Moving Ahead or Falling Behind?
Volunteer Promotion and Data Collection

Jeffrey L. Brudney, Beth Gazley

Substantial efforts have been expended to promote civic engagement during the 1990s and early 2000s. Yet as significant as volunteerism is economically, socially, and philosophically to the United States, surprisingly little in the way of longitudinal research has been carried out to assess the impact of these promotional activities. Few areas of civic engagement offer reliable trend data. We examine the available data in three areas: individual volunteering, volunteering to stipended government programs, and employee volunteering. We find modest but steady increases in volunteer numbers in all three areas, but point out numerous methodological problems that limit the reliability of present longitudinal data. We conclude by calling for a renewed financial investment in national volunteering surveys with a broader focus than current efforts.

For more than forty years, expanding the number and diversity of people who volunteer and the groups and organizations that support and sustain them has been public policy in government and a high priority in the voluntary sector in the United States (Chambré, 1989; Brudney, 1990). Joint organizational efforts to promote civic engagement were particularly prominent during the 1990s. They included the founding of new public and private agencies dedicated to civic service and greater coordination of federal,
state, corporate, and nonprofit promotional efforts. The Bush, Clinton, and Bush presidential administrations have exhibited a “remarkable continuity” in this respect (Perry and Thomson, 2004, p. 143). The most prominent of these efforts during the past three presidential administrations were the National and Community Service Act of 1990, the Presidents’ Summit for America’s Future in 1997, the Volunteer Protection Act of 1997, the United Nations International Year of Volunteers in 2001, and the establishment of the U.S. Freedom Corps in 2002. The public outpouring of voluntary aid following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the Southeast Asian tsunami of December 2004, and the inundation of the Gulf Coast following Hurricane Katrina in 2005 have served to reemphasize the value of civic engagement in meeting public needs.

Although a multitude of public and private organizations now work jointly to promote civic service, they have had less success in determining the impact of their efforts. Of special concern is that even while the promotional drum beats louder, consistent and reliable methods of data collection are not in place to gauge their success. Exacerbating these concerns—or perhaps lending greater weight to the need—is the recent interest of the policy and academic communities in building volunteer management capacity. A 2004 report by the Urban Institute, the first nationally representative study of the state of volunteer administration and management in America’s charities and congregations, documented a relationship between organizational support for volunteer administration and the perceived benefits gained from volunteer involvement, such as higher-quality services, more detailed attention to clients, increased service levels, and cost savings. Organizational investment in volunteer administration, however, was found in this study to be relatively low, placing volunteer recruitment and retention in jeopardy in many agencies.

The Urban Institute study has sparked a spirited movement to extend volunteer management capacity (VMC) in host organizations. Without longitudinal data on the level of volunteering, however, it will be difficult to evaluate the success of efforts toward building VMC. We see a similar pattern regarding the promotion of civic engagement in general.

This article examines data on trends in volunteerism over the 1990s and early 2000s, with an eye toward evaluating—and invigorating—data collection efforts for the future. Presented in this article are data representing trends in individual volunteering, volunteering to government in stipended volunteer programs such as AmeriCorps, and volunteering through employee-based volunteer programs. We examine these three areas of civic engagement because they offer trend data, albeit of varying quality. As significant as volunteerism is economically, socially, and philosophically to the United States, surprisingly little in the way of longitudinal research has been carried out on this crucial area (Brudney and Gazley, 2002). We also
offer recommendations to improve the ability to measure the impact of these important organizational efforts.

**Trends in Volunteerism: Individual Volunteering**

Due to a well-known series of biennial surveys sponsored by the **INDEPENDENT SECTOR** (Weitzman, Jalandoni, Lampkin, and Pollak, 2002), trends in individual rates of volunteering over the 1990s are easiest to track. Table 1 presents the estimated rates of volunteering by the American public eighteen years of age and older for the period 1987 through 1998. Each assessment is representative of the American population and retrospective in nature; the survey asks about volunteering and philanthropic behavior for the year preceding the survey (the headings across the columns in Table 1 correspond to this year rather than to the year in which the survey was undertaken). The question is broadly worded, asking if the respondent volunteered time to an organization in the past year, whether regularly or sporadically, on several occasions or just once, for many hours or few: “By volunteer activity I mean not just belonging to a service organization, but actually working in some way to help others for no monetary pay.”

