



Nonprofit Sector

Building a Knowledge Base

Distinguishing Characteristics of Active Volunteers in Canada

People who volunteer give a valuable gift to others—their time. In Canada, almost a third of adults spend some time volunteering for charitable and voluntary organizations.

Are volunteers different from non-volunteers in some observable way? What characteristics might set them apart? Is there a profile of traits that can be used to recognize the people who are most likely to be volunteers?

A study undertaken at Statistics Canada to answer these questions sketches a broad yet detailed picture of the distinguishing traits of Canadian volunteers. The study analysed data from the 1997 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating, which contained detailed information from a sample of 18,301 Canadians aged 15 years and older.

Of the 31% of adults who reported having volunteered for a charitable or community organization, the top third accounted for more than 80% of total volunteer time, while the bottom third accounted for only 3%. Consequently, the research focused on the most active half of all volunteers—people who volunteered more than the annual median number of hours (66) nationally. This group was responsible for nearly 90% of total volunteer time in Canada in 1997.

The study compared Canadians who actively volunteered with those who did not volunteer at all on a wide range of social and economic characteristics—47 in all.

The Need for this Research

In recent years, there has been a major shift in views about the institutions responsible for the well-being of Canadians. This has sparked considerable public debate about the proper role of government and other sectors of society in this area.

As the public sector has reduced its social spending, there has been pressure to broaden the functions of the nonprofit sector and to give households, families and local communities more responsibility for the well-being of their members.

This has led to a new emphasis on the work of the charitable and voluntary sector and the resources it needs to do that work.

While attracting and retaining volunteers has always been a major challenge for charitable organizations, it has become an even larger one in the 1990s. By providing information on the characteristics of individuals who contribute time and effort to charitable organizations, this research can help nonprofit organizations understand what kinds of individuals are more likely to become volunteers.

Statistics Canada, with financial assistance from the Kahanoff Foundation, is developing a body of knowledge on the nonprofit sector in Canada through its **Nonprofit Sector Knowledge Base Project**. The findings from this project will be of particular interest to those researching the voluntary sector or working in nonprofit organizations.

This brief report summarizes a study conducted by Paul Reed and L. Kevin Selbee that seeks to identify distinctive traits shared by active volunteers in Canada. The authors can be reached at (613) 951-8217 or <reedpau@statcan.ca> for additional details from the study.

Initial analysis revealed large variations among regions. It was also evident that patterns of volunteering varied significantly across communities of different size and with the importance respondents ascribed to religion.

Consequently, the data were disaggregated by five regions (Atlantic, Quebec, Ontario, Prairies and British Columbia), by three community size categories (large urban with over

The characteristics traits of volunteers vary by region, community size and level of religious participation.

Some of the Characteristics Examined

Social and economic traits:

- age
- education
- employment status
- ethnicity
- gender
- household size
- income
- language
- marital status
- occupation
- strength of religious belief
- presence and age of children in the household
- religious participation
- self-assessed health status
- years of residence in the community
- size of community of residence

Traits specific to volunteering:

- charitable giving
- early life involvement in volunteer and civic activities
- participation in civic organizations
- reason for volunteering
- satisfaction with life

100,000 population, small urban and rural with population under 15,000), and by two levels of religious participation (low and high). This resulted in 30 different groupings of active volunteers, and a profile was prepared for each using logit regression techniques.

Findings and Implications

Active volunteers are different from non-volunteers, but not in a way that is standard in every part of the country; there is no single profile of traits common to active volunteers everywhere in Canada.

While there are several characteristics that are shared by nearly all active volunteers, the great majority of traits occur in patterns particular to different regions, community sizes and people with different levels of religious belief.

The one characteristic that sets the majority of volunteers apart and holds true across Canada is that of civic participation. Not only do active volunteers contribute their time to community and charitable organizations; they are also more likely than non-volunteers to be involved as members and participants in these organizations. Active volunteers are also more involved in charitable giving and in informal caring and helping.

Other principal distinguishing traits of active volunteers lie in a number of clusters concerned with early life experiences, household characteristics, religion-related factors, education, occupation, assessment of one's life situation, and reasons for volunteering.

The traits examined were ranked according to a composite score for each that combined the prevalence of each factor in the 30 subgroups examined with a measure of how useful, relative to the other factors in the model, each one is in distinguishing between volunteers and non-volunteers. On the basis of this score, the 10 most influential traits were found to be levels of civic participation and informal helping, the amount of charitable donations, having participated in student government, being socially active, household size, giving regularly to charity, having children aged 6 to 17, and level of education.

