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Wouldn't It Be Nice to Really Know

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

June

2006

I just ended yet another telephone conversation with a newspaper reporter who was doing research for an article about volunteering. As always, he began by wanting statistics. And, as usual, I was forced to reply: “We really don’t have a lot of facts.”

Trends in volunteering are reported largely based on observation and anecdotes rather than on hard data. Or, worse, extrapolated globally from very narrow research. The very first American study on who volunteers and where volunteering occurs was conducted only in 1970 – so “facts” earlier than that can only be inferred from a wide variety of non-statistical sources. Then no one did another study of any note until the 1990s. Today, the American government (Bureau of Labor Statistics) and other governments around the world are finally collecting rudimentary data on an annual basis, but this research is more tantalizing for what’s not revealed than for what is.

In December 2001 I offered the Hot Topic, “It's Time to Start Counting Volunteers Seriously” ([/hot-topics/2001/december](#)), in which I questioned why all data on volunteering is collected only by asking *individuals* about their volunteering habits, without any balancing research on what *organizations* report about their involvement of volunteers in their work. Labor statistics most often are collected from *employers*, not their employees, and companies are mandated to provide much of the information. Yet it remains optional for nonprofit and government agencies to report what volunteer services they receive – and very few report this at all. (Remember: What we don’t assess, we don’t value.)

Because questions about volunteering are almost always asked as a small part of a larger study, respondents are rarely asked more than a few questions and often just one or two. These are generally a variation on the theme of: “Have you volunteered somewhere in the past 12 months?” or “What do you estimate as the amount of time you volunteer in an average month?”

The problem is that volunteering is actually more complex – by many magnitudes – than paid work. So, a simplistic overview of aggregate numbers is not enough for us to understand what’s going on. If we ever hope to encourage researchers to do serious data collection about our field, then we need to

articulate some better questions to ask. To this end, here are a few possible queries the answers to which would certainly interest *me* – how about you?

From Individuals about Their Civic Engagement...

- How many different sorts of volunteering did you do this year and for how many different organizations?
- What types of volunteer assignments do you carry (*not just where do you do it*)?
- If you also volunteered last year, did you take on *additional* volunteer work this year? Or did you leave one volunteer role to take on another? (Why?)
- Do you volunteer regularly on a weekly or monthly schedule? Or is the majority of your volunteer work one day at a time or seasonal (like Christmastime)? Or Both?
- If you mainly volunteer for one-day projects...
 - Is this a change from the past when you did ongoing volunteer work? Or did the availability of one-day projects enable you to serve for the first time or more frequently?
 - Do you return to the same organization/project or do you purposely select different causes each time?
- Do you engage in single days of service as part of an organized group, such as your place of worship or employment? Do you repeat days of service to continue as part of this group, regardless of the project selected?
- When you've done a single day of service, have you ever been directly invited to join that organization as an ongoing volunteer?
- Why do you *stay* at this volunteer work?
- Does it matter to you if the organization is a nonprofit, government agency, or for-profit? Would be more or less likely to offer your services if one or the other?
- Do you ever take members of your family along when you volunteer? Who and what ages? Do you ever take friends?
 - Did an organization ever refuse to allow you to volunteer with one or more children?
- If you stopped some form of volunteer service this year, why?
- Why do you think organizations want volunteers in the first place?
- Has volunteering ever helped you in your work or professional life? How?

- If you were required to do “community service” in college or even high school, did it introduce you positively to volunteering, reinforce volunteering you had already been doing, or turn you off from further volunteering?
- In your experience, what has changed about volunteering in the last twenty years?

From Organizations about Patterns in Volunteering by Setting...

