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Statistics, Bikinis and Volunteers: The New Independent Sector Study on Giving and Volunteering

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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Two weeks ago I was interviewed by a reporter who wanted my reactions to the new Independent Sector/Gallup Report on "Giving and Volunteering" in the United States. A summary is available at the Independent Sector Web site: http://www.indepsec.org/GandV/s_keyf.htm. The reporter noted that the number of individuals reporting participation in volunteer activities had gone up, while the average number of hours contributed had gone down. What did I think of that?

Before answering, I mentioned that I had always liked the following perspective on the meaning of statistics (original source unknown): "Statistics are like bikinis. They reveal what is interesting and conceal what is essential." Or, consider the story of the scientist studying frog behavior. With exact measurements and careful recording, the scientist shouts "jump" to a frog five times, each time removing one leg to see the difference in distance leaped. Because, by the end of the experiment, the frog does not move at all, the scientist concludes that: "When one removes all four legs of a frog, it goes deaf."

This elaborate introduction only serves as a caution to us all to examine the assumptions behind the "conclusions" reached about the Independent Sector study--or any other attempt to quantify volunteer activity.

Let's first look at the conclusion--"the number of individuals reporting participation in volunteer activities has gone up." Certainly it is worthwhile--and heartening!--to know that more individuals are engaging in volunteering (assuming, of course, that this data can be trusted) but what does this statistic really mean? Unlike financial giving, where a dollar amount (factoring in inflation) is consistent from year to year, an individual volunteering is not consistent. An hour given as a member of an emergency rescue team has a different value than an hour wrapping holiday toys for

hospitalized children. Yes, we all have the same allotment of 24 hours and so “number of hours served as a volunteer” speaks to our use of time, but what does it tell us about its value to the community (or even to the volunteer)?

Moving on to the second part of the conclusion--"the number of hours has gone down"--are we to assume that obtaining the gift of volunteer time is a meaningful goal in and of itself? And that therefore having “more” or “less” of such time means more or less service provided? In some circumstances, organizations are better off cutting their volunteer corps in half, focusing on the most qualified volunteers, and wasting less staff supervisor effort. But such a reorganization plan, as effective as it may be, would be recorded by studies such as the one from IS as a diminishment of volunteer contribution. Hours served do not equal service provided.

From the individual volunteer’s perspective, why was less time spent volunteering and how does s/he feel about it? If the person wanted to give more hours but couldn’t because of work pressures or family constraints, then a decrease in hours might be perceived as unwanted and therefore negative. But if the decrease in hours is due to positive changes--studying for an advanced degree, re-marrying after a lonely period of divorce, caring for a new baby, etc.--maybe we ought to be amazed that these individuals squeezed out as much time as they did to volunteer at all!

Here are two possible explanations for why the number of hours have gone down:

- The study has picked up the success of such programs as City Cares or Make a Difference Day, which offer people the chance to contribute volunteer talents without making a long-term commitment. If the overall numbers of volunteers have gone up, this means that fears that such one-time projects will divert potential long-term volunteers might be unfounded. In fact, the data may give evidence that the one-day events have brought out more people who had not been involved before.
- Perhaps the drop in hours served is an indicator of effective volunteer management! In the past, organizations complacently wasted a lot of volunteered time. Today, with pressure to efficiently make use of a volunteer’s available schedule, perhaps we have succeeded in facilitating even greater accomplishments in less time. Of course, we can’t tell, since none of the studies looks at achievements, impact, or even the roles volunteer fill (reporting field of endeavor does not explain the work contributed).

I find the IS study fascinating--and thank them sincerely for continuing to provide us with the only consistent source of data on volunteering at all. But I want us all to avoid snap judgments based on those figures. For example, for a long time I've taken exception to how the data correlating educational level and volunteering is interpreted. The statistics tell us that the higher a person's educational level, the more likely they are to volunteer. Do you think this is due to education leading people to volunteer or might it be due to our tendency to recruit volunteers most like the staff they will be working with? How often do we actively recruit blue collar volunteers?

Take a look at the new figures and share what you think. What do they mean to you? To your program? Do they reflect your experience in running a volunteer program? What data might be more valuable to volunteer administrators?

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Submitted by Cathy Kort, Volunteer Coordinator, Hollygrove, California

I used the results of this study to "energize" my own volunteer force at our annual banquet. Our volunteers each give on average 200 hours a year (2-4 hours a week) and support our agency with 15,000 to 20,000 hours total per year- it made them feel very good in comparison. They serve abused children at a residential treatment center in Los Angeles. I do not see the downward trend in hours as negative at all, especially if volunteer coordinators have found a way to make it work for their agencies. I believe these statistics primarily reflect a large increase in corporate involvement and all of our agencies benefit by the exposure we get from these events and our opportunity to recruit for longer term volunteers. Make it an integral part of your recruitment strategy!

