

Patterns of volunteering over the life cycle

by L. Kevin Selbee and Paul B. Reed

This article has been adapted from *Patterns of volunteering over the life cycle*, one in a series of reports from Statistics Canada's Nonprofit Sector Knowledge Base Project.

A teenager working in a hospital gift shop after school, a parent coaching their child's soccer team, a senior sitting on the board of directors of a community social service agency — these are some of the faces of volunteering in Canada today. A significant proportion of

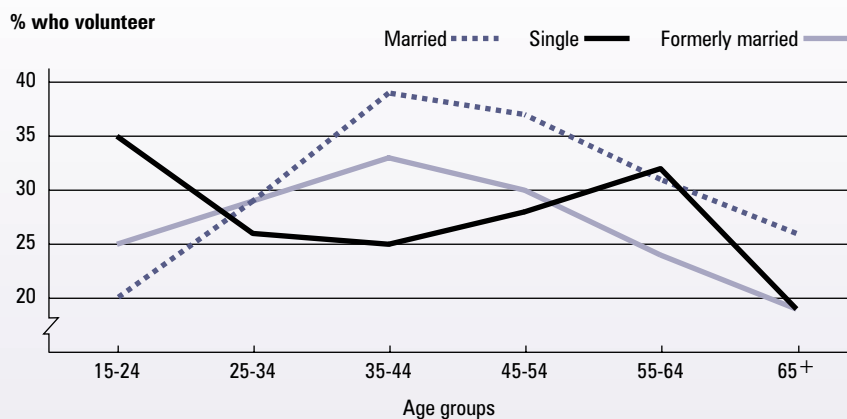
Canadian adults offer their time and energy to work as volunteers.

Volunteering varies in orderly patterns as people move through the different circumstances of their lives. Generally, it rises from a low in teenage years through early adulthood to a peak in the late 40s and 50s and declines thereafter. However, these overall, age-specific rates mask some important differences, which emerge when such life events as getting married, having children and working are considered. Using data from the 1997 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (NSGVP), this article probes how different mixes of social factors increase or diminish the likelihood that a person will be a volunteer at different stages of the life cycle. It also considers the relationship between social connectivity and volunteering.

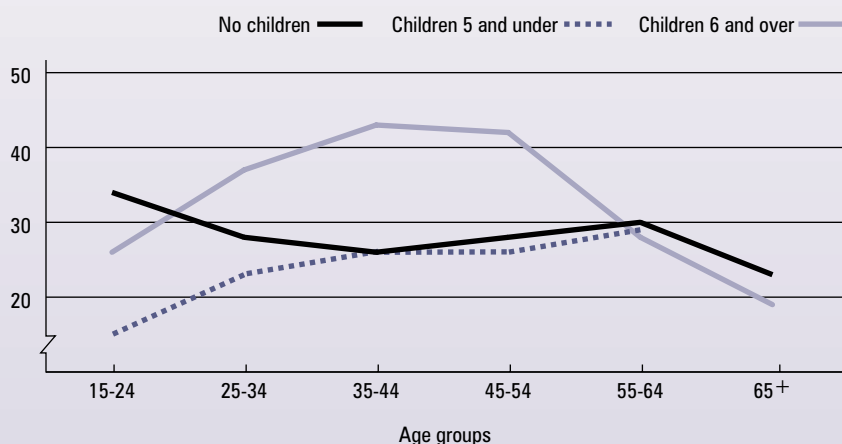
Marriage and children are key influences on volunteering

The formation and dissolution of partnerships are important parts of the life cycle that affect many of the subsequent choices people make. In general, married individuals tend to volunteer more than those who are single or formerly married. The only exceptions occur in the 15- to 24-year-old group, in which singles were more likely to volunteer than married individuals (35% compared with 20% in





... as are those with children 6 years and over in the home



Source: Statistics Canada, National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating, 1997.

1997) and in the 25- to 34-year-old group, in which people volunteered at equal rates regardless of their marital status. While married and formerly married people volunteer most between the ages of 35 and 44, singles this age tend to volunteer the least.

Perhaps even more than getting married, having children brings changes with far-reaching consequences. Once people become parents, their obligations, expectations, roles and outlook on life often change quite dramatically. Not surprisingly, then, the presence and age of children also affect the likelihood that individuals will volunteer. Overall,

having young children (age 5 and under) reduces, while having older children (age 6 and over) increases, the probability of volunteering.

People without children volunteer at the same rate as singles, and those with older children volunteer at the same rate as married individuals. Of course, married people may volunteer at higher rates than singles because they are more likely to have children, whose various educational and recreational activities get parents involved. Indeed, when the presence and age of children are held constant, there are no significant differences in volunteering rates for marital groups at most ages.

