

# The Top Search Criteria Used by People Looking for Short-Term Mission Opportunities

ShortTermMissions.com Search  
Summary Report, Spring 2007

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# The Top Search Criteria Used by People Looking for Short-term Mission Opportunities

## Introduction

Since launching ShortTermMissions.com in 2000, Mission Data International (M-DAT) has tracked searches made on the website for the purpose of understanding what search criteria people use to look for a short-term mission opportunity. We have chosen to release this report to the short-term missions community to bring new information to the table and help us all ask better questions.

The graphs in this report are based on roughly 80,000<sup>1</sup> “basic” searches<sup>2</sup> made on ShortTermMissions.com from January through April of 2007.

In order to understand the data contained in this report, it is important to first know who uses the website. Start by reading the section titled “Demographics of ShortTermMissions.com” on the next page. It would also be helpful to take a moment to visit [ShortTermMissions.com](http://ShortTermMissions.com) and try a few searches to familiarize yourself with the method through which the data was collected.

If you have questions or would like more information, please contact David Armstrong. Email: [research@mdat.org](mailto:research@mdat.org), Phone: 479-524-9110

New reports as well as corrections or updates to information contained in this report will be posted at <http://www.mdat.org/reports/>.



**Mission Data International**, an innovative mission mobilization organization, creates websites that help believers take their next step in missions. Our vision is that every believer desiring growth in mission involvement would obtain the practical assistance necessary to realize significant, life-long involvement in the Great Commission.



**ShortTermMissions.com** is a service of Mission Data International. Since 2000, the website has helped thousands of youth and adults take the step of serving on a short-term mission opportunity. It features current details of mission opportunities from nearly ninety sending organizations and sees nine thousand unique visitors each month.

**A special thanks** to all of our friends involved in the Fellowship of Short-Term Mission Leaders ([fstml.org](http://fstml.org)) and the Standards of Excellence in Short-Term Missions ([stmstandards.org](http://stmstandards.org)) for their encouragement over the years and consistently striving toward excellence in what they do. We genuinely appreciate you!

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<sup>1</sup> ShortTermMissions.com employs a variety of methods to filter out non-human search activity from search data; however, due to the complex and ever-changing nature of robot and spider activity it is impossible to achieve 100% accuracy. Our current methods filter out at least 95% of all non-human activity on the website.

<sup>2</sup> The analysis of the data in this report does not attempt to filter multiple searches made by the same person for the same or similar search criteria.

## Demographics of ShortTermMissions.com

ShortTermMissions.com's primary target audience is Americans who tend toward the Evangelical side of the Christian spectrum. The opportunities posted are primarily from US based, interdenominational sending organizations and have an evangelistic component to them.

A demographic survey of website visitors who viewed at least one short-term mission opportunity on ShortTermMissions.com from April 26 through May 30, 2007 revealed the following characteristics:

- 3/4 female and 1/4 male
- 14% high school aged (14-17), 24% college aged (18-21), 61% adults (22-65)
- 72% describe themselves as having a "high interest in missions"
- 80% want to go on a mission trip within the year
- 1/4 are considering long-term missions (i.e. serving on a short-term to explore whether or not becoming a career missionary is for them)
- 8% are youth leaders or youth pastors

While this was not a fully scientific survey, the results give an accurate picture of the website's users. The results were quite similar to a survey performed in 2005 with most of the same questions.

## Search Activity

ShortTermMissions.com has two kinds of search forms: “basic” and “advanced.” The data in this report is for basic searches. There were just over 80,000 basic searches made on ShortTermMissions.com from January through April of 2007. The graph below shows that this is the time frame when search activity is at its highest:

