

# Volunteering *by the Numbers*

by Rick Cohen

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**V**OLUNTEERS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN a part of the workforce of the civic sector, and they have played a powerful central role in some of the most inspired world-changing work nonprofits have accomplished. They are this sector's strategic advantage but what does this component of our workforce look like? Is it getting larger or smaller? Is it more or less diverse than the population at large? What effects are generational and socioeconomic shifts really having? The research does not always provide clear answers but what follows is a summary of its findings.

## Who Volunteers and How Much?

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) conducts its Current Population Survey (CPS) of 60,000 households annually to generate statistics on population changes and demographic dynamics without having to wait for data from the official decennial census. For a few years, the BLS has also incorporated questions from the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) concerning volunteering, which has yielded some interesting results.

The BLS's *Volunteering in the United States, 2007* indicates that, between September 2006 and September 2007, nearly 61 million people vol-

unteered at least once.<sup>1</sup> How many hours do those 61 million Americans put into their volunteer labors? In the BLS study, respondents volunteered a median amount of 52 hours annually, equivalent to one hour a week, for those 16 years of age and older, with equal amounts of time spent by men and women. A closer look at the findings indicates some differences by age, marital status, and race.

- **Volunteering by age.** Boomers age 55 to 64 years old devote a median of 60 hours a year to volunteering; seniors age 65 and older, 96 hours, with nearly 10 percent of seniors reporting more than 500 hours annually of volunteering. Those age 16 to 24 devote approximately 40 hours a year to volunteering, while those age 25 to 34 spend a median of 36 hours volunteering.
- **Volunteering by marital status.** Married people volunteer a median of 59 hours a year, people who are divorced, separated, or widowed 54 hours a year, and those single and never married only 40 hours.
- **Volunteering varies by racial category.** Whites devote a median of 52 hours annually to volunteer activities, Latinos 48 hours, Asians 36, but blacks or African Americans report a median of 60 hours of volunteering annually.

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## Rates of Volunteerism

A statistic of an estimated 60 million volunteers is impressive, but the BLS data suggests that the *rate of volunteering* has declined. Between 2003 and 2005, the rate of volunteering was 28.8 percent, but since 2005, that number has declined to 26.2 percent of the population. But, according to a CNCS publication, the nation's current 26.2 percent volunteering rate still represents a huge increase over the 1989 level of 20.4 percent.<sup>2</sup> Do the recent years of declining rates of volunteerism warrant concern, or are they simply minor statistical "blips" in an otherwise upward trajectory? BLS statistics about volunteerism by age and gender suggest some areas for further inquiry and analysis.

- **Rate of volunteering by gender.** While lower than in previous years, the volunteer rate for women was 29.3 percent, compared with a static 22.9 percent for men.
- **Rate of volunteering by age.** The highest rate of volunteering by age is for those between the ages of 35 and 55 (at 30.3 percent); the lowest for those in their early twenties (17.7 percent).
- **Rate of volunteering by marital status.** Married people are the most inclined toward volunteering: 31.9 percent of married respondents volunteer, compared with 19.2 percent of people never married and 20.9 percent for those with other marital statuses.

Compared with the previous year, the largest proportional decrease for these groups occurred among teens age 16 to 19, declining from 28.8 percent to 26.6 percent for women and from 24.1 percent to 22.5 percent for men. With all the national discussion of community service becoming part of high school and college curriculums, this decline is perplexing and potentially disturbing. Proposals such as the Aspen Institute's—which recommends that a "summer of service"<sup>3</sup> become a requirement for students moving from middle school to high school—seem geared toward instilling a volunteer spirit among America's young people. This may be the locus of part of the volunteerism downturn and the area where policy makers have to focus in order to halt future declines.

## The Nature of Volunteering

According to the CNCS data, the distinction between volunteering today and volunteering two

decades ago is an increase in "episodic volunteering": that is, short-duration volunteering that totals less than 99 hours a year.

