

Small Troop Considerations



Small troops – or troops with enough Scouts for only one full patrol – are a valuable part of the Scouting movement. A small troop is often the best or only option in rural or underserved communities, not to mention that most new troops start small.

Troops of all sizes can achieve Scouting's aims, even if they do not resemble the troops with multiple patrols that are described in much of the Scouts BSA literature. This guide highlights key points for leaders of small troops, including references to the Troop Leader Guide.

Recruiting and Membership

Some troops are small because they recruit from a smaller pool of potential Scouts, especially in rural areas. These troops might stay small, but they should do their best to grow, even if new recruits are rare – the smaller the unit, the more each new Scout helps!

Sometimes, recruiting can be easier if a small troop includes a small circle of friends or a group of Scouts of similar age. A strong nucleus of active Scouts can be enticing for other families who are interested in Scouting. Once that nucleus is established, siblings of existing Scouts could join the troop, especially in family troops that welcome youth regardless of gender.

Age Distribution: Pros and Cons

The age distribution of Scouts can be especially important in small troops. If all Scouts are similar in age, each meeting and outdoor activity can be tailored to their skill level. A small troop of younger Scouts, for example, could focus on rank advancement and more basic skills, while a troop of older Scouts could focus on high adventure – and could even go places that cannot accommodate larger groups. This tailored approach can improve Scouts' engagement and retention.

Of course, a narrow range of Scouts can have drawbacks. If all Scouts are older, leaders should pay especially close attention to recruiting to ensure the troop continues in the community. Also, adults in younger troops may need to guide Scouts when older, more experienced youth leaders are absent.

When a small troop has a mix of ages, older Scouts have more opportunities to teach and mentor younger Scouts, but they also want to interact with Scouts their own age. In these cases, keep an eye out for district or council events, or consider emphasizing participation in the Order of the Arrow or in other older-youth programs in other cities, even if they are farther away. Also, leaders of small troops with mixed ages should be intentional about allowing younger Scouts to lead older Scouts during some meetings and outings, and to ensure that activities are always age-appropriate.

The Patrol Method and Youth Leadership

Small troops can achieve the aims of Scouting using all of Scouting's methods, including the patrol method. In a single patrol, Scouts can still practice leadership in a youth-led troop. In some ways, leadership opportunities can be enhanced in small troops: more Scouts can serve in critical leadership positions during each election cycle and hold more positions over time.

Organization charts for small troops can be found in the syllabus for *Introduction to Leadership Skills for Troops* (ILST), the *Senior Patrol Leader Handbook*, and the *Patrol Leader Handbook*.

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Adult Leadership

Small troops need fewer adult leaders than large troops do, but they also have a smaller pool of families where they can find their adult leaders. As a result, small troops are more likely to struggle to maintain critical levels of adult support. A small troop with a Scoutmaster and two active assistant Scoutmasters, for example, may be just one illness away from failing to maintain barriers of abuse on an outing, or from ensuring that an IOLS-trained adult goes on every campout. Even though smaller troops need fewer leaders, they may need a higher ratio of leaders to youth, and the training of each leader becomes especially important.

Small troops may also choose to prioritize critical functions on their troop committee. Some best practices apply to troops of all sizes, such as having a dedicated treasurer with proper oversight. Other tasks, however, may be appropriate to share among active adults with multiple roles, including secretary, training coordinator, and equipment coordinator.

Other Resources

For a more detailed description of the intricacies of small troops, including benefits, challenges, leadership, and logistics, refer to:



Troop Leader Guide (Vol. 1), Chapter 3: Patrol Method, "The Patrol Method in Small Troops" (p.18)



Troop Leader Guide (Vol. 2), Chapter 22: Special Troop Situations, "Very Small Troops" (pp.137-138)

Remember: Small Scouts BSA troops play a vital role in Scouting, especially as Scouting grows and new troops form. Regardless of whether a small troop serves a rural area or is just getting started, there are many resources available to help it thrive and deliver a strong Scouting program.