
Girl scouts	0	0	0
Others	36	44	56
Total	249*		

* A total of 249 memberships were held by 192 young people. Some reported memberships in more than one group.

Influence of Others

Findings of the Adams County study strongly support the notion that participation is a family trait. Regardless of socioeconomic status, the degree of parental interest in having youth belong to clubs (as perceived by youth) was more closely related to youth membership in clubs than other family characteristics studied (Table 3). Mothers' perceived interests were related more closely to club membership of those in the higher socioeconomic group than in the lower (no youth in the higher group belonged to clubs when mothers were perceived as not being interested). The perceived interests of fathers were more closely related to club membership in the lower socioeconomic group than in the higher. Youth-reported participation of parents, especially of mothers, in adult organizations was associated closely with youth membership in clubs (Table 4). Regardless of socioeconomic status, youth membership in clubs was highest when parents approved of having their children join clubs, when parents belonged to several adult organizations, when parents held leadership positions in youth clubs, when siblings were members of youth clubs, and when parents had been members of youth clubs.

Table 3. Number and per cent of youth belonging to clubs as related to their perception of parents' interest in having them belong, Adams County, Wisconsin.

Perceived level of parent interest	Lower socioeconomic			Higher socioeconomic		
	No. of youth	Youth belonging to clubs		No. of youth	Youth belonging to clubs	
		No.	Per cent		No.	Per cent
<i>Mother</i>						
Interested	56	37	66	99	70	71
Neutral	71	40	56	51	32	63
Not interested	48	10	21	21	0	0
No response	1	0		3	3	
Totals:	176	87		174	105	
<i>Father</i>						
Interested	34	26	76	80	55	69
Neutral	87	47	54	61	42	69
Not interested	48	10	21	29	6	20
No response	7	4		4	2	
Totals:	176	87		174	105	

Participation by lower socioeconomic youth decreased as size of the family increased. Conversely, highest participation by higher socioeconomic youth occurred among youth from larger families.

The influence of peers has been identified as a major determining factor of participation by youth in organized groups. Influence of friends was the most frequently given reason for joining Boys' Clubs of America⁶ (membership was 84 per cent from low and lower-middle class families). However, another nationwide study⁷ revealed that lower-status boys were influenced less by their friends than were high-status boys. Findings of several 4-H re-enrollment studies⁸ identified the peer group as an important factor in the decision to continue membership. In Adams County, club membership was found to be associated with the extent to which friends belonged to the same clubs. This was the case regardless of socioeconomic status. When asked "Who has the most to say about your not belonging to clubs?" 80 per cent of the nonmembers in the lower socioeconomic status and 63 per cent of those in the higher socio-

Table 4. Number and per cent of youth belonging to clubs as related to their reporting parents' participation in adult organizations, Adams County, Wisconsin.

No. of organizations reported for parents	Lower socioeconomic			Higher socioeconomic		
	No. of youth	Youth belonging to clubs		No. of youth	Youth belonging to clubs	
		No.	Per cent		No.	Per cent
<i>Mother</i>						
Three or more	55	38	70	120	84	70
One or two	85	41	48	42	18	43
None	36	8	22	12	3	25
Totals:	176	87		174	105	
<i>Father</i>						
Three or more	20	13	66	88	64	73
One or two	86	48	56	65	35	54
None	70	26	37	21	6	29
Totals:	176	87		174	105	

⁶ Boys' Clubs of America, *Needs and Interests Study of 11-12-13 Year Old Boys' Club Members* (New York: Boys' Clubs of America, 1963), p. 30.

⁷ Survey Research Center, *A Study of Boys . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

⁸ Kreitlow, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

economic status answered "parents." However, more of the higher socioeconomic youth (14 per cent) than lower (7 per cent) indicated that peers were most influential.

Reasons for Participation or Nonparticipation

Participation studies indicate that, among other reasons, youth join clubs to learn, to have fun, and to gain new experiences. In the Adams County study, the reasons indicated by youth for joining clubs were similar for lower and higher socioeconomic youth. Reasons most frequently cited were to learn, to have fun, and to be with friends.

Nonparticipation may result from various blocks. A study by Kreitlow⁹ revealed that the main reasons youth did not join 4-H were unavailability of a club and lack of interest. Major reasons reported by adolescent-age boys¹⁰ for nonparticipation were personal dislike for clubs and pressures on leisure time.