The behavior of older volunteers provides additional insight into the character of those who volunteer. Data from the Urban Institute supports the counterintuitive finding that starting work, caring for a spouse, or providing child care (for grandchildren) actually increases the odds that senior citizens will volunteer. Like volunteers among all age groups, senior volunteers lead busy lives, but being busy is an indication that people will volunteer. Like most volunteers, seniors are less likely to quit volunteer activities if they have volunteered for many years and have spouses or partners who do so as well. The longer a person volunteers and the more volunteerism is part of a family culture or ethic, the lower the volunteer turnover rate.

A CNCS study of volunteerism among baby boomers also confirms that busy people make good volunteer recruits. Like seniors, boomers are more likely to volunteer for organizations if they already volunteer; that is, an organization interested in recruiting baby boomers for volunteer slots will likely do best by inviting those who already volunteer at other organizations.<sup>4</sup> Rather than being a detriment, a busy schedule is a strong predictive factor of potential new volunteer recruits. The more volunteer hours that boomers put in, the more likely it is that they will continue to volunteer. And in concert with the number of volunteer hours, retention rates increase dramatically.

## Volunteering for What?

The BLS survey reveals the immense diversity of volunteers' interests and priorities. Religious organizations are the primary beneficiaries of volunteering (35.6 percent), followed by educational or youth service (26.2 percent) and, finally, social or community service (13.1 percent). Higher proportions of women put time into youth activities and health care-related volunteer activities; men apply more time to social or community service and civic, political, or professional volunteer slots. Those age 35 to 44 emphasize youth-oriented and educational service opportunities; for seniors, the focus is religious organizations, and teens participate most heavily in youth-oriented educational opportunities and community service.

Table 1: Volunteering Rates by Race and Kind of Service

	Overall Volunteer Rate	Percentage of Volunteers in Civic or Professional	Percentage of Volunteers in Education or Youth Service	Percentage of Volunteers in Health Care Services	Percentage of Volunteers in Environment and Animal Protection	Percentage of Volunteers in Religious Organizations	Percentage of Volunteers in Social or Community Service
White	27.9	5.2	26.3	8.1	2.1	34.5	13.1
African American	18.2	4.0	24.3	5.1	0.6	47.9	11.6
Asian	17.7	3.4	24.9	7.9	0.9	38.3	12.0
Latino	13.5	3.1	34.8	6.3	1.4	35.5	10.9

Fundraising is the top activity, involving 10.9 percent of volunteers.

As table 1 demonstrates, distinctive differences arise in volunteering by race and ethnicity. These statistics reflect complex dynamics that may be explained in several possible ways. One might be that the high proportion of African Americans volunteering in religious organizations reflects the important social and institutional roles of churches in the black community. The high proportion of Latinos involved in education or youth services might reflect the larger families than other ethnic and racial groups.<sup>5</sup> As volunteer studies have long shown, the presence of children in a household is a strong indicator of volunteer activity (and often related to children's educational and youth activities). These differences in volunteer interests are probably not simply cumulative totals of individual interests but part and parcel of the family, age, employment, education, and income characteristics of these different racial and ethnic groups.

What kinds of work do volunteers do—functionally—at their desks or elsewhere in organizations? Fundraising is the top activity, involving 10.9 percent of volunteers (and 12.4 percent of women volunteers).<sup>6</sup> Providing management assistance, including serving on boards, involves 7.6 percent of volunteers, and 9.3 percent of male volunteers. 10.8 percent of volunteers tutor or teach (12.9 percent of female volunteers).

For boomer and older volunteers, a primary motivation for volunteering is to engage one's business or technical skills. But a recent report from VolunteerMatch, an organization devoted to matching potential volunteers with organizations, suggests that two out of five nonvolunteers age 55 and older *don't* volunteer because of an inability to find the right opportunity.<sup>7</sup> Some kind of disconnect has occurred, where 46 percent of the nonprofits in the VolunteerMatch survey say that they have

trouble finding people interested in volunteering, and 51 percent are thwarted because potential recruits are too busy to volunteer.

