

# Improving Lives and Communities: Perspectives on 40 Years of VISTA Service



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## **Corporation for National and Community Service**

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Created in 1993, the Corporation for National and Community Service improves lives, strengthens communities, and fosters civic engagement through service and volunteering. Each year the Corporation engages more than four million Americans of all ages and backgrounds in service to improve communities and meet national, state, and local needs through:

**Senior Corps**, the network of programs that helps Americans age 55 and older use their skills and experience in service opportunities that address the needs of their communities. Senior Corps includes the RSVP, Foster Grandparent Program, and Senior Companion Program;

**AmeriCorps**, whose members serve with local and national organizations to meet community needs, mobilize volunteers, and build the capacity of nonprofit organizations to address today's most pressing challenges;

**Learn and Serve America**, which helps link community service and learning objectives for youth from kindergarten through college as well as youth in community-based organizations.

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Appendices to this report are found in a separate volume, *Improving Lives and Communities: Perspectives on 40 Years of VISTA Service: Appendices to Final Report*:

- Appendix A: Detailed Description of Study Methodology
- Appendix B: Detailed Results for All Respondents
- Appendix C: Detailed Results for First Generation Respondents
- Appendix D: Detailed Results for Second Generation Respondents
- Appendix E: Detailed Results for Third Generation Respondents
- Appendix F: Telephone Survey
- Appendix G: In-Person Interview Protocol

# Overview of Findings

*Improving Lives and Communities: Perspectives on 40 Years of VISTA Service* provides insight into the experience of VISTA members starting with the program's inception in 1965 until 1993 when VISTA merged with AmeriCorps and became the AmeriCorps VISTA program. In addition to participants' experiences, the study focuses particular attention on the long-term effects of VISTA on members' civic engagement, education, employment, and the intergenerational transfer of values.

Most of the outcomes are assessed using inputs gathered from two sources: 1) a telephone survey administered to 1,539 respondents designed to provide information on the breadth of VISTA's effects; and 2) a series of 64 in-depth personal interviews providing highly detailed insights into the experiences of a much smaller sample. Both data collection components were structured to gather feedback from three distinct generations of members defined by major program and policy shifts that have shaped the evolution of VISTA over its 40-year history. To provide a point of reference, the experiences and outcomes of VISTA members were compared to those of similar individuals who applied for VISTA, completed a portion of the training, but ultimately did not serve.

The study was conducted by Abt Associates Inc., an independent social policy and research firm, under contract to the Corporation for National and Community Service.

## Key Findings

This study includes positive findings on the effect of the VISTA program on VISTA members who served over a three-decade span of the program's existence. Based on the findings and some encouraging results in each of the four major outcome areas, there is select evidence that the VISTA program has long-term, life-changing effects on its members.

In both the telephone survey and in-person interviews, VISTA members reported positive, life-changing experiences while serving in VISTA, and many individuals were able to connect their life choices to their VISTA service. Importantly, large majorities of VISTA members felt challenged by their VISTA service, believed that they made a contribution, and felt like part of a community. When asked to describe the effect that VISTA had on them, many respondents felt that VISTA either changed them in important ways or helped reinforce their values and beliefs. Some additional VISTA members even said that their service experience fundamentally transformed them. Response patterns were similarly positive across the three generations of VISTA members.

In the examination of effects on *civic engagement*, we found positive results on a number of items, such as voting behavior, volunteering, and community leadership. Differences were found between VISTA members and the comparison group in their levels of engagement in the political process. In addition, VISTA members reported higher levels of voting and volunteer participation than the general U.S. population. Results on other outcome measures, such as personal effectiveness of community service, community leadership, and connection to community showed little or no differences.

Differences between VISTA members and those in the comparison group suggest that the perseverance that kept members in the VISTA program initially may have also influenced their post-program *educational outcomes*. The majority of VISTA members and their counterparts in the comparison group came to VISTA with similarly strong educational credentials. However, even though the pursuit of post-VISTA education was slightly stronger among those in the comparison group, in part because they had an additional year of available time to continue their education, VISTA members were more likely to have pursued a Master's Degree than a Bachelor's Degree and tended to complete their degree programs with more consistency than those in the comparison group.

The *employment outcomes* overall show stable employment patterns characterized by extended employment duration and limited job changes. A solid majority of both VISTA members and respondents in the comparison group were employed at the time of the follow-up survey. Nonetheless, it appears that VISTA members were consistently more likely to be employed than their counterparts in the comparison group. Despite the difference in current employment rates, both VISTA members and the comparison group have exhibited consistent patterns of labor market and career choices. This is most in evidence in their choice of full- or part-time work and sectoral preferences (public, private, nonprofit employment) as well as their actual fields of employment, which emphasize the teaching profession and to a lesser extent, social and community work. Despite these similarities, however, VISTA members reported a higher current income profile than their counterparts in the comparison group.

VISTA members demonstrate greater *intergenerational transfer of values* by making more efforts to introduce and encourage their children to engage in volunteer activities compared to those in the comparison group. Most telling is the higher percentage of VISTA members who reported that their children accompanied them on volunteer activities "regularly" compared to respondents in the comparison group. In contrast, respondents in the comparison group were much more likely than VISTA members to report that they have never had their children accompany them on volunteer activities. Consistent with these findings, VISTA members were more likely than their counterparts in the comparison group to report that their children regularly participated in volunteer activities on their own.

African-American and Hispanic respondents were much more likely than whites to report that their VISTA experience has strongly influenced the amount or kind of volunteering they have performed since leaving VISTA. Chief among the findings on civic engagement were the effect of VISTA on the voting participation of minority participants. African-American and Hispanic VISTA members were more likely to have ever voted in a presidential election, more likely to have ever voted in a state or local election, and more likely to have voted in an election 10 years after departing VISTA compared with the voting histories of African-Americans and Hispanics in the comparison group.

# Chapter 1:

## Study Overview

### VISTA: Celebrating Over Forty Years of Service

VISTA recently celebrated the 40th anniversary of America's longest-running national domestic service program, Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA). Throughout over 40 years of service, VISTA has pursued its mission to support low-income communities by strengthening local agencies and organizations that serve those communities; encouraging volunteer service; and generating the commitment of private sector resources. Currently, VISTA continues to provide members an opportunity to serve in nonprofit, faith-based and other community organizations and public agencies across the nation to create and expand programs that bring low-income individuals and communities out of poverty.

VISTA builds on our country's long history of citizens engaged in volunteerism and service to their community, starting with Franklin D. Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s and early 1940s. Influenced by President Kennedy's establishment of the Peace Corps in the 1960s, VISTA was later created as part of President Johnson's War on Poverty and the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. The Office of Economic Opportunity oversaw VISTA and several other domestic anti-poverty programs until 1971, when the ACTION agency was created and given responsibility for administering VISTA, Peace Corps, and other national service programs. The Corporation for National and Community Service was created in 1993 to oversee the newly formed AmeriCorps program. VISTA joined two other new programs under the AmeriCorps umbrella, the AmeriCorps State and National and AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) Programs.

Not only has the federal agency responsible for administering the program changed over VISTA's history, but VISTA policies and procedures have also evolved over time. Changes include the length and nature of training provided to VISTA members, the decentralization of recruitment efforts between national and local organizations, the nature of services delivered by VISTA members, and the populations targeted to participate in the program. While some programmatic features have been changed to reflect fluctuations in funding levels and political support, VISTA's mission to serve low-income communities has remained constant throughout its history.

### The Corporation and VISTA

The Corporation for National and Community Service (the Corporation) is an independent government agency that administers VISTA. VISTA was originally created in 1964 by the Economic Opportunity Act, and, in 1973, the program was reauthorized with the passage of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act (DVSA), and became part of a new federal agency called ACTION, the Federal Domestic Volunteer Agency. In 1993, the National Service Trust Act was passed which created the new AmeriCorps program and combined ACTION with the Commission on National and Community Service forming a new federal agency, the Corporation for National & Community Service. The Corporation's mission is to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering. In particular, focus is directed towards addressing the

education, public safety, human, and environmental needs of American communities through its major programs. More importantly, the Corporation programs AmeriCorps NCCC, AmeriCorps State and National, Senior Corps, and Learn and Serve America offer millions of individuals an opportunity to volunteer in their communities.

Since 1965, more than 140,000 Americans have served through VISTA. Today, nearly 6,000 AmeriCorps VISTA members serve throughout the country—working to fight illiteracy, improve health services, create businesses, increase housing opportunities, bridge the digital divide, and strengthen the capacity of community organizations.

## Study Design

### Research Questions and Analytic Approach

The central purpose of this study is to explore the life decisions and outcomes of VISTA participants, in comparison with similar individuals who were “near members,” to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the effects of VISTA on its members? and (2) How have the behaviors and attitudes of VISTA members changed over time? Outcomes of interest<sup>1</sup> include:

- Civic engagement;
- Educational choices and opportunities;
- Career and employment choices; and
- The intergenerational transfer of values.

This study of VISTA relies on a retrospective research design to explore the long-term attitudes and behaviors experienced by both VISTA members and similar individuals in a comparison group.<sup>2</sup> In exploring the broad outcomes noted above, the study examined such issues as community and political activity, educational attainment and focus, employment patterns and choices, and sustained commitment to volunteering. A comparison group was selected for this study from individuals who applied for entry into VISTA and completed some training or service for a very short period of time.<sup>3</sup>

This approach uses two data collection methods: a telephone survey and in-person interviews. Both methods captured information from VISTA members and those in a comparison group comprising

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<sup>1</sup> Outcome areas were specified by the Corporation with input from project staff and the Technical Working Group assembled to advise the study.

<sup>2</sup> To provide a point of reference, the experiences and outcomes of VISTA members were compared to those of similar individuals who applied for VISTA, completed a portion of the pre-service training, but ultimately did not serve.

<sup>3</sup> In order to identify outcomes, the study relied on comparisons in results between individuals who served in VISTA and a comparison group of similar individuals. Due to the challenges associated with surveying individuals who served in VISTA during the last 40 years, it was determined that differences in response patterns between VISTA and the comparison group was more suitable than conducting significance testing. See Appendix A for more detail.



individuals who either completed some or all of the pre-VISTA training but did not serve.<sup>4</sup> The in-person interviews supplemented the survey data with guided conversations about the information revealed in the survey. In-person interviews were completed with both VISTA members and individuals in the comparison group who previously responded to the telephone survey and agreed to participate in a longer in-person interview

### **Formation of Generations for the 1965–1993 Period**

Reflecting social and programmatic changes that occurred during the long history of the VISTA program, the sample of respondents was organized into three distinct groups that we refer to as “generations,” based on when they served in VISTA. The generations for the VISTA study were defined taking into consideration the broad societal context in which the program was operating along with the nature of VISTA’s operational and programmatic policies in place at the national level. As a result of these discussions, the study sample was organized into three distinct generations:

- The first generation: individuals from the initial years of VISTA starting in 1965 and continuing up until 1972;
- The second generation: individuals participating in VISTA in the 1973 through 1980 period; and
- The third generation: a more recent generation of persons enrolling in VISTA from 1981 through 1993.

The generations were formed based on the criteria described above, leading to distinct periods that are not divided into equal numbers of years: the first and second generations both cover 7-year periods while the third generation spans 12 years.<sup>5</sup> Because the intent of the study was to examine the long-term effects of participating in VISTA, the study does not include individuals who enrolled in the program after 1993.

### **Organization of this Report**

This report is organized in four following chapters. Chapter 2 offers a history of the VISTA program and descriptions of VISTA participants who served during the periods represented by the three generations of program participants. Chapter 3 discusses the VISTA experience of VISTA members who participated in the three generations with special emphasis on results from the in-person interviews. Chapter 4 presents the effects of the VISTA program as determined from the results of the telephone survey and in-person interviews. The descriptive findings of the survey are presented along with testimonies from VISTA members as collected in the interviews. Finally, Chapter 5 offers conclusions about the VISTA program and its effects on participants. Details on the study methodology used, copies of the survey form and interview protocol, and detailed tables of results are attached in separate appendixes to this report.

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<sup>4</sup> Due to shorter training periods during parts of the 1980s and 1990s, some members of the comparison group served in VISTA for a few days or weeks.

<sup>5</sup> The formation of the generations is discussed in more detail on page 11.



## Chapter 2: The Evolution of VISTA: Programmatic Changes Over Time

While VISTA's overall mission to serve low-income communities has endured throughout its history, the program has experienced significant changes in policies, procedures, and service priorities to accommodate funding levels and the administration priorities at the time. There were also differences in the types of individuals who were targeted for participation as VISTA members.

### Defining the Generations between 1965 and 1993<sup>6</sup>

To provide an in-depth understanding of the VISTA program from 1965 to 1993, VISTA members were separated into generations. As discussed in Chapter 1, we determined that in addition to reporting results for the entire group, it was also appropriate to organize the program into distinct enrollment groups or generations that can be characterized consistently with respect to their societal and political backdrop as well as program priorities, policies and operational features:<sup>7</sup>

- The first generation: enrollment between 1965 and 1972
- The second generation: enrollment between 1973 and 1980
- The third generation: enrollment between 1981 and 1993

Each of the three generations is summarized in Exhibit 2.1 and described in the remainder of this chapter.

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that the summary profiles by generation presented in this section are based on information provided by respondents to the survey. As such, they may not be fully representative of the entire population who enrolled in VISTA during these timeframes. Nonetheless, we feel that the demographic information gathered from the survey is sufficient to broadly characterize the three generations and will provide the reader with a useful frame of reference for interpreting and gauging findings throughout the report. It should further be noted that, for the purpose of characterizing the three generations in this chapter, we have combined the VISTA members and those in the comparison group into a single population since their motivations and characteristics at program entry were comparable.

<sup>7</sup> The generations were developed based on input from the Corporation, our Technical Working Group, and VISTA program staff with solid historical knowledge of the program

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**Exhibit 2.1****Overview of Three Generations of VISTA Members**

<b>Generation</b>	<b>Historical/Political Backdrop</b>	<b>Significant Program Features</b>
First Generation (1965–1972)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Many young people inspired to volunteer by assassination of President John Kennedy</li><li>• Presidency of Lyndon Johnson, War on Poverty and building the Great Society</li><li>• Continuation of the Vietnam War</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Most VISTA members recruited from outside the communities being served by the program</li><li>• Training is intense and lengthy, lasting 6 weeks</li></ul>
Second Generation (1973–1980)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• U.S. withdrawal from the Vietnam War</li><li>• Election and subsequent resignation of President Richard Nixon</li><li>• Followed by presidencies of Ford and Carter</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• VISTA members recruited both from within and outside the communities being served</li><li>• Duration of training varies over the years from 4 weeks to as few as 2 days</li></ul>
Third Generation (1981–1993)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush</li><li>• Iran-Contra affair</li><li>• Worldwide economic crash of 1987</li><li>• Expulsion of Iraq from Kuwait</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• VISTA members primarily recruited from within the community being served by the program</li><li>• Length of training is generally 3 days accompanied by in-service training</li></ul>

## VISTA Policies and Procedures

Throughout the last four decades, there has been a great deal of transformation within the VISTA program. Not only has responsibility for the administration of the program moved from one federal agency to another, but key policies and procedures that shape the operation of VISTA have also evolved. These changes include the balancing of recruitment efforts between national and community-level volunteers, the length and nature of training for VISTA members, the nature of services delivered by VISTA members, and the populations targeted to participate in the program. An overview of these key program changes is presented below.