| Table 1. Rates of Individual Volunteering in the United States, 1987–1998 |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                                | 1987 | 1989 | 1991 | 1993 | 1995 | 1998 |
| Percentage of population volunteering | 45.3 | 54.4 | 51.1 | 47.7 | 48.8 | 55.5 |
| Total volunteers (millions)     | 80.0 | 98.4 | 94.2 | 89.2 | 93.0 | 109.4 |
| Average weekly hours per volunteer | 4.7 | 4.0 | 4.2 | 4.2 | 4.2 | 3.5 |
| Average annual hours per volunteer | 244.4 | 208.0 | 217.6 | 218.4 | 218.4 | 182.0 |
| Annual hours volunteered (billions) | 19.6 | 20.5 | 20.5 | 19.5 | 20.3 | 19.9 |
| Annual hours volunteered, excluding informal volunteering (billions) | 14.9 | 15.7 | 15.2 | 15.0 | 15.7 | 15.8 |
| Full-time-equivalent volunteer employment, excluding informal volunteering, at 1,700 hours per year per employee (millions) | 8.8 | 9.2 | 9.0 | 8.8 | 9.2 | 9.3 |
| Total assigned dollar value of volunteer time, excluding informal volunteering (billions of dollars) | 149.9 | 169.9 | 175.7 | 182.0 | 201.6 | 225.9 |

*Note:* Informal volunteering includes helping neighbors or organizations on an ad hoc basis (for example, babysitting for free or helping in school fairs). Formal volunteering involves regular work for an organization.  
The survey identifies a volunteer as “a person who gives time to help others for no monetary pay. Formal volunteering is defined as giving a specified amount of time to organizations such as hospitals, churches, or schools. Informal volunteering is performed on an ad hoc basis and involves helping organizations as well as individuals, including neighbors, family, and friends” (Weitzman, Jalandoni, Lampkin, and Pollak, 2002, p. 241).

The estimated rate of volunteering by individuals for the year appears in the top row of Table 1. The trend established between the first year assessed, 1987, and the final year, 1998, seems evident: the estimated rate of volunteering increased dramatically over this period from 45.3 to 55.5 percent. The percentage change in the rate of volunteering is even more dramatic: a gain of nearly 23 percent. The trend in the intermediate years between the end points is not so clear; it never falls below the 1987 rate, but it does not demonstrate consistent growth either. The same pattern characterizes other gross indicators of volunteering shown in Table 1: total volunteers; annual hours volunteered, excluding informal volunteering (billions); and full-time-equivalent (FTE) volunteer employment, excluding informal volunteering. Table 1 suggests that from 1987 to 1998, the estimated number of volunteers increased by almost 30 million persons (from 80.0 million to 109.4 million), a whopping 36.75 percent. Gross levels of volunteering appear to have risen substantially.

Some indicators in Table 1, however, suggest no increase and even a decline. For example, the average weekly hours per volunteer fell sharply over the 1987–1998 period, from 4.7 hours per week to 3.5 hours per week—a drop amounting to one-quarter or 25 percent in the average weekly hours per volunteer. The average annual hours volunteered illustrates the same trend, though not as clearly. The oft-cited assigned dollar value of volunteering (displayed in the last row of Table 1) has increased consistently and significantly over this period, yet these results suggest that the growth is due primarily to the rising hourly dollar value attributed to volunteer time rather than a pronounced increase in annual hours volunteered. In fact, annual hours volunteered varies relatively little over this period, remaining between 19.5 and 20.5 billion hours.

What these trends document—more Americans volunteering but for fewer hours per week on average—is an emergent phenomenon in volunteerism known as episodic volunteering. Nancy Macduff (1995, 2005) is credited with introducing the term, which refers to volunteers who give service that is short in duration (temporary) or at regular intervals for short periods of time (occasional). Michele A. Weber (2002) defines episodic volunteers as those who contribute their time sporadically, only during special times of the year, or as a one-time event. These volunteers give time without an ongoing
commitment, often in the form of self-contained and time-specific projects. Estimates from the 1998 INDEPENDENT SECTOR survey in Table 1 suggest that the level of episodic volunteering is substantial, rivaling the amount of volunteering to organizations at regularly scheduled times, weekly, biweekly, or monthly (Kirsch, Hume, and Jalandoni, 2000).