Three important exceptions do, however, exist. Among people with no children in the home, single 15- to 24-year-olds and married seniors were significantly more likely to volunteer than other marital groups. And among people with older children, married parents between 25 and 64 were consistently leaders in volunteering.

Over one-third of 15- to 24-year-olds without children volunteer

Multi-dimensional cross-tabulations were used to further identify factors that influence rates of volunteering.¹ The first question addressed was why single childless 15- to 24-year-olds volunteer more than their married counterparts. Results indicated that religion was the only factor that could explain the difference in rates. Furthermore, the results were significant only for Protestants (51% of singles and 24% of married individuals volunteered) and Catholics (31% versus 20%, respectively). Among people with no religious affiliation, rates of volunteering were the same regardless of marital status. Results were inconclusive for those of other religions.

It could be that these young married Protestants and Catholics volunteer less than their single counterparts because, being at an early stage of their marriage, they are more focused on their own lives than the affairs of the larger community. Indeed, when 15-to 24-year-olds' involvement in the community is examined, it becomes clear that single Protestants and Catholics tended to have higher community participation

1. The variables examined included education (high school or less, some postsecondary, and university or more), labour force status (working full-time, part-time, or not in the labour force), religion (no religion, Catholic, Protestant and other religions), gender, and student status.

Data for the analysis in this article come from the 1997 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (NSGVP) that was conducted in private households in the 10 provinces. The NSGVP interviewed 18,301 Canadians aged 15 years and over, of whom 31% reported that they had given time as an unpaid volunteer to a non-profit organization at least once during the preceding 12 months.

Multi-dimensional cross-tabulations were used to arrive at rates of volunteering across age groups and a method called analysis of variance was employed to test for differences between groups.

Single: never married.

Married: legal marriage or common-law union.

Formerly married: individuals who are widowed, divorced or separated.

Individuals with older children: those who have at least one child aged 6 or over. Younger children may or

may not be present in these homes.

Indices of community participation

Civic participation: membership in political organizations, religious groups, service clubs and other community organizations.

Social participation: the frequency with which a person interacts with family and friends in various social settings.

Frequency of church attendance: the number of times per year the individual attends religious services.

Number of organizations: the number of organizations a person belongs to.

Years of residence in the community: proxy for the extent to which a person becomes integrated into or connected with their community over time.

Informal helping: supporting others in ways that do not involve organizations.

rates than those who were married.² Singles were equally, or more, active in community organizations than their married counterparts: they were more active socially with family and friends, went to church much more often, volunteered for twice as many organizations, and had lived longer in their communities.

Research has repeatedly shown that the more varied a person's involvement in their community, the greater the likelihood they will perform volunteer work.³ "Social connectivity" (or community involvement) reflects the scope and intensity of the ways people interact with other individuals and groups, be they family, friends, neighbours, store staff, coworkers, acquaintances, or strangers. Interactions with individuals can be described as either socially proximate (those with family members) or socially extended (those with people at one's workplace or others who are not family). Extended connectivity entails awareness of, and attention to, a range

of individuals and groups who extend beyond one's social world of immediate family and neighbours.

Being connected may lead to increased volunteering in a number of ways: other people's need for help becomes more apparent, the cause of organizations becomes more visible, more acquaintances are volunteers and, perhaps most important, one gets asked to volunteer more often. There is ample evidence that being asked is the main way people become volunteers and this happens most often among people who are known to, or in contact with, one another. It is reasonable, then, to conclude that single 15- to 24-year-olds' higher rate of volunteering is related to their more extensive involvement in activities in the community.

Nearly one-third of married seniors volunteer

The other group of people without children at home who have significantly higher volunteer rates than

others was married seniors 65 years and over. Both men and women in this age group volunteered at higher rates than those who were not married.⁴ What could account for this? As in the case of 15-to 24-year-olds, religion is the only significant factor. Among seniors in 1997, married Protestant and Catholic men and married women of other religions had volunteering

2. Six indices of community participation examined are: civic participation, social participation, frequency of church attendance, number of organizations volunteered for, years of residence in the community, and the number of different types of informal helping done in the past year. (See "What you should know about this study" for definitions.)
3. Wilson, J. and M.A. Musick. 1997. "Work and volunteering: The long arm of the job." *Social Forces*. 76: 251-272.
4. In analyzing this group, the single (never married) are combined with formerly married (widowed, divorced and separated) to create a single group of not-married individuals.

rates significantly higher than their not-married counterparts. No significant differences in rates of volunteering were found between married and not-married women of Protestant and Catholic denominations and those with no religious affiliation.

Seniors who volunteer more were more likely to be socially connected. And indeed, senior married Catholic and Protestant men, and senior married women of other religions, had significantly higher rates of community participation than their not-married counterparts — on all six indicators for Catholic men and on three of six for Protestant men and women of other religions.