A similar skill-mismatch finding was uncovered in a survey of 250 HR managers of Fortune 500 companies, examining how these organizations encourage employees to volunteer.<sup>8</sup> According to the Deloitte authors, the rate of volunteering among corporate employees increases by level of education (according to the BLS statistics, 21.7 percent of high-school graduates without a college education volunteer, 34.1 percent of people with some college or an associate degree volunteer, and 45.6 percent with a bachelor's degree or higher volunteer), but that does not necessarily mean that those more educated volunteers use their business or technical skills in their volunteer placements. Although corporations are increasingly interested in promoting volunteer opportunities for their employees, only 16 percent of companies "make it a regular practice to intentionally offer *skills-based* volunteer opportunities for employee development" (emphasis added).

For a firm like Deloitte, skills-based volunteering would involve helping organizations with finances and accounting, strengthening nonprofits' business practices. The BLS survey might reveal a corporate bias, since only 13 percent of corporations offer volunteering options to all employees. The others restrict corporate-sponsored volunteer programs to management-level employees and above. That might explain the stunning statistic in the BLS survey that only 1.3 percent of volunteers became involved with a nonprofit because of an invitation or introduction by a boss or employer. Other surveys confirm that only about one-fifth of corporate employers allow most or all employees to do volunteer work during regular work hours. A survey of 1,100 cor-

## Who's a Volunteer?

When you look at data on volunteerism, consider a study's methodology and sample. Consider the research cited here, and you'll find the following definitional challenges:

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) study *Volunteering in the United States, 2007*, uses this definition: "Volunteers are defined as persons who did unpaid work (except for expenses) through or for an organization." But the BLS survey was presented to respondents this way: "We are interested in volunteer activities, that is, activities for which people are not paid, except perhaps expenses." How might a respondent have interpreted the "perhaps" (noting that 71 percent of BLS respondents were self-reports, so no clarifying questions were possible)?

What kind of work constitutes volunteering? The BLS describes volunteer activities this way: "The count of volunteers only includes persons who volunteered through or for an organization; the figures do not include persons who volunteered in a more informal manner." For example, helping organize Little League games would be considered volunteering, but informally organizing softball games for kids in the neighborhood without the official structure of a sponsoring organization such as the Little League would not be considered volunteering for the purpose of the BLS survey.

Could this distinction between formal and informal volunteering reflect a cultural bias? Perhaps so. This definition, for example, may result in a significant undercount of volunteering among Latinos.<sup>19</sup> As expressed in one summary of the research, "Latino volunteerism occurs first in the context of family and secondarily in the neighborhood and church as opposed to mainstream community-based organizations."<sup>20</sup> The dominant culture's predilection for counting time "volunteered" at only mainstream organizations may well overlook a significant amount of time devoted by particular groups to help their neighbors without recompense.

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porations with 50 or more employees conducted by the Families and Work Institute found that for those corporations permitting work-time volunteering, approximately one-half provided no pay for volunteer hours, 23 percent compensated staff up to a maximum of 19 hours, and one-fourth provided some pay for 20 or more hours of volunteer activity.<sup>9</sup>

The CNCS study of baby-boomer volunteers suggests that boomers might not be attracted to volunteering opportunities induced by employers: "Among volunteers who are asked to volunteer, those who are asked by the volunteer organization have the highest retention rates, while those asked by their employer to volunteer have the lowest retention rates (70.5 percent versus 53.9 percent)."<sup>10</sup> That suggests that volunteerism reflects values and beliefs, not orders and expectations from a boss. Much like workplace pressures to make payroll-deductible charitable

contributions, more or less compulsory corporate-structured volunteer activities may create resentment rather than enthusiasm about charitable activity. Volunteerism flourishes in environments of freedom of choice and potentially suffers where the activity is perceived as part of one's job responsibilities.

