

The Decline of Volunteering in America: Economic Factors and Rural-Urban Differences

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The Decline of Volunteering in America: Economic Factors and Rural-Urban Differences

Volunteering rates have been declining across the US in recent decades, raising concerns about the health of civil society and local communities. Researchers Dr Rebecca Nesbit, Dr Laurie Paarlberg, and their colleagues have investigated the complex economic and geographic factors contributing to this trend. Their work sheds light on how economic conditions, rural-urban differences, and community characteristics shape volunteering behaviors across the country.

Volunteering in Decline

For generations, volunteering has been viewed as a cornerstone of American civic life and community engagement. From local charities and religious organizations to youth sports leagues and political campaigns, volunteers have long played a vital role in sustaining community institutions and addressing social needs. However, in recent years, a troubling trend has emerged – volunteering rates across the US have been steadily declining.

Data from the US Census Bureau shows that the percentage of Americans engaging in formal volunteering activities fell from around 29% in the early 2000s to less than 25% by 2015. This downward trajectory has continued, with some estimates suggesting volunteer rates may now be below 20%. The decline has been observed across demographic groups and geographic regions, though it appears to be especially pronounced in rural communities.

This trend has raised alarm bells for researchers, policymakers and community leaders concerned about social cohesion and the health of civil society. Volunteers provide critical support and services for nonprofit organizations and community groups. A decline in volunteering can leave gaps in social support systems and weaken local institutions. It may also signal broader shifts in civic engagement, social trust, and community connectedness.

Investigating the Rural-Urban Divide

A key focus of the research team's work has been examining differences in volunteering patterns between rural and urban areas. Historically, rural communities in the US have had higher rates of volunteering compared to urban areas. However, this gap appears to be narrowing over time.

Dr Rebecca Nesbit of the University of Georgia and Dr Laurie Paarlberg of Indiana University Indianapolis analyzed data from the US Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) Volunteering Supplement, which has tracked volunteering rates and behaviors across the country from 2002–2015. The research team merged the volunteering data with county-level data to control for county-level contextual effects across the entire country.

There has long been an idea that rural communities have stronger social bonds and a culture of mutual support that promotes volunteerism. The team wanted to examine the data to see if that still holds true and what factors might be driving any differences they observe.

The analysis found that rural respondents are indeed more likely to report volunteering compared to urban respondents. However, this rural advantage has been decreasing over time. By 2015, the rural-urban gap in volunteering rates had largely disappeared.

Interestingly, the researchers found that the determinants of volunteering behavior differ between rural and urban contexts. Community-level factors like education levels, racial homogeneity, and religiosity tend to have different effects on volunteering propensity in rural versus urban communities. These results suggest we need to be careful about making sweeping generalizations regarding rural versus urban civic engagement. The dynamics at play are quite complex and context-dependent.



Community Characteristics Matter

New insights into what drives rural-urban differences in volunteering were gained from the team's detailed decomposition analysis. This approach allowed them to parse out how much of the rural-urban volunteering gap is explained by differences in individual characteristics of residents versus community-level factors.

The identified differences in individual demographics between rural and urban residents actually explain very little of the volunteering gap. In reality, the place-based community characteristics accounted for most of the difference. The researchers found that congregation density and racial homogeneity increase urban volunteering relative to rural – thus reducing the rural/urban gap. The stronger effect of these community characteristics in rural areas accounts for much of the rural advantage in volunteering.

However, the decomposition also revealed some counterintuitive findings. For instance, lower education levels in rural counties actually work to reduce the rural-urban gap. If rural areas had education levels on par with urban areas, the volunteering gap would likely be even larger. Education could, therefore, be said to be 'worth more' in terms of volunteering for rural residents – it has a stronger impact on volunteering for rural residents relative to equally educated residents in an urban setting.

These results highlight the complex interplay between individual and community factors in shaping civic behaviors, and how volunteering trends cannot be looked at in isolation from the broader community context.

Economic Factors at Play

To better understand the forces driving the decline in volunteering, Dr Nesbit, Dr Paarlberg, and their colleagues have conducted extensive research examining how economic conditions shape volunteering behaviors. Their work reveals that the relationship between economic factors and civic engagement is complex and multifaceted.

Drs Nesbit and Paarlberg combined the CPS Volunteering Supplement with county-level economic data to examine how local economic contexts influence individuals' propensity to volunteer. They found that community-level economic factors have a significant impact on volunteering, even after controlling for individual characteristics. People living in economically disadvantaged communities with higher poverty rates are less likely to volunteer compared to those in more affluent areas. Income inequality within communities also has a dampening effect on volunteering.