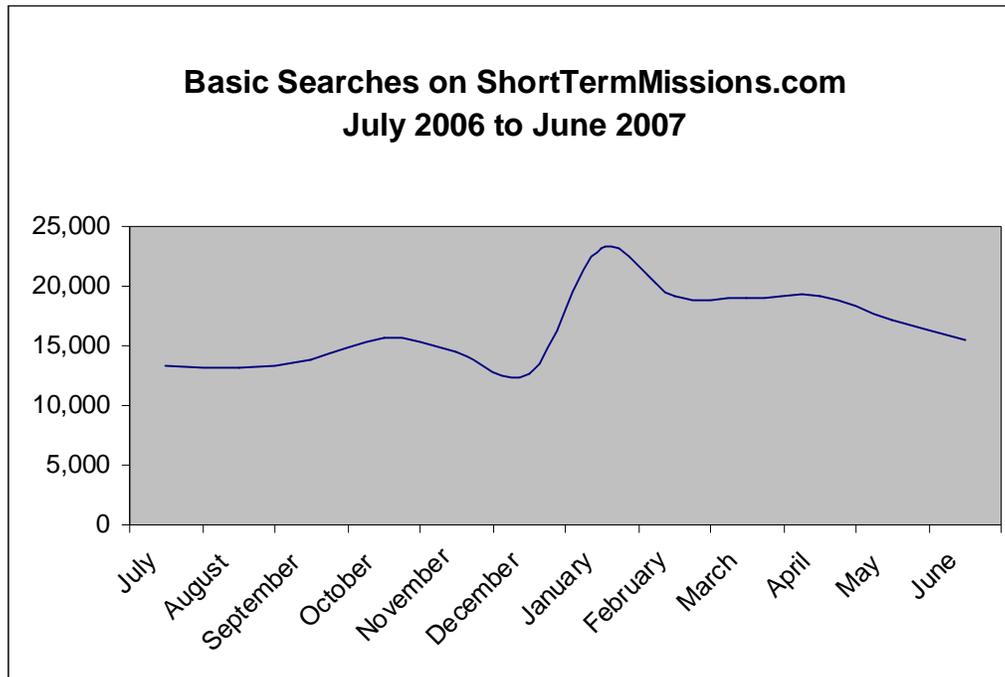


Figure 1

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*Note: Overall traffic to ShortTermMissions.com grows each year. No attempt has been made in the chart above to adjust search volume increases related to traffic growth.*

Over the last six years, the pattern of the line graph has remained pretty constant except for two points:

- 1) Search activity in November is normally higher than in October.
- 2) The shoulder moving to the right from the January peak has extended further to the right each year. It used to cover January through March. Now, it also covers April and is moving into May.

While November and January are peak months for searching, notice that there is significant search activity ALL year long. This means it is important for sending organizations to start making details about short-term mission opportunities for the following year available in July or August. We recommend to our listing organizations to post a skeleton description with exact date and cost “to be announced” and then fill out the rest of the information as it becomes available later in the year.

## Search Criteria Popularity

The basic search includes nine possible search criteria: participant type, age, ministry activity, region, country, length, start month, start year, and keyword. By default, all of these criteria are set to “any” or blank except participant type which is set to “individuals.” The average searcher selects three search criteria in addition to participant type (which all searches must include). Below is a graph showing how often each optional search criteria was used in the 80,000 basic searches:

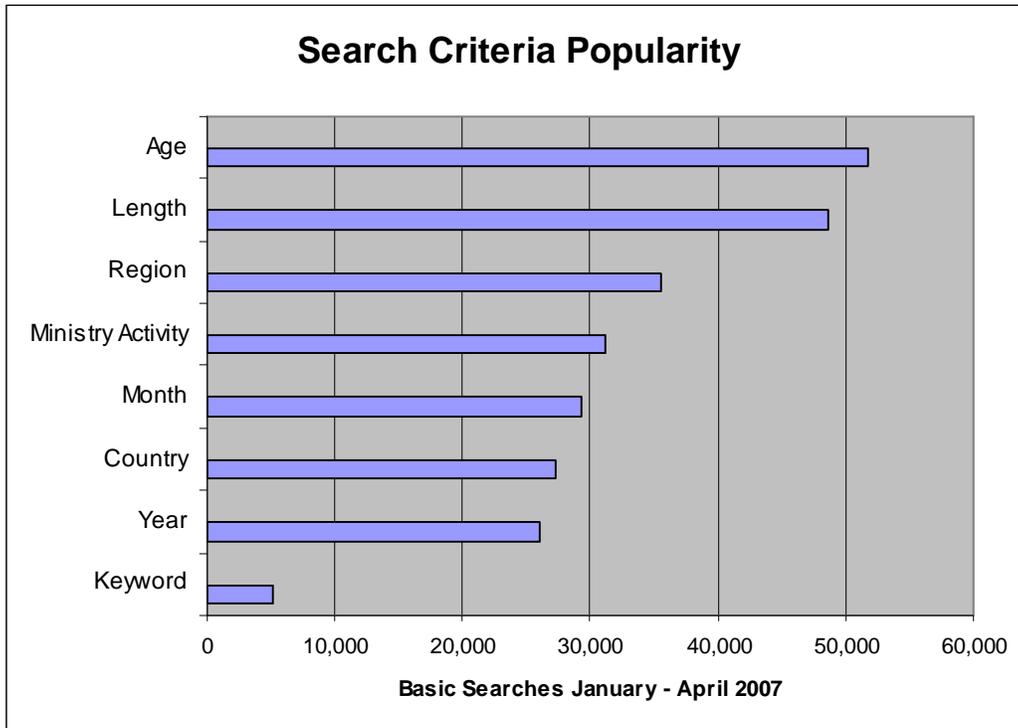


Figure 2

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A closer look at each of these search criteria is provided in the pages that follow with the exception of start month, start year, and region. Overlaps in the region selections makes gleaning useful information from this category difficult.

