

Civic and Political Engagement Among Young Adults in Ireland

DATE

14th November 2023

AUTHOR

James Laurence
Emer Smyth



Introduction: what is civic and political engagement?

- How people get involved in the world around them and try to change it
- **Civic engagement:** young people volunteering their time to help others through organisations
 - For example, coaching sports teams, fundraising, working with charities and social organisations
- **Political engagement:** young people undertaking activities in which they 'express opinions on the world and how it is governed, and try to shape the decisions that affect their lives'
 - For example, signing a petition, taking part in a demonstration, working with political or environmental groups, voting

Introduction: the importance of civic and political engagement (1)

- **Volunteering benefits communities and society**
 - E.g., providing help and support for people, filling important gaps in resources, and contributing to community development (Putnam, 2000; Hodgkinson, 2003)
 - Recent estimates put the value of volunteering to the Irish economy at over €5 billion per annum (Volunteer Ireland, 2022)
- **Volunteering can also benefit volunteers**
 - E.g., improving health, mental wellbeing, expanding social networks, job opportunities (Aminzadeh et al., 2013; Borgonovi, 2008; Laurence, 2021)
- **Political engagement is critical for a healthy democracy** (Larcinese et al., 2013).

Introduction: the importance of civic and political engagement (2)

- Engagement is a critical part of the vision for young people to feel ‘connected, respected, and contributing to their world’ (Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, 2019)
- Engagement as a means of empowering youth in rural areas
 - Engagement of young people in community and civic life also identified as important for the sustainability of rural communities in long-term (*Our Rural Future*, 2021)
 - Opportunities for young people to make ‘meaningful contributions’ to community to support remaining in, or returning to, rural areas
- However, rural youth may face different obstacles to engagement than urban youth
 - E.g., lack of access to facilities and transport for young people living in rural areas (*Our Rural Future*, 2021)

Introduction: aims of report

- Little systematic research in Ireland on patterns and drivers of civic and political engagement among young people, or dynamics across urban/rural areas
- AIMS:
 1. Do civic and political engagement vary between rural and urban areas?
 2. What factors in young people's lives are related to civic and political engagement? Do the factors associated with engagement differ between rural and urban settings?
 3. How is civic and political engagement related to young adults' life outcomes, including their wellbeing (life satisfaction and depressive symptoms), the extent to which they consider themselves an adult and their sense of trust in others?

Data and Methods: Data

- Growing Up in Ireland, 1998 Cohort
 - A representative sample of children born in Ireland in 1997-98 (and their families)
 - 1 in every 7 of the nine-year-olds resident in the country were present in the survey
- We use four waves of data from this study – following young people from:
 - **9-years-old** (2007-08); **13-years-old** (2011-12); **17-/18-years-old** (2015-16); **20-years-old** (2018-19)
- Contains detailed information on young people's lives, such as family background, social lives, schooling/education, and neighbourhoods, from childhood to early adulthood
 - Key advantage: look at the role of drivers over their lives

Data and Methods: Measuring engagement

- Civic engagement (Volunteering) (age 17 and 20):
 - Whether a young person has done ‘any volunteer activities through or for an organisation’ in past 6 months:
 - **Sports** volunteering
 - **Non-sports** volunteering
- Political engagement (age 20):
 - No. of political activities involved in over past 12 months
 - **Low** intensity e.g., signed a petition, boycotted products
 - **High** intensity e.g., demonstrations, worked for political party
 - Registered to vote
 - How interested they are in politics

Data and Methods: Identifying urban/rural youth

- Definition of urban/rural areas:
 - Rural: settlements of <5,000 people
 - Urban: settlements of >5,000 people
- Measured when young person was *aged 9*
- Engagement at AGE 20 among young people *who grew up in urban or rural areas*

Predictors of engagement

AGE 9 and AGE 13

FAMILY BACKGROUND e.g.,
mother's education, housing

SOCIAL CAPITAL e.g.,
number of friends, religiosity

LOCAL AREA e.g.,
youth facilities, public transport,

EDUCATION e.g.,
enjoys school, school activities

EXTRA CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES
e.g., sports, dance/drama, cubs