## Volunteer Screening and Interviewing

Nonprofits have multiple challenges in recruiting, screening, and managing volunteers. Recent studies offer some perspective on integrating volunteers into nonprofit work environments.

Turnover among volunteers is no less disruptive than turnover among paid staff. Good management to sustain quality work environments counts for volunteers as well as employees. Like paid employees, volunteers need to be treated well and managed appropriately. While much of the writing on volunteer management in the United States tends toward consultant-marketed bromides, the U.K.-based Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) conducts robust surveys on volunteer management practices that work. IVR's 2008 survey of more than 1,300 managers of volunteers reveals the following findings:<sup>11</sup>

- One-fourth of the surveyed organizations had no financial resources dedicated to supporting organizations' volunteer operations.
- The average volunteer manager or organizer was responsible for an average of 15 volunteers and a median of 20.
- One-fourth of all volunteer managers were themselves unpaid volunteers.
- Less than 10 percent of respondents identified recruitment or retention as a serious problem for their organization.

Though written about extensively, some of the basic elements of good volunteer management are missing from many of the surveyed U.K. charities: 81 percent of volunteers say that they did not have job descriptions, nearly as many say that they never received training for their volunteer work, and despite reports from volunteer coordinators, an almost equal amount claim never to have been interviewed by a member of the organization before beginning volunteer activity.<sup>12</sup>

British charities lacking volunteer managers or relying on unpaid staff to manage volunteers were typically the smaller nonprofits in IVR's survey sample. Not surprisingly, screening of volunteers was not particularly rigorous: 84 percent reported

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holding “an interview or chat with volunteers before they start,” and only a little more than one-fourth reported holding exit interviews with volunteers who leave.

This is consistent with recent U.S. survey data from the National Center for Victims of Crime (NCVC), whose 2008 study revealed gaps in volunteer screening among many nonprofits.<sup>13</sup> Among the NCVC findings from a survey of 517 human-service providers were the following:

- 12 percent of surveyed organizations don’t screen volunteers (typically smaller organizations without the funding to pay for volunteer managers or coordinators).
- While more than 90 percent interview volunteers, only three-fourths contact references, and a similar proportion perform at least one kind of background check.
- The smaller the number of volunteers, the less likely the organization checks references and does background checks: for organizations with less than 10 volunteers, only 63 percent check volunteers’ references and 57 percent perform some sort of other background check.
- Even among organizations that conduct interviews, reference checks, and background checks, such practices are not universal, with one in three surveyed nonprofits reporting that some volunteers receive no screening at all.

Typically, volunteers engaged in direct service roles receive more background checks and screening than volunteers assigned to fundraising, financial, and administrative roles, despite the obvious problem that those with criminal records can pose to organizations’ finances and donor records. Since the Corporation for National and Community Service requires background checks on its placements, these numbers might be quite different if AmeriCorps and other CNCS participants had been excluded from the NCVC survey sample.

## Bolstering Nonprofit Volunteerism

Volunteerism is a mom-and-apple-pie topic in our society. No one opposes it, everyone likes it, but often its proponents—nonprofits in particular—don’t pay sufficient attention to how to strengthen and support it.

Volunteerism has been on the national agenda of the past two national administrations, and both Bill Clinton and George Bush put forward new initiatives to promote it. Some early supporters of Bush’s vision for “a new culture of responsibility”

recently described the initiatives as “sputtering” and “a disappointment,” a victim of the administration’s intense focus on the Iraq war.<sup>14</sup>

In the current presidential competition, Senator Barack Obama of Illinois has proposed a massive increase in national service. He would increase AmeriCorps to 250,000 slots (from its current level of about 75,000 members<sup>15</sup>), double the size of the Peace Corps (currently around 8,000 volunteers<sup>16</sup>), encourage middle- and high-school kids to engage in community-service programs, offer a tuition tax credit for college students who devote 100 hours of annual service, and create special service opportunities for disadvantaged youth.<sup>17</sup> Senator John McCain’s campaign Web site recently inserted a plan for new national service incentive programs as well.<sup>18</sup>

The nonprofit sector is fond of complaining about its lack of visibility in policy arenas but it is the go-to part of the economy on this emerging national initiative. It is important for groups at the local, state, and national levels to look at these kinds of findings and help drive not only better practice but excellent policy on this question. Volunteers are a critical resource for nonprofits—let’s begin as a sector to think strategically about them.