*Recruitment strategies* have changed significantly throughout VISTA's 40-year history. During the initial years of the program, volunteers were recruited on a national basis, relocated, and placed with sponsoring organizations, similar to the Peace Corps model. In the 1970s, however, the proportion of members who already resided in the communities in need of assistance began to rise to about half of all volunteers. VISTA then utilized a mixed-mode approach where some members stayed and served in their communities while others were nationally placed. In the 1980s, the feasibility of the national recruitment component became severely limited by federal budget cuts, forcing the program to alter its outreach strategy. Subsequently, recruitment was primarily conducted at the community level, including an effort to recruit individuals on public assistance. This continued until the late 1980s when VISTA was able to gradually return to the national recruitment model that was originally employed. Currently, the VISTA program employs a balanced approach, recruiting both nationally and from within local communities.

The *intensity of training* that VISTA members receive has also undergone significant changes. While many of the changes were driven by the budgetary landscape, refinements were also made to ensure that volunteers had the requisite skills and knowledge base needed to work effectively in highly

disadvantaged communities. Like the early recruitment system, training was modeled after the Peace Corps. New VISTA members took part in a six-week regional training, usually held on university campuses, before being placed at a service site. The length of training sessions was shortened to four weeks in the early 1970s, and later cut drastically to as few as two or three days. A few years later, the length of training increased to seven days. The early 1980s saw another cutback in the duration of training when it decreased from approximately one week to less than two days. In the late 1980s, VISTA established a training procedure that has continued to the present. The training is three days in length and is accompanied by in-service training sessions over the course of the first months of service. Finally, it should be noted that the setting as well as the individuals responsible for facilitating training also underwent transformation throughout the 1980s. Specifically, individual sponsoring agencies took over the training function from regional or state level entities that had originally been responsible. Additionally, VISTA headquarters training specialists, rather than contractors who specialized in group training facilitation, took on the responsibility of providing training sessions.

VISTA has also seen some variation in the *characteristics of volunteers* throughout the program's history. Given the specialized needs of each community served, VISTA has consistently put forth efforts to recruit professionals, such as lawyers, doctors, and teachers. However, the interest and availability of skilled professionals has fluctuated over time depending on the broader economic conditions and employment opportunities as well as other external factors. Later, in the 1980s, a greater effort was placed on recruiting welfare recipients in the program benefiting both the program participants, by providing employment and job training, and the communities being served.

# Overview of VISTA Members

## Demographic Characteristics of VISTA Members

Throughout four decades of service, the composition of VISTA members has changed dramatically. The racial makeup of VISTA members has gradually become more diverse while an increasing proportion of women began serving in the VISTA program. The age of volunteers during their service has shifted over time as well, with an increasing number of older adults belonging to the more recent third generation. A large number of all three generations of respondents were unmarried while serving, yet this percentage decreased over the years as the average age of members increased. Additionally, more respondents who served in the third generation reported having children at the time of their enrollment compared to those enrolled in the first and second generation. Importantly, VISTA members and respondents in the comparison group were very similar in terms of demographic characteristics.

In addition to providing a basic demographic profile, the survey also provided an opportunity to review the various volunteer activities in which respondents were engaged when they were growing up. More than two-thirds of both VISTA members (68%) and their

counterparts in the comparison group (69%) had been involved in volunteer activities as youth. As shown in Exhibit 2.3, similar percentages of VISTA members and respondents in the comparison group also participated in school activities in high school, such as student government, sports teams, and special interest clubs. Exhibit 2.4 shows that similar percentages in both groups of respondents also participated in non-school-related youth activities, including recreational activities, church youth groups, and Scouts/4-H club. Therefore, self-reported levels of volunteer activities as youth were similar between both groups before joining VISTA.

**Exhibit 2.2**

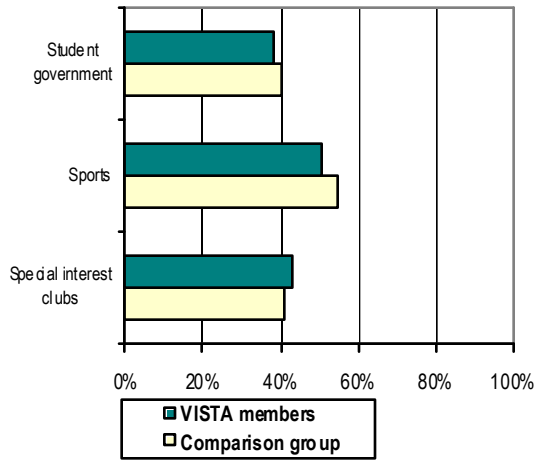
### Demographic Profile at Enrollment of VISTA Members

Characteristic	First Generation (1965-1972)	Second Generation (1973-1980)	Third Generation (1981-1993)
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	45%	36%	21%
Female	55	64	79
<b>Race/Ethnicity<sup>a</sup></b>			
Am. Ind./Alaskan Native	1%	1%	2%
Asian	1	1	2
African-American	5	7	17
Hawaiian/Pacific Island.	0	1	1
Hispanic/Latino	3	5	8
White	91	86	74
Mixed	1	2	2
Other	1	3	3
<b>Age at enrollment</b>			
18-25	93	76	43
26-30	5	15	12
31-40	2	6	22
41 and older	1	3	23
<b>Education level</b>			
Less than Bachelor's Degree	57	41	55
Bachelor's Degree or higher	43	59	45
<b>Marital status</b>			
Married	15	19	38
Single/Never married	83	72	42
Divorced/Widow/Other	2	9	20

a Multiple responses were allowed

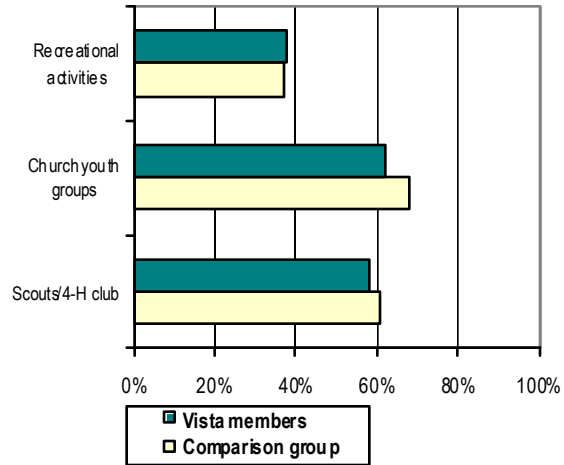
**Exhibit 2.3**

**School Activities in High School (All Respondents)**



**Exhibit 2.4**

**Non-school Activities in High School (All Respondents)**



There were few differences in overall youth volunteering levels across the three generations of VISTA participants. The second generation VISTA members had the highest percentage of participation, with three-quarters reporting that they were involved in volunteer activities as youth (73% compared to 65% of the first generation and 68% of the third generation). VISTA members who served in each of the three program generations and their counterparts in the comparison group reported similar levels of volunteering as youth. These similarities between the VISTA members and comparison group persisted for both school and non-school-related youth activities.

**Reasons for Joining or Leaving VISTA**

Most VISTA members across all three generations reported joining for altruistic reasons—to reduce inequality and to promote social change. They also wanted to do something out of the mainstream. VISTA members reported several reasons why they decided to enroll in the VISTA program (see Exhibit 2.5). Respondents who joined VISTA at around the same age joined for very similar reasons. Most volunteers in two distinct age groups (under the age of 26 and between the ages of 41 and 60) were motivated to reduce social or economic inequality. Approximately half of all respondents 26 to 40 years of age wanted to do something outside of the mainstream. Also, more women than men

**Exhibit 2.5**

**Primary Reasons for Enrollment for VISTA Members (Percent Responding “Quite Relevant” or “Very Relevant”)<sup>a</sup>**

Reason	Percent
Had a friend applying or already participated in VISTA	14%
Had a family member applying or already participated in VISTA	4
Had a desire to participate in service to reduce social or economic inequality	70
Wanted to spend time doing something outside mainstream	61
Thought that VISTA would give skills for school or job	42
Wanted to avoid draft	7
Wanted to bring about social change	67
Told you would continue public assistance	4

<sup>a</sup> Multiple responses were allowed

were motivated to apply to VISTA to gain skills for school or a job and felt that social change was a very important reason to apply.<sup>8</sup>

VISTA members were also asked about other options they were considering while inquiring about VISTA. Not surprisingly, college was a popular response among 18- to 25-year-olds, while most respondents between the ages of 21 and 25 were considering graduate or professional school. Approximately one-quarter of all respondents, as well as more women than men, were not considering any other options during their time of enrollment.

Comparison group members were asked why they left during their VISTA training or in their initial phase of service. Exhibit 2.6 shows several reasons that were offered by respondents, including personal or health reasons and dissatisfaction with the VISTA program.

**Exhibit 2.6**  
**Primary Reasons for Not Serving<sup>a</sup> in VISTA for Comparison Group Respondents<sup>b</sup>**

Reason	Percent
For personal reasons/health reasons	31%
Because of dissatisfaction with the program	26
To take a job	9
To enroll in school	4
For financial reasons	5
Because you were asked to leave	13
Other reasons	12

a Some individuals in the third generation comparison group did serve in VISTA for a few days or weeks.  
b Multiple responses were allowed

## The First Generation (1965–1972): The Early Years

The period from 1965 to 1972 overlapped with the presidential term of President Lyndon B. Johnson. During this era, President Johnson focused his efforts on establishing the War on Poverty with new agencies including the Office of Economic Opportunity, which initially administered the VISTA program. His commitment to fighting domestic poverty and building the Great Society was especially evident at a meeting of the President and the first VISTA members prior to the commencement of the program in early 1965. He commended their shared allegiance to helping Americans out of poverty, while acknowledging the difficult road ahead. Throughout the period when the first VISTA members served, the country encountered a tumultuous sequence of events, including the assassinations of Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King, and Robert F. Kennedy, and the 1964 passage of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution that announced the United States’ involvement in Vietnam and the subsequent worldwide opposition to the war.

Exhibit 2.7 summarizes the primary reasons for enrolling in VISTA across the three generations. As can be seen, enrollees during the first generation were heavily motivated by social and economic concerns. Over three-quarters cited their primary reason for enrolling in the program as either to promote social change (75%) or reduce social or economic inequality (80%). Conversely, only one in four (25%) viewed VISTA as an avenue for pursuing a job or educationally related skills. Consistent with the tenor of the times, nearly one in five (18%) acknowledged explicitly that their motivation was to “avoid the draft.” One-fifth of respondents in this generation considered the Peace Corps or another full-time service activity to be an option when deciding to join VISTA.

<sup>8</sup> VISTA members and respondents in the comparison group reported similar reasons for enrolling in VISTA.



The first generation is particularly noteworthy for its gender balance and the young age of its members. As can be seen in Exhibit 2.2, over 90 percent of the VISTA enrollees (including the comparison group) reported that they were age 25 or younger at the time of enrollment. Given this age profile it is not surprising that a majority of enrollees had not yet attained Bachelor’s Degrees. During the early days of VISTA, it is clear that the program attracted a predominance of white enrollees, with African-American and Hispanic enrollees comprising only 6 percent of the total.

## The Second Generation: The Transitional Years (1973–1980)

The beginning of the second generation saw the U.S. withdraw its troops from Vietnam in March 1973, marking the culmination of this divisive war. During this era, Richard Nixon was the first 20th century president to resign from his position. Vice President Gerald Ford assumed the presidency but lost the election in 1976 to Jimmy Carter. The country fell into a deep recession in 1979 with a major energy crisis; it also witnessed the kidnapping of American hostages by Iran.

As can be seen in Exhibit 2.7, the second generation respondents began to reflect a slight decrease in the proportion of enrollees who were motivated by a desire to bring about social change or reduce social or economic inequality. While these factors remained influential (64% and 68%, respectively), the importance of other factors began to emerge. Most notably, almost half of enrollees hoped that VISTA would provide an opportunity to develop skills that would be useful in school or on the job. The importance of this factor more than doubled between those in the first and second generation.

### Exhibit 2.7

#### Primary Reasons for Enrollment of VISTA Members by Generation (Percent Responding “Quite Relevant” or “Very Relevant”)<sup>a</sup>

Reason	First Generation (1965-1972)	Second Generation (1973-1980)	Third Generation (1981-1993)
Had a desire to participate in service to reduce social or economic inequality	80	68	60
Wanted to bring about social change	75	64	63
Wanted to spend time doing something outside mainstream	58	61	64
Thought that VISTA would give skills for school or job	25	48	58
Had a friend applying or already participated in VISTA	13	12	17
Had a desire to volunteer as a means to serve others	9	7	11
Wanted to avoid draft	18	2	1
Interested in work you were doing/VISTA was way to stay involved	3	11	10
Had a family member applying or already participated in VISTA	5	4	2
Wanted to travel	5	12	3
Told you would continue public assistance	1	3	11
Provided income and a way to get paid for volunteering	2	9	9

a Multiple responses were allowed

During this time frame, VISTA made a concerted effort to recruit slightly older, more educated professionals who were placed both in local communities and nationally. The results of this targeting can be seen clearly in Exhibit 2.2, where nearly 6 in 10 respondents from the second generation reported that they had a Bachelor's Degree or higher at the time of enrollment. Similarly, the proportion of enrollees who were over 25 years of age had risen to nearly one-quarter. It should also be noted that the second generation began to reflect the emergence of women dominating VISTA's gender mix.

## **The Third Generation: A More Recent VISTA Program (1981–1993)**

VISTA members who enrolled during 1981 to 1993 witnessed the Iran-Contra affair, the worldwide economic crash of 1987, and the expulsion of Iraq from Kuwait in the early 1990s. On the domestic front, with the election of President Ronald Reagan, funding for social service programs, including VISTA, was drastically cut. In 1989 President George H.W. Bush created the Office of National Service in the White House and the Points of Light Foundation to foster volunteering.

The third generation continued to reflect an evolving shift in the factors motivating VISTA enrollees. As summarized in Exhibit 2.7, the stated importance of social change and working to reduce social and economic inequality continued to decline while more personal motivators such as the development of job skills and the desire to do something out of the mainstream continued to grow. It also appears that by the third generation there was an emerging social or community network that generated additional interest in VISTA. Specifically, nearly one in five (17%) reported that they enrolled because they had a friend who was applying or had previously participated in VISTA.

The third generation reflects VISTA's increasing racial and ethnic diversity, with African-American and Hispanic members growing to nearly one-quarter of the total. From a gender standpoint however, the program continued to grow more homogeneous with nearly 8 in 10 of all enrollees being women. In addition, close to half of third generation respondents (45%) were over the age of 30, which was dramatically higher than the previous waves of enrollees.

## **VISTA Today: The Current VISTA Program (1994–2007)**

Interest in volunteerism was further bolstered in the early 1990s with President Clinton's formation of the Corporation for National and Community Service, an independent government agency dedicated to public service. In 1993, President Clinton signed the National and Community Service Trust Act, making VISTA part of the new AmeriCorps program and housing it under a new federal agency, the Corporation for National and Community Service. The Corporation was responsible for the newly formed AmeriCorps Program, and, VISTA, while still operating under the authority of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act, formally fell under the AmeriCorps umbrella and became known as AmeriCorps VISTA. Despite administrative changes, VISTA programs continue to create a lasting impact on communities across the country.

