

ISSUE BRIEF:

Volunteer Growth in America: A Review of Trends Since 1974



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 periodic research into the volunteer activities of Americans. Its latest study, Volunteer Growth in America: A Review of Trends Since 1974, 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. Like other studies in the Corporation's "Volunteering in America" series, the findings in this report are based on data collected annually since 2002 by the U.S. Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics in a volunteer supplement to the Current Population Survey, a comprehensive and scientifically rigorous survey of 60,000 American households. Unlike past studies, however, the report also analyzes data on volunteering collected by the Census Bureau in 1974 and 1989. To ensure a fair and accurate comparison with the earlier surveys, several statistical adjustments have been made (see Methodological Note below).

KEY FINDINGS

- **Volunteering Is at a 30-Year High.**

At 27%, the rate of volunteering among adults in America today is the highest it has been during the past 30 years. The rate is 32% above a low of 20.4% in 1989, and 15% above the 1974 level of 23.6%.

- **The Growth in Volunteering Has Been Fueled by Three Groups: Older Teenagers (16-19), Mid-Life Adults (45-64), and Older Adults (65+).**

- The rate of volunteering among older teenagers today (28.4%) is more than double what it was in 1989 (13.4%) and 36% higher than in 1974 (20.9%).
- The rate of volunteering by mid-life adults today (30%) is 30% higher than it was in 1974 (23.2%) and 36% higher than in 1989 (22%). That finding suggests that Baby Boomers, who were born 1946-1964 and today make up the vast majority of mid-life adults, are volunteering in mid-life at a higher rate than past generations.

- The rate of volunteering among older adults today (23.5%) is 64% higher than it was in 1974 (14.3%) and 39% higher than in 1989 (16.9%).

- **The Increase in Volunteering Appears to Reflect Changing Lifestyles.**

Observable social trends such as the rise of service and service-learning in the schools, higher education levels among adults, delayed child-bearing, and longer life expectancy appear to be reflected in the growing volunteer rates for teenagers, mid-life adults, and older adults.

- **Volunteering Through Educational Groups Is Increasing.** The percentage of adult volunteers who serve through educational or youth service organizations has increased 63% since 1989, from 15.1% to 24.6%.

- **Volunteering Through Civic Groups Is Decreasing.** The percentage of adult volunteers who serve through civic, political, professional, and international organi-

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zations has decreased by 48% since 1989, from 13.2% to 6.8%.

- **More Americans Volunteer Through Religious Organizations Than Through Any Other Type of Organization.** A larger percentage of adults volunteer through religious organizations (35.5%) than through any other type of organization.
- **'Episodic' Volunteering Is Increasing.** At 59.3%, the percentage of volunteers who serve 99 or fewer hours a year is higher than it was in 1989 (54.7%), but lower than it was in 1974 (70.6%). The increase in "episodic" volunteering since 1989 has been driven largely by teenagers and mid-life adults.
- **Older Adults Volunteer Most Intensively.** The intensity of volunteering, as measured by the percentage of volunteers who give 100 or more hours a year, is highest among those age 65 and older. However, the percentage of older adult volunteers who serve intensively has dropped from 52.2% in 1989 to 46.1% today.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

To enable comparisons across the 1974, 1989, and 2003-2005 Current Population Surveys, a number of statistical and other adjustments have been made that account for variations from previously published figures. For example, the 1974 study included information on respondents ages 14 and 15, while the 1989 and recent studies focused on those age 16 and older. Also, to ensure greater accuracy, the rates for "today" are based on a combined dataset for the years 2003-2005, and they have been modified downward to account for the fact that a follow-up "prompt" to encourage respondents to think again about their activities over the previous 12 months was not included in the earlier surveys.

RELATED CORPORATION RESEARCH

College Students Helping America (2006) identifies key trends in college student volunteering.

Volunteering in America: State Trends and Rankings (2006) presents a national, regional, and state-by-state analysis of volunteer trends.

Volunteers Mentoring Youth: Implications for Closing the Mentoring Gap (2006) explores the characteristics that distinguish volunteers who mentor youth from those who do not.

Educating for Active Citizens: Service-Learning, School-Based Service, and Youth Civic Engagement (2006) looks at participation in school-based service among middle school and high school aged youth, paying particular attention to the relationship between different service-learning experiences and civic attitudes and outcomes.

Building Active Citizens: The Role of Social Institutions in Teen Volunteering (2005) explores the state of youth volunteering and the connections between youth volunteering and the primary social institutions to which teenagers are exposed—family, schools, and religious congregations.

Volunteer Management Capacity Series (2004) assesses the capacity of the nonprofit sector to engage volunteers in a way that provides the greatest possible impact and to provide meaningful volunteer opportunities.

CORPORATION FOR NATIONAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICE

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