



# Community Economics

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Community Economics Newsletter

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## Volunteerism and Community Development<sup>1</sup>

Steven C. Deller

Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics  
University of Wisconsin-Madison/Extension

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It is widely recognized that effective community development efforts require high levels of volunteerism amongst business leaders and concerned citizens. Few communities can afford a full-time development staff and hence the need for community-wide

volunteerism. But what are the characteristics of those people who volunteer their time to better their community? Between September 2001 and September 2002 about 59 million people, or 27.6 percent of the population volunteered through or for an organization.

As expected, some population groups are more likely to volunteer than others. Parents of young children, for example, are likely to be involved with school or youth-related groups. Older persons, many of whom are in their early years of retirement, are more likely to volunteer than young adults. High school students are increasingly participating in volunteer activities in order to fulfill community service requirements. Women volunteered

at a higher rate, 31.1 percent, than did men who volunteered at a rate of 23.8 percent. This pattern remained consistent across age groups, education levels and other major demographic characteristics. Whites had a considerably higher volunteerism rate (29.4 percent) than blacks (19.2 percent) and Hispanics (15.7 percent). This latter pattern held for all age groups.

People aged 35 to 54 years are more likely to volunteer than those who are either younger or older. About one in three between the ages 35 to 54 volunteered, a rate that may be partially explained by the fact that a great majority of individuals of those ages have children at home. People with children at home volunteered at a rate of 36.5 percent compared to those who had no children at home, who volunteered at a rate of only 23.7 percent. Parents often volunteer for organizations for which their children participate. Indeed, volunteering to be a teacher or a coach is one of the most popular types of volunteer activity.

Education is one of the strongest predictors of volunteerism. When considering all volunteers, people with less than a high school diploma volunteered at a rate of only 10.1 percent, those with a high school diploma and no college volunteered at a rate of 21.3 percent, those with some college volunteered at a rate of 32.9 percent and 43.6 percent of those with a college degree volunteered.

Somewhat surprisingly, however, employment status does not really seem to influence rates of volunteerism. For example, people who are employed full-time volunteered at a rate of 28.5 percent and those who are employed part-time volunteered at a rate of 35.5 percent. But 25.3 percent of unemployed persons volunteered and those who are not in the labor force such as retirees and stay-at-home mothers volunteered at a rate of 23.7 percent.

Volunteers spent a median of 52 hours performing volunteer activities annually. While 34.1 percent of volunteers reported to have spent more than 100 hours volunteering, 21.5 percent reported having volunteered less than 15 hours. Some of the same groups that have high volunteer rates also devote a large number of hours to volunteering. College graduates, for example, with a volunteer rate of 43.6 percent, spend a median of 60 hours volunteering whereas those with less than a high school diploma volunteered a median of 48 hours. In addition, while those who are not in the labor force tend to volunteer at a lower rate, those who do volunteer spend a median of 72 hours a year volunteering. In addition, those who are over age 65 tend to devote the most hours with a median of 96 hours a year and 10 percent volunteer more than 500 hours a year.

Volunteers performed many different types of activities. Among the more commonly reported were teaching or coaching (24.4 percent), canvassing, campaigning or fundraising (22.9 percent), collecting, making, serving or delivering goods (22.2 percent) and serving on a board, committee or neighborhood association (16.3 percent). Clearly, people volunteered in ways that are closest to their own self-interests or skills. For example, people with school age children are more likely to volunteer to teach or coach children activities than those who do not have school age children. Similarly,

people with college educations are more likely to do consulting or administrative work than those without a high school diploma.

The data show that there are two primary ways in which individuals become involved in volunteering: two in five did so on their own initiative, approaching the organization for which they did volunteer work, and another two in five were asked to become involved by someone in the organization. There is little variation in how people become involved across age profiles, education levels, gender, or employment status.

Effective and sustainable community development requires a diversified pool of volunteers that are willing to assume leadership positions in some situations while at other times are willing to follow. The results of this Bureau of Labor Statistics' survey suggest that two of five volunteers are asked to become more involved. The results also suggest that people are most likely to volunteer for activities that they derive some direct benefit from such as parents coaching their children's sport teams. The results also suggest that while some are willing to volunteer numerous hours, concern must be expressed about over taxing the pool of community volunteers.

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Steven C. Deller  
Community Development Economist

*Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8, and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Arlen Leholm, Cooperative Extension, University of Wisconsin-Extension.*

*University of Wisconsin-Extension, U.S. Department of Agriculture and Wisconsin counties cooperating. UW-Extension provides equal opportunities in employment and programming, including Title IX and ADA.*

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<sup>1</sup> This essay draws on "Volunteerism in the United States"  
by Stephanie Boraas, *Monthly Labor Review* August 2003.

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