



A new wave of interest in growing charitable giving, which some measures say is stuck around 2 percent of GDP, is under way. But many measures of giving, like the share of GDP, do not sufficiently account for the changing patterns in how Americans are spending their financial resources for social good.

This dashboard brings together selected core indicators that can track some of the changing patterns and levels of individual giving using the best data sources available.

The Greater Giving Dashboard

by Joycelyn Ovalle and Keely Hanson



Just about every week or so, there are reports released about giving patterns—sometimes with confusing and conflicting messages. In some, Americans are more generous than ever; in others, fewer Americans are giving. And we may find that online giving is up or is down, depending on the source. But the real challenge is knowing what is important, what is meaningful, and what we need to pay attention to.

Nonprofit professionals trying to keep up with the developments in individual giving patterns may feel overwhelmed by these reports and struggle to cope with the seemingly constant stream of numbers, percentages, and graphs, all claiming to be the final word on the latest giving trends. A further complication is that this information varies in quality, being produced both by professionals and by those with little or no knowledge of the subject.

A few key sources offer a sustained commitment to collecting charitable data on a regular basis, using fairly representative samples and robust survey methodology (such as federal data sources like the Current Population Survey, the Consumer Expenditure Survey, and the Survey of Consumer Finances, as well as Giving USA and the Indiana University Philanthropy Panel Study). But these have a somewhat limited scope and do not capture the full range of giving practices—for example, supporting a charitable cause by buying merchandise, political giving, and remittance giving, as well as emerging ways of giving, like the use of digital currency. For many of the broader giving practices and new giving vehicles, data come from smaller and more targeted surveys or estimates provided by the businesses or organizations that offer these services—and the rigor, representativeness, and timeliness of the data from these sources vary widely.

Notwithstanding these limitations, there is a potential upside to the vast and constant flow of information on giving patterns from this array of data providers. We are beginning to get a more complete picture of twenty-first-century donors and the many ways they are choosing to use their financial resources for social good. This is important, because charitable statistics, in the quest to be rigorous, have not been entirely representative or reflective of the giving behavior of all Americans. What we know about giving behavior is so dominated by the tax-deductible (and tax-reportable) contributions to organizations, that we miss (and, by omission, discount) the many different ways that donors support a cause, a goal, or an individual. To the extent that more of these broader giving practices can be counted in the official charitable statistics, there may be a possibility to challenge and correct

Participation in Giving to Charitable Organizations

51%

Levels of Giving

\$25,509

Total Giving to Charitable Organizations

\$264.6B

the prevailing view in the public and policy discourse that charitable giving is hopelessly trapped by a 2 percent-of-GDP ceiling.

To help us and others better understand and keep track of this changing landscape, the Center for Nonprofits and Philanthropy at the Urban Institute has compiled a set of indicators across many sources of giving reports. Our intention is to bring together in one big picture disparate giving data, focused on individual giving, that together provide a sense of the current amount of giving along with the changing and dynamic elements that may have implications for current and future giving.

We sifted and sorted through hundreds of reports to identify the sources that are, at this time, the best and most current available information on these particular giving trends—although, as is reflective of the current state of the field, not all of the sources meet the standards of representativeness and absence of bias that would be ideal.

By bringing together these different indicators and data sources into one collective image, this dashboard lends some structure to an otherwise unwieldy deluge of data, and highlights three important issues: 1) it is important that, in addition to the annual statistic representing total giving to organizations (currently around \$264 billion), we watch the changing patterns in donor retention and participation that help put those total giving numbers in perspective and help answer questions around the sustainability of or potential for acceleration of growth; 2) as new forms of giving proliferate in our society—such as crowdfunding, donor-advised funds, online giving, and digital currency—it is important to watch their changing scale and influence relative to total giving; 3) donors can choose from many different ways to engage in philanthropic behavior, and it is important to watch the extent to which these emerge as complements to or substitutes for traditional forms of giving.

Through regular updates and expansions of this dashboard, we hope to be able to capture even more of the dynamic giving patterns and encourage continued data improvement. We welcome feedback and ideas.

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