

Voluntourism: The Economic Benefit and Societal Costs of Short-Term Mission Trips.

S. Eric Anderson, Ricky Kim, Kelly Larios

La Sierra University, USA

sericanderson40@gmail.com, rkim@lasierra.edu, klar656@lasierra.edu

Abstract

The study examined 60 short-term mission trips to 31 different countries, ranging from 1 – 30 days by 720 volunteers. The total number of days for the 60 trips was 551 and the number of days in service was 362, which was about 66% of the time. Thirty-eight of the 60 trips were medical related and 22 of them were non-medical related. About 82% of the funds raised were for travel costs and about 18% went to the recipient community. Research suggests that money spent on voluntourism may not provide economic benefit for the recipient community, but it seems to be providing economic benefit to the individual evident by the fact that the voluntourism is a thriving industry. One must not be overly critical of how the spends were spent without also considering what the volunteer would have done with the money if they did not go on the trip. A cash contribution would often provide more economic benefit to the recipient community than a visit, but it is unlikely that a cash contribution to the community would have ever been made without a visit.

Keywords – Voluntourism, economic benefit, short-term mission trips, recipient community and medical mission trips.

Introduction

Kahn (2014) reported that volunteer tourism (voluntourism) is one of the fastest growing trends in travel and that volunteer tourists (voluntourists) are spending about \$2 billion each year. In 2009, Fanning (2009) conservatively estimating that between 1 and 4 million people worldwide served as short-term missionaries each year, while Popham (2015) just six years later placed the number at 10 million, with travel expenses totaling \$2 billion, which was about the same amount reported by Kahn (2014). As short-term mission trips grow in popularity so does the scrutiny. Are short-term mission trips a waste of time and money? Are individuals simply ignoring, rationalizing or failing to recognize the real economic benefit of short-term mission trips? There has been much criticism for mixing volunteering with tourism as critics describe them as being self-aggrandizing vacations disguised as self-sacrifice. While short-term mission trips often provide volunteers with many life-changing experiences (Brown, 2008), the opposite may be true for communities visited.

According to Staton (2015) there have been many articles written about the ineffectiveness of short-term mission trips to developing nations. These types of trips often exploit the people and communities they pretend to help. Worse, these short-term self-fulfillment trips can do more harm than good. Many have the best intentions, but lack the required skills to be effective.

Guttentag (2009) expressed concerns over neglecting recipient interests, hindrance of work progress, poor work quality, disrupting recipient economies, reinforcing stereotypes, poverty rationalizing and the impact on local cultures. With the questionable efficacy of short-term mission

trips combined with the \$2 billion spent annually, it's important to ask the question of who really benefits. Is it the volunteers or the community served?

Literature Review

According to Probasco (2013) the goals and activities of short-term mission trips typically include evangelism, cultural immersion, education, social justice advocacy or some kind of service project in an impoverished community. For many, short-term mission trips provide exciting experiences in exotic locales that broaden one's horizons and provide opportunities to put their faith into action.

Jesionka (2017) wrote that there is a lot of discussion currently taking place on the effectiveness of voluntourism that includes writers from industry, academia, travel, and from volunteers themselves. From "The White Tourist's Burden" to "Lions, Zebras and African Children," these writings express concerns of inexperienced volunteers from privileged environments going abroad for their own egos and end up doing more harm than good for the recipient community. Mohamub (2013) wrote "As the gap between rich and poor widens, so too it seems does the need for those of the global north to assuage the guilt of their privilege".

Wesby (2015) wrote that "the altruism of voluntourism may be a warped form of narcissism, citing hashtags such as "#instagrammingafrica" as evidence that the volunteer aspect of these trips are being commercialized and glamorized while failing to create any change in a person's worldview". Zakaria (2014) wrote that, "As admirably altruistic as it sounds, the problem with voluntourism is its singular focus on the volunteer's quest for experience, as opposed to the recipient community's actual needs". Staton (2015) expressed concerns about narcissistic westerners asserting their perceived superiority by "rescuing" a developing nation. When people visit only the worst part of a country, they don't experience much beyond its helpless stereotype.