One of the most significant events witnessed by current VISTA members, was the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks in 2001. Following this unprecedented event in our nation's history, President Bush issued his call to service in early 2002. During his 2002 State of the Union Address, President Bush specifically

recognized the existing need to increase volunteerism in the United States by calling on all Americans to devote at least two years over the course of their lifetimes in the service of others. President Bush also recognized a specific and existing need to increase the capacity of the faith-based and community organizations that have historically played a critical role in helping Americans in need.

Recent procedural changes to VISTA include, implementation of an online recruitment system to increase community support and foster partnerships with a new generation of volunteers and sponsors. In addition, current VISTA members are eligible for an education award of \$4,725 to pay for additional education or to pay off existing education debt. Since 2000, the number of members has reached its highest level ever—about 6,000 serving annually.

The current generation of VISTA members (1994–2007) did not participate in this study.



## Chapter 3: The VISTA Experience

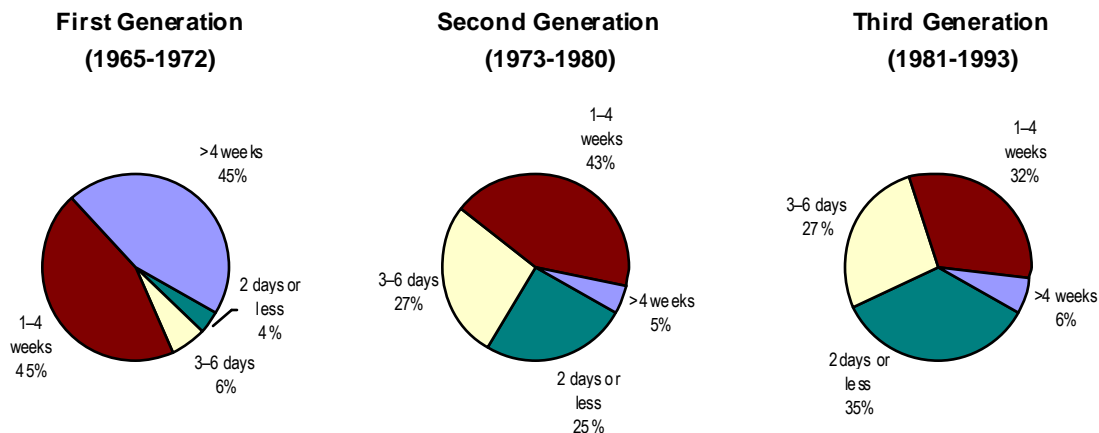
The Corporation provides opportunities for Americans of all ages and backgrounds to serve their communities and country, while also working to build a culture of citizenship, service, and responsibility in America. To this end, our survey included questions about the service experience of VISTA members and their opinions on the influence of VISTA on their own lives. Respondents were asked about their training experience, placement circumstances, and service experience. In addition, members of the comparison group were asked why they did not complete their entire term of VISTA service. While the ultimate effect of the work of VISTA members was often difficult to measure and while the problems addressed were complex and longstanding in many cases, VISTA members left their experiences feeling as though something was accomplished. It should be noted that these general trends were consistently reported across all three generations.

### Training

As discussed earlier, the length of *training* that new VISTA members receive has undergone significant changes. Under the early recruitment system established during the first generation, new members generally took part in a lengthy six-week regional training. Later, when the second generation served, the length of training varied as it was shortened twice and then lengthened again to seven days. For the third generation, training was again cut back in duration until the late 1980s, when training was maintained at three days combined with in-service training sessions throughout the first months of service.

**Exhibit 3.1**

#### Duration of Training Reported



When asked to reflect back on the quality of the training they received, most respondents described their training as either very or somewhat effective (86%). A larger percentage of VISTA members than comparison group members (across the three generations combined) characterized their training as very effective (44% and 38%, respectively), and almost twice the percentage of those in the comparison group (19%) as VISTA members (11%) believed their training was not effective. There

was also some variation in satisfaction levels across generations, with a majority of third generation respondents characterizing their training as very effective (55%) in contrast to the percentages who served in the first and second generations (38% and 35%, respectively). These results could indicate that an ineffective training experience may explain why some applicants left the VISTA program.

## Placement in VISTA Service

VISTA members had somewhat different *placement experiences* depending on the generation in which they served.<sup>9</sup> Overall, a majority of respondents (54%) reported that they were relocated to serve in a community far away from home; however, these percentages varied across generations. Respondents who served in the first generation had the highest levels of placements far from their home communities (87%), with this percentage decreasing substantially across generations (51% for the second generation and 13% for the third generation). Consequently, the vast majority of respondents who served in the third generation reported that they were placed in or near their home community (87%). This pattern is not surprising as, during the later generations, the VISTA program was more likely to recruit members from within the communities they served. Also, most respondents were placed in urban (55%) or rural communities (34%) compared to suburban or mixed areas (11%), with only modest differences across generations. Those who served more recently, in the second and third generations, had the largest percentage reporting that they were placed in an urban area (57% and 59%, respectively, compared to 50% of the first generation).

The living situations of VISTA members and those in the comparison group varied depending on the generation during which they served. A majority of respondents who served in the first generation reported that they lived with other VISTA members (59%), while far fewer respondents from the second generation reported living with other VISTA members (31%). Members of the third generation were much more likely to live with their own parents (38%) and far less likely to live with other VISTA members (3%), which is most likely due to the fact that these members tended to come from the communities where they served. Very small percentages of members across all three generations lived with a host family (between 5% in the first generation and 1% in the second and third generations).

VISTA members and those in the comparison group who served in the second and third generations reported similar living situations. However, living situations differed somewhat between VISTA members and those in the comparison group who served in the first generation. For instance, higher percentages of VISTA members in the first generation were placed with other VISTA members (62%) or lived by themselves (21%) than comparison group members (49% lived with other VISTA members and 12% lived by themselves). In addition, a third of comparison group members were placed with a host family (36%) compared to a small percentage of VISTA members who were placed with a host family (5%). Again, there were no major differences in living situations between VISTA members and those in the comparison groups who served in the second and third generations.

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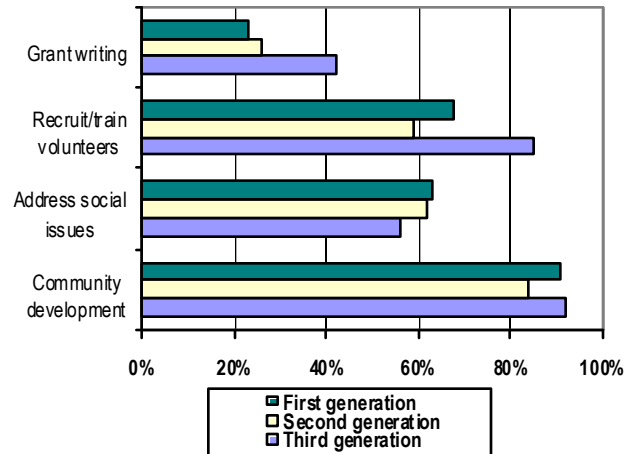
<sup>9</sup> Most comparison group members were not placed in a community. However, due to shorter training periods during parts of the 1980s and 1990s, some members of the comparison group were placed in communities and served in VISTA for a few days or weeks.

## The VISTA Service Experience

VISTA members reported participating in community *service activities* across all generations. A majority of members were sometimes or regularly engaged in community development efforts targeting specific social problems (89%) or worked with a local or state government official to address a social problem (60%). In addition many VISTA members (67%) were responsible for the recruitment and training of volunteers for the organization to which they were assigned. VISTA members who served in the third generation were particularly likely to be engaged in recruiting and training volunteers (85%) relative to their counterparts in the first and second generations (68% and 59% respectively). While participation in grant writing activities was low (29%) across all generations, the third generation VISTA members were more likely to be engaged in grant writing activities (42%) compared to those who served in the first and second generations.

**Exhibit 3.2**

**Service Activities of VISTA Members**



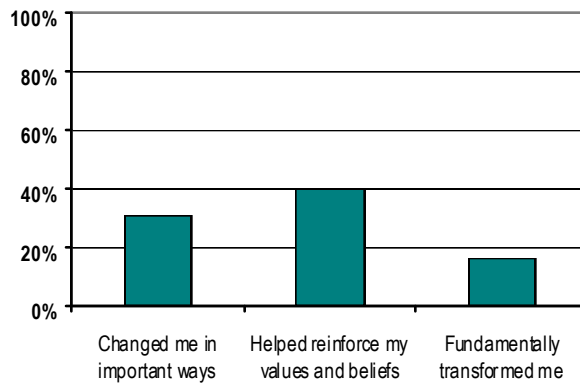
VISTA members encountered numerous positive experiences while they served in new and unfamiliar settings. Four out of five members across the three generations reported receiving help from community members in adjusting to and dealing with their service experience. Moreover, one-quarter of respondents had kept in contact with these community members, and almost half of respondents reported staying in contact with other VISTA members. VISTA members who served in the third generation were more likely to have kept in contact with community members than VISTA members who served in other generations (34% compared to 28% of the first generation and 25% of the second generation), possibly due to the fact that more third generation members already lived in the communities where they served before joining VISTA.

The vast majority of VISTA members viewed their service experience as positive. Even though three-quarters of members reported feeling emotionally challenged and one-third were physically challenged by their assignments, nine out of ten respondents reported feeling appreciated by the community members they served (95%), felt that they made a contribution (93%), and felt like part of a community (88%). In addition, over 90 percent of VISTA members reported that they learned more about the effects of poverty and social injustice (92%) and were exposed to new ideas and ways of seeing the world (92%). Consequently, over three-quarters of members reported that their VISTA experience made them re-examine their beliefs and attitudes about themselves. These high percentages were maintained consistently across the three generations.

Consequently, there is indication that VISTA had a positive influence on the members. When asked to describe the effect that VISTA had on them, many respondents felt that VISTA either changed them in important ways (34%) or helped reinforce their values and beliefs (40%). A smaller percentage felt that their VISTA experience fundamentally transformed them (16%). Of those who reported that VISTA changed or transformed them, most said it transformed them both personally and professionally. Over two-fifths of respondents reported that the activities they were involved in as a VISTA member were related to their career goals at the time they served, and one-quarter of VISTA members reported having been hired by their VISTA programs after their service period was over.

**Exhibit 3.3**

**Positive Effect of VISTA (VISTA Members Only)**



At the time of the interview, a large majority of VISTA members said that they would join the program again (87%). Responses were similarly positive across the three generations of VISTA members.

As explained in Chapter 1, the comparison group for this study was created from individuals who joined VISTA and then dropped out of the program either during or shortly after training. Respondents in the comparison group were asked to identify the main reasons why they did not complete their entire term of VISTA service. Several reasons were offered, including personal or health reasons (31%) and dissatisfaction with the VISTA program (26%). One-fifth of respondents in the first generation comparison group reported they ended their VISTA service because they were asked to leave the program, compared to much smaller percentages in the second and third generations (5% and 7%, respectively). Third generation respondents were more likely to report that they left the VISTA program primarily because they took a job (19%) and less likely to report that they left because they were dissatisfied with the program (13%).

## Insights from In-Person Interviews

Although questions were asked on the telephone survey about the VISTA service experience and its effect on VISTA members, more in-depth information was collected through the in-person interviews. Interviews were conducted with a small sub-set of VISTA members (43) and those in the comparison group (21) who had previously completed a telephone interview for the study. The interviewees were geographically clustered around seven geographic areas: Boston, MA; Madison, WI; Chicago, IL; San Diego, CA; Seattle, WA; Austin, TX, and Birmingham, AL. Issues related to sample clustering necessitated that the in-person interviews be concentrated in metropolitan sites; however, efforts were made to include a number of interviews in rural areas.

Many of the topics explored in the phone interview were discussed at greater depth in the in-person interviews. New areas were also investigated, particularly related to the participants life course



decisions. In discussing topics including employment, political participation, volunteering, family formation, and other areas, we were able to examine how early service experience affects many of the major decisions and choices that individuals make over their lifetimes. The protocol used by the field researchers was designed to lead the conversation from an in-depth discussion of the actual VISTA experience into all the broader topics involved in assessing life course choices. The interviews lasted between one and three hours.

As shown in Exhibit 3.4, the individuals interviewed for this study tended to be similar to the sample of respondents who participated in the telephone survey and to the overall population of VISTA program participants. Interviewees who served in the first and second generations tended to be white and under the age of 25 when they joined VISTA, while those who served in the third generation tended to be more racially diverse and older. Also, the two later generations (second and third) tended to include more female participants, while those who served in the first generation were more evenly divided between men and women.

When considering the differences in the stories we heard from those who completed VISTA and those in the comparison group, a couple of themes emerged. VISTA members believed that they had to demonstrate a certain amount of perseverance and tolerance of ambiguity in completing their assignments. Thus, it is not surprising that the few stories of struggle and disappointment were

concentrated in the accounts given by those who did not complete the program, the comparison group. While those who completed VISTA also faced moments of confusion and uncertainty about their work and their decisions to join, these doubts tended to dissipate as they built deeper relationships within the community. On the other hand, while many did achieve significant career success, there were a striking number of VISTA members who never married or divorced young and lived alone for many years.

The reasons given for joining VISTA ranged greatly, from a desire to “find oneself,” explore different career options, and to confront and address poverty. No matter the reason given, VISTA almost always turned out to be something quite different from what was expected. Very few volunteers reported an experience that matched what they believed in advance the program would be like. For

**Exhibit 3.4**

**Demographic Profile of In-person Interviewees<sup>a</sup>**

Characteristic	First Generation (1965-1972)	Second Generation (1973-1980)	Third Generation (1981-1993)
<b>Total Number of Interviewees</b>	27	23	14
<b>Response Group</b>			
VISTA members	17	14	12
Comparison group	10	9	2
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	15	8	0
Female	12	15	14
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>			
White	25	20	9
African-American	0	0	3
Hispanic	2	3	2
Other	1	3	2
<b>Age at enrollment in VISTA</b>			
Under 25	27	22	3
25 and older	0	1	11
<b>Marital status</b>			
Married	10	14	5
Single/Never married	7	4	1
Divorced,/ Widowed/ Other	10	5	8

a Totals may vary due to nonresponse

many, there were wonderful surprises and moments of great personal growth. For others, there were frustrating and painful memories associated with their experiences.

For other interviewees, VISTA was simply seen as a valuable experience, but not transformative. In these instances those interviewed had not done much subsequent volunteering and had chosen traditional career paths. For this group, VISTA was an enlarging experience but one that did not appear to exert a strong influence on later choices. For others who did volunteer after VISTA, subsequent volunteer work ranged from participation in homeowners associations to tutoring youth in disadvantaged circumstances to helping on political campaigns.

The interviews also illuminated a connection between the age at service and the way the VISTA experience was conceptualized. For those who participated in VISTA later in life, the program represented something quite unique. VISTA was a resource for reconnecting with the community for older participants and a way to reenter the work force, sometimes after decades of absence related to parenting. Increased job skills or greater civic engagement were neither the goals nor the result of VISTA participation for this group. Instead, the program was a bridge leading to new experiences and an important change of pace for adults who sought a change of direction.

In addition, we learned from some of the interviewees how VISTA shaped parenting choices and practices. After seeing people in poverty, several volunteers reported that they made efforts to expose their children to the fact that not all Americans live comfortably. In addition, several of the volunteers began families with strong collective commitments to social action.

