

The determinants of volunteering

A new study by the Personal Social Services Research Unit at the University of Kent and The Volunteer Centre UK has identified some of the key factors which determine an individual's involvement in voluntary work. The study, a thorough statistical re-working of the data from the 1991 National Survey of Volunteering, looked both at all types of volunteering and at the specific areas of community care, committee membership and fundraising. The study found that:

- f** Overall, people on higher incomes and with greater educational attainments are more likely to volunteer, but this is not true of informal volunteering in community care where people in lower income groups are more likely to be involved.
- f** The relationship between age and volunteering shows participation reaching a peak in middle age and declining sharply after retirement.
- f** In contrast to all types of volunteering, women are generally more likely than men to volunteer in community care work although even here the picture is not straightforward, with men more likely to be involved in transporting and escorting activities.
- f** Also in contrast to all volunteering - where people from black and minority ethnic groups are less likely to volunteer - people from minority ethnic groups were found to be those most likely to volunteer in community care work.
- f** Those volunteers who received full out-of-pocket expenses were more likely to volunteer on a regular basis and put more time into their volunteering.
- f** Individuals who were motivated by the need to meet people or to make friends were more likely to become regular volunteers than those motivated by a connection with their paid job or because they have been asked to help.

The 1991 survey

The 1991 National Survey of Volunteering was based on a representative sample of 1,692 adults aged over 18 in the UK. It adopted a broad definition of volunteering and drew the distinction between 'formal' and 'informal' activity. The survey found that, in the twelve months prior to the survey, half the respondents had been involved in some formal, organised voluntary activity and three-quarters in informal volunteering.

The survey suggested that involvement in volunteering was linked to a range of socio-economic and demographic characteristics, such as age, income and occupational status. This second study looks in more detail at why people volunteer.

Key determinants of volunteering

The study suggests that certain factors appear to be associated with involvement in volunteering, although the picture is not straightforward and there are clear differences between different types and fields of volunteering.

All volunteering

In terms of all types of volunteering, the key factors which appear to influence participation include: income, length of time in full-time education, occupational group and age. In the case of the first three factors the relationship is positive and fairly straightforward, so that people on higher incomes and with greater educational attainments are more likely to volunteer. The relationship between age and volunteering is more complicated and shows an inverted U-shape pattern, with participation reaching a peak in middle age and declining sharply after retirement. The study found that people from black and minority ethnic groups are less likely to volunteer overall than white people (although the small sample of non-white people suggests caution in this interpretation).

Community care

Age and education remain important indicators of volunteering in community care, but there are some important differences to the general pattern. In contrast to all types of volunteering, women are generally more likely than men to volunteer in community care work, although even here the picture is not straightforward, with men the more likely to be involved in transporting and escorting. Also in contrast to all volunteering - where people from black and minority ethnic groups are less likely to volunteer - in community care people from

minority ethnic groups were found to be the most likely to volunteer.

The community care analyses also suggest caution is needed in concluding from the overall analysis that people from higher socio-economic groups are the most likely to volunteer. Whilst this is certainly the case for all forms of volunteering, it is not true of informal volunteering in community care, such as visiting sick or elderly people, where there is no such differential, nor indeed driving and transporting, where people in lower income groups are more likely to be involved. The study thus provides support to those who have argued that previous surveys have under-measured the contribution of the less well-off by concentrating exclusively on formal volunteering at the expense of informal volunteering.

Fundraising and committee membership

As with all volunteering and community care activities, the study found that volunteering in fundraising and committee membership is affected by a number of factors, both economic and non-economic. Being a committee member and being involved in fundraising is positively related to the age of leaving full-time education and income, although the income effect is not straightforward. As with the previous analyses, volunteering in these two areas was found to increase with age until a turning point when it declined; this was after the mid-50s for committee membership and about 40 for fundraising. People from black and minority ethnic communities were less likely than white people to be fundraisers, but ethnic group had no effect on committee membership. Earlier analyses had shown that employment status had little effect on volunteering overall. However, whilst this pattern held for fundraising, part-time workers were found to be more likely than others to be involved in committees.