The shift toward short-term volunteerism brings to the light a trend whose implications for the field of volunteerism and volunteer management are significant yet not well understood. Once aware of the trend, we can begin to ask important questions about it. For example, how are nonprofit organizations and directors of volunteer programs coping with these trends? How problematic are the trends for the myriad service organizations that rely on an ongoing and permanent commitment of labor from volunteers? More fundamental, is the plethora of episodic or short-term volunteering opportunities now available, such as annual service days, projects, and events organized by various cities, national corporations (for example, the “Hands On” network), and volunteer centers (for example, “Make a Difference Day”), a response to this trend—or a cause of it? That is, does episodic volunteering encourage short-term projects and events, or do these projects inspire episodic participation? Regardless of the causal direction, can episodic volunteering serve as a gateway to more long-term volunteering?

The series of biennial INDEPENDENT SECTOR surveys can help to reveal such insights, but they are not without faults. Conducted by the Gallup Organization for the INDEPENDENT SECTOR, these in-person surveys yield large, nationally representative samples. However, the sampling frame used in these surveys (stratified, multistage, quota sampling) and the information presented in the published survey reports do not allow us to assess response rates. The 1999 survey report advised, “This report represents the last in-home survey conducted by Gallup, Inc. for Independent Sector. In December we were informed that Gallup would cease to offer in-home survey interviews citing problems with accessibility and low response rate” (Kirsch, Hume, and Jalandoni, p. iii); this development presaged a move to telephone administration in the 2001 INDEPENDENT SECTOR survey. Internal validity issues also arise because of the large number of subjective questions in the surveys, the sensitive nature of the questions pertaining to giving, and the reliance on memory recall. Although a possible outcome of the validity threats could be overstated rates of volunteering, the authors conclude, “Through the years, the surveys appear to have had greater success in capturing more accurately and completely information about volunteering than giving” (p. iv). These problems notwithstanding, the trend lines etched in Table 1 from the INDEPENDENT SECTOR surveys demonstrate the value of having a consistent source of longitudinal information.
Challenges and Promise for the Future

The INDEPENDENT SECTOR commissioned another national survey of volunteering (and giving) behavior in 2001, retrospective for the year 2000. According to the 2001 survey, 44 percent of adults age twenty-one and over volunteered with a formal organization in 2000 (Toppe, Kirsch, and Michel, 2002). However, changes in the methodology of the survey and in the ages encompassed in the sampling frame—twenty-one years of age and older in 2001 versus eighteen years of age and older in the previous surveys shown in Table 1—mean that the results of the 2001 survey cannot be directly compared with the INDEPENDENT SECTOR surveys of the past decade. These changes and the highly uncertain future of the INDEPENDENT SECTOR surveys highlight the challenge for longitudinal analysis and evaluation of volunteering.

Some relief may be on hand regarding future surveys of volunteering by the American public. At the urging of several government agencies, including the Corporation for National and Community Service and the USA Freedom Corps, in 2002 the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics began including questions regarding volunteering on its yearly Current Population Survey (CPS), replicated in 2003, 2004, and in 2005. Should this practice continue regularly, the resulting information would provide a useful complement to the INDEPENDENT SECTOR surveys.

Complicating longitudinal analysis are the differences between the INDEPENDENT SECTOR surveys and those conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). The BLS data on volunteering were collected through a supplement to the September CPS, a monthly survey of about sixty thousand households that obtains information on employment and unemployment among the nation’s civilian noninstitutional population age sixteen and over. Due to differences in samples, sampling methods, and question wording, the level of volunteering registered in the BLS surveys is much lower. (One notable difference between INDEPENDENT SECTOR and CPS surveys is the exclusion of “informal” or noninstitutional volunteering in the CPS.) According to the BLS, 28.8 percent of the population age sixteen and over volunteered from September 2003 to September 2004, the same percentage reported by the BLS for 2002–2003, and up slightly from the first BLS survey, 27.4 percent in 2001–2002.

The BLS surveys offer somewhat of a trade-off: we obtain access to a new source of data for trend analysis, based on highly sophisticated sampling methods, but the data continue to represent an incomplete picture of the full level of U.S. civic engagement. The very large sample size and the behavioral nature of the questions in the surveys offer gains in validity. Yet while it may appear that the BLS has stepped into the void created by the apparent departure of INDEPENDENT SECTOR from the survey arena, the limited number of questions that the BLS has asked in its surveys thus far are no
substitute for the kind of comprehensive, in-depth survey that INDEPENDENT SECTOR used to administer—and that the field needs. Moreover, any attempt to find a source of trend data that is more comprehensive and focused squarely on civic engagement will also need to account for a chief limitation in past sampling techniques: the emphasis on formal volunteering in these sources neglects other active and healthy forms of civic engagement that are less focused on institutional involvement (Stolle and Hooghe, 2005).