One of the biggest incentives for the volunteers to raise money is the prospect of travel and for many much of the appeal in travel is the opportunity to showcase their trip journey on social media. This practice is problematic because it often reinforces inaccurate stereotypes on the recipient community. Gharib (2017) discusses the ethical issues of putting suffering individuals on display and depicting them in a helpless light. Posting images of sick and starving individuals on Facebook or Instagram results in those from the west seeing the photos and assuming that all peoples of that region are similarly helpless and dependent on foreign intervention for progress. This is often a disservice to the region, as it will give them an undeveloped, unfavorable image.

Van Engen (2000) stated that short-term mission trips are a phenomenon within Christian culture in North America. However, despite the good intentions that motivate individuals to participate in short-term missions, volunteers are spending significant sums of money investing within self-fulfillment trips rather than the recipient community.

According to Biddle (2016), the amount of money raised for a person's trip rarely includes personal fees, which can be the equivalent of the money needed to go on the trip. Another concern Biddle (2016) identified is that many of the organizations involved in voluntourism are often travel giants such as Carousel that are not specialized in development and may not be concerned with local welfare, preferring margin to mission.

Kahn (2014) noted that many individuals are making a living off voluntourism. Initially a travel business that taught Spanish, *Máximo Nivel*, has now expanded throughout Latin America, offering classes and tourism. Although not necessarily bad for the local economy, Western-owned groups may appeal more to voluntourists, giving them a competitive advantage over the voluntourism businesses owned by local citizens.

Kushner (2016) described a scenario where even experts got it wrong. “Critics of the Red Cross’s post-earthquake work in Haiti argue that the half a billion dollars the organization raised for disaster relief was largely misspent. Multimillion-dollar projects undertaken by the U.S. government ultimately failed to help Haiti export its mangos or complete a new building for Haiti’s Parliament on time. If smart, dedicated professionals fail to achieve lasting progress over a period of years, how then is an untrained vacationer supposed to do so in a matter of days?”

According to Freidus (2017) most volunteers bring few relevant skills and are not committed to the long-term. As a result, volunteers mostly take part in service projects like basic construction, painting, tutoring, distributing food or just being a friend. The volunteer’s ability to change systems, alleviate poverty or provide support for vulnerable children is limited and they often inadvertently perpetuate patronizing and unhelpful ideas about the recipient community.

Staton (2015) suggested that the tens of thousands of dollars that a group spends on travel to an orphanage could have covered the orphanage’s food costs for a long time. Staton also wrote that “If six people go on this two week trip, that’s more than enough money to pay for a local doctor’s annual salary. If one truly cared about helping a community or a cause, then they could re-purpose the money that would have been spent on a tour of the area and instead invest it directly into the community itself”. However, it should be recognized that recipient communities relying on donations are less likely become self-sustainable and experience economic growth.

Birrell (2010) wrote that “In Cambodia, as in other parts of the globe, orphanages are a booming business trading on guilt. Some are even said to be kept deliberately squalid. Westerners take pity on the children and end up creating a grotesque market that capitalizes on their concerns. This is the dark side of our desire to help the developing world.” There are also reports of human traffickers setting up orphanages who take in non-orphans for profit.

Oppenheim (2016) quoting JK Rowling wrote “Voluntourism is one of the drivers of family break up in very poor countries. It incentivizes orphanages’ that are run as businesses.” According to collected data, 90% of the eight million children in institutions worldwide are not orphans and have families at home, which want to care for them, but can’t because they are pushed into institutions because of poverty and discrimination on the basis of disability or ethnicity (Oppenheim, 2016). ”

Kushner (2016) found that volunteering as caregivers for children has become so popular that some orphanages are now operating more like a business than a charity. Orphanages have been known to subject children to poor conditions in order to get naive volunteers to donate or raise even more money. Many orphans actually have living parents who could probably do a better job of raising their children than the orphanage. Wesby (2015) wrote that a more suitable long-term solution would be to provide parents with the resources and knowledge to care for their children, or

investing in a more permanent educational infrastructure, rather than focusing solely on short-term necessities.

Staton (2015) wrote that “People on such short trips usually don’t stick around long enough to realize how ineffective they are being. Worse, they can even be harmful to children who struggle with abandonment issues. This should not be understated; have you ever considered the negative impact it routinely has on kids after they bond with someone for a week and then that person disappears from their life? If your justification for going on these trips is “seeing the smiles on the kids’ faces”, then you’re part of the problem.”

