Volunteers in the U.S.: who donates the time?

One in every five Americans does some volunteer work for church, school, other organizations, according to Current Population Survey

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Every year, millions of Americans give their time, talents, and skills, without pay, to a wide variety of organizations and institutions. Under the auspices of schools, hospitals, churches, and so forth, these volunteers perform many different tasks, such as assisting the elderly or disabled, coaching children's athletics, helping with church or school activities, or providing staff assistance for political or other organizations.

Who are these volunteers? Where, or for whom, do they perform volunteer work? How much time do they spend at these unpaid activities? Some answers to these questions are available from data obtained from supplementary questions included in the May 1989 Current Population Survey.[1] This article reports on the findings from the survey and compares them to findings from earlier surveys on the same subject, providing a historical perspective on the phenomenon of volunteer activity.

Who volunteers?

About 38 million people were reported as having volunteered for work without pay for an institution or organization at some time during the year ended in May 1989.[2] This represented about 1 out of every 5 persons in the civilian noninstitutional population 16 years old and over. The incidence of voluntarism varied considerably by a number of demographic and economic characteristics. For instance, persons in the 35- to 44-year-old age group were more likely than those younger or older to have done some volunteer work. Whites were more likely than blacks or Hispanics to report volunteer work. And, college graduates were more likely to contribute their time and skills as volunteers than persons with fewer years of schooling. (See table 1.)

Overall, about 22 percent of women and 19 percent of men did some work as unpaid volunteers for an organization or institution during the year ended in May 1989. The proportions of persons with some volunteer work ranged from about 13 percent among women under age 25 to 31 percent among those 35 to 44 years old, tapering off to 18 percent among those 65 and over. The pattern was similar for men. The fact that women were slightly more likely than men to volunteer, combined with the fact that they outnumber men in the population, meant that the majority (56 percent) of volunteers were women.

Part of the reason why women were somewhat more likely than men to be volunteers has to do with their employment and family status. Despite rapid labor force gains, women make up a larger proportion of part-time workers or persons not in the labor force. And, women in both groups had higher volunteer rates than their male counterparts. (See table 1.) This is probably because substantial proportions of the women in these groups were between the ages of 20 and 54—a period

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during which childrearing is a major activity for most women. Thus, through their children's school, sports, or religious activities, mothers have many opportunities to volunteer. Indeed, such volunteering is often expected of both parents.

Married men and women were more likely than those in other marital statuses to have volunteered at some time during the year ended in May 1989. One reason, of course, for the higher incidence rate among husbands and wives is that they are more likely than unmarried persons to have children living with them. And, as noted above, parents usually have many more volunteer opportunities readily available than persons who do not have children. As the following tabulation shows, higher proportions of fathers and mothers were volunteers than men or women with no children under 18 years old.

	Men	*Women*
With no children under 18 years old	16.8	19.1
With children under 18 years old	22.6	26.3
6 to 17 years old, none younger	23.2	27.8
Under 6 years old	21.8	24.0

Education is apparently another important determinant of volunteering. Adults with a college degree are much more likely to do volunteer work than those with fewer years of schooling. Roughly 4 out of 10 college graduates 25 years old or over—both men and women—participated in unpaid volunteer work, compared with fewer than 1 in 10 among the high school dropouts.

Despite the often time-consuming demands of jobs, employed persons were more likely to be

Table 1. **Persons who performed unpaid volunteer work at some time during the year ended May 1989, by sex and selected characteristics**

[Numbers in thousands]