In trying to sort out the fundamental differences between the VISTA members and comparison group interviewees, the most consistent factor appeared to be life satisfaction and career success. Those who dropped out of VISTA were less successful in their personal and professional lives. Those who completed VISTA were consistently higher achieving and more satisfied with their professional careers. However, it is not possible to know exactly how much the VISTA experience explains this difference.

In this section we present specific results from the in-person interviews with special focus on the VISTA experience and the effects of the program on those who served.

The *communities* where VISTA members lived and served provided unique opportunities to observe and learn. One interviewee described developing a desire to assist those in need through his work with VISTA. One of the most memorable aspects of the experience related to the family that hosted him during his VISTA experience.

*It was a husband and wife. The husband was a disabled miner who was retarded, and the wife was almost kind of like his caretaker.... They had no running water. It froze. You woke up and had to sort of break the ice to get at the dishes. It was just—a coal stove. It was really cold, but that provided some heat... But they were very interested in us, and they wanted to take us to church and meet their friends. It was probably my first case, because they had absolutely no income... And I helped him get his disability benefits. We traveled three hours to get a doctor at the [hospital] to examine him, and that's how we found out he [had a disability].... We were successful in getting him his benefits despite a very difficult*

*case because he was deprived in so many ways but he had no clear impairment that was disabling.*

First Generation VISTA Member  
(1965-1972)

The community where another VISTA member served influenced his life significantly. He developed a passion for working with communities during his time in VISTA, serving as an architect for a housing development organization in upstate New York. By his own account, he learned an important lesson for his future career: the need to build what is useful to the people who will live in a home, not necessarily what the architect thinks is interesting.

*I really wanted to find a way of finding out how can I best believe that I'm giving them what they will want when all is said and done. I really wanted to find out from them what they wanted.... I just never quite believed I was doing the right thing. And I tried to read from their own houses how they lived ... but we were giving them [something] so different from what they had that it was hard to translate. And all that tempered by trying to help them not waste money on things that I thought would not be useful. For example, one of the walls in the living room, nice big blank wall. And of course, you make a small room look bigger by making it look simple. Well, this family had chosen a kind of finish plywood and it was this bold, black and white zebra stripe wood. It made the room look half the size it was. I can tell you make a room seem bigger. But no, you like this thing and I can't say that [looks bad]. It was more a matter of not trusting my own instincts apart from things like sound building. I think [other VISTAs] had the same problem.*

First Generation VISTA Member  
(1965-1972)

When discussing their VISTA service, several interviewees had mixed feelings about the **skills and experience** they gained. Some found the opportunities to work independently in areas with great needs as an opportunity to learn, while others were frustrated by the lack of direction they received. One interviewee described his experience as not particularly centralized and without much programmatic coordination. However, in his opinion, this led to a fair amount of autonomy and gave VISTA members multiple opportunities to learn how to organize and build projects from the ground up.

*I think that the thing that was made clear was that we were not to make ourselves indispensable, that we were supposed to set up things and work with people, and not define what those things were. And yet on one hand we were trained in certain categories, you know? Co-op organizing and advocacy and tenants' rights and maybe one or two other things. So it wasn't just generalized approaches to organizing. We were given tools; we were given handbooks and things like that. So we tended to gravitate towards there and if there was, you know, a meeting of 30 people and four of them said they wanted to do a food Co-op, oh, yeah, we can do that. That kind of thing happened, you know? But there wasn't a plan in advance to have pre-order co-ops everywhere and then have a central warehouse. And the fact that the sites and the downtown office let that happen, I think, was good.*

First Generation VISTA Member  
(1965-1972)

On the other hand, another VISTA member interviewed for this study found the lack of direction she received frustrating. Though involved in launching a Head Start program and other community programs, she did not find a coherent strategy behind the work, nor the opportunity to really make a lasting difference.

*The job was not clearly defined.... I think it became clear that it was hard to have a goal that was realistic. To think that I was going to be there for one year and make a difference in somebody's life, even one person's life.... I didn't really remember what we did on a daily basis but I do remember feeling under-utilized and it wasn't really worth anything. We were just kind of showing up. I think my goal was a few months into it was to get through the year and stick it out because I did want to stay for the year.*

First Generation VISTA Member  
(1965-1972)

One VISTA member interviewed for this study described her VISTA assignment to develop a program that assisted low-income families in obtaining federally funded Section 8 housing. As with other interviewees, she had little experience or assistance, but the work taught her some important lessons that she believes were applicable to jobs she held later in life.

*It was Section 8 rental assistance, so it's federal funding so it's kind of two-fold: one, you have to find the clients on assistance or Social Security. You have to qualify them then, second, you had to convince the landlord to accept the money directly, which wasn't easy because [many] really didn't [sic] like the government. So I would drive around and find these people and then I had to look for the places.... I had to be really organized. I had to learn how to do paperwork, which in any social service job you have to get the paperwork done. And I learned ... how to work within the bureaucracy because it's what's required and how far are you willing to stretch the roles to make it work. I've had to do that in every job I've had ... not violate the rules but [learn] how to make it work. I had to do a lot of networking which you have to do as a social worker on the job, figuring out where to find your clients and explain your program to them...it was definitely a career booster for me.*

Third Generation VISTA Member  
(1981-1993)

While some VISTA members reflected on their experience primarily in terms of what they were able to accomplish for others, some subjects saw a clear link between their experience and the way they understood the world later in life. Opportunities to **address social injustice** were a part of many VISTA members' experiences while serving. Several VISTA members interviewed for this study cited examples of how they were able to achieve results by helping others gain justice. For one VISTA member, the program represented an opportunity to right an old wrong. Still uncomfortable with the treatment of her childhood housekeeper, who was African-American, VISTA gave this young lawyer a chance to correct symbolically a very old wrong.

*There was a housekeeper that I felt that was always unfairly treated.... I recognized at an early age that there was something wrong with, you know, everybody that I knew being white and people who were their servants being not white... Then, early in my VISTA career ... I represented a women in a social security [dispute] who had been a housekeeper all her life*

*and she got turned down because ... she didn't have the records. I realized that people could work all their lives and not have social security because she was working as a housekeeper. My parents probably didn't pay social security for [our housekeeper] but it would never have dawned on me when I was growing up that they should have. And, so, it was only with hindsight and looking at this woman who was applying for social security and getting turned down, I realized that the injustice of working all your life and then having no retirement. Ultimately I got her benefits off of her deceased husband's record, not off of her own working record.*

Second Generation VISTA member  
(1973-1980)

One interviewee joined VISTA after law school and was placed with a local law firm. She did whatever was needed from organizing a library of law materials, to questioning defendants. As an African-American herself, her most memorable experience as a VISTA member was seeing the racial disparities in the criminal justice system. After serving in VISTA, she came to realize that the economic structure contributes to the situation.

*It made an impact on me to see ... the large number of ... blacks, African-Americans that were caught up in the legal system. But even though we were still not in great numbers you had more out of proportion, as a disproportionate coming into the legal system. So that was a little disheartening because you just wonder, you know ... and I still ask that question today because now I work in child welfare and I see a disproportionate amount of African-American kids coming into the child welfare system. And I asked that same question.... But overall, just seeing how the system seemed to catch people up or people didn't have hope. And, so, they made bad choices that kept getting them in the system made me think that that was an area where I could really work at.*

First Generation VISTA Member  
(1965-1972)

Many VISTA experiences were shaped by the political and cultural context in which they occurred. In the case of one VISTA member, his service assignment was near the apex of social and racial tensions, and the experience affected his outlook on social responsibility.

*In 1967 the biggest race riot in Milwaukee occurred and it was the summer. I worked for the Department of Corrections and I would go to all the kids who were at foster care, someone from the state had to go to all the doctors appointments with them, to buy clothing, everything, and I was a student intern, I guess it was called.... I was in the inner city all day long and then there was a curfew at five o'clock and I had to make sure and be out but I never was concerned about my safety or anything. There was a lot of tension, a lot of stress in the community and of course it didn't help people who had prejudice. My parents just were not happy that I was doing this. I really felt strongly about that our generation was responsible for helping to turn things around, that it was not, that things weren't going to change unless we took responsibility for it.*

First Generation VISTA Member  
(1965-1972)

Many VISTA members felt that they *had achieved real accomplishments* through their service, and those interviewed for this study were able to offer concrete examples of how their service benefited others. Working with low-income populations left a real impression on one VISTA member interviewed for this study. Helping children with emotional needs was a compelling experience because the stakes were high and the results noticeable.

*There were two young boys that will never go away from my mind. One of them was a little boy whose Mom was in prison and his grandmother used to drive him to school every day. She was quite elderly and they had a very struggling relationship and he would come into the classroom every day and if I wasn't right there to greet him, ... he would walk into the room and put his hand out and just take every single thing that was on the shelf and knock it off and we went through this little routine of kind of behavior modification of trying to get that to change. It made you feel like you had some positive impact for him.*

First Generation VISTA Member  
(1965-1972)

Serving in the 1960s, another VISTA member worked in New York City for a year and a half. His task was to improve a low-income community, and set up a health clinic there. VISTA turned out to be an eye-opening experience. He was given the complex and difficult task of understanding what kind of health care immigrants in the neighborhood needed and how to best establish the services that they needed. He spoke with great pride about this work since the health care clinic is still there to this day.

*And your job was to understand the position of poor people in that situation and figure out what can be done to help them and their situation. And so what remains is the sense that people's positions in society condition both their opportunities and their attitudes both towards this society, and what their roles in that society are... You have to understand where people are coming from and the sense of that history. And to see what the society's role is in providing something that approaches equal opportunity, given the social, class and racial distinctions everywhere.... The situations that people were born into produce certain bias. In order to approach them as a democratic society, ... society should act to eliminate those biases.*

First Generation VISTA Member  
(1965-1972)

As a part of his VISTA work after law school, one VISTA member would go to court and try to assist those with little means and few advocates. In addition, he kept up an extensive correspondence with incarcerated men. The simple act of listening and of writing a letter allowed this volunteer to play a role in the lives of people he knew he would never meet.

*[One] thing I would do, which was really incredibly moving to me, was get letters from people in prison, all around the country. We put out a newsletter, and people heard about the organization. Some of them would get the newsletter in prison. They would write to us. They were suffering in prison, issues of brutality, things they wanted to let us know, just a voice to share their stories with. Letters from prison are censored, but letters to lawyers are not. So basically, I held a correspondence with hundreds of inmates around the nation,*

*advised them as I could about their rights, listened to their stories, shared their stories when possible.*

Second Generation VISTA member  
(1973-1980)

For many interviewees, VISTA was a *life-changing event* that changed their general outlook for the rest of their lives. For one interviewee, VISTA was an opportunity to act on his values and to grow personally. The program brought him into contact with the “real world.”

*I learned about poverty; I learned about different cultures; I learned how to deal with the problems of people, whether VISTA volunteers or staff people or neighborhood people or teenagers. I learned a lot about group dynamics, how to interact, and how to deal with personal problems and work with these problems. I was thrust out of ... the cocoon.... I was all of a sudden completely free. I didn't have parents; I didn't have friends who would lead me in certain directions or who would intimidate me.... It was a fresh start for me.*

First Generation VISTA Member  
(1965-1972)

The VISTA experience gave another VISTA member interviewed for this study a new perspective on inequality. Participation rendered poverty and need more real and its causes were shown to be more complex.

*When people would talk to me, I think about economic issues and I have something to say because I had experiences that other people might not have had. I was enriched, I think, with that experience. I hear ignorant things like ‘people make their own choices’ and ‘they do this to themselves’ and yes sometimes that is true but sometimes they are the children of a crack addict in the inner city, and they do not do that to themselves.*

Third Generation VISTA Member  
(1981-1993)

Throughout many of the interviews, we noted a strong emotional connection to the VISTA experience. As interviewees reflected on their lives and the critical junctures in it, VISTA almost always figured prominently as a turning point, along side marriage, divorce, promotions, deaths in the family, relocations and other major events. Yet the VISTA experience still emerged as a formative moment for many, leading them into helping professions and work focused on social justice. For those who felt less strongly about the long-term effect of VISTA on their life course, there was still an acknowledgement that the program opened their eyes and broadened their perspectives.





## **Chapter 4:**

# **The Effects of VISTA Participation**

As discussed in Chapter 1, the purpose of this study was (1) to identify the effects of VISTA on its members; and (2) to investigate how the behaviors and attitudes of VISTA members have changed overtime in the areas of civic engagement, education, employment, and the intergenerational transfer of values. The central hypothesis associated with this examination is that participation in the VISTA program leads to positive, lifelong effects on individual participants. This study used self-reported data to explore the effects of participation on these four general areas of interest, as listed in Exhibit 4.1. The use of a comparison group was necessary to learn how measured results for VISTA members contrast with those for individuals who are similar to VISTA members, but did not serve in the program.

### **Method Used to Analyze Results**

The data analysis for this study synthesized the information from the telephone surveys and in-person interviews to describe VISTA's influence on participants. Data collected in the phone survey was utilized to broadly assess the effects of VISTA participation, while the information from the in-person interviews provided highlights of findings to enhance emerging themes. Analyses of the telephone data were conducted using simple descriptive techniques. The descriptive analyses provide an understanding of the information at hand through comparisons across and within generations. Particular attention was paid to differences in results reported by various demographic groups.

The effects of the VISTA program were quantified by comparing outcomes of VISTA members with those of near members in the comparison group for the study sample as a whole and for each of the three generations. The overall analysis estimated the aggregate effects of the VISTA program on all respondents who enrolled in the 1965–1993 period, being careful to note programmatic differences that might explain any variation in outcomes across generations. The within-generation analysis allowed for the isolation of effects within a given generation. Specifically, the within-generation analysis isolated time period-specific elements, such as the broad societal context in which the program was operating and the nature of the operational and programmatic policies in place at the national level.

The analysis of the in-person interview data began with an examination of the major themes and issues that emerged from the fieldwork. In examining the interviews, we looked for representative quotes and observations that illustrated these themes and used quotes to enhance the broader narrative about the interplay of service and personal development. As shown in Exhibit 4.1, the outcomes measured fell into four broad categories and include both behavioral and attitudinal items.

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**Exhibit 4.1****Outcomes Assessed**

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***Civic Engagement-Related Outcomes***

*Engagement in the Political Process (Behavior)* provides respondent's reports of the frequency with which he/she participates in activities intrinsic to the political process, including contributions to candidates and voting in national and local elections.

*Volunteer Participation (Behavior)* indicates whether the respondent has served as a volunteer at any point since participation in VISTA and describes the frequency and type of volunteering.

*Personal Effectiveness of Community Service (Attitude)* represents the respondent's opinion about the effects of his/her prior volunteer activities during VISTA with respect to making a difference.

*Community Leadership (Behavior)* represents the respondent's participation in community or volunteer leadership roles.

*Connection to Community (Attitude)* represents the respondent's opinion about the strength of his/her connection to the community, as represented by the amount of interaction with neighbors and strength of feelings toward the community.

***Education-Related Outcomes***

*Educational Pursuits (Behavior)* indicates the type of additional education pursued after VISTA participation.

*Educational Attainment (Behavior)* indicates the level of education attained after VISTA participation.

*Field of Study (Behavior)* provides the respondent's predominant field of study pursued after VISTA participation.

***Employment-Related Outcomes***

*Labor Force Status (Behavior)* consists of an examination of the labor force attachment of the respondent.

