

## ISSUE BRIEF

# Volunteering in America

## An Overview of Corporation Research



*As part of its mission to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering, the Corporation for National and Community Service conducts research about the volunteer activities of Americans. The Corporation believes that volunteering is not just nice to do, but a necessary aspect of meeting the most pressing needs facing our nation, including poverty, illiteracy, care for the elderly, disaster response, and youth in need of mentors to help them succeed in life. Corporation research, based largely on comprehensive data collected annually by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, is aimed at providing government and nonprofit leaders with a deeper understanding of volunteer habits and trends in order to help them develop better strategies for engaging more Americans in volunteer activity.*



### VOLUNTEERING TRENDS

- Americans are volunteering at a historically high rate. In fact, since 1989 the adult volunteer rate has increased by more than six percentage points, from 20.4% to 26.7% in 2006.
- The growth in volunteering since 1989 has been led by teens (ages 16-19), Baby Boomers (ages 45-64), and older adults (ages 65 and older).
- Although the national volunteer rate remains at a historically high level, it dropped from 28.8% in 2005 to 26.7% in 2006.



### VOLUNTEERING IN AMERICA'S STATES AND CITIES

- 26.7% of adult Americans nationwide—or 61.2 million people—volunteered in 2006. However, about a third of those who volunteer each year—more than 20 million people—do not return to volunteer the following year.
- Volunteer rates among the 50 states and District of Columbia vary significantly,

ranging from 17.5% to 45.9%. States with high volunteer rates include Utah, Nebraska, Minnesota, Alaska, and Kansas.

- Among the nation's 50 largest metropolitan areas, volunteer rates vary significantly—from 14.4% to 40.5%—though the cities with the highest rates tend to be located in middle America.

### VOLUNTEER IMPLICATIONS

- Volunteering produces significant health benefits. Individuals aged 65 and older who volunteer tend to have greater longevity, lower likelihood of depression, higher functional ability, and less likelihood of heart disease.
- There is a "class gap" in youth volunteering, with youth from disadvantaged circumstances reporting less engagement in positive civic behaviors than other youth. However, when youth from disadvantaged circumstances engage in volunteering, school-based service, and service-learning, they are more likely to continue on the path of service for a lifetime.

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## COMMUNITY FACTORS CAN PROMOTE OR INHIBIT VOLUNTEERING

- Areas in which residents show greater levels of community attachment, as demonstrated by factors such as home ownership, tend to have higher rates of volunteering.
- Volunteering rises with community education levels, particularly with high school graduation rates, and declines with increasing poverty rates.
- Long commutes to work can drive down an area's volunteering rate, as cities that have longer average commuting times tend to have lower levels of volunteering.
- Communities with a higher prevalence of non-profit organizations and with organizations that are better able to retain volunteers have higher volunteer rates.

## CORPORATION RESEARCH REPORTS

*Volunteering in America: 2007 City Trends and Rankings (2007)*. Provides data and profiles volunteering trends in the nation's 50 largest metropolitan areas.

*Volunteering in America: 2007 State Trends and Rankings in Civic Life (2007)*. Provides data on volunteering at the national, regional and state levels, including state level rankings and individual state profiles for the second time. Includes a first-ever Civic Life Index, which ranks overall civic health based on factors such as volunteer rates, voting rates, attendance at public meetings, and prevalence of civic associations.

*The Health Benefits of Volunteering: A Review of Recent Research (2007)*. Documents some of the major research findings on the relationship between health and volunteering. It has been shown that better health leads to continued volunteering, but these studies also show that volunteering leads to improved physical and mental health; thus, they are part of a self-reinforcing cycle.

*Volunteer Growth in America: A Review of Trends Since 1974 (2006)*. Provides an in-depth look at volunteering over the past 30 years, with particular attention paid to changing historical volunteer patterns by select age groups.

*College Students Helping America (2006)*. Identifies key trends in volunteering among college students, discusses future implications for volunteering given the changing college environment, and provides state rankings for volunteering among college students.

*Volunteers Mentoring Youth: Implications for Closing the Mentoring Gap (2006)*. Provides a greater understanding of the characteristics and traits that distinguish individuals whose volunteering includes mentoring youth from volunteers who do not mentor.

*Keeping Baby Boomers Volunteering (2007)*. Describes volunteering trends for Baby Boomers and projections for older Americans. Also provides strategies to harness Baby Boomers' experience and energy and identifies the factors likely to impact their decision to volunteer.

*Youth Helping America Series. Leveling the Path to Participation: Volunteering and Civic Engagement Among Youth from Disadvantaged Circumstances (2007)*. Examines the attitudes and behaviors of young people from disadvantaged circumstances, including volunteering and other forms of civic engagement.

*Volunteer Management Capacity Study (2003)*. Explores various issues around volunteer management, recruitment, and ways to improve volunteer management capacity.

## CORPORATION FOR NATIONAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICE

The Corporation for National and Community Service improves lives, strengthens communities, and fosters civic engagement through service and volunteering. Each year, the Corporation provides opportunities for more than 2 million Americans of all ages and backgrounds to serve their communities and country through Senior Corps, AmeriCorps, Learn and Serve America, and various other programs and initiatives. For more information or to read or download our reports, visit [www.nationalservice.gov](http://www.nationalservice.gov).

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