

# Community involvement: The influence of early experience

by Frank Jones

The participation of citizens in their communities through involvement in civic groups, service clubs, volunteer organizations and other institutions has long been a cornerstone of society in Canada. Such activities help foster social cohesion, healthy communities and governments, and may be especially important in times of rapid economic and social change. But what sort of people contribute their time and effort to the neighbourhood community association, the school council, or a soup kitchen?

Researchers interested in the larger issue of what motivates people to be “public-spirited” propose that influences during the formative years of childhood are important. Some studies have suggested that taking part in extracurricular activities in high school can influence the participation of young adults in political activities<sup>1</sup> and voluntary associations.<sup>2</sup> Others have found that a person’s membership in voluntary organizations can be influenced by their parents’ attitudes toward, and involvement in, volunteer work.<sup>3</sup> Further suggestion of the importance of the formative

years is contained in a study that reported that the “moral climate” on U.S. college campuses influenced participation in community service, having the greatest effect on students who had no clear religious commitment.<sup>4</sup> A subsequent study found that a high level of participation in community projects was associated with spiritual values and, not surprisingly, with the value placed on community service.<sup>5</sup>

Using data from the 1997 National Survey of Volunteering, Giving and Participating (NSVGP), this article considers the degree to which organized activities in youth may influence community involvement in adulthood. Particular emphasis is placed on the role that a religious background may play in an individual’s level of activity.

## Defining community involvement

Ten indicators of community involvement are identified in this article. The first four indicators are associated with what could be called “civic awareness” and include following the news regularly and voting in elec-

tions. The remaining six indicators are more demanding of people’s time and are considered to be indicative of higher levels of personal commitment, and do to some extent measure participation in shared community values. These are “intensive community commitments” and include

1. Glanville, Jennifer L. June 1999. “Political socialization or selection? Adolescent extracurricular participation and political activity in early adulthood,” *Social Science Quarterly*, 80, 2: 279-289.
2. Hanks, Michael and Bruce K. Eckland. Summer 1978. “Adult voluntary associations and adolescent socialization,” *Sociological Quarterly*, 19: 481-490.
3. The authors also found that socioeconomic status had some effect. Smith, David Horton and Burt R. Baldwin. Summer-Fall 1974. “Parental socialization, socioeconomic status, and volunteer organization participation,” *Journal of Voluntary Action Research*, 3, 3-4: 59-66.
4. Serow, Robert C. September 1989. “Community service, religious commitment, and campus climate,” *Youth and Society*, 21, 1: 105-119.
5. Serow, Robert C. Summer 1990. “Volunteering and values: an analysis of students’ participation in community service,” *Journal of Research and Development in Education*, 23, 4: 198-203.

This article is based on data from the National Survey of Volunteering, Giving and Participating (NSVGP), conducted by Statistics Canada in partnership with several voluntary sector and government organizations<sup>1</sup> as a supplement to the Labour Force Survey in November and December of 1997. The survey questioned a representative sample of over 18,000 Canadians, aged 15 and over, about the ways in which they had supported friends, family and their communities during the previous 12 months.

**In youth/when young:** about ages 5 to 18. Respondents were asked, “Did you do any of the following things when you were in grade school or high school? Were you active in a youth group, religious organization, etc.?”

**Religiously active/religious background:** persons who were active in religious organizations when they were young. This characteristic is distinct from current attendance at religious services.

**Community involvements:** ten activities undertaken by an individual that can help to promote social cohesion and commitment to the community.

*Civic awareness:* following the news regularly; voting in municipal, provincial and federal elections.

*Intensive community commitments:* community-oriented activities that require more commitment and time than civic awareness activities. These involvements are: membership or participation in a service club or fraternal organization; membership or participation in a civic, community, neighbourhood or school organization; membership or participation in a political organization; regular attendance at religious services (at least once a month); doing unpaid work for a voluntary organization (formal volunteering); and, doing unpaid work without being a member of a voluntary organization (informal volunteering), such as helping neighbours or strangers.

*Core community commitments:* intensive community commitments excluding current attendance at religious services.

1. Collaborating organizations were the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, Department of Canadian Heritage, Health Canada, Human Resources Development Canada, the Kahanoff Foundation’s Non-Profit Sector Research Initiative, and Volunteer Canada.

membership or participation in service clubs, civic or community, organizations, political organizations, attendance at religious services, and doing volunteer work, either formally or informally.

6. Shields, David Lyle Light and Brenda Jo Light Bredemeier. 1995. *Character Development and Physical Activity*.

### Formative experiences affect the number of involvements

Canadian adults aged 20 and over reported that they had participated in an average of 4.4 out of the 10 possible types of community involvement, in the year prior to the survey. The average number of intensive community commitments was lower, amounting to 1.6 of a possible 6 types. However, approximately 18 million Canadians — about four-fifths

of the adult population — reported that they participated in at least one of these intensive community commitments.