AGE 17/18 and AGE 20

FAMILY BACKGROUND e.g.,
health/disability, housing, income

SOCIAL CAPITAL e.g.,
ethnic/gender diversity of friends

LOCAL AREA e.g.,
disorder, social infrastructure

EDUCATION e.g.,
Higher education, Transition Year

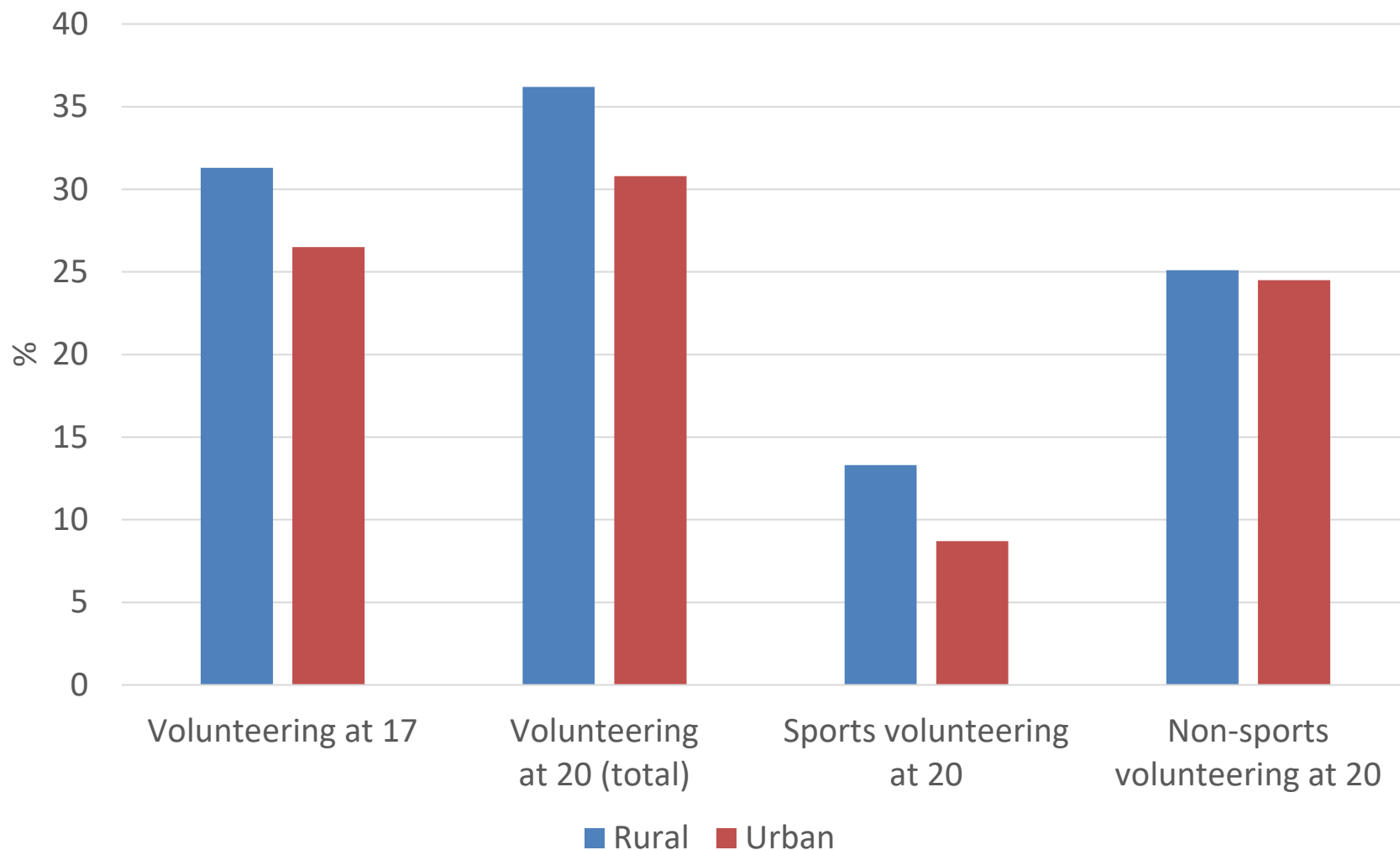
EXTRA CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES
e.g., sports, dance/drama, guides