Characteristic	Both sexes		Men		Women	
	Volunteer workers	Volunteers as percent of population	Volunteer workers	Volunteers as percent of population	Volunteer workers	Volunteers as percent of population
Total	38,042	20.4	16,681	18.8	21,361	21.9
Age						
16 to 24 years old	3,966	12.3	1,814	11.4	2,152	13.1
16 to 19	1,902	13.4	879	12.3	1,023	14.4
20 to 24	2,064	11.4	935	10.6	1,129	12.1
25 to 34 years old	8,680	20.2	3,678	17.4	5,002	23.0
35 to 44 years old	10,337	28.9	4,683	26.8	5,655	30.9
45 to 54 years old	5,670	23.0	2,601	21.8	3,069	24.1
55 to 64 years old	4,455	20.8	1,987	19.8	2,468	21.8
65 years old and over	4,934	16.9	1,917	15.8	3,016	17.7
Race and Hispanic origin						
White	34,823	21.9	15,273	20.0	19,550	23.6
Black	2,505	11.9	1,082	11.5	1,423	12.3
Hispanic origin	1,289	9.4	587	8.6	702	10.1
Marital status						
Never married	6,327	13.7	3,102	12.4	3,225	15.3
Married, spouse present	26,344	24.8	12,131	22.8	14,213	26.9
Married, spouse absent	765	13.2	275	12.1	489	14.0
Divorced	2,510	17.3	908	15.3	1,602	18.6
Widowed	2,096	15.3	266	11.9	1,831	16.0
Years of school completed by persons 25 years old and over						
0 to 11 years	2,939	8.3	1,295	7.8	1,644	8.8
12 years only	11,105	18.8	4,120	16.0	6,985	20.9
13 to 15 years	7,572	28.1	3,042	24.0	4,531	31.6
16 years or more	12,459	38.4	6,410	36.0	6,049	41.4
Employment status						
In labor force	27,284	22.1	14,094	20.9	13,190	23.6
Employed	26,439	22.6	13,734	21.4	12,705	24.0
Full time	21,182	21.9	12,541	21.8	8,641	22.0
Part time	5,257	26.0	1,193	18.0	4,064	29.9
Unemployed	845	13.8	360	11.1	485	16.8
Not in labor force	10,758	17.1	2,587	12.2	8,171	19.6

volunteers than those who did not work. In fact, almost 7 out of 10 volunteers held paying jobs. Once again, age was a key factor. While employed men and women tended to be in those age groups in which the volunteer rate was highest (25 to 54 years old), those who were unemployed or not in

Differences between the surveys

The May 1989 CPS supplement on volunteers counted substantially fewer volunteers than a separate survey conducted in 1990 by the Gallup Organization for the Independent Sector (a private, nonprofit group dedicated to encouraging giving, volunteering, and not-for-profit initiatives). According to Gallup's Survey of Giving and Volunteering, about 54 percent of Americans 18 years old and over had done some volunteer work during the 12 months prior to the survey. By contrast, the CPS reported that 20 percent of the population (16 years old and over) had done some volunteer work in the prior year.

Why were the results of these two surveys so different? The answer appears to lie in the way each was conducted and the kinds of questions each asked.

The questions on volunteer activity that were included in the May 1989 CPS were part of a group of supplementary questions on a variety of topics that were added to the regular labor force questions that are asked each month. (The sample for the CPS includes some 60,000 households containing more than 150,000 persons 16 years and over.) To meet rigid reporting deadlines, one household member—called a proxy respondent—can answer survey questions relating to other members who may be absent at the time the household is contacted by an interviewer. About two-thirds of the interviews were conducted by telephone.

By contrast, respondents in Gallup's survey were asked in person about their own volunteer activities. Proxy respondents were not used. The survey's sample consisted of 2,727 persons 18 years old and over selected to be representative of the U.S. population. Included were oversamples of blacks, Hispanics, and those with household incomes of more than $60,000 to improve the reliability of survey results for these smaller populations.

The exclusion of proxy respondents from the Gallup survey undoubtedly had an impact on its results *vis-a-vis* those of the CPS. About half of the data on volunteering collected by the May 1989 CPS was provided by "proxy" respondents representing others. These "proxies" were significantly less likely to report volunteer activity than respondents representing only themselves. It would appear that proxy respondents are not always aware of the volunteer activities of the person for whom they are responding.

The questions that were asked in each survey—and the way they were asked—also affected the results of the two surveys. The questions on volunteering in the May 1989 CPS began with the introduction, "And now we would like to ask a few questions about UNPAID volunteer work. This is the work that persons often volunteer to do, *without being paid,* for hospitals, churches, civic, political, and other organizations" (original emphasis). This was followed by the question, "...did [household member] do any unpaid volunteer work?" This sequence could have resulted in some uncertainty on the part of respondents as to precisely what kind of activities were included as volunteer ones. Also, the question may have been insufficiently detailed to prompt recall of marginal or infrequent volunteer activities.

By contrast, respondents to the Gallup survey were given a clearer definition of volunteer activities and were prompted to recall infrequent or brief incidences of volunteering. This was done by showing the respondents a list of 17 possible volunteer activities accompanied by the following statement: "Listed on this card are examples of the many different areas in which people do volunteer activity. By volunteer activity, I mean *not* just belonging to a service organization, but actually working in some way to help others for no monetary pay. *In which, if any, of the areas listed on this card have you done some volunteer work in the past twelve months?*" (original emphasis). The list also included "informal" volunteering as a choice, an alternative that was explicitly excluded from the CPS. ("Informal" volunteers are persons whose volunteer activities are not performed on behalf of any organization or institution, such as helping elderly neighbors or babysitting for friends or relatives in an emergency.) Consequently, it is not surprising that the Gallup survey would have "found" more volunteers than those counted by the CPS.