Van Engen (2000) told the story of eighteen students raising \$25,000 to fly to Honduras for spring break. They painted an orphanage, cleaned the playground, and played with the children. Everyone had a great time, and the children loved the extra attention. One student commented: “My trip to Honduras was such a blessing! It was amazing the way the staff cared for those children. I really grew as a Christian there”. The Honduran orphanage’s yearly budget was \$45,000 and that covered the staff’s salaries, building maintenance, food and clothes for the children. One staff member there confided, “The amount that group raised for their week here is more than half our working budget. We could have done so much with that money”.

Staton (2015) identified at least two problems with a group of American teenagers traveling to a lesser developed region to construct a school. First of most of them have never constructed anything and secondly, they are taking jobs away from local construction workers who need the work. Biddle (2014) described an experience in which a group of highly educated private boarding school students were so bad at the most basic construction that each night the local men had to take down the structurally unsound bricks each night and rebuild the structure before the volunteers woke up in the morning so they wouldn’t be unaware of their failure. Kushner (2016) said that missionaries making concrete blocks in Port-au-Prince knew nothing about how to construct a building. The missionaries spent thousands of dollars to travel there to do a job that Haitian bricklayers could have done faster and for far less money. Imagine how many classrooms might have been built if the missionaries had just stayed home and donated the money they spent on travel. Kushner (2016) also pointed out that Haitian masons could have found employment with a decent wage for a several days.

Staton (2015) wrote that “Medical mission trips are more respectable than other types of voluntourist trips. Vaccinating a few hundred people in Haiti for Cholera is a wonderful thing. It has a lasting positive effect on society. Training local medical staff and bringing medical supplies to a clinic is also valuable. Providing relief to an overburdened, under-resourced clinic is great”. However, Wesby (2015) reported that “voluntourism in the medical field brought local communities more harm than good”. She described a situation in Ghana where the locals had become reliant on foreign volunteers bringing medication and offering free medical care that they were no longer interested in purchasing health insurance. The free care had a negative impact on the local health insurance and healthcare providers. This resulted in the community becoming even more dependent upon foreigners to maintain their health and increased community susceptibility to disease during the times that healthcare was not available.

Methodology and Results

The survey data was collected by conducting in-person interviews, phone conversations, and email correspondence with 60 individuals who have either organized or participated in short-term mission trips. There were a total 720 volunteers that traveled to 31 different countries on trips that ranged from 1 to 30 days. The total number days for all 60 trips were 551 and the volunteers were in service for 362 days or about 66% of the time. Thirty-eight of the 60 trips were medical related and 19 of the trips were non-medical related. The total travel costs of the mission trips amounted to \$1,349,500 and the total amount raised for the charity was \$303,990. About 82% of the money raised or spent for the mission trips covered travel costs and around 18% of the total money raised went to the local charity (see Appendix).

Listed below are a few of the more insightful observations that were shared by the volunteers during their interview for this study.

- 1) A lady in Lesotho couldn't understand why a group of kids whom they had never met would raise thousands of dollars and then travel half way around the world to help us. It just didn't make sense to her, but she was appreciative of the support provided.
- 2) A medical doctor in Malawi said that many local doctors resented medical students doing their rotations at his hospital. The doctor said it would have been more helpful if these medical students, who think they know it all, had just stayed home and sent money.
- 3) A volunteer expressed frustration after several boxes of medical supplies disappeared at customs in the Nairobi airport. It really made her mad that someone in customs would steal supplies that were going to help their own people.
- 4) A volunteer after raising thousands of dollars to purchase \$25 mosquito nets became frustrated after she heard that the mosquito nets sold by the non-profit costs \$4 piece.
- 5) A volunteer surprised at how many showed up for an HIV/AIDS conference in Swaziland asked a conference attendee why she thought so many attended the conference. The attendee said that "Free food is the reason so many attended the conference. The conference topic wasn't really all that important".
- 6) A hospital administrator in Guyana told a volunteer that the donated used equipment wasn't as helpful as they had hoped. The equipment often broke down and the maintenance guy who flew in from Trinidad to repair made more than the local doctors.
- 7) A volunteer felt sick after he was told that he smuggled in \$20,000 of dental equipment and supplies into Zimbabwe. The trip sponsor told the so-called smuggler that they didn't tell him the value of what he smuggled or the legality of it all, because they didn't want him to be nervous going through customs at Harare.
- 8) A medical volunteer said that she was shocked to see a Roma Gypsy kid used to living outside pee in the corner of the clinic exam room in Albania like it was normal behavior.