### Government-Stipended Volunteer Programs

Table 2 turns to the second aspect of volunteering examined in this article: trends over the past sixteen years (1988–2003) in government-stipended volunteer programs, such as AmeriCorps and Peace Corps. These data are both more difficult to obtain and to interpret than the surveys of individual volunteering from the INDEPENDENT SECTOR. Despite the fact that this information is

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>RSVP</th>
<th>FGP</th>
<th>SCP</th>
<th>AmeriCorps</th>
<th>Peace Corps</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>AC-State/National</td>
<td>VISTA&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>395,900</td>
<td>17,600</td>
<td>7,000</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>408,665</td>
<td>18,000</td>
<td>7,300</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>410,000</td>
<td>18,275</td>
<td>7,760</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>422,900</td>
<td>18,070</td>
<td>7,780</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>432,500</td>
<td>18,120</td>
<td>7,790</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>440,700</td>
<td>18,100</td>
<td>8,060</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>445,500</td>
<td>18,240</td>
<td>7,908</td>
<td>21,246</td>
<td>3,164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>450,000</td>
<td>18,550</td>
<td>8,130</td>
<td>21,376</td>
<td>2,864</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>450,000</td>
<td>17,100</td>
<td>8,130</td>
<td>21,778</td>
<td>2,506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>447,600</td>
<td>20,450</td>
<td>8,100</td>
<td>32,773</td>
<td>5,965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>450,550</td>
<td>22,130</td>
<td>8,600</td>
<td>35,642</td>
<td>4,256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>466,900</td>
<td>22,900</td>
<td>8,750</td>
<td>36,325</td>
<td>4,650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>470,440</td>
<td>23,094</td>
<td>9,194</td>
<td>47,578</td>
<td>4,464</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>473,791</td>
<td>23,340</td>
<td>9,273</td>
<td>51,938</td>
<td>5,826</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>483,346</td>
<td>23,968</td>
<td>9,666</td>
<td>13,738</td>
<td>5,569</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>484,168</td>
<td>24,389</td>
<td>9,896</td>
<td>56,824</td>
<td>6,397</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Increase, 1988–2003 | 88,268 | 6,789 | 2,896 | 35,578<sup>b</sup> | 3,433<sup>b</sup> | 448<sup>b</sup> | 2,922 |
| % increase, 1988–2003 | 22.3 | 38.6 | 41.4 | 167.5<sup>b</sup> | 108.5<sup>b</sup> | 60.6<sup>b</sup> | 63.4 |

**Note:** RSVP = Retired Senior Volunteer Program; FGP = Foster Grandparents Program; SCP = Senior Companion Program; AC = AmeriCorps; VISTA = Volunteers in Service to America; NCCC = National Civilian Conservation Corps. Sources: For Senior Corps: CNS, Public Information Office. For AmeriCorps: Education Award Enrollments Reports. For Peace Corps: Peace Corps Press Office.

<sup>a</sup>Measured as “service years completed,” not as individual participants. Annual VISTA data could not be obtained prior to the inception of the Corporation for National and Community Service in 1994.

<sup>b</sup>Increase from the first year of the AmeriCorps program, 1994.
public, it is not readily available. Acquiring some data for this article involved repeated requests for information to the officials at these organizations; other data required formal requests under the Freedom of Information Act of the U.S. federal government.

Many good reasons exist for exercising caution in interpretation of the data on the stipended volunteer programs shown in Table 2, ranging from the mundane to the profound. With respect to the former, different offices and reports from the same agency can have different sets of data for the “same” trend; although the annual figures differ but little, multiple results are a complication that Brudney and Gazley (2002) also encountered in a longitudinal analysis of volunteers in another federal agency (the U.S. Small Business Administration). With respect to the latter, even if there is interest in increasing stipended (or other) volunteer programs, the budgetary resources to create and fund additional slots for citizen participants are unlikely. While the figures represent actual volunteer enrollments rather than the slightly larger number of funded slots, these figures are essentially bound to political rather than voluntary motivations. Although Congress recently reversed a decline in appropriation levels for the Corporation for National and Community Service, President Bush is unlikely to succeed in doubling placements in both AmeriCorps and the Peace Corps as promised in his 2002 State of the Union Address. By design, many offices and officials have input and influence over the outputs of government, and they typically do not agree on all particulars of policy. In a fifteen-year period, changes in elected administrations and appointments to leadership positions, reorganizations, and even changes in how outputs are measured are quite common. In addition, serious disputes can erupt over policy, thus jeopardizing seemingly established priorities.