See Virginia Ann Hodgkinson and Murray S. Weitzman, *Giving and Volunteering in the United States: Findings from a National Survey* (Washington, Independent Sector, 1990).

the labor force were mostly younger or older. Among employed men, full-time workers were more likely to be volunteers, whereas among employed women it was the part-time workers who were more likely to do volunteer work.

Income. In general, the higher their income, the more likely persons are to engage in volunteer work. As the following tabulation illustrates, the volunteer rates for men and women whose 1988 family or individual income (depending on whether they were family members or unrelated individuals) was over $50,000 were about three times those for persons whose incomes were under $10,000.[3]

Income	*Volunteer rate*		
	Total	*Men*	*Women*
Under $10,000	9.2	7.5	10.0
$10,000 to $29,999	15.6	12.9	18.0
$30,000 to $49,999	23.4	20.9	26.0
$50,000 or more	27.0	25.1	29.1

The link between volunteering and income may be partly a reflection of the relationship between education and volunteering: persons who have completed college generally have higher incomes than those with fewer years of schooling. Also, participation in volunteer activities can require some out-of-pocket expenses for such things as transportation, appropriate clothing, or incidental supplies, which persons in lower income categories may not be able to afford. Also, age may be a related factor; individuals' peak earning years coincide with the ages during which volunteering is most prevalent.

Race and Hispanic origin. Blacks and Hispanics were less likely than whites to report volunteer activity. (See table 2.) This was partly because they tended to be more concentrated than whites in groups with relatively low volunteer rates (young, not college educated, and not employed). Also, blacks and Hispanics are more likely to have lower incomes than whites. For instance, about 28 percent of blacks and 18 percent of Hispanics, compared with 11 percent of whites, had incomes of less than $10,000 in 1988. At the other end of the scale, 27 percent

Table 2. **Persons who performed unpaid volunteer work at some time during the year ended May 1989, by race or Hispanic origin and selected characteristics**

[Numbers in thousands]

Characteristic	White		Black		Hispanic	
	Volunteer workers	Volunteers as percent of population	Volunteer workers	Volunteers as percent of population	Volunteer workers	Volunteers as percent of population
Total	34,823	21.9	2,505	11.9	1,289	9.4
Age						
16 to 24 years old	3,532	13.3	325	7.0	180	5.3
16 to 19	1,700	14.7	133	6.1	83	5.9
20 to 24	1,832	12.3	192	7.7	97	4.9
25 to 34 years old	7,816	21.7	676	12.7	374	9.6
35 to 44 years old	9,541	31.1	585	15.1	374	14.4
45 to 54 years old	5,207	24.5	356	13.7	180	10.9
55 to 64 years old	4,095	21.8	294	13.9	131	11.4
65 years old and over	4,632	17.7	267	10.9	50	4.7
Sex						
Men	15,273	20.0	1,082	11.5	587	8.6
Women	19,550	23.6	1,423	12.3	702	10.1
Marital status						
Never married	5,548	15.2	598	7.7	274	6.6
Married, spouse present	24,627	26.0	1,295	16.4	811	11.1
Married, spouse absent	585	15.0	151	9.2	70	8.0
Divorced	2,140	17.5	305	15.4	101	11.9
Widowed	1,923	16.4	155	9.2	33	6.0
Years of school completed by persons 25 years old and over						
0 to 11 years	2,524	8.8	379	6.9	234	4.7
12 years only	10,315	19.9	684	11.3	311	10.8
13 to 15 years	6,859	29.3	547	19.7	302	21.0
16 years or more	11,594	40.2	569	28.7	262	26.0

Table 3. **Percent distribution of persons who performed unpaid volunteer work at some time during the year ended May 1989, by type of organization for which work was performed and selected characteristics of volunteer workers**

