

Volunteering in the UK

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INTRODUCTION

In the United Kingdom (UK) volunteers traditionally have made a substantial contribution to the activities of the voluntary sector. However, in recent years many voluntary and other organisations in the UK have found it increasingly difficult to recruit new volunteers and even to maintain existing levels of volunteering. This has prompted some talk of a 'crisis' in volunteering (Volunteer Centre UK, 1991).

This, if true, gives cause for considerable concern at the present time as we see a combination of increasing demands on the voluntary sector for service provision and increasing competition for resources. Many voluntary organisations are having to spend more and more time trying to increase donations of both time and money from all potential sources. In this context it becomes very important to have an accurate picture of the extent of current volunteering as a basis for policy.

CHARITIES AID FOUNDATION RESEARCH ON VOLUNTEERING

Since 1985 the Charities Aid Foundation, together with a consortium of national charities, has commissioned an annual survey of giving and volunteering in Britain. The 'Individual Giving and Volunteering Survey,' previously called the 'Charity Household Survey' (Charities Aid Foundation 1985), has been the major source of information about the charitable behaviour of individuals in the UK. The aim is to provide an accurate statistical picture of giving and volunteering by individuals and establish trend data over a period of time as a basis for developing policies to increase charitable donations and volunteering.

The survey involves interviews with a quota sample of over 1000 individuals in Britain. Interviews took place over a one-year period and were conducted face-to-face with the individuals in the sample. Questions were asked about giving in the month prior to the interview, with the aim of reducing the problem of people having to recall what they had done over a longer period.

Respondents were shown a list of 39 voluntary activities and asked which they had done in the last month, and whether they had done any volunteering in other ways.

About a third (29%) of respondents reported that they had done at least one of the listed activities or some other voluntary activity in the last month. However only 8% had been involved in more than two voluntary activities, and only 2% in more than five. The mean and median (*i.e.*, typical) number of activities undertaken by each individual was 0.7. This suggests that people typically undertake a voluntary activity about eight times per year, although many do none and a few do a lot more.

This skewed distribution of voluntary activity is also seen in the pattern of overall time spent volunteering, with 72% of respondents giving no time, 12% giving up to 5 hours and 4% giving more than 30 hours. This means that the typical time spent volunteering was quite small—about 40 minutes per person in the month prior to interview.

Many of the listed voluntary activities were undertaken by few respondents, so it is difficult to establish and analyze patterns in the data. We can, however, identify several activities which were undertaken more commonly. These include

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visiting the sick or elderly (6% of respondents), helping with a club or activity (5% of respondents), collecting things to be sold (5% of respondents), selling raffle tickets/organising a raffle (5% of respondents) organising/helping at a jumble sale (5%) and serving on a committee (4%). Less common activities such as answering a telephone helpline, parish visiting and campaigning for a voluntary organisation tend to be done by people who also undertake other activities. In other words, people undertaking less popular activities tended to be more involved in several types of volunteering.

The pattern of total time spent on each voluntary activity by all respondents broadly reflects the number of times a particular activity is undertaken, so that visiting the elderly and sick and helping in a club or activity each represent 12% of total volunteer hours. At an aggregate level there is a 95% probability that volunteering by all adults in Britain over the year from July 1989–June 1990 totaled between two billion and three billion hours.

Looking at different groups of people according to their sex, age, and social class we can see variations in the voluntary activities undertaken. However, despite these differences it cannot be predicted, except to a minor extent, how much time people will give to volunteering on the basis of their sex, age, household income and similar factors.

Women were more likely than men to be involved in voluntary activities in the past month, although this was a very weak relationship. There are some variations in the type of activity undertaken—for example, women were more likely than men to be involved in collecting things to sell and organising or helping at a jumble sale.

The age of the respondent was also related to the type and extent of volunteering undertaken; for example, people in the 25 to 44 age group were less likely to volunteer, but more likely to give more time when they did. More older and younger people visited the elderly and sick and more middle-aged people served on committees. Again, the relationships were very weak.