- 9) A volunteer couldn't believe that some of the kids in Cambodia would spend the entire day in trash dump looking for things to sell and earning a dollar a day if they were lucky.
- 10) A volunteer said that the recipient community of aid in a Caribbean country showed zero appreciation for the donations received.
- 11) A volunteer said that their tour group brought lots of disposable food and toiletry items, but there wasn't a place to dispose of it and felt bad leaving so much trash behind.
- 12) A volunteer in Cambodia said that the only clothes many of the kids had were the ones that they were wearing. After she returned to the US, the volunteer attended a baby shower where a baby received 80 new outfits, which made her sick to her stomach.
- 13) A volunteer said that the locals selected for a leadership in a Caribbean country had this great sense of entitlement and doubted that they would ever be effective leaders.

Conclusion

The amount of money spent on voluntourism may not provide value, but people are free to spend their money however they like. It has been pointed out that if these trips weren't providing value then the voluntourism industry would not be a thriving industry. One must not be overly critical without also considering what the volunteer would have done with the money if they had not gone on the trip. It may be true that a cash contribution often provides more value to the local community than a visit, but it is unlikely that a cash contribution to the local community would have ever been made.

It's said that "numbers don't lie", and while it may be off-putting to think about voluntourism, an enterprise primarily motivated by a heartfelt desire to create value and make a difference, from the cold and calculating perspective of a cost-benefit analysis—the numbers do, in fact, tell a different story that demand a reexamination of the perceived efficacy of voluntourism.

Indeed, the goal of this research isn't to deter individuals from engaging or supporting voluntourism per se. Rather, it's to implore voluntourists to start a serious conversation about how to responsibly allocate their financial resources to gain the highest possible return for themselves and the communities that they aim to serve.

But how should such a conversation start? By examining the very ingredient that motivates voluntourism in the first place—human empathy. When individuals imagine themselves into the lives of other people, they are better able to understand and fulfill their needs.

By constructing voluntourist experiences with the end-user in mind, organizers will be better able to access workforce talent to meet demands, develop sustainable solutions, and make critical decisions about the value that they will be able to provide. Ultimately, the merit of a voluntourist venture should be judged by the following question, "will 80% of funds raised go towards the communities served"? Or "will 80% of funds raised go towards traveling costs"?

References

- Biddle, P., (2017) The Economics of Volunteer Travel, Go Overseas, October 20.
<https://www.gooverseas.com/industry-trends/voluntourist-dilemma/the-economics-of-voluntourism>
- Biddle, P., (2014) The Problem With Little White Girls, Boys and Voluntourism, Huffington Post, February. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/pippa-biddle/little-white-girls-voluntourism_b_4834574.html
- Birrell, I., (2010) Before You Pay to Volunteer Abroad, Think of the Harm you Might Do, The Guardian, November.
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/nov/14/orphans-cambodia-aids-holidays-madonna>
- Coghlan, A. & Noakes, S., (2012) Towards an Understanding of the Drivers of Commercialization in the Volunteer Tourism Sector, *Tourism Recreation Research* 37(2), 123–131.
- Brown, S., (2005) Travelling with a Purpose: Understanding the Motives and Benefits of Volunteer Vacationers, *Current Issues in Tourism*, 8(6), 479-496.
- Fanning, D., (2009) Short Term Missions: A Trend that is growing exponentially, Trends and Issues in Missions.
- Freidus, A., (2017) Help Not Always Needed: The Problem with Volunteer Tourism for NGOs is it doesn't do much good, Quartz Africa <https://qz.com/1124920/voluntourism-ngo-volunteers-turned-tourists-are-a-problem-in-africa/>
- Gharib, M., (2017) Volunteering Abroad? Read This Before You Post That Selfie, November 26. <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2017/11/26/565694874/volunteering-abroad-read-this-before-you-post-that-selfie>.
- Guttentag, D., (2009) The Possible Negative Impacts of Volunteer Tourism, *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 11(6), 537-551.
- Hartman, E., Morris, C. P., and Blache-Cohen, B., (2014) Fair Trade Learning: Ethical Standards for Community-Engaged International Volunteer Tourism, *Tourism and Hospitality Research* 14(1-2), 108–116.
- Jesionka, N., (2017) The Reality of Voluntourism and the Conversations We're Not Having, The Muse. <https://www.themuse.com/advice/the-reality-of-voluntourism-and-the-conversations-were-not-having>