Over 40% of married parents with older children volunteer

Through involvement in school and recreational activities, children aged 6 and over often draw their parents into volunteering. But in the 25- to 64-year-old group with older children, married parents volunteer at rates significantly higher than those who are lone parents. This is hardly surprising: with no partner to share the other demands on their time, lone parents likely have less time and energy to devote to volunteering.

Testing for the reasons behind this pattern reveal the by now familiar result: religion alone influenced volunteering. Only married Catholic and Protestant parents volunteer at significantly higher rates than lone parents in these denominations. But while married and not-married men show no differences in rates of volunteering, married Catholic and Protestant women are significantly more likely to volunteer than their not-married counterparts. Once again, the difference can be linked to social connectivity.

Five of six indices for both Catholic and Protestant married women with older children show higher levels of

CST Among people with older children, married 25- to 64-year-olds were most likely to volunteer				
	Age group	Single	Married	Formerly married
		%		
No children	15-24	35	23	--
	25-34	27	29	34
	35-44	25	26	33
	45-54	26	28	30
	55-64	31	31	26
	65+	19	26	19
Children 6 and over	15-24	--	--	--
	25-34	28	38	30
	35-44	22	45	34
	45-54	--	43	30
	55-64	--	30	16
	65+	--	22	15

-- Sample size too small to produce reliable estimate.
 Note: Numbers in bold are statistically significantly different from at least one other row entry.
 Source: Statistics Canada, National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating, 1997.

CST Among 15- to 24-year-olds with no children, one in two single Protestants offered their services as volunteers		
	Single	Married
	%	
No religion	30	32
Catholic	31	20
Protestant	51	24
Other religions	35	--

-- Sample size too small to produce reliable estimate.
 Note: Numbers in bold are statistically significantly different from the other row entry.
 Source: Statistics Canada, National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating, 1997.

CST Among 25- to 64-year-olds with older children, more than 6 in 10 married Protestant women volunteered				
	Women		Men	
	Not married	Married	Not married	Married
	%			
No religion	39	46	23	33
Catholic	21	37	26	37
Protestant	35	62	50	54
Other religions	35	26	--	27

-- Sample size too small to produce reliable estimate.
 Note: Numbers in bold are statistically significantly different from the other row entry within gender.
 Source: Statistics Canada, National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating, 1997.

community participation than for lone mothers. This same relationship holds for other groups as well: where levels of connectivity tend to be equal, the likelihood of volunteering tends also to be equal.

Full-time workers and the jobless volunteer at similar rates

Another component of the life cycle centres on a person's job and stage of career development. The typical progression begins with schooling, at times combined with part-time work, followed by full-time work in the labour force or unpaid work outside the labour force, and then retirement from the paid labour force.

Those employed full time and those with no jobs volunteer at roughly similar rates; significant differences occur only between the ages of 25 and 44. On the other hand, the rate for part-time workers and students combined⁵ are significantly higher than both full-time worker and no-job rates at all ages. Marital status, presence of children, education, income, occupation and even religion do not explain these differences. Examining levels of community participation clarifies the picture; the majority of connectivity indices — four out of six — are higher for the part-time/student group.

Summary

Differences in the rate of volunteering are associated with marriage, children and employment, three of the defining components of the life cycle. Married individuals volunteer more than those who are single, divorced, widowed or separated. Individuals with children 5 years and under

volunteer the least, those with children aged 6 and over volunteer the most, and those without children fall somewhere in between. Students and part-time workers tend to volunteer more than those who work full-time or those who are not in paid employment.

When data are examined more closely, however, these patterns are not as clear and it becomes apparent that there are important age-related differences in how life cycle circumstances affect volunteering. For example, patterns of volunteering by marital status differ across age groups and are influenced by the presence and age of children in the home. In the case of people without children, marital status affects volunteering only for young adults and seniors. For those between the ages of 25 and 64, marital status has no effect on volunteering if there are no children in the home; if there are children over the age of 6, married individuals are more likely to volunteer than those who are not married.

Additional patterns exist, but the important point is that a complex interplay of factors encourages or inhibits volunteering depending on the combination of an individual's life cycle circumstances. Nor are patterns across the full life cycle entirely due to differences in basic

socioeconomic characteristics such as religion, education or income. Religion makes a difference for some, while education and income do not affect the patterns in any consistent or pronounced way. The various conditions and factors overlap in numerous ways and how, in combination, they affect volunteering has not been identified with full precision.

Finally, the link between volunteering and levels of community participation shows that, among groups of individuals, who are often quite different, higher rates of volunteering are fairly consistently associated with higher levels of community participation of various kinds. There may be some benefit from a more thorough examination of the link between social connectivity and volunteer behaviour.



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5. The student and part-time rates were combined because after age 25 the student rate is much like that of the part-time group, and because the number of students for cohorts 34 years and over becomes very small.