Looking at volunteering across different socio-economic groups, it is the interme-

diating non-manual workers who have the highest proportion undertaking more than 10 hours volunteering in the past month (25%), followed by managers and professional workers (14%) and then the lower socio-economic groups in turn.

Respondents were also shown a card listing 11 statements of different reasons for volunteering. The most common response selected by 47% of volunteers was that they 'wanted to do something useful or help others.' Other popular responses were 'had an interest in the activity or work' (22%) and 'thought I would enjoy the work or feel needed' (21%). Also, many (17%) said they volunteer because they were asked.

More general questions on attitudes to charities and charitable giving revealed that most respondents thought that the government should take the basic responsibility and should not rely on charities. However, people do prefer charities to step in rather than leave the needy unsupported, and this is reflected in their willingness to volunteer.

OTHER RESEARCH ON VOLUNTEERING IN THE UK

During the 1980s there have been several other major surveys of volunteering in the UK. The Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) conducts the General Household Survey annually, randomly sampling about 15,000 household in Britain. In 1981 and 1987 the survey contained questions on voluntary activity, aiming to estimate the proportion of the population doing voluntary work, their characteristics and what kinds of voluntary work people do. In the 1981 survey 23% of respondents had done some voluntary work in the previous 12 months, and 15% had in the previous 4 weeks. Only 9% of those interviewed undertook at least one activity regularly each week.

In 1981 and 1991 the Volunteer Centre UK conducted a National Survey of Volunteering (Volunteer Centre UK 1991) which aimed to establish a more detailed picture of volunteering in England, Scotland and Wales. The findings of these surveys vary considerably from the findings of the 'General Household Survey' and the Charities Aid Foundation 'Individual

Survey of Giving and Volunteering.' The 1991 'National Survey of Volunteering' found that 51% of people over the age of 18 had volunteered at least once during the previous 12 months, whilst 31% had volunteered at least once during the last month. Over 75% of respondents had been involved in informal neighbourhood activity.

DISCUSSION

The differences between the surveys can be explained to a large extent by the problem of defining voluntary activity. Volunteering may include all unpaid work, or just unpaid work which is in the service of others. It may exclude services to family and friends. Volunteering may include all informal care, e.g. shopping and visiting the sick, or just activities undertaken through an organisation. Finally, it may include work for statutory or private organisations. The Volunteer Centre Survey definition is quite wide and includes all unpaid work in the service of others, whether on behalf of an organisation or not. Problems of definition can be reduced by showing respondents a list of activities, rather than just asking them if they have undertaken any voluntary activities. The latter avoids relying on people's own definition of volunteering, and this is the approach adopted in the surveys mentioned.

A further source of difference between the surveys is the fact that the Volunteer Centre Survey is exclusively on volunteering, which is likely to reveal a greater extent of voluntary activity than a more general survey.

The substantial differences between the figures remain something of a mystery; but it seems that despite talk of a crisis, volunteering is still a common activity for many people in the UK today. The worrying fact identified by the 'Individual Giving and Volunteering Survey' is that volunteering is not increasing from year to year. The level of volunteering, in terms of

the number of voluntary activities undertaken in the past month, was almost the same in 1988-89 and 1989-90, with 70% and 71% respectively reporting that they had done no volunteering in the past month. This trend, along with the uneven spread of volunteering between voluntary organisations, perhaps explains the difficulties groups face in recruiting and maintaining volunteer levels at a time when increasing demands are being placed on organisations throughout the voluntary sector to supply more services with fewer resources.

NOTE

As part of the continuing research programme at the Charities Aid Foundation, successive surveys of individual charitable behaviour continue to fill gaps in knowledge, enabling those involved in the voluntary sector to address the issue of how to increase the future levels of donations of both time and money. The most recent figures on the extent and nature of volunteering in the UK contained in the 1991 'Individual Survey of Giving and Volunteering' was published by the Charities Aid Foundation in May 1992 (ISBN 0 904757 58 7). This will provide invaluable up-to-date information for all policy makers and fundraisers in the voluntary sector.

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