Characteristic	Total (percent)	Hospital or other health organizations	School or other educational institutions	Social or welfare organizations	Civic or political organizations	Sport or recreational organizations	Church or other religious organizations	Other organizations
Volunteer workers, total	100.0	10.4	15.1	9.9	13.2	7.8	37.4	6.3
Sex								
Men	100.0	7.0	10.5	10.1	17.2	11.8	35.9	7.5
Women	100.0	13.1	18.8	9.7	10.1	4.6	38.5	5.3
Age								
16 to 24 years old	100.0	10.6	22.5	9.3	10.9	8.1	32.3	6.2
25 to 34 years old	100.0	9.1	18.3	9.3	13.3	8.9	34.9	6.1
35 to 44 years old	100.0	7.4	20.3	8.5	12.6	12.1	33.1	6.1
45 to 54 years old	100.0	10.1	11.8	8.8	15.1	7.1	40.8	6.3
55 to 64 years old	100.0	12.4	6.7	10.9	16.1	2.5	45.7	5.7
65 years old and over	100.0	17.8	4.3	14.5	11.1	1.8	43.3	7.2
Marital status								
Never married	100.0	10.9	18.6	12.4	14.0	7.6	29.3	7.3
Married, spouse present	100.0	9.0	15.2	8.4	13.2	8.4	40.4	5.4
Married, spouse absent	100.0	13.2	17.8	12.5	11.6	5.0	29.4	10.5
Divorced	100.0	15.0	12.6	15.0	15.1	8.2	25.1	9.0
Widowed	100.0	20.8	5.9	13.9	8.1	1.3	41.2	8.9
Years of school completed by persons 25 years old and over								
0 to 11 years	100.0	10.0	6.6	13.1	10.0	4.8	48.4	7.0
12 years only	100.0	11.1	12.5	8.8	11.2	8.2	41.5	6.7
13 to 15 years	100.0	10.8	14.7	10.1	13.2	8.0	36.8	6.3
16 years or more	100.0	9.7	17.4	10.1	16.4	7.8	32.9	5.7

of whites had incomes of $50,000 or more, compared with 14 percent of blacks and 16 percent of Hispanics.[4]

For whom and how long?

Volunteers were more likely to work for churches or other religious organizations than for any other kind of organization. And, although most of them spent fewer than 5 hours per week at their volunteer task, it was often an extensive effort. Four out of 10 volunteers performed some volunteer work in a majority of the weeks during the year.

Nearly the same proportion of male (36 percent) as of female (39 percent) volunteers reported that working for churches was their main volunteer activity during the year ending in May 1989. Among men, the second and third ranking fields were "civic or political organizations" and "sports or recreational organizations," while for women, "schools or other educational institutions" and "hospitals or other health organizations" were the principal alternative choices. (See table 3.)

Certain groups of volunteers tend to gravitate towards specific organizations or institutions. About half the volunteers without a high school diploma performed voluntary religious work. By contrast, volunteers who were college graduates were about equally likely to work for educational and civic organizations or institutions (combined) than for religious ones. Divorced persons were the least likely to do unpaid volunteer work for religious organizations, though this was still the dominant field of volunteer work for them.

Overall, 3 out of 5 volunteers spent fewer than 5 hours a week at their volunteer activity during the year. An additional 20 percent worked 5 to 9 hours and 17 percent worked 10 to 34 hours. Fewer than 5 percent did volunteer work for 35 hours a week or more—the equivalent of a full-time job. (See table 4.)

Volunteers who were black, Hispanic, or 65 years and over tended to devote more hours a week to their volunteer activities than other volunteers. Likewise, high school dropouts and unmarried persons, though volunteering less frequently than college graduates or married persons, tended to do so for more hours per week.

The majority of volunteer workers were active in fewer than half the weeks during the year

Table 4. **Usual hours per week and weeks worked in volunteer activity during the year ended May 1989, by sex**

Usual hours per week and weeks worked	Total	Men	Women
Total volunteers (percent)	100.0	100.0	100.0
Hours			
Less than 5	60.0	58.0	61.5
5 to 9	19.9	20.9	19.2
10 to 19	10.8	11.7	10.0
20 to 34	5.8	5.7	5.8
35 hours or more	3.6	3.7	3.5
Weeks			
Less than 5	20.2	21.7	19.1
5 to 14	21.2	22.4	20.3
15 to 26	14.4	14.6	14.2
27 and over	44.2	41.3	46.4
27 to 49	15.9	12.9	18.3
50 to 52	28.3	28.4	28.2

ended in May 1989. Nonetheless, a remarkable 44 percent performed volunteer work at some time during at least half the weeks of the year, and 28 percent did some volunteer work throughout the entire year. As the following tabulation shows, those volunteers who worked 27 weeks or more were more likely to be women, 35 years old or over, or married, compared with volunteers who worked 26 weeks or less.

	Worked 26 weeks or less	*Worked 27 weeks or more*
Percent of volunteers who were—		
Women	54	59
35 years old and over	61	74
Married, spouse present	67	73

Changes over time

Three surveys on voluntarism have been conducted through the Current Population Survey in the past 25 years; one in 1965, another in 1974, and the most recent, in 1989.[5] The following tabulation shows the proportion of persons reporting volunteer work (in percent) as derived from the three surveys.

