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AARP's Report on "Connecting and Giving"

Reviewed by Stephen Howlett

Connecting and Giving: A Report on How Mid-life and Older Americans Spend Their Time, Make Connections and Build Communities

By Alicia Williams, John Fries, Jean Koppen and Robert Pristula

Published by AARP, 2010

Available at: http://assets.aarp.org/rgcenter/general/connecting_giving.pdf

Connecting and Giving outlines a range of findings about the time-giving habits of older Americans. It details how much time Americans give in mid-life and later, where they give it and their motivations. The report covers a range of ways people spend time, including civic participation, 'activity involvement' such as hobbies and entertaining, and volunteering. Much of the information on how older people spend their time will be no surprise to *e-Volunteerism* readers. But the report's insights into the interplay between volunteering and other activities is of interest, particularly concerning how people view the tradeoff between spending time in leisure or in civic engagements as opposed to volunteering. Unfortunately, the report does not itself provide such a discussion; the authors allow that they do not analyze the data with a view to highlighting barriers to participation. But some of those some of those are apparent anyway.

This report is useful because it:

- Looks at the time commitments of Americans over age 45;
- Looks at a sample of 29 to 44-year-olds to compare with the over 45s;
- Divides the over 45s into three age brackets (rather than considering them as a whole);
- Adds a sample of African Americans and Hispanics, again to compare and contrast how time is spent in communities.

The survey was conducted by telephone in August 2009 and contacted 1,474 Americans over 45 years of age. For comparison to the general population, specific cohorts of 470 African Americans and 447 Hispanics were also interviewed. The survey further questioned 500 Americans aged 29 to 44-years-old – again for comparison to the main survey of older Americans.

The report looks at three age groups over 45 and talks about them as groups, though it does not clearly define the age spread of each: 'Baby Boomers' who are over 45; the 'Silent Generation,' which lasts up until 81 years old; and the 'Greatest Generation.' The comparison group, aged 29 to 44, are 'Generation X.'

The Findings

The report finds that the nature of *civic engagement* is changing as it becomes more personal and secular. Consider these key findings:

- Mid-life and older Americans are less likely than before to join organizations. This is important because joining organizations has always been a strong predictor of civic engagement.
- Involvement with religious activities has declined; although it remains substantial, it has seen the largest decline compared to figures for 1999. Where religion remains important, older people report that it is a key link to their community participation. Younger people (and in particular Generation X) are more involved in general – perhaps not surprising – but their time is spent more on hobbies and leisure.
- When it comes to volunteering, more people involve themselves in their community as individuals. Informal volunteering is the preferred way of being active, rather than through organizations. The number of people who reported volunteering solely through organizations declined 16 percent between 2003 and 2009, while those volunteering solely on their own increased over the same period by seven points. The authors look at the idea that an increase in informal volunteering and a failure to grow formal volunteering may be caused by a lack of suitable volunteering opportunities, but they dismiss this because they find that it seems people are happy with what they do – 81% of people are very happy with their current rate of activity. In other words, the opportunities are out there, but people don't necessarily want them in the form they are presented. Most people, it seems, are happy doing things individually.
- Overall, volunteering rates have held steady, but the hours given in service have declined. In 2003, volunteers devoted an average of 15 hours a month, but by 2009 their time commitment had dropped to between six and 10 hours. The figures also show that a small number of volunteers give a lot of time (9% spend 40 hours or more a month volunteering), while the majority give smaller amounts (64% spend less than 10 hours a month volunteering).
- Age continues to have a correlation with volunteering and participation. The 29 to 44-year-olds have the highest rate – an amazing 78% reported volunteering in the last 12 months, but they were more likely to have served on their own, suggesting a lot of informal volunteering. The over- 81-year-olds had the lowest rate, with just over a third reporting being active. It is perhaps unsurprising that greater age causes some dropping off of participation. The higher involvement of those in mid-life can be explained through parental duties – being involved in schools, their kids' clubs and so on.
- Women are more likely to be involved in volunteering and African Americans are more likely to be involved in all fields – social, civic and volunteering activities. Taking up this theme and looking only at volunteering rather than other forms of community engagement, nearly three-quarters of African Americans and non-Hispanic whites volunteered, while the figure for Hispanics was just over 50%. But this bears closer examination as non-Hispanic whites are more likely to serve through an organization. And, importantly, if the data is controlled for things like education and income, differences disappear. In all groups, those with increasing educational and income levels volunteer more.
- The activities cited among volunteers were those that helped meet basic needs, such as helping persons with disabilities (41% reported this) and fundraising (37%). Generation Xers were most likely to help in schools, which reflects the fact that they

may have school-aged children. The report mentions that when a corresponding survey was done in 1997, the baby-boom generation cited school-based activity most frequently because *they* then had school-aged children; now, the boomers report helping people with disabilities. This is consistent with what we know about how volunteer activities reflect life cycles and help form the identity of volunteers.