With those cautions in mind, Table 2 presents the available long-term data on stipended federal volunteer programs. The data consist of annual placements in seven stipended volunteer programs from 1988 through 2003. Since the AmeriCorps programs began in 1994, the data for them emanate from that year forward (although VISTA has a longer time line, lamentably, no agency seems to have tracked the enrollment data from its inception). Similar to the findings in Table 1, all of the trends shown in Table 2 are ascending, and most are sharply ascending.

The last two rows in Table 2 present the numerical and percentage increases in stipended volunteers over the period 1988 to 2003; for the AmeriCorps program, the changes are calculated from 1994 to 2003. The percentage changes in these series are all positive and vary from 22.3 percent over sixteen years in the Retired Senior Volunteer Program to more than a 167 percent increase in AmeriCorps members in a ten-year period. It should be noted, however, that the smallest percentage increase occurs in the largest program (Retired Senior Volunteer Program); large size makes it more difficult statistically to demonstrate substantial gains. In addition, at least
two of the programs were start-ups and were intended and expected to grow rapidly (National Civilian Conservation Corps and AmeriCorps State and National). Nevertheless, the data show that these programs gained political acceptance during this period and that preexisting stipended programs also have increased dramatically.

The Peace Corps figures are also healthy, although they are substantially lower than those required to meet a White House goal of doubled enrollment by 2007. Actual Peace Corps enrollment levels are also only about one-tenth the level of applications (sixty-six thousand in 2001), a difference that highlights the value in examining actual placements rather than funded slots or application levels (Bush, 2002b). Even then, actual placements may still present some difficulties in interpretation, since individual federal volunteer programs may differ in the way they decide which volunteers to include in their official counts. VISTA and the Foster Grandparents program involve volunteers who are also direct beneficiaries and thus may have more reliable records.

**Employee Volunteer Programs**

Based on the scant data available, the third trend we examine pertains to employee volunteer programs (EVPs) over the 1990s. Employee or corporate volunteer programs are managed efforts by employers to motivate and involve their employees in volunteer service under the company’s official sponsorship (Cihlar, 2004; Tschirhart, 2005). Such programs are often designed to serve the larger philanthropic missions of corporations. This study documented substantial limitations in the conceptualization, measurement, and other methodological features (especially sampling) of existing studies and reports on EVPs. These limitations include a reliance on anecdotal evidence and research reports that lack well-defined methodological techniques, including the potential for nonresponse bias in samples with small response rates. As a consequence, few academically rigorous studies of employee volunteering have made their way into social science journals or other public forums.

This gap in the literature has helped to create a fragmented landscape of research on employee volunteering programs (Tschirhart, 2005). Virtually no commonality exists in the way basic measures of these programs are reported, such as number of volunteers engaged or volunteer hours spent by employee volunteers, and businesses generally lack the ability to compare their programs with others. Despite these challenges, a limited number of data offer the opportunity for some trend analysis of employee volunteer programs, although the conclusions based on such data must be equally limited.

Table 3 lists six studies that have addressed the incidence and scope of employee volunteer programs with respect to the number of employees involved and the amount of time contributed. To the
best of our knowledge, these represent the most comprehensive data available. The percentages of corporations in these limited samples that report employee volunteer programs are impressive, ranging from 55 to over 80 percent. The robust rates of employee volunteer programs would seem to confirm Cihlar’s observation (2004, pp. 1–2) that “employee volunteering programs are flourishing and most companies are eager to associate themselves with this sort of activity.” Confirmatory research is warranted to ensure that these robust rates do not reflect what may be substantial sampling error.