LIFE SITUATION e.g.,
financial strain, lives at home

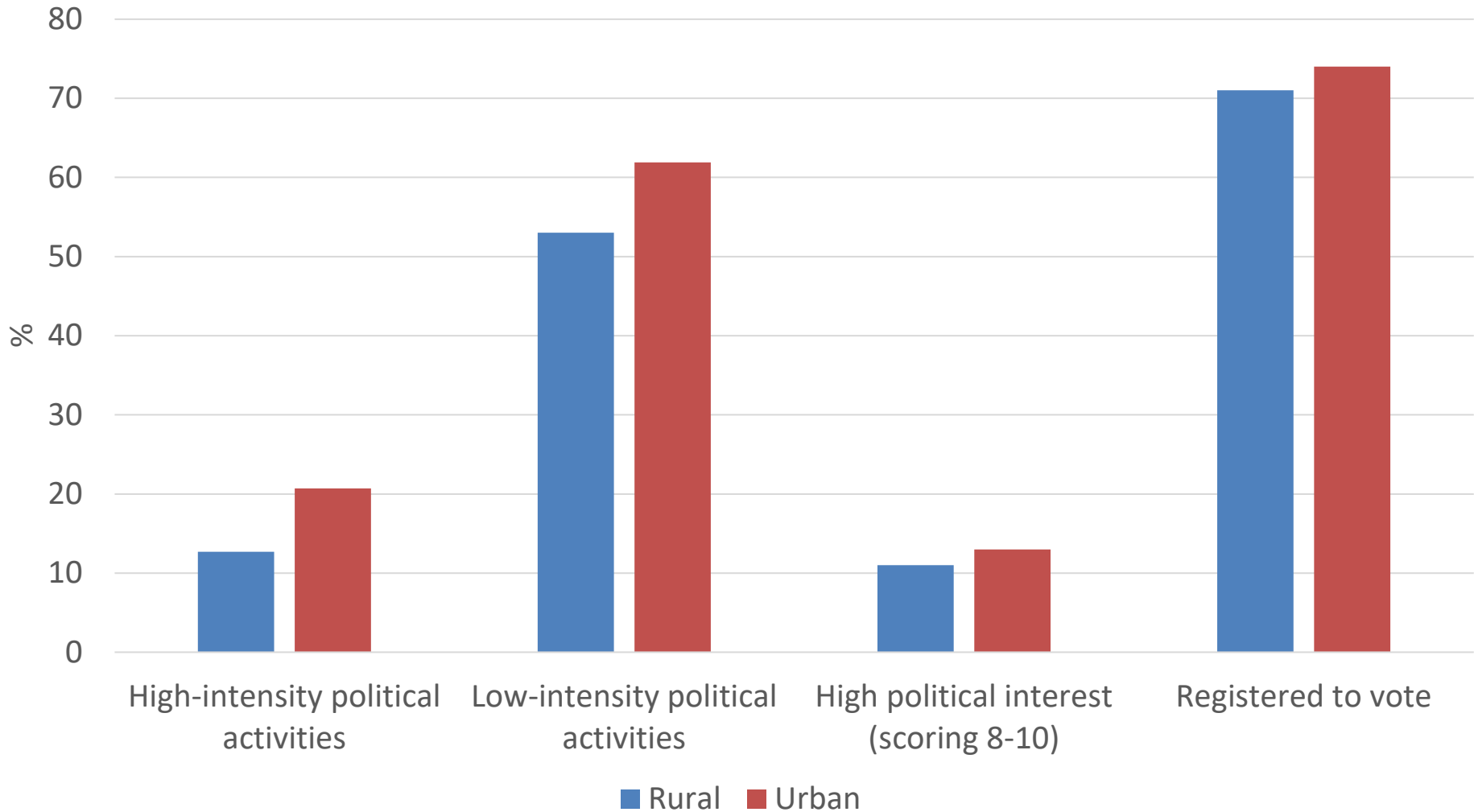
RESULTS:

Engagement among rural and urban youth

Volunteering across urban-rural areas at age 17 and age 20



Political participation across urban-rural areas at age 20



RESULTS:

Predictors of **civic** and **political** engagement

Predictors: **civic engagement** at age 20 (1)

- Family socio-economic background
 - ↑ mother's education = ↑ **all** volunteering
 - Private/social renting = ↓ volunteering
- Gender
 - Young women = ↑ **non-sports** volunteering (e.g., for social/charitable organisations)
 - Young men = ↑ **sports** volunteering (as in organised sports more generally)
 - Urban young women particularly low **sports** volunteering
- Poorer health/disability = ↓ **sports** volunteering

Predictors: **civic engagement** at age 20 (2)

- **Social networks**
 - Larger, more gender/ethnically diverse friendship group in youth = ↑ volunteering (esp. **non-sports**)
 - Higher with integration of family and peer networks
 - ↑ religious attendance = ↑ **all** volunteering
- **Local Area**
 - ↑ access to facilities (e.g., youth clubs, swimming, and sports clubs), ↑ access to public transport, ↑ nei. safety = more **sports** volunteering in adulthood
 - Facilities and transport = more **non-sports** volunteering among urban youth