*Employment Status (Behavior)* represents the employment status of the respondent and a review of their employment choices.

*Employment and Career Stability (Behavior)* is a holistic examination of respondent's employment and career patterns through their entire employment history.

*Field of Employment (Behavior)* provides the respondent's current career choice.

***Outcomes Related to the Intergenerational Transfer of Values***

*Family and Children's Service Participation (Behavior)* provides an examination of the volunteer participation of the respondent's family, including his/her parents and children.

*Joint Participation in Volunteer Activities (Behavior)* provides the respondent's report of the frequency with which he/she participate in volunteer activities with their children and have their children accompany them when participating in civic responsibilities such as voting.

*Views on Children's Service and Community involvement (Attitude)* provide the respondent's report of the values he/she hopes to instill in their children in terms of community involvement and helping others.

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## Outcomes for VISTA Members

In this section we present the findings by individual outcome measure, organized by the four outcome groups, beginning with civic engagement. For each outcome measure, findings are reported overall, comparing all VISTA members against the entire comparison group. Results are also presented by generation, comparing the results for VISTA members who served during each of the three generations against their counterparts in the comparison group. Also, where applicable, results are compared across the three generations to understand how outcomes for VISTA members have changed over time. Finally, it should be noted that outcomes are selectively presented across key demographic characteristics in instances where the findings substantially enhance our understanding of core findings.

### Civic Engagement

It is important to understand that the civic engagement of VISTA members was not explicitly part of the purpose of VISTA until it joined AmeriCorps in 1993 with the formation of the Corporation for National and Community Service. Because of the importance of civic engagement to the Corporation's mission, however, many of the outcome measures in this study focus on this objective.<sup>10</sup> Outcome measures addressed in this section include engagement in the political process, volunteer participation, personal effectiveness of community service, connection to community, and community leadership.

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#### Outcome Measures for Civic Engagement:

- Engagement in the political process
  - Volunteer participation
  - Personal effectiveness of community service
  - Community leadership
  - Connection to community
- 

Differences were found between VISTA members and the comparison group in their levels of engagement in the political process, especially in the voting behavior of African-American and Hispanic respondents. In addition, VISTA members reported higher levels of voting and volunteer participation than the general U.S. population. Results on other outcome measures, such as personal effectiveness of community service, community leadership, and connection to community showed little or no differences.<sup>11</sup>

Next we present the detailed results on outcomes relating to civic engagement.

*Engagement in the political process* is measured through several types of political behaviors. It represents the frequency with which the respondent currently participates in activities related to the

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<sup>10</sup> Promoting civic engagement is a primary goal for all of the Corporation's programs, including VISTA. Furthermore, the promotion of civic engagement is one of the Corporation's ten guiding principles, as detailed in its Strategic Plan for 2006–2010; programs are encouraged to “use service-learning principles to put volunteer and service activities into an appropriate context that stimulates lifelong civic engagement.”

<sup>11</sup> Although we identified some differences on outcomes of civic engagement, it is important to note that both VISTA members and respondents in the comparison group are likely to have demonstrated high levels of civic engagement before participation in VISTA as confirmed by their knowledge of, and interest in joining, the program.

political process, including voting in local and national elections, contributing money to a candidate or political party, and engaging others in discussions on political issues.

Several survey questions asked respondents about their post-VISTA voting behavior in both presidential and state/local elections. Specifically, these questions addressed whether or not the respondent:

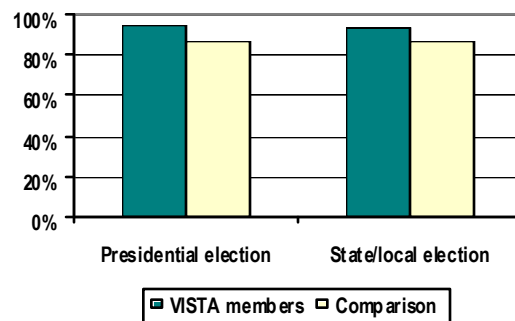
- Has ever voted since leaving VISTA
- Voted in the 2004 election
- Voted in the first election since leaving VISTA

Overall, post-VISTA voting behavior was very strong for both groups of respondents. The vast majority (96%) of both VISTA members and their counterparts in the comparison group reported that they have voted in a presidential election or in a state or local election since leaving VISTA. This strong commitment to participating in the electoral process includes highly active participation in the 2004 elections, in which over 96 percent of both VISTA members and the comparison group reported voting in both the presidential and state/local elections.

While commitment to voting has been historically strong, VISTA members appear to have been more inclined to actively engage in the electoral process immediately upon their program departure. Specifically, VISTA members were more likely than their counterparts to vote in the first presidential election (95% versus 87%) as well as the first state or local election (93% versus 86%) following their departure from VISTA (Exhibit 4.2).

Additional analysis was also conducted to explore whether voting behavior differed within subgroups defined by racial/ethnic status. The low levels of civic participation among minorities has continued to be a topic of interest among researchers and a concern for policymakers.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, the civic engagement of minorities is also a focus of the Corporation's programs.

**Exhibit 4.2**  
**Voted in First Election After VISTA (All Generations)**

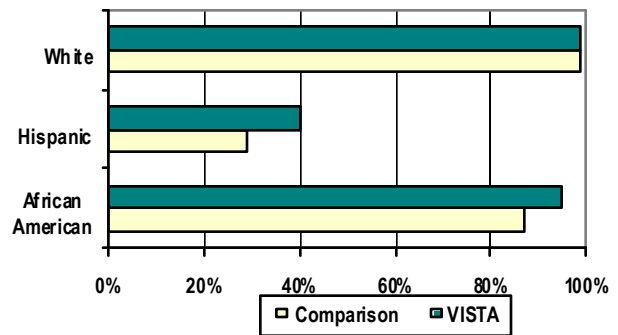


<sup>12</sup> Schlozman, K.L., Verba, S., and Brady, H.E. 1999. "Civic Participation and the Equality Problem," in Civic Engagement in American Democracy, eds. Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina. Washington, DC: Brookings Press.

Cohen, C.J. and M.C. Dawson. 1993. "Neighborhood Poverty and African-American Politics," American Political Science Review. Volume 87, pp.286-302.

Important differences were observed in the voting patterns of African-American and Hispanic VISTA members compared to their counterparts in the comparison group, with the VISTA members generally reporting higher levels of voting behavior. As shown in Exhibit 4.3, African-American and Hispanic VISTA members were considerably more likely to have ever voted in a presidential election since departing VISTA than their counterparts in the comparison group. Additionally, African-American VISTA members were more likely to have ever voted in a state or local election since departing VISTA than their counterparts in the comparison group (93% of African-American VISTA members compared to 85% of African-Americans in the comparison group). Despite this difference, similar percentages of African-American and Hispanic VISTA members and those in the comparison group were likely to vote in a state or local election. Analysis on other racial/ethnic groups was not possible due to small numbers of respondents in these other categories.

**Exhibit 4.3**  
**Voted in a Presidential Election Since Leaving VISTA (All Generations)**



As these results imply, VISTA can influence member’s political awareness and voting behavior. This possibility is supported by the story of one VISTA member interviewed for this study who first became aware of VISTA through a college professor she had at a Midwestern university. She joined VISTA after graduating because she was looking for a way to help out in her community while earning some money. She was not politically active before going to college, but became slowly more familiar with current events in the 1970s:

*I don’t know if I was voting before VISTA.... I don’t think I was politically aligned with a party. I wasn’t doing anything actively in party politics during that year, that time. Since that time ... I have been more involved in it than any other time. During my VISTA days there was a social consciousness ... there were still some demonstrations going on. There was apartheid going on. So those kinds of things I was aware of. I did some support things, but that was not a party affiliation. It was kind of bigger than that.*

First Generation VISTA Member  
 (1965-1972)

As part of our examination of voting behavior, we also collected information on national levels of voting behavior and compared them to the voting levels of study respondents. Information on voting behavior was obtained from the 2004 *Current Population Survey*<sup>13</sup> and is based on self-reported voting behavior from the 2004 presidential election.<sup>14</sup> According to the 2004 *Current Population Survey*, 64 percent of U.S. citizens voted in the 2004 presidential election. When compared to the

<sup>13</sup> The *Current Population Survey* is a monthly survey of about 60,000 households that obtains information on employment and unemployment among the nation’s population 12 years of age and older.

<sup>14</sup> There are no national estimates of voting rates in state and local elections because voting participation varies by location.

voting rates of VISTA members and their counterparts in the comparison group for the 2004 presidential election (96% and 98%, respectively), the study participants appear to be far more politically engaged than the general U.S. population. Also, the voting rates of VISTA members and those in the comparison group continue to be high even compared to the voting rate of all registered U.S. voters, 89 percent of whom reported voting in the 2004 presidential election.

When examining the 2004 voting levels by racial/ethnic group, the differences are even more apparent. Voting rates among U.S. citizens were 67 percent for whites compared to 99 percent reported by white VISTA members, 60 percent for African-American citizens compared to 95 percent of African-American VISTA members, and 47 percent for Hispanic citizens compared to 40 percent of Hispanic VISTA members. Voting levels among respondents in the comparison group were generally lower than those of VISTA members, but still remained higher than those of the general U.S. population for white and African-American voters. However, Hispanic respondents in the comparison group reported voting at a lower rate compared to the national Hispanic population.

**Exhibit 4.4**

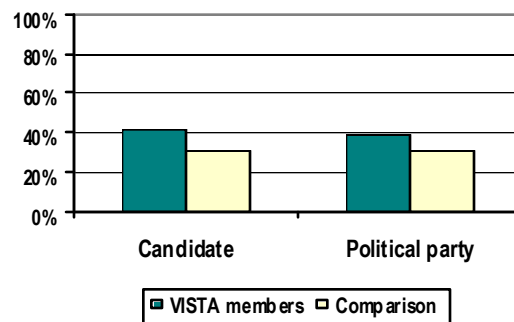
**Voting Rates of U.S. Citizens, VISTA Members, and the Comparison Group (2004 Presidential Election)**

Race/Ethnicity	U.S. Citizens	VISTA Members	Comparison Group
White	67%	99%	99%
African-American	60	95	87
Hispanic	47	40	29

In addition to voting behavior, monetary contributions to the political process were more common among VISTA members than their counterparts in the comparison group. As can be seen in Exhibit 4.5, a slightly higher percentage of VISTA members contributed money to a candidate (41%) or to a political party (38%) compared to those in the comparison group (31% contributed money to a candidate and 30% contributed to a political party). In contrast, VISTA members were similarly as likely as respondents in the comparison group to discuss community politics and community affairs with others. Only small percentages of both VISTA members and their counterparts in the comparison group reported that they never discuss community politics and affairs.

**Exhibit 4.5**

**Contributed Money to a Candidate or Political Party (All Generations)**



One of the VISTA members interviewed for this study credited her time in VISTA with activating her lifetime political engagement. Working with the poor and getting a start as a social worker led to a social awareness that she has continued ever since:

*I saw a lot of poverty and people living on the edge. Those people's lives, it's kind of hard to forget that, living your little middle class life. But I have to say how it's changed me. I'm much more politically involved and probably aware and vocal than I ever was in VISTA. VISTA started the process. I think it was already there for me but it sort of confirmed for me*

*that there's just a lot of social injustice in our country. You have to work in small ways to try to correct that [and do] whatever you can do.*

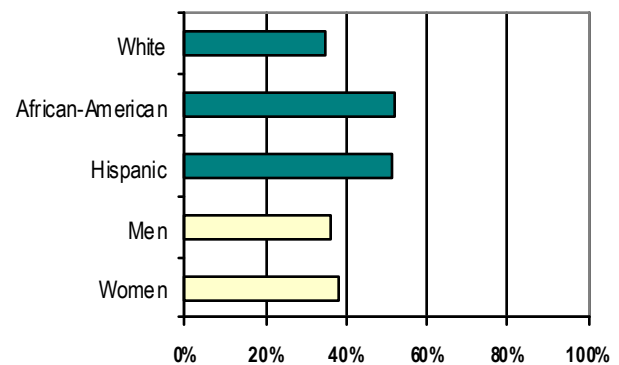
Third Generation VISTA Member  
(1981-1993)

To measure the outcomes of VISTA associated with lifelong civic engagement, respondents also were asked questions about their **volunteer participation**.

Respondents were asked whether their VISTA experience influenced the amount or kind of volunteering they have performed since leaving the program. As anticipated, higher percentages of VISTA members than comparison group members reported that their VISTA experience influenced their volunteering activities (43% and 26%, respectively). However, the most interesting findings emerged when examining the results by demographic subgroups. For example, African-American and Hispanic respondents (52% and 51%, respectively) were much more likely than whites (35%) to report that their VISTA experience has strongly influenced the amount or nature of their volunteering since leaving the VISTA program. In addition, women (38%) were similarly likely compared to men (36%) to say that their VISTA experience has strongly influenced the amount or kind of volunteering they have performed since leaving VISTA.

**Exhibit 4.6**

**VISTA Experience Influenced Respondents' Volunteer Participation (All Respondents)**



In the interviews with VISTA members, one respondent discussed her current involvement in volunteer activities. She went on to be involved in the schools her children attended, including the PTA. Work in VISTA oriented her toward those less well off and led her to reach out to try to help the children who were struggling in school:

*I saw that in schools, too, where there was a group, even though in the elementary school my kids attended, there was a group of children that lived in subsidized housing and we tried to help those kids, pull those kids up. And we offered tutoring. These kids moved every couple of months. It's sad and some of the parents got angry with us for offering to help. It was their business and they would help the kids. But they didn't. And that really, how could they not want help for their kids but it was like we were intruding. And it wasn't just the white parents and the black parents. But I guess they thought we were judging them and we weren't. We were just trying to help.... I think I learned that at VISTA too.*

Third Generation VISTA Member  
(1981-1993)

Respondents also were asked to describe their volunteer activities since participation in VISTA, including whether they have been active in politics, served on a local board or council, joined a neighborhood association, or volunteered with a religious organization. The number of volunteer

activities was averaged and compared between VISTA members and the comparison group. Results were similar for the two groups with VISTA members and non-members both volunteering on average in 1.6 activities during the year following their departure from VISTA. When asked in which volunteer activities respondents had participated in the past 12 months, this average remained the same at 1.6 activities for both VISTA members and non-members. However, when the national rate of volunteering is compared to the rate of reported volunteering of respondents, we find that the study participants have a much higher level of volunteering than the general population.

National statistics on volunteering were obtained and compared to the self-reported volunteering rates of both VISTA members and their counterparts in the comparison group. These national statistics were obtained from the Bureau of Labor and Statistics based on a 2006 survey, *Volunteering in the United States*.<sup>15</sup> The results showed that 61.2 million Americans volunteered in some capacity between September 2005 and September 2006, a rate of 26.7 percent of the population. In contrast, a very high percentage of the VISTA members and those in the comparison group reported participating in one or more volunteer activities in the last year (95% and 94% respectively). These results indicate that both groups of respondents demonstrate a higher level of volunteer participation than the general population.

**Personal effectiveness of community service** represents respondents' opinions about the effect of their current volunteer activities with respect to making a difference. Respondents were asked how much of a difference they think people like themselves can have in making their community better. Similar percentages of respondents thought that they could make a big or moderate difference in their community (88% of VISTA members and 86% of the comparison group).