The studies with trend information on EVPs are quite limited but helpful. The 2001 report produced by the Points of Light Foundation (Points of Light Foundation, 2002) suggests that the number of member organizations that incorporated volunteering into their overall business plans increased from 19 percent in 1991 to 48 percent in 1999. Two other studies also note a positive trend in EVPs. The first comes from the Financial Services Roundtable, a national business association representing approximately ninety large, integrated financial services corporations. The Financial Services Roundtable has conducted annual membership surveys of community involvement since 1998, which allow it to track the annual number of volunteer hours contributed, although the survey does not report on the percentage of members specifically with EVPs. The results of the surveys show that employees of responding corporations contributed 4.46 million volunteer hours in 1997, 4.6 million hours in 1998, 4.99 million hours in 1999, 7.37 million hours in 2000, 10.3 million hours in 2001, and 8.2 million hours in 2002. The more than 8 million volunteer hours contributed by member employees in 2002

### Table 3. Data Available Concerning Employee Volunteer Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A 2001 study by the Points of Light Foundation (Points of Light Foundation, 2002).</td>
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<tr>
<td>A 2003 benchmark study by Boston College’s Center for Corporate Citizenship, in partnership with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship, 2004).</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The biennial surveys of the INDEPENDENT SECTOR, which can offer some trend analysis regarding any increase or decrease in the number of volunteers who were referred to service projects through their employers.</td>
<td><a href="http://www.independentsector.org">http://www.independentsector.org</a>.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
represented the equivalent of 4,100 full-time employees. The authors of the Financial Services Roundtable study suggest that the spike in 2001 volunteer hours was due to the events of September 11, 2001, since many of its member corporations' employees are located in New York City and were involved in volunteer efforts associated with the Twin Towers tragedy. Even with the spike, however, the trend is ascending, thus suggesting that corporate volunteer engagement (at least in this small sample) has increased steadily over the time series.

The second source of data on EVPs is more indirect but still enlightening in an area in which valid data are scarce. The biennial surveys of giving and volunteering commissioned by the INDEPENDENT SECTOR Organization discussed above (the source of the data in Table 1) include questions asking how individuals were referred to a volunteer program. These questions can be useful to a study of EVPs by offering an indication of the extent to which workplace promotion of volunteerism may have had an effect on volunteer referrals over time. Table 4 presents data on the percentage of volunteers in the INDEPENDENT SECTOR surveys who said they learned about their volunteer activities through their workplace or employer (the survey did not ascertain whether the employer had a formal employee volunteer program).

The data in Table 4 suggest that employer participation in promoting and referring individuals into voluntary activity has had a modest but generally positive impact. In the national surveys shown in the table, about 6 to 8 percent of individuals report that their employer asked them to volunteer, and this percentage has changed little over the 1990s. The net effect of workplace-related volunteer referrals is more positive, however: between 1989 and 1998, the number of employees who learned about their volunteer activity through the workplace increased by approximately one-third (from 17.9 percent to 24.1 percent). According to these results, the workplace represents a source of volunteer referrals second only to places of worship.

**Table 4. Responses to Workplace-Related Questions Concerning Volunteering**

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learned about volunteer activity through workplace or employer</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
<td>20.4%</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone at work other than employer asked them to volunteer</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer asked them to volunteer</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Toppe, Kirsch, and Michel (2002).*
Each of the studies on corporate volunteer programs described in this article has methodological limitations—principally because of limited sampling frames, selection bias, and the use of convenience sampling. We must therefore limit the conclusions that can be drawn from them. The trend data available are not by at any means conclusive, but they do suggest a steady increase in employee volunteer programs during the past several years. The size varies according to the sample: an approximately 10 to 15 percent annual increase in voluntary activity among members of the Financial Services Roundtable, compared to an annual increase of just one or two points in the Independent Sector and CPS samples. Available data further suggest that approximately one-third to one-half of reporting companies have formal EVPs—represented, for example, by their inclusion in a strategic plan—and that a much larger percentage encourage employee volunteering with other, although perhaps more passive, approaches (generalizability of these findings remains highly problematic, however). Finally, the results of the Independent Sector surveys on the impact of these efforts on individual volunteering suggest that they have their desired effect by representing one of the principal means by which adults learn about—and engage in—community service.

Summary

This inquiry has presented and examined trends in volunteerism over the 1990s and early 2000s with an emphasis on individual volunteering, volunteering to government in stipended volunteer programs such as AmeriCorps, and volunteering through employee-based volunteer programs. The findings suggest that all three facets of volunteerism have increased in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Equally if not more important, the study suggests three limitations that need to be addressed if more and better analyses of trends in volunteerism are to be conducted and understood. Without such analysis, it will be difficult to assess the impact of efforts to increase volunteer management capacity or to evaluate whether government and voluntary organizations and policies are having the desired effect of raising the number and diversity of volunteers and the types of volunteer opportunities and programs available to them.