## The Most Searched for Countries

Searches specified a country criteria 34% of the time. Below is a graph of the sixteen most searched for countries:

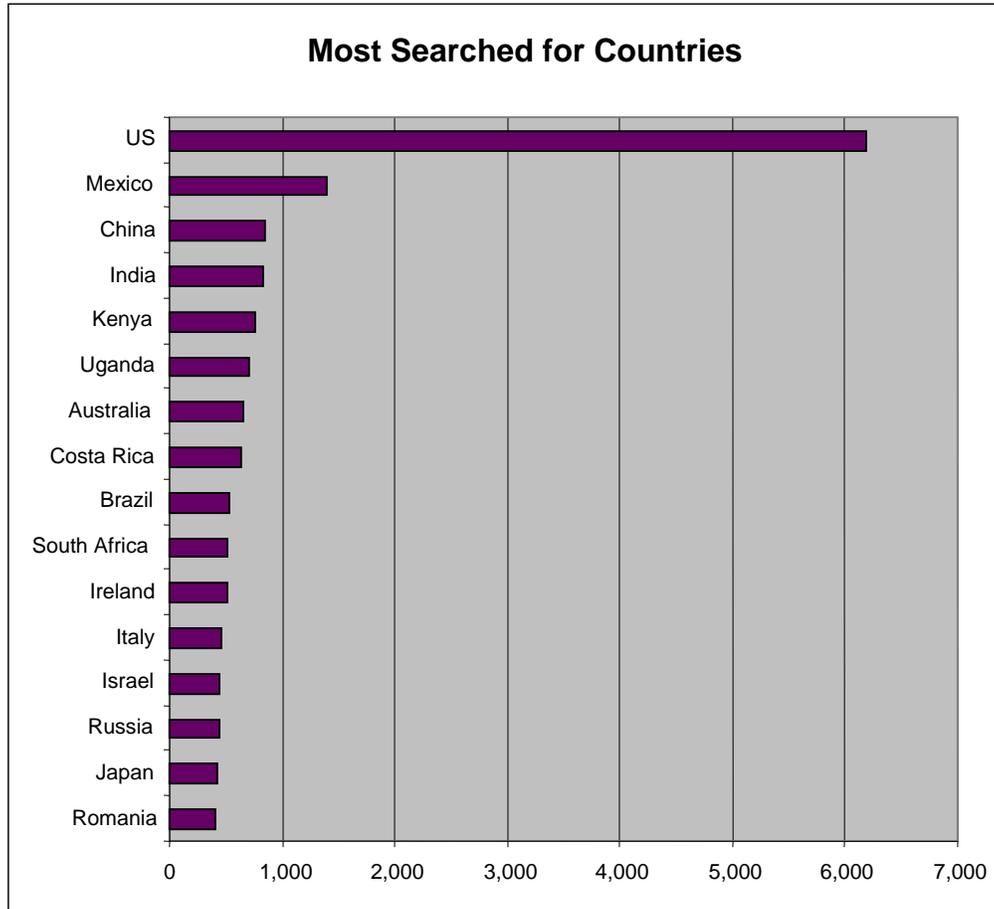


Figure 3

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The United States, Mexico, and China are consistently the top three searched for countries. Interest in other countries fluctuates. There is often an increase in interest for countries affected by natural disasters.

Uganda's ranking as the sixth most searched for country is a significant change. It has risen from not even registering in the top twenty-five countries in 2004. The increase in popularity for Uganda likely correlates with strong interest generated by the *Invisible Children* documentary (<http://www.invisiblechildren.com/home.php>).

Why is interest in the United States so much higher than the other countries? People specifying the United States tend to be looking for what may be better described as US outreach or community service opportunities. Popular usage of the terms "mission trip" and "short-term mission" has shifted to include these activities. This change in terminology underscores the need for research about short-term missions to distinguish data by length and type of opportunity.