**Connection to community** includes measures of the strength of respondents' connection to their community, as indicated by the number of years they have lived in their community and the amount of interaction and strength of connection they feel toward their neighbors.

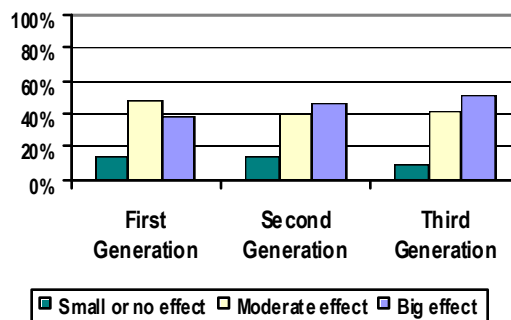
In most cases, there were no differences in responses between VISTA members and their counterparts in the comparison group. A high percentage of most survey respondents have long-term connections to their communities, having lived there for five or more years (87%);<sup>16</sup> most VISTA members (75%) and their counterparts in the comparison group (73%) said that they talk with their neighbors regularly (i.e., several times a month, week, or every day); and two-thirds (64%) of respondents reportedly believe that they can trust their neighbors a lot. Furthermore, when asked in general

<sup>15</sup> *Volunteering in the United States* is a supplement to the September 2005 *Current Population Survey*.

<sup>16</sup> The number of respondents who lived in their community for five or more years may be high due to the fact that those who are less transient were easier to locate for this survey.

**Exhibit 4.7**

**VISTA Members' Opinions on the Effect of Volunteer Activities on Their Community**





whether people can be trusted, similar percentages of VISTA members and those in the comparison group said that people can be trusted (74% and 71%, respectively).

**Community leadership** was measured by respondents' reported participation in community or volunteer leadership roles. A slightly higher percentage of VISTA members have volunteered on a governmental board or council when compared to their counterparts in the comparison group (31% and 27%, respectively). In addition, a slightly higher percentage of VISTA members (40%) than respondents in the comparison group (37%) have served as a leader or coach in a non-educational organization (such as Girl Scouts, 4-H, or a sports team).

### ***Differences across Generations***

In general, high levels of voting behavior were reported across the three generations. However, the most noticeable differences between VISTA members and their counterparts in the comparison group were identified among third generation respondents. Third generation VISTA members were slightly more likely to vote in the first presidential election (93%) after departing from VISTA than comparison group members in the third generation (90%), and also were more likely to have ever voted in a state/local election (95%) than their comparison group counterparts in the third generation (88%). In contrast, higher percentages of those in the third generation reported that they never discuss community politics and community affairs (14%) compared to the other generations (5% of the first generation and 6% of the second generation).

In addition, differences in monetary contributions to the political process between VISTA members and respondents in the comparison group remained relatively constant among respondents in each of the three generations. Yet respondents who served in the first and second generations were more likely than those in the third generation to contribute money to either a candidate for office or a political party.

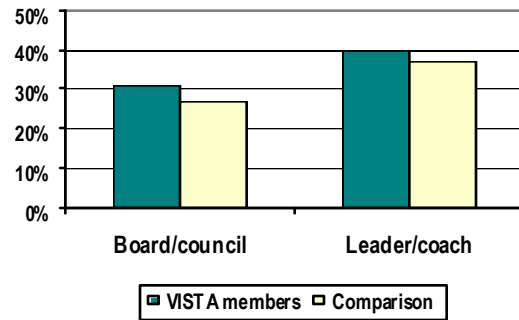
Although all three generations demonstrated strong and lasting connections to their communities, VISTA members who served in the third generation were more likely to respond that they trusted their neighbors a lot (58%) when compared with their counterparts in the comparison group in the third generation (48%). When asked in general whether people can be trusted, large majorities of respondents across all three generations agreed with this statement. However, a smaller percentage of third generation respondents said people can be trusted (62%) compared to the other generations (79% of the first generation and 75% of the second generation).

### **Education**

The majority of both VISTA members and applicants who comprise the comparison group were between the ages of 21 and 26 when they initially applied and/or served in the VISTA program.

**Exhibit 4.8**

**Participate on a Government Board or Council or as a Leader or Coach (All Generations)**



While there is some variation across generations, the vast majority had completed high school before VISTA and were in the formative stages of making choices that would shape a career path. An examination of post-VISTA educational pursuits is important in understanding their educational choices. On the one hand, it is conceivable that the VISTA experience could provide a career step that would, in some instances, limit members' pursuit of more formal degree or certification programs. On the other hand, it can also be hypothesized that the VISTA program would serve as a catalyst to further education.<sup>17</sup>

In exploring these dynamics the evaluation examined the pursuit and emphasis of degree-granting programs undertaken by both VISTA members and their counterparts in the comparison group. This includes a review of the type of educational program, success in attaining the degree, and the field of study that was pursued. Major findings included that VISTA members were more likely to have pursued a Master's Degree than a Bachelor's Degree and tended to complete their degree programs with more consistency than those in the comparison group.

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**Outcome Measures for Education:**

- Educational pursuits
  - Educational attainment
  - Field of study
- 

The following discussion presents the results of our analysis of educational outcomes.

*Educational pursuits* examine the level of education attained after exiting the VISTA program. The pursuit of post-VISTA degree-awarding programs partly reflects respondents' levels of education at the time of enrollment. As discussed in Chapter 2, approximately 51 percent of the VISTA members and 44 percent of the comparison group had attained a Bachelor's Degree or higher at the time of enrollment. Despite this rather strong educational background, approximately six in ten of all survey respondents reported having enrolled in a degree-awarding educational program since exiting VISTA. The rate of degree pursuit was slightly lower among VISTA members (59% versus 64%), which may reflect the likelihood that some portion of VISTA members may have made an immediate "trade-off" between the time invested in the program and the time that would have been invested in a degree-awarding program.

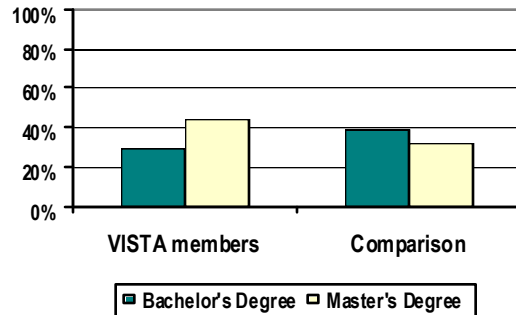
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<sup>17</sup> Currently VISTA members who complete a year of full-time service are eligible for an education award. The award can be used for education or training with qualified institutions, or to repay qualified student loans for a period of seven years after completing service. Although the current education award was not available to study participants after they completed their service with VISTA, it is an indication of the Corporation's commitment to advancing the educational prospects of members. Clearly, education is an outcome of interest to the Corporation.

As can be seen in Exhibit 4.9, VISTA participants are more likely to have pursued a Master's Degree than a Bachelor's Degree while the reverse pattern applies to those in the comparison group. In part, this reflects the varying educational profiles characterizing the two groups at program entry. VISTA members were more likely to have enrolled in the program with a Bachelor's Degree than their counterparts in the comparison group. As a result, a larger proportion of the VISTA members pursued a Master's Degree as their first post-program educational initiative while those in the comparison group were more likely to pursue a Bachelor's Degree.

**Exhibit 4.9**

**Most Common Degree-Awarding Pursuits (All Generations)**

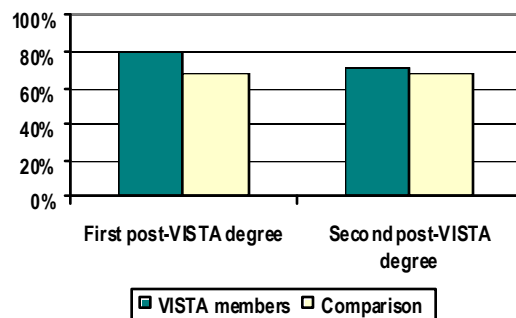


Approximately 26 percent of respondents (23% of VISTA members and 31% of the comparison group) pursued a second degree-awarding program after they left VISTA. Consistent with trends noted in our examination of first degree programs, the incidence of second degree programs was larger among the comparison group since, for the most part, their educational level upon enrollment was slightly lower than the VISTA members.

The *educational attainment* of VISTA members and the comparison group was also compared. Over three-quarters of those enrolled in a first post-VISTA educational program attained their degree. VISTA members appeared to achieve this educational milestone somewhat more consistently than the comparison group. Respondents who were 21 to 25 at the time of enrollment also attained their degrees more consistently than younger respondents (81% versus 73% for those under 21). Rates of degree attainment tailed off slightly among those who pursued a second post-VISTA educational program. This percentage was similar for both the VISTA members and the comparison group although slightly lower for women.

**Exhibit 4.10**

**Incidence of Attainment of First and Second Post-VISTA Degrees (All Generations)**



The most predominant *field of study* in respondents' first degree program was education. As shown in Exhibit 4.11, approximately one in five members of the comparison group pursued this field of study compared to approximately 16 percent of VISTA participants. The next most prevalent first field of study was social work, which attracted 12 percent of the VISTA respondents and 10 percent of the comparison group. This was followed by pre-law and psychology, both of which were equally prevalent educational pursuits among VISTA participants and the comparison group.

**Exhibit 4.11**

**Predominant Fields of Study in First Degree-Awarding Program (All Generations)**

Rating	VISTA	
	Members	Comparison
Education (including physical education)	16%	20%
Social work	12	10
Law/Prelaw	7	7
Psychology	7	7

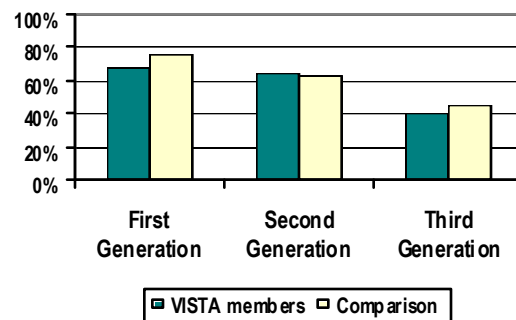
***Differences across Generations***

As discussed above, high percentages of both VISTA members and their counterparts in the comparison group had attained a Bachelor's Degree or higher at the time of enrollment. These levels of prior educational achievement were highest among those in the second generation, with well over half (58% of VISTA members and 62% of those in the comparison group) entering VISTA with a Bachelor's Degree or higher.

As can be seen in Exhibit 4.12, first generation VISTA and comparison group members were the most active in pursuing post-VISTA education, with over two-thirds of the VISTA members and three-quarters of the comparison group having enrolled in a degree-awarding program. This in part reflects the relatively younger age composition of this generation.

**Exhibit 4.12**

**Enrolled in Degree-Awarding Program Since VISTA (All Generations)**



Both treatment and comparison groups in the second generation reported somewhat lower levels of degree-awarding educational pursuits. Within this generation the educational experiences of VISTA members and their counterparts in the comparison group were quite similar, with VISTA members reporting a slightly higher incidence of participation in post-VISTA degree-awarding education.

Both VISTA members and their counterparts who served in the third generation were comparatively less likely to have pursued an educational degree since leaving the program. Two factors may, in part, help to explain this dynamic. First, this generation has had the shortest timeframe within which to pursue further education. It also should be noted that the comparatively low levels of educational pursuits may be due to the emphasis on recruiting local community residents with lower levels of education who may simply be disinclined towards formal education.

In terms of degree completion, VISTA members from the first and second generation attained their degrees at rates (over 80%) at least ten percentage points higher than their counterparts in the comparison groups (72% and 71%, respectively). The pattern is reversed among those who served in the third generation, with 80 percent of the comparison group completing their first post-VISTA degree program compared to 69 percent of the VISTA members.

While similar fields of study were popular across the three generations, those who served in the third generation were comparatively less likely (13%) to study education than those in the first generation (19%) and second generation (17%). In addition, social work was a particularly popular choice of study among those who served in the second generation, with slightly over 13 percent pursuing a degree in this field.

## Employment

The VISTA program experience itself combines elements of both an employment and educational experience. As a one-year commitment the program has the structure and length of a graduate course or internship and requires the commitment and responsibility of a full-time job. As such, this experience can potentially serve to shape an individual's future career by enhancing employability as well as by potentially shaping their choices about the types of jobs they take and the professional commitments they are willing to make. At the same time, it should be noted that the VISTA experience and its one-year commitment may delay (or interrupt) some participants' integration into the workforce relative to those individuals in the comparison group.

In exploring this set of dynamics we examined respondents' current labor force and employment status, their employment and career permanence, which is the extent to which they have experienced comparatively stable employment, and their commitment to a particular field of employment. The findings showed that VISTA members were more likely to be employed and had a slightly stronger income profile than those in the comparison group. Other measures, such as the current field in which respondents were working, were similar across both groups.

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**Outcome Measures for Employment:**

- Labor force status
  - Employment status
  - Employment and career stability
  - Field of employment
- 

Next, we present the results from our examination of employment-related outcomes.

As part of this examination of employment outcomes, the current *labor force status* of VISTA members was compared to that of the respondents in the comparison group. While a solid majority of all respondents were working at the time they were surveyed, VISTA members were somewhat more likely to be employed than those in the comparison group. It should also be noted that very low reported levels of unemployment further support this solid pattern of current employment. Specifically, only 2 percent of VISTA members and 3 percent of the comparison group reported that they were unemployed or laid off and "actively seeking work."

Following on VISTA members' strong labor force participation is a closer look at respondents' *current employment status*, which provides insight into the culmination of several decades of

educational, career and personal choices. Regardless of differences in the employment rates of VISTA members and the comparison group, of those currently in the labor force, approximately 80 percent of both groups are currently working in a full-time position. However, despite similar current employment status, VISTA participants reported a slightly stronger income profile than those in the comparison group. Approximately 56 percent reported an annual income in excess of \$60,000 per year, with only 13 percent earning less than \$20,000. The comparison group was somewhat different, with 49 percent earning more than \$60,000 and 17 percent earning less than \$20,000. Approximately one-third of both VISTA members and the comparison group reported an annual income between \$20,000 and \$60,000.

An examination of respondents' current *field of employment* reveals consistent patterns of career choice between VISTA members and their counterparts in the comparison group. Particularly noteworthy is the clustering of employment choices among a very targeted set of fields. As can be seen in Exhibit 4.13, over 70 percent of both the VISTA members and the comparison group reported that they were currently employed in one of five occupational fields. While minor variations can be seen, the overall pattern of current employment choices remains quite

consistent between the two groups with an emphasis on social work, law, business, and health professions. The exhibit further highlights the frequency with which both VISTA members and the comparison group chose the teaching profession (children and adults); teaching attracted over one in five of those currently employed.

The survey data also revealed a consistent pattern among VISTA members and their counterparts with respect to their choice of employment sectors. Approximately 20 percent of both groups were working in the nonprofit sector (at the time of the survey) with the remainder evenly split between the private sector and public sector.

In analyzing the in-person interviews, we found that service in VISTA sometimes influenced participants' employment choices. For one VISTA member interviewed, an initial VISTA placement in a youth service agency for juvenile delinquents led to a successful, lifelong career in the nonprofit sector.