The first limitation encountered in the study is the lack of reliable, consistent longitudinal data on individual volunteering behavior. The series of surveys undertaken by Independent Sector biennially and the BLS annually come closest to meeting this criterion. These surveys are crucial to research, policy, and advocacy in the nonprofit field. These advantages notwithstanding, the 2001 Independent Sector survey adopted new methodology and sampling criteria that limit comparability with the surveys of the past decade, thus accentuating the problem of data consistency (Kirsch, McCormack, and Saxon-Harrold, 2001). The future of national surveys on giving and volunteering is uncertain, thus complicating the
maintenance and continuation of longitudinal trends, which depend on consistent data sets and methodologies.

The BLS supplement to the September CPS concerning volunteer behavior is a welcome addition to the field. The BLS survey has been conducted annually for four years (2002–2005), and should replication continue, it will yield much-needed longitudinal information on volunteering. Nevertheless, at this writing, the CPS survey supplement does not contain many items on this important phenomenon or collect the depth of information on volunteering that helped to make the INDEPENDENT SECTOR surveys on giving and volunteering useful to researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and nonprofit and government organizations.

A great strength of the INDEPENDENT SECTOR and BLS surveys is that they are widely available. The same cannot be said with regard to another type of data examined in this study: annual placements in stipended government volunteer programs such as AmeriCorps—a second limitation that needs to be addressed for longitudinal analysis of volunteerism beyond the 1990s. Although data on stipended government volunteer programs should be considered public information and made readily available, our experience has been that the data are currently difficult for researchers or others to access. We believe that their use should be promoted by host organizations.

A third limitation that should be addressed for studies on volunteerism beyond the 1990s is information on EVPs. Research suggests that EVPs appear to be an increasingly important source of volunteers and of citizen entry into volunteerism, yet systematic knowledge about them is scant (Tschirhart, 2005; Cihlar, 2004). We do not know the rate of participation by corporations, the number of employees involved, the scope of their activities, the administration and management features of these programs, the results of EVPs, and so forth. The expanding role of corporations in mediating, nurturing, and sustaining volunteer activity calls for more systematic research on representative samples.

Further research on employee volunteer programs, together with continuing information on volunteering at the individual level and greater availability of data on government-stipended volunteer programs (and other data on volunteering in the public sector), would be a significant asset for future longitudinal studies of volunteerism.

**What Direction in the New Century?**

For us, the implications are clear: the field is sorely in need of one or multiple sources of ongoing data for detailed, longitudinal analysis of volunteer behavior, possibly incorporating a broader definition of civic engagement. In their wide-ranging review of service-related research in 2001, Perry and Imperial (2001) arrived at a similar conclusion: “Longitudinal or panel data for doing comparative or time-series research are in short supply. . . . One of the barriers to doing
high quality research is the lack of good longitudinal data and the resource-intensive nature of gathering and maintaining the data over time” (p. 475). By contrast, consider how the ongoing series of nationally representative surveys of electoral behavior in the American National Election Studies have facilitated and enriched scholarship and teaching in that field. Beginning in 1948 and continuing forward with every presidential election since (and often in the off-year congressional election as well), these surveys have become the staple of the field, yielding a consistent store of knowledge for understanding such diverse topics as voting decisions, campaign strategies, economic effects, representational issues, primary elections, candidate spending, and interest group influence. One can only imagine the implications for the development of philanthropic studies were a comparable series of dedicated surveys available to inform the field.

Perry and Imperial (2001) conceived several ways to surmount the information gap. They suggested that new panel data sets could be designed to meet the needs of researchers from different disciplines, existing longitudinal data sets (such as the National Longitudinal Surveys and the Panel Study of Income Dynamics) could be exploited more vigorously by scholars in the field, and institutional donors might provide support for long-term research to track programs over an extensive period of time.

We concur with these recommendations. Having seen the problems for research and analysis stemming from the lack of conclusive longitudinal data continue over the ensuing four years, however, we are prepared to advocate for even stronger methods.

We propose that a major survey on volunteering appropriate to the breadth and richness of the field be conducted on an annual or biennial basis.

We propose that a major survey on volunteering appropriate to the breadth and richness of the field be conducted on an annual or biennial basis, to include formal and informal volunteering, corporate-based volunteer programs, volunteering to government (and other sectors), stipended volunteering, episodic volunteering, volunteer attitudes and motivations, and others. A single institution, or a consortium of organizations, should collect, cumulate, and release this information for use by the field. The establishment of single points of contact (compare Smith, 2003), along with policies that limit the need for Freedom of Information Act requests, would be most helpful in moving this information to the public domain and to academic research and policymaking. Currently either a public agency—for example, an agency under the USA Freedom Corps umbrella or the Points of Light Foundation—or an academic institution seems a suitable nominee for this task.