- People give numerous reasons for volunteering, but again we see recognizable themes. The top reason is a sense of responsibility to help others – noted by 68% of volunteers and the top reason in nearly all the age groups studied. Other factors mentioned by at least 66% of volunteers include: ‘It is a way to give something back;’ ‘It makes their own life more satisfying;’ ‘It provides an opportunity to use knowledge, skills and experience.’

Implications for Practice

The survey findings confirm much of what we know but add to that knowledge, too. It also seems to confirm trends that are happening outside of the United States.

Perhaps the striking element of this survey is the decline in religion as a factor in volunteering. Although the finding is relative, it is still important. The most common motivation to volunteer – the feeling of responsibility to help others – is perhaps still a reason that links to faith. But even if there are ‘faith-related’ reasons to volunteer, the faith-based *organization* seems to be a less important factor.

In fact, the survey shows that *all* organizations are less important. Which raises the question: Does it matter if more volunteering is informal? Perhaps not, if communities are being sustained through participation. However, organizations that involve and depend on volunteers will be concerned if people no longer wish to be involved through organizations.

Conclusion

Let’s focus here on what this report adds specifically for organizations. There are a number of points:

- One of the reasons given for not joining organizations is that people felt comfortable with their contribution to their community and felt they were able to exert influence in their community. We know that people volunteer is to make a difference. So perhaps organizations need to focus on and highlight how volunteering through their organization can make a difference to people in communities.
- There is no doubt that people want shorter volunteer experiences – so called episodic volunteering. Can our organizations offer this? Should we? Maybe we want to argue that the service we provide needs committed volunteers. Maybe, just maybe, we need to heed the old saying, “Trends are like horses – they are easier to ride in the direction they are going.” This survey suggests that we cannot assume ‘traditional’ volunteers can still be found in older age groups. The stalwarts – those people giving over 40 hours a month – still exist, but they represent less than one in 10 volunteers.
- The survey divides into three age groups. It is good that we can distinguish one from another and not assume a 50-year-old thinks like a 70-year-old. But maybe it also suggests that age is not necessarily the most important factor. For instance, it seems that *all* volunteers want episodic volunteering, or at least the option.
- We also cannot assume that volunteers are ‘in the right place.’ The volunteers in the survey who are heavily involved are located in particular places – schools and kids’ clubs. If we want to encourage them to continue volunteering after they have done their part with their children, we have to ask, “How do we access them?”

This report offers a lot to think about. It details how mid-life and older Americans spend their time. But it also helps organizations look at the implications for recruiting new volunteers of all ages.

About the Reviewer



Steven Howlett is Programme Convenor for the Voluntary Action Management MSC at Roehampton University. The programme is pre- and post-experience and run full-time and part-time. Full-time people tend to be those looking to work in the sector, and the course combines theory and practice by finding placements for students within voluntary organisations. The course recognises that voluntary organisations are different from public and private organisations, but that future leaders in the sector need access to education that acknowledges this difference and looks at how voluntary organisations are managed. The course can be found at: <http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/pg/vam/>

Before joining Roehampton University, Howlett worked as a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Volunteering Research, where he was involved with a variety of projects connected with all aspects of volunteering. He recently participated in a study that audited central government support for volunteering, a project that examined age discrimination in volunteer involving organisations and a European study that assessed how volunteering can address issues of social exclusion. He was previously Research Fellow at the Centre for Institutional Studies at the University of East London where he worked on a project to evaluate urban regeneration programmes in East London. He also researched the changing roles of voluntary organisations in local service delivery and its implications for stakeholder groups and for local governance. He has also worked in local government as an Economic Development Officer at Durham County Council where he was involved in developing and implementing projects to regenerate the East Durham coal field area.

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