Analysis of the NSVGP suggests that participation in organized activities during a person’s formative years may encourage them to take on more community involvements in adulthood. Membership in youth organizations, such as Guides, Scouts or the 4-H Club, was associated with being involved in a greater number of community activities as an adult. People who had been members of a youth group reported an average of 4.8 total involvements, almost one more than adults who had not belonged to a youth organization.

People were also more likely to be involved in community activities in adulthood if they had participated in organized team sports as children or adolescents; this held true for both total community involvements and intensive commitments. It has been suggested that behaviours learned in sports, such as cooperation and working toward group goals, may account for a greater concern for the larger community and hence for participation in civic activities.<sup>6</sup>

An important formative influence for children is the example set by their parents. With a role model in the family, those persons whose parent had volunteered had one of the highest levels of community involvement, with an average of 4.9 total involvements compared with only 4.0 for those whose parents had not volunteered.

### Religiously active youth more involved in community as adults

Adults who had been active in a religious organization in their youth had higher rates of involvement than those who had not, with an average of 5.1 involvements compared with 4.1. The difference between the two groups was even greater for intensive community commitments — 2.1 versus 1.3 activities.

Since regular attendance at religious services is associated with community commitment, a fact well-documented in many studies on volunteering, it may be argued that a religious background encourages a person to be more empathetic and to engage in social action. Indeed, when the other formative factors are looked at again in terms of religious activity in youth, adults who had also been religiously active recorded consistently higher averages of community involvement than those who had not.

### Current circumstances also dictate level of community involvement

Of course, a person's experiences as an adult influence the number of community activities that they participate in. Some of these factors include regular attendance at religious services, age, educational level and satisfaction with life.

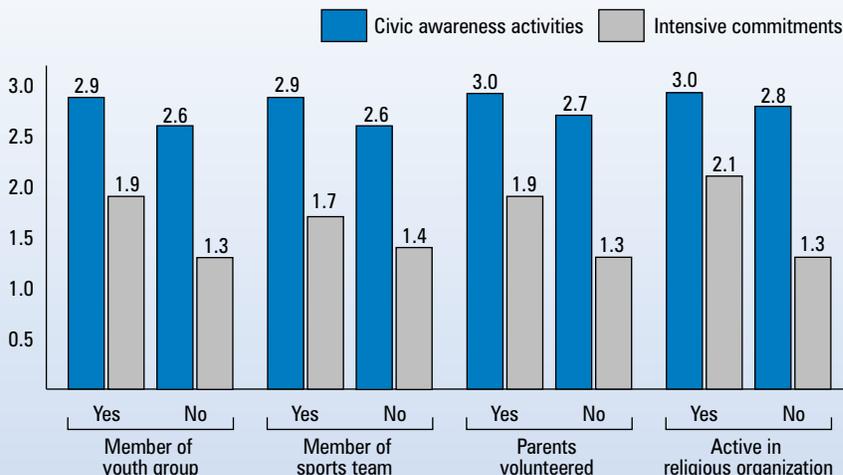
Much of the research on volunteering ties current religious practice to a higher level of community activity. The NSVGP data show that adults who regularly attended religious services had the highest number of community involvements of any group, with an average of 5.5 total involvements, or almost two more than the non-attenders. Further possible evidence of the enduring importance of childhood religious practice can be seen in those adults who, despite having no current religious affiliation, had higher rates of involvement in their communities if they had been members of a religious organization in their youth.

Age also appears to play a role, with the average number of community involvements adults reported rising steadily between the ages of 20 and 54, then peaking at 5.0 for people aged 55 to 74. Growing community involvement with increasing age may simply reflect normal changes over the course of an individual's life

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## Adults active in their youth have a higher average number of current community involvements

Average number of community involvements

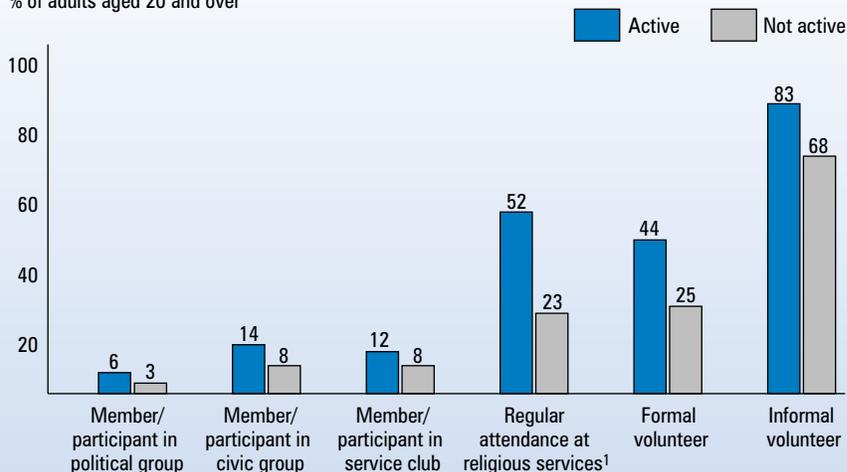


Source: Statistics Canada, National Survey of Volunteering, Giving and Participating, 1997.