## ENDNOTES

1. *Volunteering in the United States, 2007*, Bureau of Labor Statistics, January 23, 2008.
2. *Volunteer Growth in America: A Review of Trends Since 1974*, the Corporation for National & Community Service, December 2006; over the years, the increase was attributable to older teens (16 to 19), midlife adults (45 to 64) and seniors (65 and older).
3. Idea number nine in *Mobilizing Change: 10 Non-profit Policy Proposals to Strengthen U.S. Communities*.
4. John Foster-Bey, Robert Grimm, Jr., and Nathan Dietz, *Keeping Baby Boomers Volunteering*, Corporation for National and Community Service, March 2007.
5. According to the U.S. Census, 53.6 percent of Hispanic families had four or more persons compared to 31.0 percent of non-Hispanic white families and 38.6 percent of all other non-Hispanic families, cf. *The Hispanic Population of the U.S.: 2004*, U.S. Census Bureau, Table 4.1
6. Among respondents, 7.7 percent of volunteers report that they spend an equal amount of time on all kinds of volunteer tasks, from coaching, tutoring,



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and mentoring to collecting, preparing, serving, or distributing food.

7. *Great Expectations: Boomers and the Future of Volunteering*, VolunteerMatch.

8. *2008 Executive Summary: Deloitte Volunteer IMPACT Survey*, Deloitte Development LLC, 2008.

9. Ellen Galinsky, James T. Bond, and Kelly Sakai, *2008 National Study of Employers*, Families and Work Institute, May 2008.

10. John Foster-Bey, Robert Grimm, Jr., and Nathan Dietz, *Keeping Baby Boomers Volunteering*, Corporation for National and Community Service, March 2007.

11. Joanna Machin and Angela Ellis Paine, *Management Matters: A National Survey of Volunteer Management Capacity*, Institute for Volunteering Research, April 2008.

12. Joanna Machin and Angela Ellis Paine, *Managing for Success: Volunteers' Views on Their Involvement and Support*, Institute for Volunteering Research, April 2008.

13. *Who's Lending a Hand? A National Survey of Nonprofit Volunteer Screening Practices*, National Center for Victims of Crime, 2008.

14. Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "Bush's 2002 State of the Union Volunteerism Initiative Is Seen as Sputtering," the *New York Times*, January 27, 2008.

15. AmeriCorps Web page, June 2006.

16. Peace Corps Fact Sheet, 2008.

17. *Helping All Americans Serve Their Country: Barack Obama's Plan for Universal Voluntary Citizen Service*.

18. *Renewing America's Civic Purpose*

19. The same undercount has long been noted in measurements of charitable giving among Latinos;. Henry A. J. Ramos, "Latino Philanthropy: Expanding U.S. Models of Giving and Civic Participation," *Cultures of Caring: Philanthropy in Diverse American Communities*, Council on Foundations, June 1999  
Walter W. Powell and Richard Steinberg, *The Non-Profit Sector: A Research Handbook*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006, p. 553, noting a common research finding that informal giving and remittances are significant though undercounted components of giving among Hispanics.

20. Beverly B. Hobbs, "Diversifying the Volunteer Base: Latinos and Volunteerism," *Journal of Extension*, vol. 39, no. 1, August 2001.

Does your organization use volunteers? What do these numbers show from your perspective? Let us know at [feedback@npqmag.org](mailto:feedback@npqmag.org). Order reprints from <http://store.nonprofitquarterly.org>, using code 150305.

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