First, I'd love every organization that receives money from any government source or private foundation to be asked to report solid information about their involvement of volunteers, including such things as how they define the term, what exactly volunteers do, and whether they include board members in their tally, or student interns, or mandated service, etc. Then I'd want to know – from the “end user” of volunteers – about the age breakdown, gender profile, and all sorts of demographics of their volunteer corps. If we ever get *comparable data* from different types of settings, then my further questions would be:

- Are there clear patterns of volunteering preference by any characteristic?
- After accounting for population limitations, is rural volunteering really different from urban volunteering?
- Let's combine several data sets and see what happens. Instead of simply saying, “most people over age 50 want X or Y” (all those Baby Boomer studies), what would we learn if we compare:
 - People over age 50 who are college graduates vs. over age 50 and only graduated high school?
 - People over age 65 who have a track record of volunteering for at least 25 years vs. those who rarely volunteered before retirement?
 - People who volunteer the same skills they use in their paying work (pro bono or donated professional services) vs. people who consciously choose totally different, even recreational, roles as volunteers?
- Can we see measurable differences in volunteering trends in schools vs. health care vs. environmental protection? Why?
- Is church attendance always an indicator of volunteer service (as past studies have concluded) or does this vary from one type of volunteer work or setting to another? Might there be, for example, some form of volunteering in which the opposite conclusion can be drawn?

I am not an academic researcher and have not attempted to word the questions above in language that would pass muster for statistical validity. That's not the point. I am simply trying to offer the scope of questions that could be posed, if we stopped assuming “all volunteers” can be predicted from a few. Would we compare data about nurses to data about truck drivers? Rarely. So let's

acknowledge that the characteristics, trends, and implications of data will be different for volunteers who are nursing home visitors, Little League coaches, museum docents, or stream water monitors. And if there are *not* differences, wouldn't *that* be important to know, too?

What volunteer data questions would you want the answers to?

How could/would you use such data?

What practices might you change in your volunteer program if you knew more details about the general volunteering demographics in your country?

Non-U.S. residents please share your experiences. Are national (or other) studies conducted in your country? How often? If so, how do you use the information?

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Posted on 28 June 2006 by Myia Johnson, Harris County, Guardianship Program, Volunteer Program Coordinator, Houston, TX USA

The Corporation for National & Community Service recently published a study that reports on some of the questions posed by Ms. Ellis.

It's called "Volunteering in America: State Trends and Rankings 2002-2005" and is available for download in pdf format on the AmeriCorps website: www.americorps.org

Posted on 16 June by Jayne Cravens, Insane Consultant, Bonn Germany

I'd so love to see research on all of the topics below, across various sectors.
From Individuals about Their Civic Engagement...

- have you used your work, home, or school computer as part of your volunteer service? If yes, how?
- what kinds of volunteering do you wish you could do that you haven't been able to?
- if you could give an organization one piece of advice regarding working with volunteers, what would it be?

From Organizations...

- do you call those who work at your organization without pay "volunteers", or do you have another name for them? (advocates, evangelists, mentors, etc.)
- do any of your volunteers ever use their work, home, or school computers as part of their volunteer service? If yes, what do they do? And approximately how many have done so?
- do you contact your volunteers by email? if not, why not?

- do you have complete information on your organization's web site about volunteering at your organization? (steps in how to become a volunteer, application form, details about orientation/training, etc.) If not, why not?

For organizations not in North America, and excluding Australia New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Ireland (all the developed English-speaking countries):

- what are the biggest barriers in your country to organizations involving more volunteers?

Posted on 8 June by Donna Lockhart, The RETHINK Group, Consultant, Ontario Canada

This is a great topic. In Canada we have great data available and it's growing, as mentioned in the other responses. I see the challenge in 3 areas, managers of volunteers: 1) are not trained in conducting research, analysis and interpretation; 2) nor in the application or "the SO-What" does this mean to our volunteer programs; and 3) they do very little strategic planning!

As a private sector consultant, I just applied volunteer data and local population stats to examine capacity building for breakfast programs in schools/rural and urban communities. The programs were targeting people in the least likely population sector to volunteer, so they had recruitment challenges. We used this information and the population profile to build some new approaches.