*I walked in there and I thought I was going to learn about hard core drugs [and] how I could help these kids in the youth program. I sat down and did a personality analysis, and talked to somebody, and really looked at my life...And I'm like, I'm messed up! And I really was, because I had dropped out of college because of drugs, and I had only a few people in my life who really [knew] how messed up I was. I've been with [this organization] ever since, and I've gone from that to the executive director of the program, internationally responsible for*

**Exhibit 4.13**  
**Current Job by Field of Employment (All Generations)**

Field	VISTA Members (%)	Comparison (%)
Teaching children/adults	21%	22%
Social/community work	13	12
Law	10	7
Business	14	16
Health-related	14	17
All others <sup>a</sup>	28	28

a Includes computer/technical/scientific, environmental, public safety, agriculture, military, arts, trades, customer service/retail, food service, athletics/recreation, religious.

like 50 centers around the world. [This is] over a 30-year history of working with this program, but that's where that started. And that was because of VISTA.

Second Generation VISTA member  
(1973-1980)

In addition to its focus on current labor market activity, we conducted an examination of **employment and career stability**. The overwhelming majority of both VISTA members (94%) and comparison group counterparts (92%) have engaged in full-time employment for some period of time during the post-VISTA time frame. In addition, both the VISTA members and their counterparts in the comparison group exhibit high levels of employment stability. Since leaving the program, the VISTA members have been employed on a full-time basis in an average of 2.9 jobs versus 3.2 jobs for the comparison group.

While instances of job changes were minimal over the post-VISTA period, nearly two-thirds of both VISTA members and those in the comparison group reported switching at least once across the public, private or nonprofit sectors of the economy (64% and 61%, respectively). One-quarter of respondents (24% of VISTA members and 25% of the comparison group) made only one switch in their major field of employment.

**Exhibit 4.14**  
**Sectoral Stability (All Generations)**

	Switched Sectors	Never Switched Sectors		
		Public Only	Private Only	Nonprofit Only
VISTA Members	64%	13%	13%	10%
Comparison Group	61	5	19	5

This general pattern is shown from a different perspective in Exhibit 4.15, which compares the employment field of respondents' first post-VISTA job and their current full-time position. The data reveal an interest in five major fields that account for the majority of all full-time jobs held (teaching, social/community work, law, business, and health). For both groups there appears to be some degree of movement towards teaching over time. At the same time, VISTA members' interest in social and community work dropped noticeably while the respondents in the comparison group sustained their emphasis in this area. Other movements into and away from specific employment choices are generally quite minor.

**Exhibit 4.15**  
**Career Permanence (All Generations)**

Field of Employment	First Post-VISTA Job		Current Job	
	VISTA Members	Comparison	VISTA Members	Comparison
Teaching children/adults	16%	17%	21%	22%
Social/community work	23	13	13	12
Law	8	7	10	7
Business	9	13	14	16
Health-related	11	11	13	17
All others <sup>a</sup>	33	40	28	28

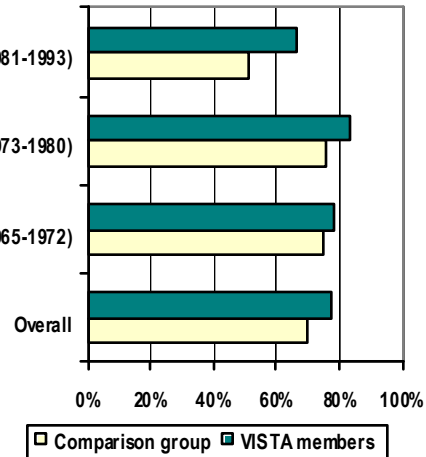
a Includes computer/technical/scientific, environmental, public safety, agriculture, military, arts, trades, customer service/retail, food service, athletics/recreation, religious.

## Differences across Generations

In all three generations VISTA members were more likely to be employed than their counterparts in the comparison group. As can be seen in Exhibit 4.16, a pattern of strong labor force attachment and employment is consistently observed among VISTA members in both the first and second generations. The third generation presents a somewhat different picture of labor force attachment with a considerably lower proportion of respondents currently employed. However, VISTA members remained more likely to be employed than their counterparts in the comparison group.

Exhibit 4.16

### Currently Employed at Time of Survey



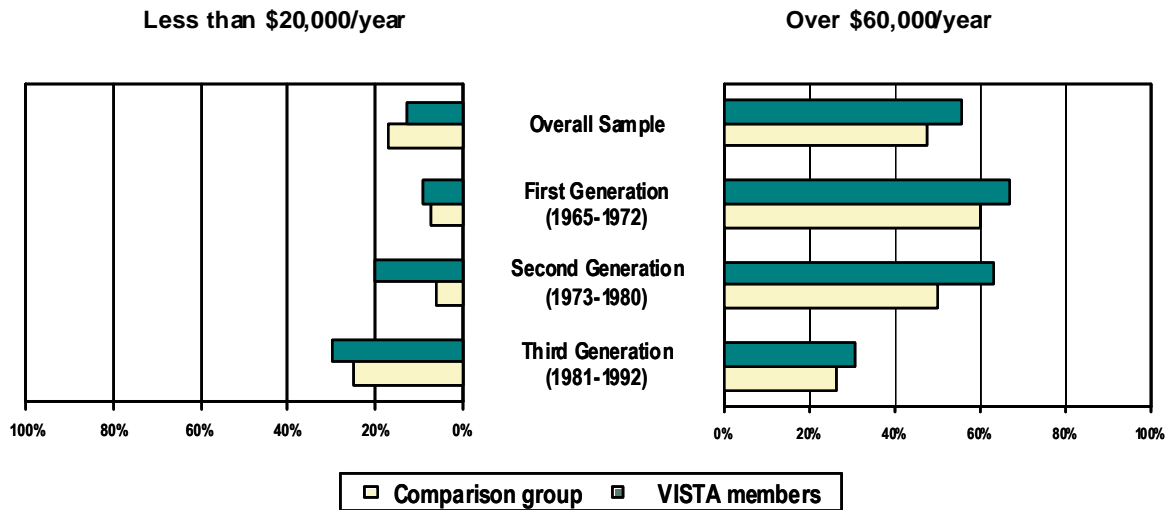
Despite their generally younger age profile, the third generation is disproportionately comprised of women, whose rates of labor force participation have historically been lower than men. This dynamic is seen in the higher proportion of respondents who report being “out of the labor force.” Most of the difference appears to be due to a comparatively larger proportion of respondents who are “keeping house” (12% of the third generation versus 3% and 4% of the first and second generations, respectively). Also, although high percentages of those in the first and second generations reported engaging in full-time employment since leaving VISTA (over 90%), those in the third generation, with the shortest post-VISTA follow-up period, were less likely to report having held a full-time job for an extended period of time since leaving VISTA (83%).

As can be seen in Exhibit 4.17, differences also were observed in the income profiles of respondents across generations. In fact, the strength of the income profile decreases across generations, with only 29 percent of those who served in the third generation reporting an income in excess of \$60,000 compared to 64 percent and 59 percent of the first and second generations. This difference may reflect the broad ages and work experiences across the three generations.

The overall income advantage, noted earlier, that is experienced by VISTA members (relative to the comparison group) is consistent within each generation. However, an edge in income profile is particularly notable in the second generation where nearly two-thirds (63%) of VISTA members report a current income over \$60,000 (compared to 50% of the comparison group) and only 9 percent report an income of less than \$20,000 (compared to 20% of the comparison group). Similar percentages of VISTA members (28%) and those in the comparison group (30%) reported incomes between \$20,000 and \$60,000. It appears that the strong educational foundation characterizing the second generation and the VISTA experience itself may generate an advantage in the labor market.



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**Exhibit 4.17****Current Income**

In our examination of current field of employment, members of all three generations demonstrated a strong and consistent interest in working in the teaching and health fields. Relative to the other two generations, however, respondents from the third generation showed a stronger inclination for social and community work. Conversely, the first and second generations showed more inclination towards employment in law. This general pattern reflects the community connectedness of the third generation recruits as well as the emphasis on higher education that characterized the second generation.

**Transfer of Values**

Several outcome measures assess whether the VISTA experience had an intergenerational effect on members by helping to shape the values and service habits of their children. Compared to youth with no family members who volunteer, youth from families where at least one parent volunteers are almost twice as likely to volunteer themselves, and nearly three times more likely to volunteer on a regular basis. Also, according to research by Independent Sector, those who began volunteering as youth are twice as likely to volunteer as adults compared to those who did not volunteer when they were younger<sup>18</sup> Because respondents in this study served in VISTA up to 40 years ago, it is possible to examine how VISTA members applied the values they gained from their participation in VISTA to their parenting behavior and whether there were positive effects on the civic engagement of their children.

To establish some context with which to interpret the results of these outcomes, it may be helpful to understand the typical family structure of survey respondents. First, about three-quarters of all respondents have children; virtually all respondents with children had a child five years or older at the time of the survey; and nearly 90 percent had children older than 18 years. These percentages were

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<sup>18</sup> Corporation for National and Community Service. *Building Active Citizens: The Role of Social Institutions in Teen Volunteering*. Brief 1 in the Youth Helping America series. Washington, DC. November 2005.

Independent Sector. *Engaging Youth in Lifelong Service*. Washington, DC. 2002.

similar among VISTA members and their counterparts in the comparison group as well as for respondents who served in all three generations.

To assess the intergenerational transfer of values, we asked respondents about family conversations about and participation in service and respondents' views on children's service and community involvement. Major findings included that VISTA members were more likely to report that their children accompany them on volunteer activities and that their children regularly participate in volunteer activities than those in the comparison group. Higher percentages of VISTA members also reported that their children accompanied them when voting.

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**Outcome Measures for Transfer of Values:**

- Family and children's service participation
  - Joint participation in volunteer activities
  - Views on children's service and community involvement
- 

The following provides the results of our analysis of the intergenerational transfer of values.

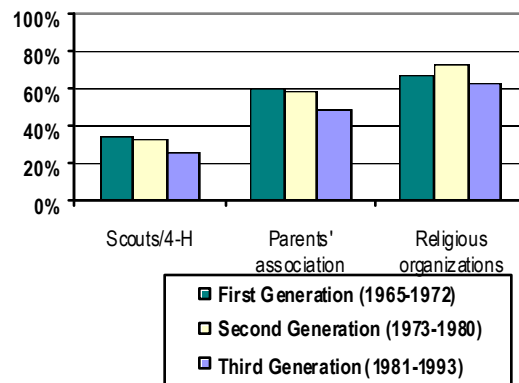
To identify and understand a generational link in the level of civic engagement among participants in the VISTA program, questions were asked about the *family and children's service participation* of VISTA members and those in the comparison group. The service and volunteer backgrounds of both VISTA members and their counterparts in the comparison group were quite similar. As first discussed in Chapter 2, similar percentages of VISTA members and those in the comparison group reported being involved in volunteer activities as youth and participating in school activities in high school, such as student government, sports teams, and special interest clubs.

In addition to their own volunteer activities as youth, respondents were asked about their parents' level of involvement in various local organizations. There were only minor differences in the level of involvement of VISTA members' parents and the parents of respondents in the comparison group. About one-third of respondents said their parents were leaders or coaches in Scouts or 4-H; more than half of respondents reported that their parents belonged to a parents' association; two-thirds of respondents reported that their parents belonged to a religious organization; and about one-quarter

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**Exhibit 4.18**

**Parents' Volunteer Activities (All Respondents)**



reported that their parents were active in politics. Again, the level of engagement of the parents of VISTA members and those in the comparison group were similar even when examined by generation. This finding indicates that both VISTA members and those in the comparison group received similar levels of exposure to volunteering in their youth and through their parents.

Thus, upon application to the VISTA program, both VISTA members and those in the comparison group had similar backgrounds in terms of their personal volunteer behavior and the level of volunteer activity shown by their parents.

A key pathway for transferring the values of civic engagement from parent to child is through *joint participation in volunteer activities*. As a result, respondents were asked several questions about their volunteering activities with their children. Despite respondents' similar levels of civic engagement as youth, some differences were found between VISTA members and their counterparts in the comparison group in the degree to which they engage in volunteer activities with their own children.

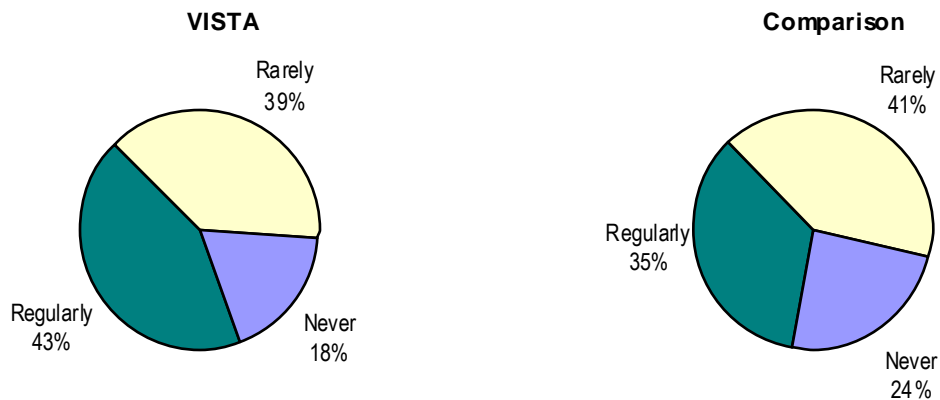
Nearly 80 percent of all respondents with children reported that their children accompanied them on volunteer activities when their children were school age. A higher percentage of VISTA members (43%) reported that their children accompanied them on volunteer activities regularly (i.e., more than once a year) than respondents in the comparison group (35%). Moreover, respondents in the comparison group were much more likely than VISTA members to report that they have never had their children accompany them on volunteer activities (24%). Close to two-thirds of respondents also reported that their children accompanied them when voting.

Large majorities of both VISTA and comparison group respondents reported that their children attended community-sponsored (88%) and school-sponsored (93%) events with them when their children were school age. Moreover, eight out of ten respondents stated that their school-age children attended community-sponsored and school-sponsored events alone.

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**Exhibit 4.19**

**Children of Respondents Accompany Them on Volunteer Activities (All Generations)**




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Respondents also were asked whether their children participated in volunteer events on their own when they were school age. Overall VISTA members were more likely (51%) than their counterparts in the comparison group (41%) to report that their children regularly participated in volunteer activities. Likewise, those in the comparison group were more likely than VISTA members to report that their children never participate in volunteer events alone (19% and 14%, respectively).

Another straightforward measure of the transfer of values from VISTA members to their children is the degree to which their children choose to serve in a similar capacity. Therefore, respondents with children over 18 were asked to report whether any of their children have volunteered for VISTA, the Peace Corps, Teach for America, AmeriCorps, or the U.S. Armed Services. Some respondents reported that their children participated in one or more of these programs (13%) with respondents from the third generation (28%) demonstrating the highest rate of participation in these programs. In

addition, higher percentages of VISTA members reported that their children participated in one or more non-military programs, such as the Peace Corps (8% of VISTA members compared to 3% of the comparison), Teach for America (4% of VISTA members compared to 1% of the comparison), and AmeriCorps (17% of VISTA members compared to 13% of the comparison).

In addition to volunteer participation and behavior, respondents were also asked about the type and frequency of *conversations about service* that respondents have with their children. These questions were designed to more accurately assess the types of interactions respondents have with their children in regards to civic engagement. The results showed that close to nine out of ten respondents (with children over five years old) discuss politics with their children at least occasionally (87%).