Commitment and volunteering

In addition to simple participation in volunteering, the study looked at the factors which lead to a volunteer making a more regular contribution to an organisation. Two important factors stood out. Those volunteers who were motivated by 'social adjustment' needs, such as the desire to meet people and make friends, were found to be more likely to be regular volunteers than those motivated by other reasons. And those volunteers who were in receipt of full out-of-pocket expenses were also more likely to volunteer on a regular basis and put more time into their volunteering.

Issues for policy and practice

Money vs time

The study found evidence of a link between the 'cost' of giving money and volunteer participation, which tentatively suggests that there may be a trade-off between the two activities. This has implications for public policy. It is possible that any steps taken to increase the tax efficiency of charitable donations could have an adverse effect on the number of people coming forward to volunteer. Policy-makers may have to take a view over the respective merits of stimulating financial donations and volunteering, for they might not be able to do both.

Similarly, organisations may need to re-think their policies on recruiting volunteers and raising funds. This study questions the 'common sense' view that people who support an agency financially are more committed to the organisation and therefore more likely to volunteer as well (and vice versa). People, it appears, will most commonly give *either* time or money, not both. If organisations push volunteers hard to give money they may persuade them to donate but only at the expense of them giving up their voluntary work. Likewise, a drive to turn donors into volunteers may result in a rise in new recruits but a fall in income.

The importance of expenses

The study suggests that volunteers in receipt of expenses are more likely to make a regular commitment to the organisation and put more hours into their voluntary work. Quite apart from any other considerations, paying expenses would therefore seem to make good economic sense.

Overcoming barriers to volunteering

By establishing a close link between socio-economic group and formal volunteering, the study suggests that action needs to be taken to remove the barriers which prevent people on low incomes from getting involved in their local communities. This might include more payment of expenses and ensuring that regulations do not prevent people on unemployment or other state benefits from volunteering.

Targeting new groups

The finding that older people are less likely to volunteer also has implications for public policy. The demographic 'time-bomb' means a potential fall in the supply of volunteers at a time when government is seeking to extend the role of volunteers in the provision of social welfare and other services. Not only will an ageing society mean

fewer volunteers (as things currently stand) but it will raise the demand on existing volunteers to support the increased number of frail elderly people.

With the demand for volunteers increasing and the supply showing at best only a slight growth over recent years, organisations will need to broaden their recruitment strategies to target 'new' types of volunteers from under-represented groups.

Highlighting the social dimension

The finding that people motivated by 'social adjustment' needs are more likely to become regular volunteers suggests that groups should pay attention to the social aspects of participation when developing a volunteer programme. Making volunteering too 'task-orientated' and not building in a social dimension may work against volunteers making a long-term commitment to the organisation.

Preventing burn-out

The finding that volunteers who had given help before were more likely to be regular volunteers than first-timers suggests that organisations should not put too many demands on volunteers at the beginning of their period of involvement. Other studies have pointed to the danger of volunteer 'burn-out', where volunteers leave an agency because of the intense demands placed upon them.

Conclusion

The study, placed alongside what we know about social and economic trends in Britain, suggests a bright future for volunteering. The factors associated with being a volunteer - higher income, age at completion of full-time education - are likely to show changes which should increase the number of people coming forward to volunteer. However, there is no room for complacency. Other changes might work against volunteering, such as the ageing population and the changing structures of the labour market and the family. The challenge for public policy makers and volunteer involving organisations is to anticipate the trends and take action to harness the positive effects on volunteering and reverse (or at least limit) the negative effects.

About the study

Although an important indicator of the patterns of volunteering, the 1991 survey was limited in its statistical analyses and was unable to draw firm conclusions about which factors had the most bearing on an individual's participation in voluntary work. In order to examine this issue in more detail and separate the key determinants of volunteering, the PSSRU and The Volunteer Centre UK decided to conduct some rigorous, searching analyses of the data collected in the 1991 survey.

Further information

Further information may be obtained from the authors: Professor Martin Knapp at the PSSRU, University of Kent at Canterbury, Cornwallis Building, The University, Canterbury, Kent CT2 7NF, and Dr Justin Davis Smith, The Volunteer Centre UK, Carriage Row, 183 Eversholt Street, London NW1 1BU.

The full report, **Who Volunteers and Why? The key factors which determine volunteering**, is available from The Volunteer Centre UK, Carriage Row, 183 Eversholt Street, London NW1 1BU, Tel: 071 388 9888, price £6.95, including postage and packing (ISBN No: 1 897708 02 5).

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