Submitted by Andy Fryar, Executive Officer, Lyell McEwin Health Service Volunteers Inc., Adelaide, Australia

Someone once said that there were three categories of lies - 'lies, damn lies and bloody statistics' (or something like that!) The issue of statistical analysis of volunteer contribution is a fascinating topic and one which is so heavily laden by the boundaries set by those conducting the survey, that it becomes increasingly difficult (and frustrating) to try and compare one survey from the next.

The other issue is that statistics can be twisted to make whatever point the distributor of those statistics is wanting to make. For me (as for other respondents), the opportunity for community development and personal growth as part of the volunteer experience will always far outweigh the number of hours contributed. The advantage which larger organisations like ours have over smaller projects, is that we have a variety of tasks and available hours which readily allows us to meet the needs of the individuals wishing to contribute time. Increasingly I am finding a larger proportion of people who are wanting to contribute a smaller amount of time than in the past - and my experience is that for many of these people volunteering is now about a lifestyle choice - rather than being undertaken out of a sense of moral obligation. Keep us thinking Susan.

Submitted by Lesley Dunn, Executive Director, Volunteer Resource Centre, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

As an organization that recruits volunteers for over 110 organizations, the positions that are posted with us are for those individuals that are highly skilled. And they are filled quickly. Routine positions are few and far between, and definitely harder to match. Why? When we ask, we find out that the more routine positions require a significant amount of supervision, something our agencies in Nova Scotia are finding increasingly difficult to do. Those with high skill sets are seeking opportunities which they can parachute in and parachute out of. We all lead busy lives, work, home, family and faith commitments all play a vital role in our time allocation. No matter which way you look at it, you hit the nail on the head - the clock only has 24 hours, and short term commitments mean I get a variety of experiences, while at the same time providing support to a group or agency in need.

Submitted by Bonnie Jennings Steele, The Stamford Hospital, CT

Right on Susan! Your comments show that you are aware of what is happening in the "trenches". Indeed, we ARE attracting people who wouldn't have volunteered were it not for the convenience of a short-term assignment, or for one that allows them to spend that time with their family while volunteering or for one that fits with their variable work/life schedules. Hours don't express value added or dollars saved. We, as professional in volunteer management, must find new and better ways of expressing these gifts of time and talent.

Submitted by Susan Lebovitz, Community Resource Coordinator, Mental Health Assoc. of the Heartland, Kansas

Your analysis of the survey interested me! Our volunteer hours are up, but then again the MHAH didn't have a dedicated volunteer manager before, and my job description basically calls for 50% of my time to be devoted to volunteer management. However, I find flexibility the name of the game. All the volunteers give a minimum of 2 hours when they volunteer, as opposed to volunteering in just 4 hour shifts, and trainings take place whenever I can train at least 2 volunteers--again as opposed to offering trainings only on specific days. This makes for some hectic weeks for me, but I sincerely feel I would lose good volunteers if they had to give 4 hours at one time, or only train on a Wednesday evening or Thursday morning, etc. Everyone's schedule is already so incredibly full, I discovered if I allow people to volunteer for a shorter time frame, they stay with the organization longer. After all, volunteering should be stress free, while still helping the organization!

Submitted by Kate Munro, Mater Community Integration Manager Mater Hospital, Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia

Ah, at last - a voice of reason in the long ongoing debate about meaningful statistics! Hours - well considering that the measurement of time is something "man" invented, how much meaning can we give it? I keep statistics of the hours my volunteers contribute - purely for the benefit of my "professional management colleagues"- not for my volunteers. I'm not saying that this is all a bad thing but it is certainly not what I am interested in - things like -are the volunteers having a good time and growing and developing as human beings will always take a front seat in my world. I invite my volunteers to complete a satisfaction survey each year and this year I asked them to identify at least 3 benefits of their volunteering and let me tell you the joy involved in reading their replies has much

more meaning to the whole organisation than their 20,000 hours!! Please continue to keep on challenging all of us Susan -you are a gem.

Submitted by Joseph Cruice, Coordinator - Compeer of Suburban Phildelphia, PA - USA

I feel that it is true that people seem to be busier than ever and feel like they have less time to donate. This presents a challenge to a volunteer organization! It is imperative that the volunteer organization presents the opportunity to volunteer with them as something fun, exciting and meaningful. I also think that it is important to constantly strive to find new ways to recognize and acknowledge volunteer service!

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