The trait profiles of active volunteers vary widely across regions and communities of different size. In some areas the profiles contain only a few traits, suggesting that active volunteers differ little from the rest of the population. In other areas, however, the profiles are much

more complex (that is, they contain many traits), suggesting that active volunteers in those locales are quite different from non-volunteers.

In general across Canada, the most complex profiles appear in Ontario (with an average of 12 traits in each statistical profile) while the least complex appear in the Atlantic Provinces (averaging only four traits per profile). Regional variation in the complexity of differentiating trait suggests that ambient social conditions strongly influence the kinds of people who become active volunteers.

Comparing trait profiles for rural Quebec with those for rural Ontario, for example, revealed less complexity in Quebec. In the Quebec profiles, a total of seven traits distinguish volunteers, including charitable giving, social involvement (civic and social participation and informal helping), health and satisfaction with life. In contrast, the profiles for rural Ontario contain a much larger, more diverse set of 13 traits: they include youth experiences, occupation, education, religion, family structure, ethnicity, social involvement and charitable giving.

Complexity of volunteer profiles also varies by community size in noteworthy ways. In general, the most complex profiles appear in large urban communities, while the simplest appear in smaller urban areas with populations ranging from 15,000 to 100,000. In the large urban centres of British Columbia, for example, the traits that distinguish active volunteers include life-stage and family-related characteristics (hours worked per week and number of children aged 6 to 17, as well as gender), education, occupation, ethnicity, youth experience (such as having volunteer role models as a

People who have volunteered early in life are much more likely to volunteer in adulthood.

youth, involvement in youth religious groups, and involvement in youth sports and school government), individual values (particularly having a sense of control over one's life) and social involvement (informal helping, and civic and social participation).

By comparison, the traits that differentiate volunteers from non-volunteers in small-town B.C. are fewer and less diverse: two family structure characteristics (marital status and children over age 13), two youth experience factors (youth teams and student government), charitable giving and social involvement (civic and social participation, and informal helping).

These variations across regions and community sizes point to the presence of different social dynamics in geographic and social contexts that 'generate' and sustain volunteer activity.

What is the overall picture of the active volunteer in Canada? This study sketches a portrait of a person who

- has been involved in civic activities as a youth;
- has an above-average education and occupation;
- feels a sense of personal responsibility for or interest in community affairs;
- feels a sense of satisfaction and control in life;
- has children under the age of 17 living at home in a larger than average household; and,
- engages not only in volunteering but in other forms of helping, contributing and participating as well, especially through religious organizations.

While these defining traits exist in different combinations and magnitudes across Canada, they suggest the presence of distinctive *values* shared by volunteers, factors that mould those values (such as early life experiences, education, religion and religiosity, and occupation) and particular social contexts that recognize and support them (such as region, language group, and community size.)

Not surprisingly, experiences with volunteering

and participating early in life are strongly associated with the decision to be a volunteer in adulthood.

Clearly, the propensity to volunteer can be enhanced through social learning. There is likely to be long-term payoff where volunteer opportunities for youth incorporate efforts to cultivate positive attitudes toward civic engagement, personal responsibility, and contributing to a common good. Other studies have shown that while compulsory community service programs aimed at students can raise the likelihood of their volunteering in adulthood, promoting positive attitudes and values toward volunteering is much more effective.

Most volunteers appear to share a concern for some kind of common good.

Many also believe that they have a personal responsibility to support and contribute to that common good. To understand this more fully, however, additional research on the values, attitudes, and motivations of volunteers is needed.

Recruiting volunteers might be more effective if recruiters recognized that volunteers are distinctive in different ways and to different degrees in different kinds of communities and in different regions of the country.

Volunteer organizations can potentially improve their recruitment processes by taking account of these differ-

ences and using local profiles to target prospective volunteers. Organizations in small towns in Nova Scotia, for example, would want to seek out different kinds of individuals than those based in large Ontario cities, in mid-sized Quebec communities, or in rural communities in Western Canada.

Questions for Future Research

Are there particular social settings (such as small urban communities and rural communities in certain regional contexts) that produce conditions which are especially favourable to volunteering and tend to bring out such behaviour? Are there milieux where the combination of prevalent norms and values, social networks, civic structures, and mixture of opportunity and need for helping, contributing and participating favour the development of a local culture of generosity?

Not only would answers to these questions bolster our understanding of volunteering, they would also shed light on something far greater—a profoundly important aspect of the fabric of Canadian society and Canada's social ethic.

This is one in a series of brief reports describing research findings of the Nonprofit Sector Knowledge Base Project that can be found in both official languages on Statistics Canada's Web site <www.statcan.ca>. Contact M. Saumure at <saummar@statcan.ca> if you would like more information on this research or if you would like to receive e-mail notification as these reports become available.