findings

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Engaging young people in giving and charity

Over the last 20 years there has been a worrying decline in younger people's participation in volunteering and giving money to good causes. Despite this evidence and the ensuing 'bad press', there has been little empirical research into how young people relate to giving and charity. This research, carried out by researchers at the Charities Aid Foundation, uses both qualitative and quantitative survey techniques to explore the views of a range of young people. The study found that:

- Young people define 'charity' and 'giving' more widely than formal organised charitable activities such as giving money, focusing more on engagement through active involvement.
- Charity is not seen as something only charities do; 'helping' others in the community informally is also seen as an important charitable act. Neighbourliness or something akin to citizenship is seen as a positive value, while giving time, in general, is seen as a greater effort than giving money and is often perceived as a more valuable gift.
- Young people are themselves engaged in a variety of activities that come under a wider definition of 'charity', better defined as 'altruistic engagement': from giving goods to charity shops to buying the Big Issue, Fairtrade goods, recycling, campaigning and taking part in charity events.
- The real level of young people's engagement with charity in the wider sense is being underestimated by traditional giving surveys and narrow approaches to measurement, which rarely include the type of activities mentioned by the young people.
- Young people aged 16–24 are particularly likely to fall through the net of existing opportunities for engagement with charities.
- There is a feeling among young people that the emphasis on raising money can be disempowering as they have limited funds to give and more to offer charities and voluntary organisations than money. Many feel that there are insufficient opportunities to give their time to charity, while only a few feel that there are insufficient opportunities to give their money to charity.
- Young people want more information from charities about what is done with their money and how their donations effect change, and they believe that having more information would encourage them to give more in future. The vast majority think that they will be engaged, giving both money and time in the future.

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Background

Against the backdrop of an apparent decline in engagement with charity, several studies have attempted to look at young people's disengagement with volunteering, but there has been almost no investigation into the decline in giving money. Charities Aid Foundation undertook this research to address this specific gap in knowledge, asking young people directly about their present and potential future engagement with charities and the voluntary sector in the UK, and in particular their giving (or not giving) of money.

Perceptions of 'charity' – changing definitions

Charity is not a topic at the forefront of young people's minds and it is not the first thing they would think to do with their money. When it is discussed, however, they have a well-developed sense of what charity is and what charities do, and have a favourable view of charities' role in raising awareness and helping people and situations. They think that the charity sector does more good in society than government or business and have greater trust in charities than in the institutions of the other two sectors.

Defining 'charity' and 'giving' too narrowly excludes much of what young people see as important to them and the society in which they live. Young people define the concept of 'charity' and 'giving' more widely than formal organised charitable activity and this suggests a need for new approaches if these concepts are to be more relevant to what young people are actually doing today.

Giving to charity – counting the contribution

Young people are engaged in a wide range of activities that could be described as 'altruistic', 'socially responsible', 'ethical economics', 'citizenship' or 'charitable', but which may not necessarily be counted under the more formal banner of 'charity' (these activities include recycling, giving goods to charity shops, giving to beggars, buying Fairtrade goods and campaigning about issues).

The current methods used in surveys to measure giving underestimate the contributions made by young people. For example, the most popular form of raising and giving money to charity among young people is sponsorship and many young people also give through company events (e.g. annual sponsored charities, Comic Relief or Children in Need events) and events organised at their colleges, such as 'rag week', charity cloakrooms and informal collections. Many of these collections will not be measured by current surveys or, if they are, may not be attributed to the young people themselves but to the company or other adults organising them.

A financial value could also be attached to other contributions made by young people which are not currently counted in giving surveys (e.g. giving goods to charity shops, recycling and buying Fairtrade products).

Young people perceive that many charities tend to concentrate on the monetary aspects of giving. They know that money is a crucial part of charity and feel that people should give to support charity; however, most young people feel that they haven't got much money and that charities should try to involve them in other ways, for example by giving other goods, being involved in events or helping out ('volunteering').

This points to a need to widen the definition of 'giving' as officially measured in current surveys, which could radically alter the picture of giving to charity currently portrayed and young people's position within it.

The generation gap

Recent research by the Giving Campaign showed that young people aged between 11 and 16 are very engaged in giving and other charitable activities largely through formal mechanisms and through their schools, while research with adults has shown that giving is also relatively strong around the age of 30 and above, when adults become engaged in the kinds of social and formal networks that encourage giving and involvement.

This study found that 16- to 24-year-olds have a tendency to fall into the gap between these age groups, in terms of not just years but also of opportunities for formal charitable activity. The decreased involvement in formal structures at this age may play a large part in young people's apparent dissociation with society, manifested in this instance in a lack of formal engagement with charities and giving.

In spite of this, the amount of 'altruistic' activities that young people actually engage in is considerable.

Responding to fundraising

Several charity marketing and fundraising methods appear either to slightly annoy young people or to affect them insufficiently to stimulate giving.

Advertisements, sponsored activities and big charity events are more popular than face-to-face collections and celebrity or business endorsements. Contrary to some beliefs, many young people seem put off by face-to-face fundraising methods, finding them intrusive and guilt inducing, and they do not discriminate between beggars and charity collectors. The vast majority, however, do like the idea of giving a small regular monthly amount by direct debit – whether this is an arrangement they feel able to commit to now or at some time in the future. Celebrity involvement in charity fundraising is viewed ambivalently but is not seen as something that would greatly encourage them to give, and young people are wary of some celebrities 'just doing it for the publicity'. The younger respondents were more likely to be influenced by celebrities than those slightly older.