- Education

- Transition Year = ↑ **all** volunteering
- Enjoying school and getting on well there and school ↑ importance on sports/arts extracurricular = ↑ **non-sports** volunteering
- ↑ LCERT points = ↑ **all** volunteering
 - Esp. in urban areas
- Higher education track = ↑ **all** volunteering

Predictors: **political engagement** at age 20 (1)

- Family socio-economic background
 - ↑ mother's education = ↑ **all** forms of political engagement
 - ↑ HH income = ↑ **registered to vote**; ↑ **political interest**
 - However, some indicators of *disadvantage* = ↑ **political activities**; ↑ **political interest**
 - Neighbourhood disorder and absence of local youth facilities; feel accommodation costs limit opportunities; difficulties repaying loans (urban areas); disability status
- Gender
 - Young women = ↑ **political activities**; ↑ **registered to vote**; ↓ **political interest**
 - Campaign to repeal the Constitutional ban on abortion around the survey (2018/19)

Predictors: **political engagement** at age 20 (2)

- **Social networks**
 - Larger, more gender/ethnically diverse friendship group in youth = **↑ political engagement** (esp. in urban areas)
 - **↑ religious attendance = ↓ political activities; ↓ political interest; ↑ registered to vote**
- **Education**
 - Transition Year = **↑ political activities**
 - Enjoying school and getting on well there = **↑ political activities; ↑ political interest**
 - Attending school **↑ importance on sports/arts extracurricular = ↑ political activities**
 - **↑ JCERT and LCERT points = ↑ all political engagement**
 - Higher education track = **↑ all political engagement**

Extracurricular activities in youth and **civic** and **political** participation in adulthood

- Involvement in clubs in childhood/adolescence predicts more volunteering and political activities at age 20
 - Even taking account of family background, peers, neighbourhood and school factors
- Type of *ex. curr.* activities matters for type of engagement
 - Non-sport, e.g., cultural (e.g., drama, music) or organised groups (e.g. Scouts, Guides) = more **non-sports volunteering** and more **political activities**
 - Sports = more **sports volunteering** but fewer **political activities** (esp. in rural areas)
- *Ex. curr.* activities can partly explain link between other factors and participation
 - E.g. Transition Year, religious attendance, gender, disability, migrant youth

Explaining urban/rural differences

- Volunteering
 - Higher **sports** volunteering in rural areas *partly* explained by different characteristics between urban/rural youth
 - However, sig. difference remains; GAA?
 - No urban/rural difference in **non-sports** volunteering
- Political engagement
 - Less involvement in **political activities** in rural areas *partly* explained by different characteristics between urban/rural youth
 - However, sig. difference remains; lower political efficacy of rural youth, even after controlling for everything else

RESULTS:

Civic and political engagement and
young people's **life outcomes**

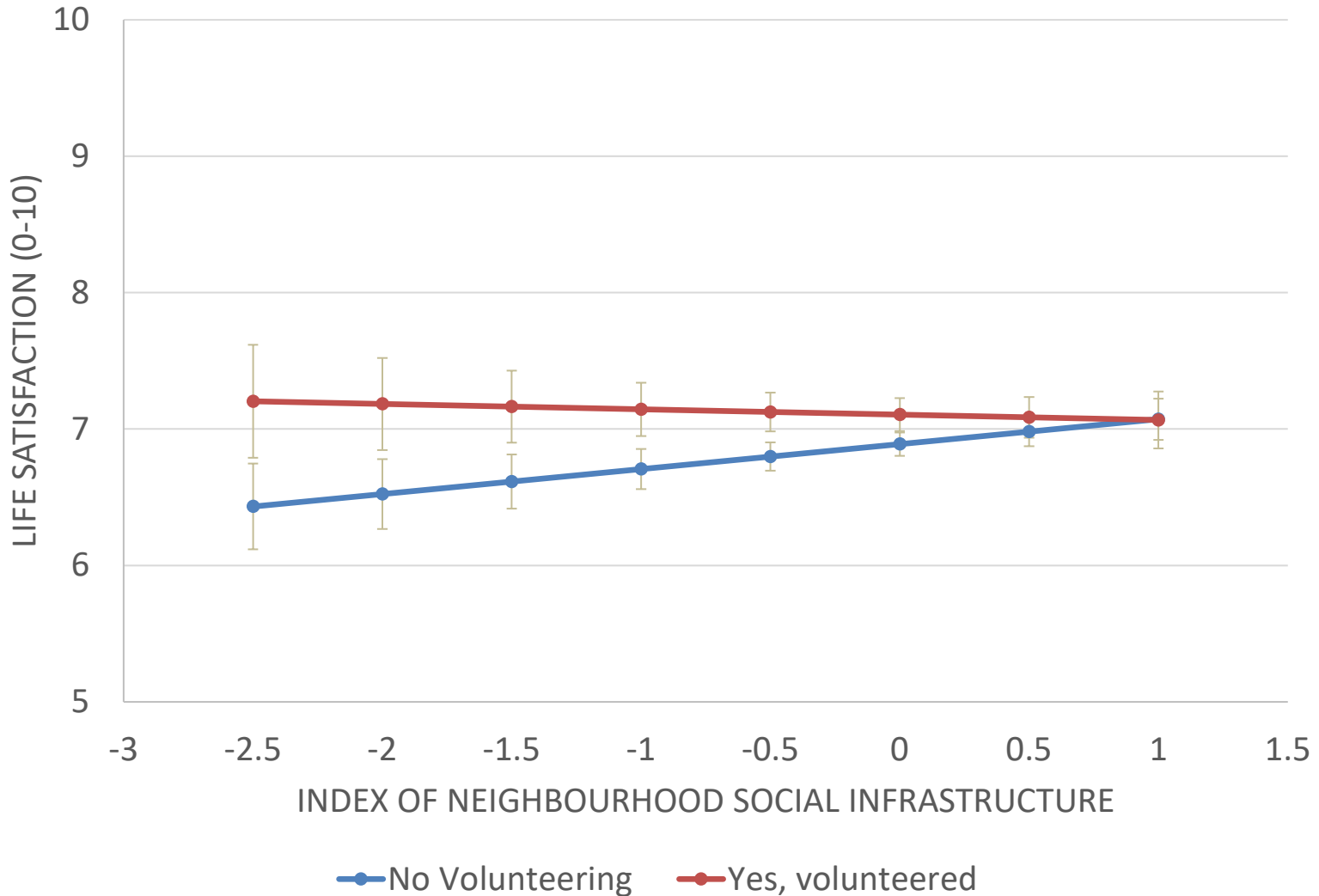
Volunteering and life outcomes at AGE 20

Outcome	Volunteering
Life satisfaction	Positive
Lower depression	No association
Adult identity	Positive
Became an adult faster	Positive
Trust in other people	No association

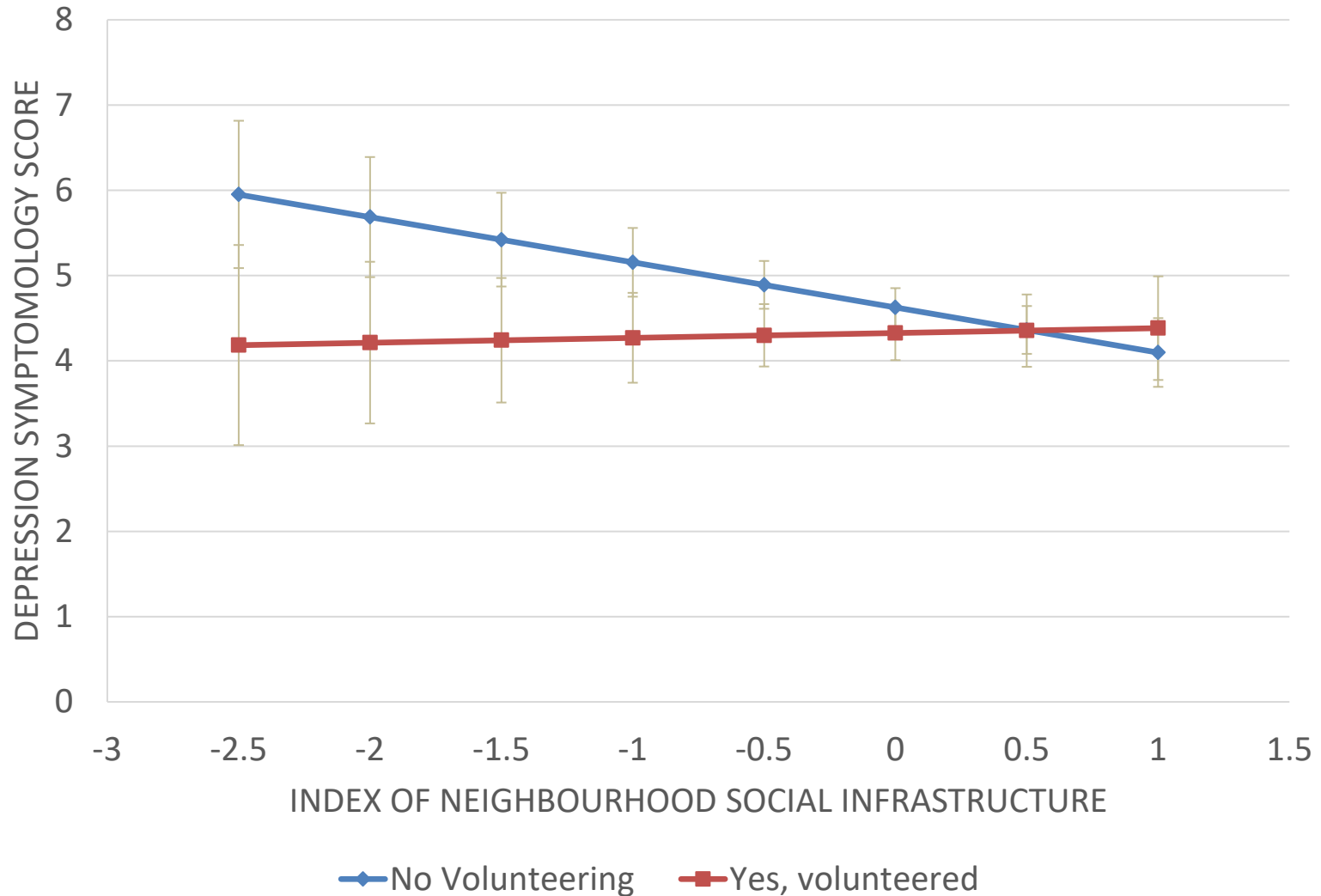
Volunteering, neighbourhood social infrastructure, life outcomes