	Incidence rate
1965 survey	18
1974 survey	24
1989 survey	20

Each of these surveys, however, differed in terms of questions, concepts, and coverage. Consequently, their usefulness in measuring changes in the volunteering behavior of Americans over time is very limited.

The universe of both the 1965 and 1974 surveys included 14- and 15-year-olds while that of the 1989 survey included only persons 16 years old and over. Because volunteer rates are low among young population groups, the inclusion of 14- and 15-year-olds in the 1965 and 1974 surveys probably depressed the overall volunteering rate relative to that derived from the 1989 survey. Much more importantly, however, the comparability of the survey results was affected by the fact that the 1965 survey was highly restrictive in its definition of volunteer work. Many activities that were included in the volunteer category by the 1974 and 1989 surveys were excluded in 1965. These included volunteer work for political organizations, work to further a hobby (for example, garden club or art club), or volunteer work done as part of a school program.

In addition, the 1965 survey treated volunteer work for religious organizations in a significantly different way than the other surveys. Specifically, it did not have a response category on the questionnaire for volunteer work for religious organizations. Despite this, a number of those surveyed reported religious volunteer work as an "other" volunteer activity. Even so, because the questionnaire did not ask for this information directly, there is no assurance that all persons who volunteered primarily for religious organizations were counted in the 1965 survey. And, work for a religious organization was the most common form of volunteer activity reported in 1989. Consequently, little can be concluded about changes in the incidence of volunteering in the United States by comparing the 1965 volunteer rate with the rates from the later surveys.

However, there are some indications that the 4-percentage-point difference between the volunteer rate in 1974 and in 1989 may be indicative of an actual decrease in volunteering sometime over the 15-year period. During the period, the proportion of the population composed of groups with relatively low volunteer rates—specifically, blacks, Hispanics and unmarried persons—increased.[6] Also, the proportion of women with children has declined; this may explain the reduction in the volunteer rate for women—from 26 percent in 1974 to 22 percent in 1989. (As noted above, mothers have many opportunities—and perhaps obligations—to do volunteer work through participation in their children's activities.) Also, in addition to the demographic trends prevailing during the period, organizations such as the League of Women Voters and the Ameri-

can Red Cross experienced problems recruiting volunteers.[7]

EVEN THOUGH OVERALL volunteer activity may have decreased a little over the last two or three decades, the May 1989 survey data clearly show that a significant portion of the population 16 years old and over does some unpaid volunteer work. Mature men and women, married persons, college graduates, and persons with higher incomes are among the most likely to volunteer. The survey data also show that, while volunteers spend relatively few hours a week—less than 5—at their main volunteer activity, more than 4 out of 10 engage in some unpaid volunteer activity in over half the weeks out of the year. Indeed, nearly 30 percent do some volunteer work practically every single week of the year. □

Footnotes

[1] The Current Population Survey (CPS) is a monthly sample survey conducted by the Bureau of the Census for the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The sample includes about 60,000 households that are scientifically selected to represent the civilian noninstitutional population 16 years old and over in the 50 States and the District of Columbia. Information is collected on more than 150,000 persons living in these households. A detailed description of this survey appears in *Concepts and Methods Used in Labor Force Statistics Derived from the Current Population Survey*, BLS Report 463.

[2] For the purposes of this study, volunteers are defined as persons who did unpaid work for organizations such as schools, hospitals, and civic organizations. Not included are persons whose unpaid work was done in connection with a family business or farm. Volunteer work is not considered to be employment for the purpose of labor force measurement.

[3] Information on the income of volunteers who were members of families or unrelated individuals was obtained by matching the microdata files generated by the May 1989 CPS with those from the March 1989 CPS. Information about the previous year's income is collected annually in the March CPS.

[4] Unpublished data obtained by matching the March 1989 and May 1989 CPS.

[5] See *Americans Volunteer*, Manpower/Automation Research Monograph no. 10 (U.S. Department of Labor, Manpower Administration, 1969); and *Americans Volunteer, 1974* (Washington, ACTION, February 1975).

[6] See, for example, *Handbook of Labor Statistics*, Bulletin 2340 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, August 1989), table 3, p. 13 and table 55, p. 235; and *Employment and Earnings*, January 1990, table 1, p. 160, table 3, p. 162, and table 39, p. 206.

[7] See Jeffrey L. Brudney, "The availability of volunteers," *Administration and Society*, February 1990, p. 419.