The Adams County study revealed no statistically significant differences between lower and higher socioeconomic youth in reasons given for not joining clubs. Lack of transportation to meetings and time conflicts when clubs met were the most prevalent reasons given. More lower socioeconomic youth than higher socioeconomic youth reported they had never been asked to join a club and indicated that their parents did not approve of their joining.

When all youth in the study were asked if they would like to join a club to which they had never belonged, over 70 per cent responded positively. Over 60 per cent reported never having been asked to join. Four-H was most often indicated as the club they desired to join, but half said it was not available.

Club Likes and Dislikes

As another means of perceiving attitudes toward clubs, respondents were asked in open-end questions what they liked or disliked about the clubs to which they belonged. Regardless of socioeconomic status, aspects most often mentioned were opportunity to learn, individual projects, and group activities. Competition and rewards, club meetings, and being with friends were mentioned least. A larger percentage of higher socioeconomic than lower socioeconomic youth liked group activities (such as tours and camp), competition and rewards, and being with friends (dif-

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁰ Sarvey Research Center, *A Study of Adolescent Boys*, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

ferences were not statistically significant). A larger percentage of lower socioeconomic than higher socioeconomic youth liked individual projects. Club meetings were the aspect most disliked, regardless of socioeconomic status of the respondent.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study are most applicable to Adams County, Wisconsin. However, the conclusions may be generalized to other rural low-income areas:

1. Participation in voluntary nonschool/nonchurch organizations is not significantly different for youth of differential socioeconomic levels in rural low-income areas where high- and low-income strata are not widely separated. However, a smaller proportion of youth of lower socioeconomic status are nonparticipants than is the case for those of higher socioeconomic status.
2. The opportunities provided for youth to participate in voluntary organizations are limited in rural low-income areas. Four-H is the major youth organization available to and reaching youth in such rural areas.
3. The participation of youth in voluntary organizations is closely associated with perceived parental interest in having their children join clubs and with youth-reported parent participation in community activities.
4. Those who belong to youth organizations want to learn new skills and knowledge through individual projects and group activities, but they tend to dislike club meetings.
5. They want to belong to youth organizations and say they will join if clubs are available, if asked to join, and if parents will approve.

Discussion

Although differences in youth participation in nonschool/nonchurch voluntary organizations and factors associated with participation were not statistically significant in this study, the findings do offer certain suggestions in terms of Extension youth programs.

Educational programs developed by Extension to meet the needs and concerns of lower socioeconomic rural youth can be part of the community 4-H program. The name "4-H" is well known in rural areas. The small differences that exist among youth of different socioeconomic levels in their basic interests and motivations toward voluntary organizations suggest that separate programs may not be

needed for lower socioeconomic youth. Many already participate, but the invitation must be extended to others to join existing clubs, or additional clubs need to be made available. The major challenge facing those who work with youth in rural low-income areas would seem to be that of changing unfavorable attitudes that many parents have about their children's belonging to voluntary organizations.

In addition to the traditional community 4-H Club program, other kinds of approaches should be considered. For example, lower socioeconomic youth indicate a strong interest in individual skill-type projects and tend to dislike club meetings. This suggests that short-term projects might be effective, rather than a year-round program. Perhaps this could be accomplished effectively in cooperation with schools, churches, or other groups and agencies where adult assistance could be more readily available than is often the case when indigenous leadership must be relied upon. Group activities, such as camps and tours, could also be developed effectively with small groups.

Extension should develop educational programs to attract a large portion of youth in rural low-income areas. Appropriate modifications and new approaches in organizational structure, program content, and methods should be attempted. Extension staff members, located in every county in the nation, have access to multiple resources to aid in planning and implementing programs that could help rural youth improve themselves.

WE ARE NOW AT THE POINT where we must educate people in what nobody knew yesterday, and prepare people in our schools for what no one knows yet, but what some people must know tomorrow. . . . We can no longer give young people a good education—we can only give them *some* education. . . . They can no longer be given a complete training for future use in what inevitably turns out to be yesterday's conditions. They must be prepared to get more education after they begin work so that they can cope with changes currently taking place.

—MARGARET MEAD