Based on the findings of an evaluation of the United Nations International Year of Volunteers (2001), Justin Davis Smith (2003, p. 23) recommended a larger role for government “if volunteering is truly to fulfill its potential.” In the United States, each of the public institutions has particular strengths and limitations. The USA Freedom Corps was newly created by President Bush in January 2002 to
“coordinate and strengthen” federal and private volunteer opportunities. It has been designed as an “interagency initiative” with the task of “recruiting, mobilizing and encouraging” citizen service, providing concrete opportunities for volunteers, facilitating public access to information about volunteer opportunities, and rewarding and recognizing public service (Bush, 2002a). Given its charge, Freedom Corps seems an appropriate central authority to collect and distribute information regarding not only stipended government volunteer programs but also other volunteer opportunities, placements, and—potentially—results in public organizations. Such efforts would help to supplement the scant research that has been undertaken on volunteer programs in the public sector (Brudney, 1999, 1990).

The caveat is that the USA Freedom Corps bears the imprimatur of one presidential administration, with no guarantee that its mission, priorities, and even existence will not change in the future. The Points of Light Foundation represents a candidate that has more autonomy and strong national prominence. It has solid links to the voluntary sector and a more established agenda. Since the Points of Light Foundation also aspires to “knowledge leadership” in volunteering, its mission can easily encompass data collection and dissemination. In recent years the Points of Light Foundation has invested more resources in research and may view the added responsibility as a logical outgrowth of its mission.

Some evidence exists of the possibility of interesting government in the merits of providing such a role. First, the BLS was persuaded to add a battery of important items concerning volunteer behavior in the supplement to the September CPS in each of the past four years. Second, the Corporation for National and Community Service has initiated longitudinal studies of some of its programs and has agreed to share the data with external users (Perry and Imperial, 2001). In addition, in 2003–2004, the corporation, Freedom Corps, and the UPS Foundation supported the first nationwide study of volunteer programs and management capacity ever undertaken in the United States (Urban Institute, 2004). Third, the Points of Light Foundation has a research and evaluation division that has recently commissioned a variety of studies on volunteering. “Research and evaluation activities seek to build a bridge between volunteer management practitioners and the academic community to increase knowledge of volunteering and its effects on social problems” (http://www.pointsoflight.org/resources/research/).

At least one academic institution, Indiana University’s Center on Philanthropy, has expressed an interest in meeting the call for the collection, maintenance, and distribution of extensive longitudinal data on giving and volunteering. As one of the nation’s foremost academic centers for the study of civic engagement, the center is well placed to fill the void left by the INDEPENDENT SECTOR. In 2001 and 2003, it conducted the first two waves of a panel study on giving and volunteering in conjunction with the panel study of Income Dynamics at the
University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research. A panel study is designed to follow the same individuals (or, in this case, families) over a long span of time. This source of data has enormous potential, particularly because it offers the first assessment of philanthropic behavior over the course of the respondent’s lifetime. As a result, it has greater methodological value than past cross-sectional studies, where causal connections are more difficult to establish.

The Center of Philanthropy Panel Study (COPPS) also offers data of special value to policymakers and institutions that depend on philanthropic activity. Some of the questions the COPPS data can address include:

- Whether and how altruistic values are passed from generation to generation
- How changes in a family’s or individual’s economic or social circumstances affect patterns of philanthropic behavior
- How national and world events (such as September 11, 2001; the Iraqi War; the 2004 tsunami; and the 2005 Gulf States hurricanes) change philanthropic behavior

There is not necessarily one best way to continue the examination of trends in volunteering beyond the 1990s. In fact, a combination of approaches would be helpful if for no other reason than it allows cross-validation of results. For example, the more methodologically rigorous of the studies we have discussed, the CPS of the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Center on Philanthropy Panel Study, show remarkable similarity in the percentage of adult volunteers they identify (about one in four Americans). Our ability to compare such findings permits us to confirm their validity.

Whatever the choice, the success of this endeavor hinges on attracting sufficient support from underwriters. Potential donors, as well as public agencies, must be educated or persuaded of the merits of a longitudinal database that would provide reliable knowledge concerning volunteering for a variety of disciplines, organizations, funders, researchers, students, and policymakers. It is an investment whose need—and time—has come.

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