- Kahn, C., (2014) As 'Voluntourism' Explodes In Popularity, Who's It Helping Most? July 31.
<http://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2014/07/31/336600290/as-volunteerism-explodes-in-popularity-whos-it-helping-most>.
- Kascak, L., (2014). #InstagrammingAfrica: The Narcissism of Global Voluntourism, June 19.
<https://psmag.com/economics/instagrammingafrica-narcissism-global-voluntourism-83838>
- Kushner, J., (2016) The Voluntourists Dilemma. The New York Times Magazine, March 22.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/22/magazine/the-voluntourists-dilemma.html>
- Mohamub, O., (2013) Beware the 'voluntourists' doing good, Guardian, February 13.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/13/beware-voluntourists-doing-good>
- Oppenheim, M., (2016) JK Rowling Condemns Voluntourism and Highlights dangers of volunteering in orphanages overseas, Independent, August 23.
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/jk-rowling-twitter-voluntourism-volunteering-in-orphanages-risks-a7204801.html>
- Popham, G., (2015) Boom in 'voluntourism' sparks concerns over whether the industry is doing good, June 29. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-travel-volunteers-charities/boom-in-voluntourism-sparks-concerns-over-whether-the-industry-is-doing-good-idUSKCN0P91AX20150629>
- Probasco, L., (2013) Giving Time, Not Money: Long-term Impacts of Short-term Mission Trips. *Missiology*, 41(2), 202-224.
- Staton, M. L., (2015) 7 Reasons Why Your Two Week Trip To Haiti Doesn't Matter: Calling Bull on "Service Trips" and Voluntourism, The Almost Doctors Channel, December.
<http://almost.thedoctorschannel.com/14323-2/>
- Van Engen, J., (2000) Short Term Missions: Are they worth the cost? The Other Side, January/February.
- Wesby, M., (2015) The help and harm of the \$173 billion voluntourism industry. *Wilson Quarterly*, July 23.
- Wesby, M., (2015) The exploitative Selfishness of Volunteering Abroad, Newsweek, August 18.
<http://www.newsweek.com/exploitative-selfishness-volunteering-abroad-363768>
- Zakaria, R., (2014) The White Tourist's Burden: Growing Western Demand for Altruistic Vacations is feeding the White Savior Industrial Complex, Al Jazeera America, April.