## Ministry Activities

Searches specified a ministry activity 39% of the time. Below is a graph of how this breaks out:

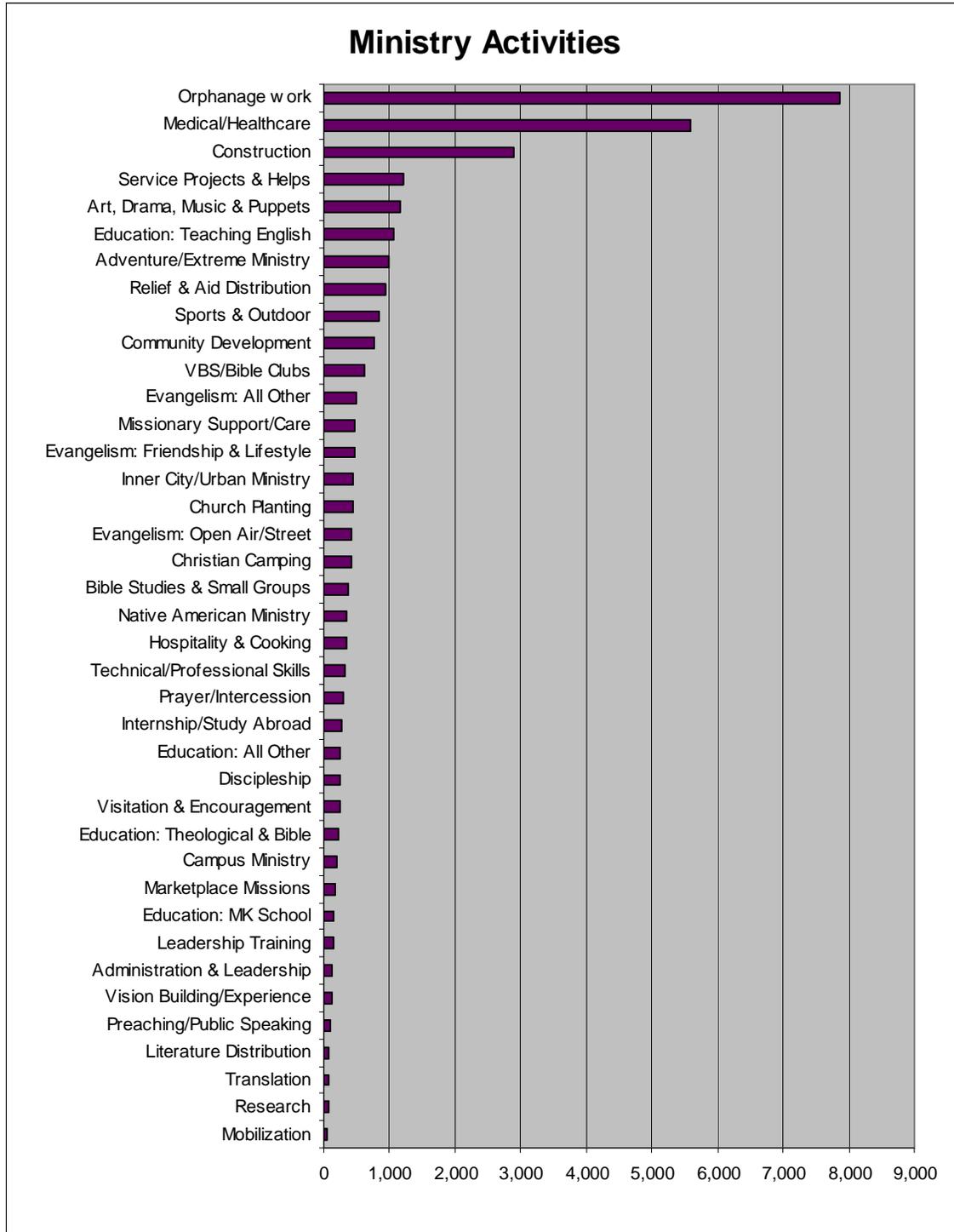


Figure 4

© 2007 Mission Data International

## Participant Type

By default, ALL searches specify a participant age group in the search criteria. Below is a graph of how this breaks out:

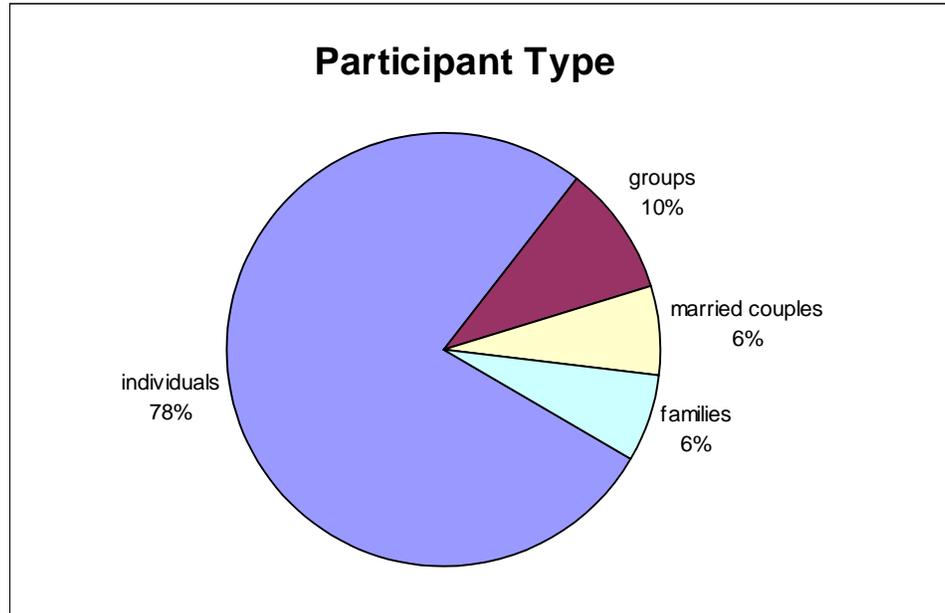


Figure 5

© 2007 Mission Data International

*Note: Due to an error in logging data in January 2007, this graph only includes data from searches made February through April 2007.*

Why the low representation of groups? One reason for this is that by default, participant type is set to "individuals." Another key reason is that for a group of ten, twenty or even one hundred people, only one person does the searching to find the opportunity. So, while just 10% of searches were done for group opportunities it likely represents more total people than those searching for opportunities for individuals. (It may be helpful to note here that in the end almost all mission trips are "group mission trips." The only difference is that some are already formed groups going together versus individuals being joined together into a group.)

## Participant Age Groups

Searches specified a participant age group 64% of the time. Below is a graph of how this breaks out:

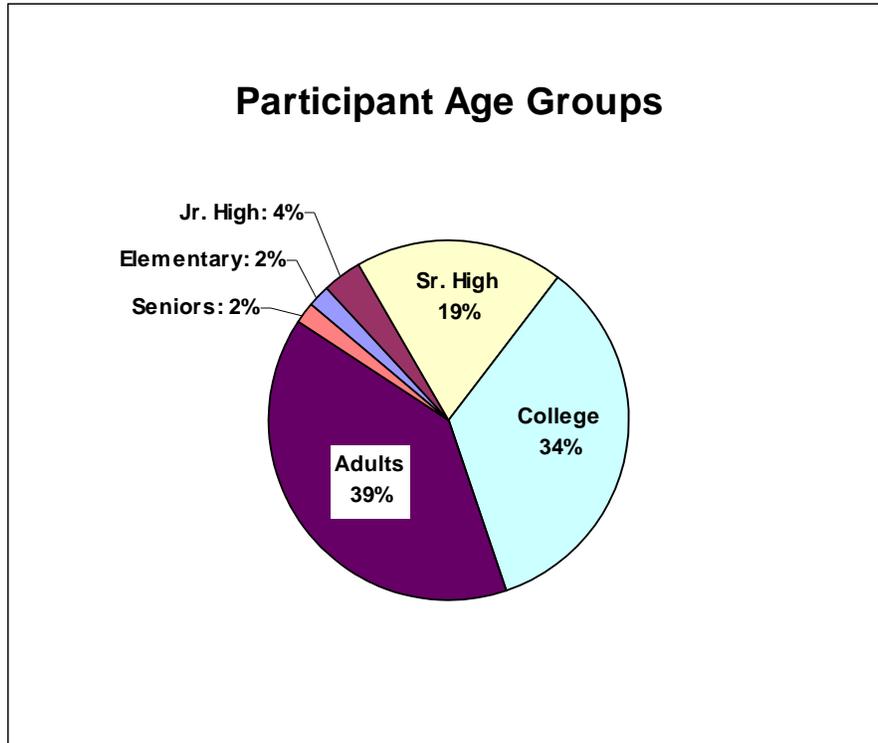


Figure 6

© 2007 Mission Data International

*Note: This graph shows the age requirement of the opportunity, not the age of the searcher. In other words, high school youth leaders would be looking for “senior high” even though they themselves would fall in the “adult” category. Individuals searching for an opportunity for themselves would search for their own age.*

Why the low representation of the junior high and senior high age group? One explanation for this is that a large percentage of junior high and senior high students going on mission trips go with their church youth group. In many cases these are *church coordinated mission trips* which are not represented on ShortTermMissions.com. For those going on *mission agency coordinated mission trips* only the youth pastor does the leg work of finding a short-term opportunity—one person searching, but ten to twenty junior high or senior high students going.