Young people are the most marketed to and brand-conscious age group and generation. They know the power of advertising and respond intelligently to it. Charity advertising is generally seen as positive awareness-raising, although many feel unable to respond directly. Large fundraising events such as Children in Need and Comic Relief are seen as positive ways for young people to get involved and to see where the money goes.

Relating to charities

Young people want an active involvement in charities' work and they want to see and understand what charities do with their money. They seem to understand the constraints on what charities can do, but although charities are generally more trusted than either the government or companies, young people still have some concerns about charity spending. Young people want to see evidence that the money given (especially their own money) has made a difference, and a number cite knowing that the money was spent well and made a difference as the thing most likely to make them give in the future. Overall however, the vast majority trust charities to spend their money well.

Young people share a cautious optimism about charities which needs to be built upon and encouraged. Their scepticism is, for the most part, healthy and reasoned, and they are not the only group wanting greater openness and accountability from the charitable sector. Young people are likely to be generally positive about charities and are the least critical in many ways than other age groups. Charities should capitalise on this positivity while these people are still young in order to build a more solid relationship when they are older.

Future engagement

Despite huge concerns that young people are less engaged with charity and that this may lead to a decline in future giving, nearly all of the young people in the survey reported that they intend to give to charity in future – either money, time or more likely both. They would ideally like charities to present them with easy ways of becoming more involved, and being more engaged on a personal level was felt to increase the chances of giving as well. Most young people do not know how to get more involved with charities.

Implications for the voluntary and charitable sector

Official surveys of giving show young people to be the least likely age group to give to charity. The research reported here, however, suggests the need to take a broader view when looking at young people's engagement. It seems likely that the real contributions of young people in all forms may not be being recorded by such measuring tools for a number of reasons, and researchers, charities, voluntary organisations and society more widely need to look at 'charity' more broadly if it is to include young people more.

Are young people disaffected or disenfranchised? Previous research has shown that there is a general decline in engagement in society among all age groups, and this is particularly marked in the young. The research reported here is the first to explicitly highlight lack of opportunity as a reason for the apparent lack of engagement of young people.

Young people generally believe that charities are a benefit to society and that giving money, time and other assets to charity is a good thing to do. The problem seems to be engagement – and particularly the opportunity to engage. Many feel marginalised by mainstream efforts to engage people as these may often exclude young people in their approach, focusing almost exclusively on giving money and giving in ways that may be out of the reach of many young people. Charities need to realise that in concentrating their efforts on those people with higher incomes they may not only be missing out on a huge untapped resource of enthusiastic young people but also burning their bridges when it comes to engaging these youngsters in future. As one focus group participant commented:

> **"It's all about intention, if you don't get it when you are young, this feeling that I have to give and there is a reason why I have to give, it won't come to you when you are older."**

Charities need to engender this feeling with a more inclusive approach to young people's engagement, in which giving money is not always seen as the most important or appropriate response, and where money is required, information about the impact of donations is given. This might also involve, for example, adapting existing approaches to 'charity' and 'giving' to encompass the wide range of activities that young people engage in on a charitable basis, including accepting that many young people may favour more radical and active solutions to some problems.

In cultivating such a relationship with young people charities can provide the missing stepping stone for young people to feel more included, valued and more powerful agents in society.

Widening our understanding of charitable giving means recognising that young people do far more than they are sometimes given credit for in society, and celebrating this fact. We also need to provide more and different opportunities for young people to become engaged with forms of citizenship and building social capital. It is vital for the charity, voluntary and community sector to address young people's concerns, as the future of the sector and the shape of civil society will depend on the input of today's young people.

About the project

The research was undertaken by Dr Catherine Walker and Andrew Fisher of Charities Aid Foundation, using both qualitative and quantitative techniques. The aim was to allow young people to talk about charity and giving in a neutral setting and to explore their relationship with the issues now and their feelings about the future.

Nine focus groups were carried out with a total of 70 young people (in groups of between four and twelve individuals). The groups varied by geographic location nationwide in the UK, by being in an urban, semi-urban, semi-rural or rural setting, and by social setting (e.g. workplace, school or college, social activity group). Groups were also chosen to roughly balance gender, age and ethnic profiles. The focus group transcripts were analysed using a grounded-type analysis.

A quantitative survey was carried out with a nationally representative probability sample of 590 young people aged 16-24. The survey was carried out by BMRB International using face-to-face CAPI interviews in the ACCESS national omnibus and was weighted according to gender, age, employment and child status of housewives, social class and standard region.

Fieldwork for the study was carried out between March and June 2002.

How to get further information

The full report, **Growing into giving: Young people's engagement with charity** by Catherine Walker and Andrew Fisher, is published by Charities Aid Foundation and is available from them (price £15.00 inc p&p, ISBN 1 85934 145 4), Tel. 01732 520125.
A summary of the report is also available from the Charities Aid Foundation website: www.CAFonline.org/research.

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

- **Young people's views of politics**, May 00 (Ref: 520)
- **Involving young people in research projects**, Dec 00 (Ref: D30)
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