Appendix

Country Visited	Purpose of Trip	Length of Trip	Days of Service	Number of Volunteers	Cost Per Person	Total Travel Costs for Trip	Money Raised for Charity
Albania	Medical	14	08	08	\$1,000	\$008,000	\$00,000
Belize	Non-Medical	09	05	06	\$1,200	\$007,200	\$03,000
Cambodia	Medical	14	10	22	\$1,800	\$039,600	\$03,640
Cameroon	Medical	05	02	04	\$2,400	\$009,600	\$07,500
Chile	Non-Medical	08	05	06	\$3,300	\$019,800	\$01,100
China	Medical	14	10	05	\$3,000	\$015,000	\$02,000
Colombia	Non-Medical	14	10	20	\$1,600	\$032,000	\$00,000
Costa Rica	Non-Medical	08	05	10	\$2,800	\$028,000	\$12,500
D. Republic	Non-Medical	10	07	21	\$0,800	\$016,800	\$00,000
El Salvador	Non-Medical	09	05	05	\$1,800	\$009,000	\$03,200
Guadeloupe	Medical	09	06	07	\$2,300	\$016,100	\$07,000
Guatemala	Non-Medical	07	04	06	\$2,200	\$013,200	\$06,500
Guatemala	Medical	05	03	07	\$1,300	\$009,100	\$07,000
Guyana	Medical	15	12	20	\$1,200	\$024,000	\$00,000
Guyana	Medical	07	05	08	\$2,500	\$020,000	\$00,000
Haiti	Medical	09	08	20	\$1,900	\$038,000	\$00,000
Haiti	Medical	07	05	15	\$1,800	\$027,000	\$00,000
Haiti	Medical	07	04	08	\$2,500	\$020,000	\$00,000
Haiti	Medical	09	07	07	\$0,500	\$003,500	\$00,000
Honduras	Medical	10	10	15	\$0,600	\$009,000	\$15,000
Honduras	Medical	10	06	11	\$1,800	\$019,800	\$08,500
Honduras	Medical	07	05	08	\$2,500	\$020,000	\$00,000
India	Medical	10	10	12	\$2,100	\$025,200	\$02,300
Lesotho	Non-Medical	10	03	14	\$3,500	\$049,000	\$05,000
Malawi	Non-Medical	10	02	02	\$3,000	\$006,000	\$10,000
Mexico	Medical	02	01	20	\$1,000	\$020,000	\$01,000
Mexico	Non-Medical	07	07	10	\$0,300	\$003,000	\$03,000
Mexico	Medical	01	01	13	\$0,000	\$000,000	\$00,300
Mexico	Medical	01	01	10	\$0,300	\$003,000	\$01,000
Mexico	Medical	05	03	05	\$1,200	\$006,000	\$02,500
Mexico	Medical	05	03	05	\$1,200	\$006,000	\$01,800
Mexico	Medical	05	03	05	\$1,200	\$006,000	\$01,500
Mexico	Medical	05	03	12	\$1,500	\$018,000	\$03,300
Mexico	Non-Medical	08	04	09	\$1,700	\$015,300	\$02,100
Mexico	Medical	01	01	18	\$0,300	\$005,400	\$00,800
Mexico	Medical	05	03	07	\$2,000	\$014,000	\$08,000
Mexico	Medical	05	03	05	\$1,200	\$006,000	\$02,000
Mexico	Medical	05	03	05	\$1,200	\$006,000	\$01,250
Mexico	Medical	05	05	14	\$0,200	\$002,800	\$00,000
Nigeria	Non-Medical	04	01	08	\$2,500	\$020,000	\$05,000
Panama	Medical	07	03	09	\$1700	\$015,300	\$07,200
Panama	Medical	07	04	05	\$2,000	\$010,000	\$04,500
Peru	Non-Medical	08	04	09	\$3,100	\$027,900	\$13,500
Peru	Medical	10	05	30	\$2,000	\$060,000	\$00,000
Peru	Non-medical	12	12	30	\$2,000	\$060,000	\$03,000
Philippines	Medical	08	06	15	\$1,700	\$025,500	\$01,700
Philippines	Medical	30	25	30	\$2,500	\$075,000	\$00,700
Philippines	Medical	14	08	22	\$1,800	\$039,600	\$04,400
Puerto Rico	Non-Medical	09	06	06	\$3,000	\$018,000	\$05,500

Puerto Rico	Non-Medical	07	05	04	\$3,000	\$012,000	\$03,800
Puerto Rico	Non-Medical	07	05	06	\$3,000	\$018,000	\$04,800
Rwanda	Non-Medical	06	02	08	\$2,400	\$019,200	\$02,500
Swaziland	Medical	09	04	36	\$3,200	\$115,200	\$25,000
Thailand	Non-Medical	21	14	40	\$3,000	\$120,000	\$01,000
Thailand	Non-medical	14	12	21	\$2,200	\$046,200	\$00,500
Thailand	Non-Medical	10	04	04	\$2,500	\$010,000	\$05,000
Thailand	Medical	30	25	10	\$2,500	\$025,000	\$00,000
Trinidad	Medical	08	04	10	\$1,100	\$011,000	\$04,500
Zambia	Non-Medical	08	03	08	\$2,800	\$022,400	\$20,000
Zimbabwe	Non-Medical	10	02	02	\$3,000	\$006,000	\$20,000
	38 Medical	551	362	597		\$1,349,500	\$303,990