***Posted on 6 June by Natalie Lue, COPA, Volunteer Manager
Toronto Canada***

Volunteer Canada does a national survey on volunteerism which captures most of the data you mentioned in the article.

They survey volunteers and organizations that use volunteers. Volunteer programs specifically funded by public foundations (such as United Way) are required to complete annual reports on their programs including total volunteer hours and types of volunteer activities.

Volunteer Canada also did a national survey on volunteer management - who does it, what agencies hire them, salaries, educational backgrounds, pros and cons of the job, etc. They compiled data and developed a profile of volunteer managers. I'm sure the findings would be very similar to volunteer management in the U.S. This and other statistics can be found at <https://volunteer.ca/>.

***Posted on 5 June by Audrey Suhr, National Aquarium in Baltimore, Dir Vol Svces & Special Projects,
Baltimore, MD USA***Great topic! In assessing one's own programs, it would certainly be helpful to know national stats, and how stats compare within and between specific non-profit fields. For instance, valid retention figures (deactivated volunteers' years of service); ratio of paid organization's employees to volunteers (raw numbers, and FT equivalents); ratio of volunteer office employees to total volunteers; ratio of the organization's number of regularly scheduled vol individuals and hours worked to that of episodic volunteers, etc.

Posted on 5 June by Fataneh Zarinpoush, Imagine Canada, Senior Research Associate, Toronto Canada

This is a great topic and I am just wondering what you think about the Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (CSGVP). This survey is developed through a partnership of federal government departments and Canadian nonprofit and voluntary organizations (i.e., the Imagine Canada, Canadian Heritage, Health Canada, Human Resources Development Canada, Statistics Canada and Volunteer Canada). The first wave of this national survey was in 1997 and the latest report was just released (<http://www.imaginecanada.ca/our-programs/national-engagement-strategy>).

Posted on 5 June 2006 by Alan York, School of Social Work, Bar-Ilan University Dr Ramat-Gan Israel

Your basic thesis is correct, in my opinion, though I believe that Gallup and the Voluntary Sector now run regular volunteer surveys. These are based on two or three questions only, but smaller surveys and researches ask all the extra questions, some of which you mention. Don't forget informal volunteering, short-term and long-term, outside of any organization. This may be the main form of volunteering among lower SES people.

Posted on 5 June 2006 by Kathleen Richardson, Southeast Steuben County Library, Volunteer Coordinator, Corning NY USA

We periodically do informal surveys and find wording is important. If the survey is not worded correctly, we end up with answers based on too many different perspectives to get a true picture. Statistics on age ranges, towns of residence, hours volunteered, etc. go to our Director, Board members, towns, and others who financially support us. Statistics are also used in grantwriting for the library and for the volunteer program itself. We also use statistics from independentsector.org.

Posted on 4 June 2006 anonymously ML, Vancouver Canada

This is a very interesting and complicated subject and I'm so glad you are posing some new questions. I'm involved with a number of community policing centres in Canada which offer various volunteer-run programs. Aside from the usual collection of numbers, we really need to know how effective the programs are and if they're making a difference. Crime stats don't tell us the true story as many don't report minor crimes anymore, or the police take all the credit. If anyone has ideas on how to measure such outcomes, please advise. Thanks, ml

Posted on 4 June 2006 by H Roberts, PLNJ Inc., President, NJ USA

I wonder to what extent grants, and monies distributed year after year to programs that barely operate well, play a decisive part in why data is lacking. Who will bite the hands that feed us?

When I began working for non profits I was amazed and underwhelmed by the number of local programs, national "affiliate" chapters and "system-based services" that did little to change the status quo. With a few years under my belt, I also believe you raise a two-sided argument. Those that fund should also make accountability and priority.

Further, (IMO) chain of command politics should have limited as well as recordable influence over social service. Often the added frustration comes in realizing just who "we" are accountable to.

Great hot topic!

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