## Length of Short-Term Mission Trip

Searches specified a trip length 60% of the time. Below is a graph of how this breaks out:



Figure 7

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While almost two thirds of searches specifying a length of opportunity were for two weeks or under, this graph shows significant levels of interest in longer opportunities as well. 15% specified three to four weeks, 11% specified one to two months, and another 11% specified three months or longer (this 11% is equivalent to 5,300 searches during the time frame of this report).

The one to two week category is the length of short-term mission that most people think of when they hear the term “short-term mission.” Unfortunately, mission trips longer than this stereotype are mostly overlooked in articles and research about short-term missions. If it is to be helpful for assessing the long-term impact of short-term missions, research needs to break out data by length of opportunity.

## Common Keywords

Searches specified a keyword 7% of the time. Below is a chart showing the top twenty-five keywords typed in for each month:

Rank	January	February	March	April
1.	children	alaska	english teaching	children
2.	construction	orphanage	build	nursing
3.	ministry	children	alaska	africa
4.	alaska	nurse	orphanage	nurse
5.	spanish	construction	children	alaska
6.	mission trip	nursing	medical	dental
7.	orphanage	music	katrina	build
8.	nurse	aids	christian	orphanages
9.	spring break	medical	thailand	aids
10.	native american	youth	europa	medical
11.	new orleans	new orleans	summer	none
12.	build	build	building	orphan
13.	hawaii	catholic	catholic	construction
14.	medical	katrina	aids	basketball
15.	sports	babies	global outreach	baltimore
16.	mission	native american	photography	orphanage
17.	babies	california	new orleans	catholic
18.	dentistry	evangelism	nurse	pharmacist
19.	nursing	mexico	uganda	jamaica
20.	jamaica-evangelism	internship	mexico	new orleans
21.	teaching	christian	nurses	mission trips
22.	aids	special education	at risk youth	worship
23.	summer	deaf	florida	evangelism
24.	computer	los angeles	montana	medical doctor
25.	film	summer	construction	surfing

Figure 8

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## Questions Raised

In addition to providing insight, we hope this report will prompt questions that contribute to the dialogue about short-term missions. Below is a list of some of the questions the report prompted us to ask:

1. Do the figures in this report apply more broadly to the short-term mission movement than just providing a snapshot of the users searching on ShortTermMissions.com? In other words, how accurately does the traffic on ShortTermMissions.com reflect the whole of short-term mission activity? Does data of those searching differ from data of those going?
2. Do different search patterns emerge at different times of the year? If so, during which months do those looking for longer opportunities do most of their searching? Does the peak search time for adults differ from college students?
3. Why are US and Mexico trips so popular? Is it due to the low cost and no airfare expense? Are there other reasons? If it is due to cost and the ability to drive, are the majority of Mexico trips actually within one hundred miles of the US border?
4. How well do the opportunities being offered match with demand (what people are looking for)? Are there any obvious gaps?
5. How much should popularity of a location, ministry activity, or length of opportunity determine what opportunities are offered by mission agencies and US outreach organizations?
6. Should services like ShortTermMissions.com make efforts to encourage people to go to certain areas of the world over others or to be involved in certain activities? If so what should be encouraged?
7. Seeing these reports left us wanting to see some cross data analysis to see if distinct patterns emerge (especially across the varying age groups and lengths of opportunities). Here are some questions related to this:
  - Are the searches for the United States and Mexico primarily coming from the junior high and senior high age groups?
  - Are searches specifying an older age group more likely to search for a country further from the United States?
  - Does length of opportunity searched for grow in proportion to the age group specified?
  - Do the kinds of preferred ministry activities vary by country, age group, or length of opportunity?
  - Do the most popular countries vary by age group, or length of opportunity?

If you have a question to add to this list, please send it to [research@mdat.org](mailto:research@mdat.org). We plan on wrestling with these questions over the next few years as time permits. An updated list of questions prompted by this report will be available at <http://www.mdat.org/reports/>.