Respondents were also asked about their *views on children's service and community involvement*. Questions were asked to learn about the values respondents hope to instill in their children. Overall, more than half of all respondents felt that it was very important for their children to be actively involved in their community. Although similar percentages of VISTA members (57%) and their counterparts in the comparison group (56%) report that their children's involvement in their community was very important, higher percentages of those in the comparison group (8%) felt that their children's community involvement was not important at all (compared to 4% of VISTA members).

Respondents also were asked to select (from a list) the most important lesson for a child to learn to prepare him or her for later life. For the most part, VISTA members and their counterparts in the comparison group tended to agree that the most important lesson for a child to learn to prepare for life is "to think for him/herself" (63% of VISTA members compared to 66% of the comparison). In addition, about one-fifth of respondents considered "to help others when they need it" as the most important lesson a child should learn to prepare for life. Only small percentages of respondents selected "to obey" or "to work hard" as the most important lessons to learn. Moreover, close to half of all respondents ranked "to help others when they need it" as the *second* most important lesson for a child to learn to prepare him/her for life (46% of VISTA members compared to 48% of the comparison). No differences in response patterns were observed among VISTA members versus respondents in the comparison group.

For one VISTA respondent interviewed for this study, a critical effect of the program turned out to be related to how she raised her own children. She describes taking her children on volunteer projects with her and the influence she thinks this experience had on them. Even though she tried to steer her children away from helping careers, they followed her to a great extent into service aimed at helping people:

*My daughter has gone with me, you know to do community stuff, give something back. Those kind of things are important and if I can look back and see wow. When my daughters went to school I always encouraged them, "Don't go into social service. Don't be a social worker!" My oldest one ... has her degree in ... psychology or something dealing with testing and job satisfaction, that kind of stuff. My middle one got her degree in political science and criminal justice. She didn't even know that mine was in political science and communications. And then my youngest daughter has decided for today that she is going to go into education.*

First Generation VISTA Member  
(1965-1972)

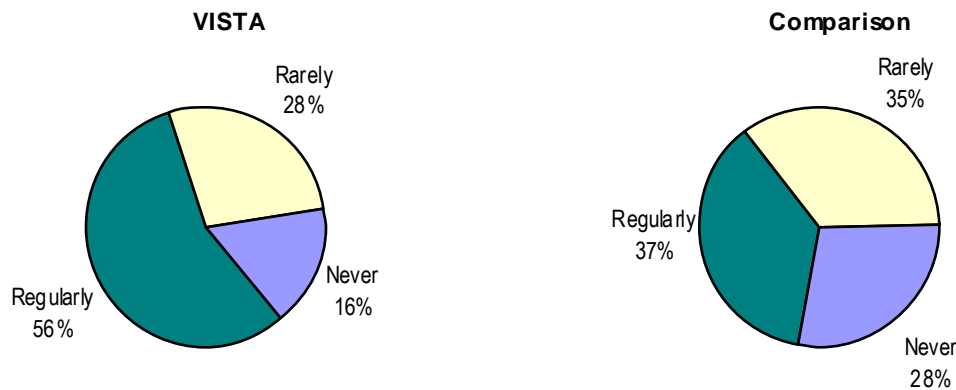
### *Differences across Generations*

The difference in the percentages of VISTA members and those in the comparison group who reported that their children accompanied them on volunteer activities *regularly* was especially prominent among those who served in the third generation, where more than half of the VISTA members (56%) reported that their children regularly accompanied them on volunteer activities compared to only a third of the comparison group. Moreover, the third generation VISTA members were much less likely than those in the third generation comparison group to report that they have never had their children accompany them on volunteer activities (16% of VISTA members in contrast to 28% of the comparison).

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**Exhibit 4.20**

#### **Children of Third Generation Respondents Accompany Them on Volunteer Activities**



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Also, the difference observed between VISTA members and those in the comparison group in the rates of volunteer participation by their children was most apparent in the third generation, where twice the percentage of comparison respondents as VISTA members reported a lack of volunteer participation by their children (16% and 32%, respectively).

There were some differences in the percentage of those reporting that their children accompanied them when voting. Among first generation respondents, no difference was observed between VISTA members and their counterparts in the comparison group (62% of VISTA members and 61% of the comparison group); however, considerable differences were observed in the responses given by those who served in the second and third generations. In the second generation close to half of the respondents in the comparison group (45%) reported that their children never accompanied them to vote compared to only a third of the VISTA members (33%). This difference narrowed somewhat in the third generation, yet the distinction remained with a higher percentage of the comparison group (53% versus 44% of VISTA members) reporting that their children never accompanied them when voting.

As noted above, more than half of all respondents felt that it was very important for their children to be actively involved in their community. Again, this difference was especially prevalent among those who served in the third generation, where more than twice the percentage of respondents in the

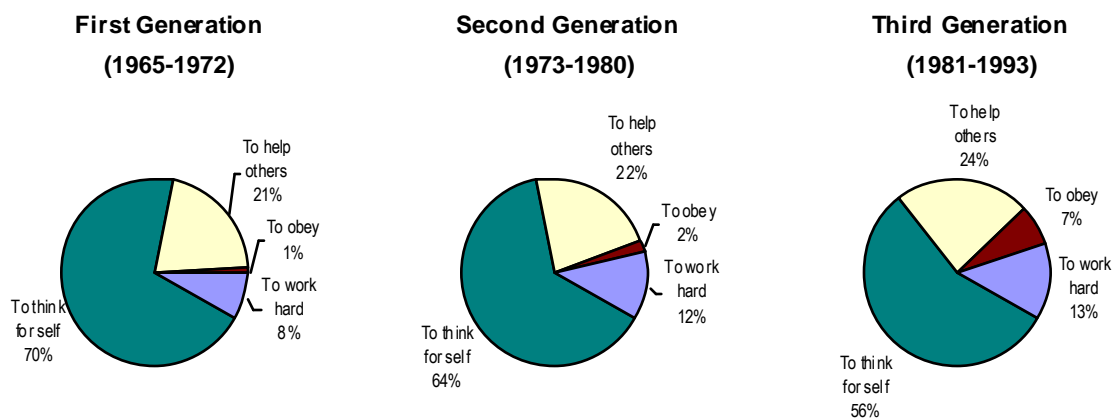
comparison group (10%) said that their children’s involvement in their community was not important (compared to 4% of VISTA members).

When respondents were asked to identify the most important lesson for a child to learn to prepare him or her for later life, “to think for him/herself” was the most popular response among all generations. However, those from the first generation were most likely (70%) to cite this lesson as important for their children and those from the third generation were least likely (56%) to cite it. Other responses were equally popular across generations, including “to help others when they need it,” “to obey,” or “to work hard.”

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**Exhibit 4.21**

**Most Important Lesson for a Child to Learn (All Respondents)**




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**Subgroup Effects**

The overall effects presented in the sections above were similar across VISTA member subgroups, except where noted. In addition to the analysis conducted by generation and demographic subgroups, as described throughout this chapter, a broader analysis was conducted to explore whether the effect of VISTA service differs across other, more meaningful subgroups. This analysis looked at the following subgroups:

- Motives for joining VISTA: Those joining for altruistic reasons versus for self-enrichment (i.e., employment and education benefits);
- Types of Placement: VISTA members who served locally or were placed in communities far from home;
- Age at service: Those who served at a younger age (21 and younger) compared to those who served over the age of 21;

Analysis was conducted on the major outcomes of interest, including civic engagement, education, employment, and intergenerational transfer of values. The subgroup analysis yielded no major differences. These results may indicate that the effects of VISTA participation are not concentrated in particular subgroups, but are experienced by members of all types.

## Chapter 5: Conclusions

The central purpose of this study was to explore the life decisions and outcomes achieved by VISTA participants by comparing their life experiences to those of a similar group of individuals to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the effects of VISTA on its members? and (2) How have the behaviors and attitudes of VISTA members changed over time? Outcomes of interest included civic engagement, educational choices and opportunities, career and employment choices, and the intergenerational transfer of values.

### Summary and Conclusions by Outcome Area

#### Civic Engagement

In the examination of effects on civic engagement, we found several positive results on items, such as voting behavior and community leadership. However, on other measures, including connection to community, personal effectiveness of community service, and volunteer participation, little or no difference was found between those who served in VISTA and those in the comparison group.

Chief among the findings on civic engagement were the effects of VISTA on the voting participation of minority participants. African-American and Hispanic VISTA members were more likely to vote in presidential elections, more likely to vote in state or local elections and more likely to vote in an election more than 10 years after departing VISTA compared with the voting histories of African-Americans and Hispanics in the comparison group.

#### Education

The majority of VISTA members and their counterparts in the comparison group came to VISTA with strong educational credentials. This was particularly pronounced in the second generation where nearly six out of ten had attained a Bachelor's Degree at the time of enrollment. Despite the strong educational platform, the majority of the first and second generations have enrolled in at least one degree-awarding program since VISTA. Overall, the pursuit of post-VISTA education was slightly stronger among those in the comparison group, in part because they had an additional year of available time while their counterparts were in VISTA.

While the overall pursuit of post-VISTA education was strong across the board, the varying dynamics across the three generations were also noteworthy. Respondents in the first generation reported the highest level of degree-awarding educational pursuits, in part because they had the longest time available. The active recruitment of more highly educated enrollees in the second generation appeared to generate additional educational momentum, particularly among VISTA members. Specifically, VISTA members were considerably more inclined to pursue a Master's Degree than their counterparts in the comparison group despite the fact that fewer had Bachelor's Degrees when they enrolled. This suggests that the VISTA experience itself in the second generation continued to motivate members.

VISTA members from the first and second generations were also more successful in attaining the degrees they pursued than their counterparts. This suggests that the perseverance that kept them in the VISTA program initially may have subsequently influenced their post-program educational pursuits.

## **Employment**

The overall pattern that appears to emerge is largely one of employment and career stability characterized by extended employment duration and limited number of job changes. A solid majority of all respondents were employed at the follow-up survey. Nonetheless, it appears that VISTA members across all three generations were consistently more likely to be employed than their counterparts in the comparison group. The strong levels of employment in the first and second generations are particularly noteworthy since many have reached or are close to a traditional retirement age. Despite their younger age profile, rates of employment are lower in the third generation. This reflects this generation's gender composition, which heavily favors women who are less likely to participate in the labor force. Both VISTA members and their counterparts report low incidence of unemployment.

Despite the differential in current employment rates, both VISTA members and the comparison group have exhibited consistent patterns of labor market and career choices. This is most in evidence in their choice of full- or part-time work and sectoral preferences (public, private, nonprofit employment), as well as their actual fields of employment, which emphasize the teaching profession. While their general labor market and employment trends have been largely consistent, VISTA members have generated a stronger current income profile than their counterparts in the comparison group. This is particularly prevalent in the second generation where VISTA members appear to have an edge in income relative to the comparison group. This may reflect a combination of their educational foundation and motivation as well as the value of the VISTA experience itself.

All three generations exhibited rather stable patterns of employment. On average respondents changed jobs fewer than three times. While there was considerable migration across major sectors of the economy (when change did occur), respondents for the most part maintained their focus on a constrained set of occupational choices that emphasized teaching, social and community work, and health-related occupations.

## **Intergenerational Transfer of Values**

Finally, the results demonstrate evidence for the intergenerational transfer of values from members to their children. Because VISTA members and those in the comparison group reported similar levels of involvement in volunteering activities as youth, and because the level of civic engagement of the parents of both groups of respondents also appear to be similar, it is reasonable to conclude that the VISTA members and their counterparts in the comparison group had similar levels of exposure to volunteering previous to joining the VISTA program. Only small differences were observed between generations, with VISTA members and the comparison group within each generation demonstrating similar levels of early volunteer involvement and parental participation. Even though little difference was found in the level of volunteering among the parents of respondents, VISTA members appear to have made a greater effort to introduce and encourage their children to volunteer compared to those in the comparison group. In addition, of those who reported that their children were serving in program similar to VISTA, either the Peace Corps or a domestic service program such as Teach For America



or AmeriCorps, a large majority of the respondents were VISTA members. VISTA members also were less likely to report little or no interest in the community involvement of their children. Respondents who served in the third generation were more likely to report that their children served in one or more of these functions than those in the first and second generations.

## **Conclusions on Outcomes of VISTA**

This study yields select positive findings on the outcomes of the VISTA program based on self-reports from former VISTA members who served over a three-decade span of the program's existence. In both the telephone survey and in-person interviews, VISTA members reported positive, life-changing experiences while serving in VISTA, and many individuals were able to connect their life choices to their VISTA service. Importantly, large majorities of VISTA members felt challenged by their VISTA service, believed that they made a contribution, and felt like part of a community. Moreover, three-quarters of VISTA members reported that their VISTA experience made them re-examine their beliefs and attitudes about themselves. When asked to describe the effect that VISTA had on them, many respondents felt that VISTA either changed them in important ways or helped reinforce their values and beliefs. Additional VISTA members said that their service experience fundamentally transformed them. Importantly, a large majority of VISTA members said that they would join the program again. Response patterns were similarly positive across the three generations of VISTA members.

Interestingly, African-American and Hispanic respondents were much more likely than whites to report that their VISTA experience has strongly influenced the amount or kind of volunteering they have performed since leaving VISTA. In addition, women were also more likely than men to say that their VISTA experience has strongly influenced the amount or kind of volunteering they have performed since leaving VISTA.

Based on these findings and some encouraging results in each of the four major outcome areas, there is select evidence that the VISTA program has long-term, life-changing effects on its members. Furthermore, some findings were especially pronounced among certain minority groups and respondents who served in the third generation, the most recent generation in the study and the group experiencing the VISTA program design closest to the current program. However, we recognize the need for a study of the current VISTA program in order to draw conclusions about the program's effects on recent VISTA members.

# VISTA Timeline

The timeline below reflects events in the United States during the span of VISTA's 40 year history. Along side these events are snapshots of program policy at certain points in the VISTA Program.

VISTA Organization	Program Features/Policies		Social/Political	Presidents
				President Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-1969)
The VISTA Program is formed in 1965 under the Office of Economic Opportunity	VISTA provided funding through grants to national and local sponsoring agencies  Membership recruitment takes place on a national scale with extended residential training lasting 5-6 weeks	1965	War on Poverty and Great Society Programs  Escalation of Vietnam War Assassination of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King	Election of President Richard M. Nixon (1969-1974)
	VISTA members' placement focuses on local and county government as well as non-profit agencies  Restrictions established on national grants and involvement in voter registration and union organizing  Transfer of VISTA to newly formed ACTION agency emphasizing volunteerism	1970	Resignation of President Nixon	Election of President Gerald Ford (1974-1977)
	VISTA focuses on recruiting volunteers with professional backgrounds  Resumption of national grants  VISTA utilizes a balance of national and local member recruitment and placement efforts	1975	End of Vietnam War  Energy "crisis" and return of American hostages held in Iran	Election of President Jimmy Carter (1977-1981)
	Significant funding cuts resulting in reduced preservice training  VISTA utilizes membership recruitment and placement exclusively at the community level  VISTA service emphasizes adult education and literacy	1980	Introduction of IBM PC	Election of President Ronald Reagan (1981-1989)
	Increase in VISTA volunteer training to 3 days plus some "in-service" activities during first month	1985	Iran-Contra Affair NASA Challenger disaster  Economic "crash" of 1987  Fall of Berlin Wall	Election of President George H. W. Bush (1989-1993)
VISTA becomes part of the new AmeriCorps program and is housed under a new federal agency, the Corporation for National and Community Service		1990		Election of President William Clinton (1993-2001)



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