Drs Nesbit and Paarlberg emphasize that their analysis demonstrates the importance of economic conditions in shaping volunteer behaviors. They note that it's not just about individual factors like income or employment, but the broader economic context of the community plays an important role.

Interestingly, the team found that economic growth is positively associated with volunteering. Communities that experienced increases in median household income over time tended to see higher rates of volunteering among residents. This suggests that economically stagnant or declining areas may face particular challenges in sustaining volunteer engagement.



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The Impact of Recession

The researchers were also interested in how major economic shocks, like the Great Recession of 2008-2009, influence volunteering patterns. They found that the recession had a significant negative effect on volunteering rates across the country.

The recession decreased overall volunteering rates, but its impact varied across different types of communities. Notably, the recession had the strongest negative effect on volunteering in communities that were previously more advantaged – those with higher income equality and stronger economic growth. Meanwhile, economically disadvantaged communities saw less impact from the recession on volunteering rates, possibly because their rates were already lower and they had fewer resources to lose. The recession's effects were particularly pronounced in rural areas, where historically higher volunteering rates declined steeply after 2008. By 2015, the traditional rural advantage in volunteering rates had disappeared as rural and urban rates converged.

The research suggests these effects persisted well beyond the technical end of the recession, indicating the economic shock may have created lasting changes in social and psychological factors that continue to dampen volunteering behavior. Even years after the technical end of the recession, volunteering levels remained depressed compared to pre-recession trends. Indeed, the lingering effects of the recession on volunteering were quite striking. It wasn't just a temporary dip – there seemed to be longer-term impacts on people's willingness or ability to engage in volunteer activities. This pattern challenges the conventional wisdom that economic hardship automatically brings communities together in mutual support.

Implications and Future Directions

The decline in volunteering across the US has important implications for communities and civil society. Volunteers play a crucial role in meeting local needs and supporting community institutions. A retreat from volunteering may leave gaps in social services and weaken social bonds.

The research team's findings suggest that economic conditions play a major role in driving volunteering trends. Communities facing economic disadvantage or stagnation may struggle to maintain civic engagement. This implies that efforts to revitalize local economies could have positive spillover effects for volunteering and other forms of civic participation.

The narrowing of the rural-urban volunteering gap is also noteworthy. Rural communities have long relied heavily on volunteers to meet local needs and sustain community organizations. The convergence of rural and urban volunteering rates may pose particular challenges for rural areas with fewer alternative resources.

As communities across the US grapple with shifting economic realities and changing demographics, sustaining a culture of volunteering and civic participation remains a critical challenge. The insights provided by Dr Nesbit, Dr Paarlberg, and their colleagues offer an important foundation for policymakers and community leaders working to strengthen civil society in the face of these headwinds. In essence, leaders should not just focus on economic development, but on civic development as well. Their ongoing research promises to illuminate further the complex dynamics shaping America's civic landscape in the years to come.

MEET THE RESEARCHERS



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Dr Rebecca Nesbit is a Professor of Nonprofit Management in the Department of Public Administration and Policy at the University of Georgia. She specializes in research on volunteering, philanthropy, and nonprofit organizations. Dr Nesbit has conducted studies examining the influences of family, major life events, and community context on volunteering behavior. Her work also explores workplace giving campaigns and the management of volunteers in public and nonprofit organizations. Dr Nesbit has published extensively in leading journals and contributed to several handbooks in the field. She has received multiple research grants from AmeriCorps to study rural-urban differences in volunteering. Dr Nesbit serves on editorial boards for prominent nonprofit journals and is actively involved in the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action. She teaches courses on nonprofit management, research methods, and volunteering at the graduate level.

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Dr Laurie Paarlberg is Professor of Philanthropic Studies and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation Chair on Community Foundations at the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy. Her research focuses on community philanthropy, nonprofit management, and public service motivation. Dr Paarlberg has extensively studied United Way organizations, community foundations, and place-based philanthropy. She has published numerous articles in leading public affairs and nonprofit journals, examining topics such as donor behavior, grant-making practices, and the impact of community context on philanthropic activity. Dr Paarlberg has received multiple research grants, including funding from the C.S. Mott Foundation to study community grant-making organizations. She is actively involved in the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action and has presented her work at numerous academic conferences. Dr Paarlberg teaches courses on philanthropy, nonprofit management, and community foundations at the graduate level.

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FURTHER READING

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