- Neighbourhood social infrastructure:
 - Friends and family in the area; leisure, and sports facilities suitable for young adults in area; and places to meet up with other people in area
- Weaker social infrastructure linked to lower life satisfaction, more depressive symptoms, less trust in people, and being less likely to feel like an adult
- Volunteering can protect young adults from living in areas with weaker social infrastructure

Volunteering, neighbourhood social infrastructure, life satisfaction



Volunteering, neighbourhood social infrastructure, depression



Political engagement and life outcomes at AGE 20

Outcome	Political activities	Interest in politics
Life satisfaction	No association	No association
Lower depression	Negative	No association
Adult identity	No association	No association
Grew up faster	Positive	Positive
Trust in other people	No association	Positive

DISCUSSION

Key Messages (1)

- Some urban-rural gaps in participation
 - Cannot be entirely explained entirely by different social worlds of urban/rural youth
- Strong social gradient in participation
 - Esp. higher participation with ↑ mother's education
- Educational experiences across youth play a key role in participating in adulthood
 - Enjoying school, culture of extra-curricular involvement, Transition Year, academic achievement, higher/further education track

Key Messages (2)

- Access to local youth facilities and public transport linked to engagement
 - Esp. social infrastructure (e.g., places to meet, leisure/sports facilities) – impt. for participation *and* life outcomes
- Extracurricular involvement in youth strongly linked with participation in adulthood
 - Can help explain other inequalities in engagement
 - Type of activities linked with type of engagement
- Volunteering is linked with positive life outcomes
 - May also protect young adults living in neighbourhoods with weaker social infrastructure
 - Political engagement/life outcomes more complicated

Implications for Policy

- Education domain
 - Bolstering of Civic, Social and Political Education at senior cycle; especially valuable in engaging more disadvantaged groups of young people
 - Further take-up of Transition Year (esp. among disadvantaged students)
 - Broader efforts to promote school engagement and achievement will have a positive spillover effects on young adults' engagement
- Provide access to a range of extracurricular activities at a young age
 - Given activities often require payment, subsidies to disadvantaged families and resources for smaller schools to help grow involvement in a range of extracurricular activities
- Improving the provision of local youth facilities (such as youth clubs and sports/leisure facilities) and regular, affordable public transport, could further foster opportunities to engage
 - Strengthening neighbourhood social infrastructure would pay dividends for both civic engagement and young people's life outcomes.
 - Community development initiatives involve young people at every stage

THANK-YOU FOR LISTENING

ADDITIONAL SLIDES

Political participation across the urban-rural spectrum