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## Adults active in religious organizations in their youth are more likely to have intensive community involvements

% of adults aged 20 and over



1. Attends at least once a month.

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

cycle,<sup>7</sup> as well as the increasing amount of free time that people have available as they reduce their work hours or retire altogether.<sup>8</sup> It could also be a result of the greater likelihood that older Canadians have a religious background.

7. Jones, Frank. "Parents who volunteer," *Perspectives on Labour and Income*, Statistics Canada Catalogue 75-001-XPE. (Forthcoming).

8. Jones, Frank. "Seniors who volunteer," *Perspectives on Labour and Income*, Statistics Canada Catalogue 75-001-XPE: 11, 3 (Autumn 1999).

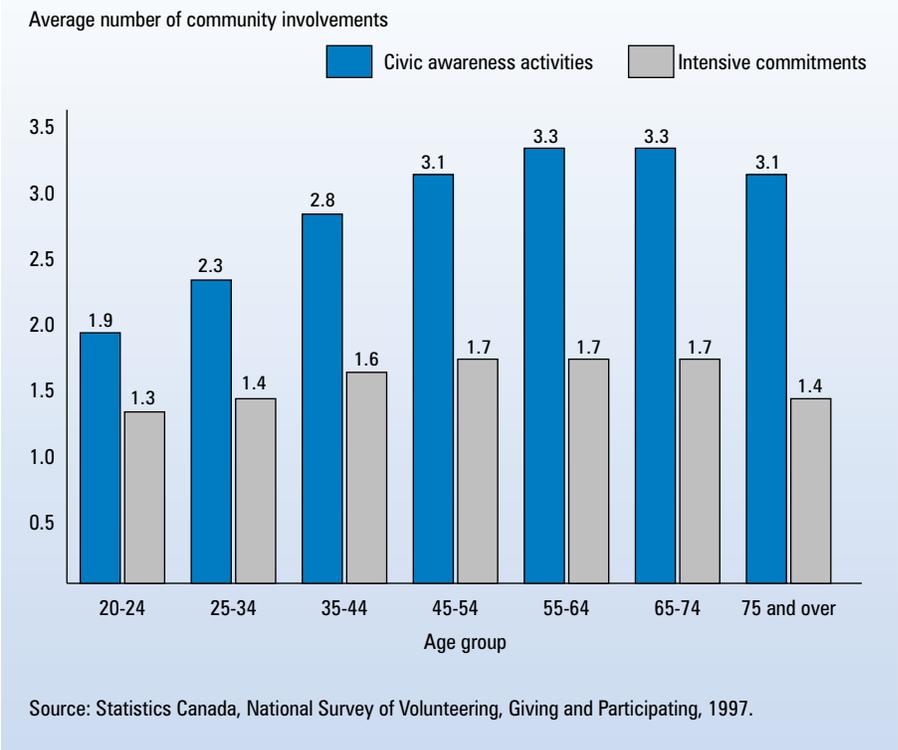
Participation in community activities also rose with educational level. Adults who were university graduates reported the highest average number of total involvements, while those who had not completed high school had the lowest. The link between educational attainment and community activity has been well-documented, and is generally explained by the belief that teaching the value of citizenship is an indirect, if not a direct, part of most education programs. However, those with higher educational attainment had also been more active in religious organizations when young — 35% of university graduates compared with 26% of those without high school — therefore their greater community involvement could reflect their religious background as well as their education.

Another finding not easily explained is that those people who reported being “very satisfied” with their lives had more total involvements. Perhaps someone who is satisfied with their life is more active in the community because they want to help others get more out of their lives; alternatively, a person may take on a larger role in the community to enhance their own satisfaction.

### Understanding the influences on community involvement

It would appear that many factors, personal and social, contribute to an individual’s level of community involvement. However, the relative importance of each factor is unclear, especially for the early experience, since those who had been religiously active when young had also been enthusiastic participants in many other organizations in their youth. A regression analysis was used to estimate the number of “core community commitments” a person might be expected to have, after the influence of various factors were controlled. Core community commitments were

## CST On average, people aged 55 to 74 are most active in the community



the six intensive commitments excluding current religious attendance. Current religious practice was dropped from the index in order to concentrate on secular involvements.

The results show that there is a statistically significant association between organized activities in youth and community involvement in adulthood. When the other variables in the model are held constant,<sup>9</sup> having a religious background during childhood or adolescence does prove to have a significant effect on the number of core community commitments. A person with a religiously active youth might be expected to have 0.14 more average core commitments than a similar person without a religious background.

However, the regression results also point to the even greater influence of other experiences in youth: having a parent who volunteered (0.27 more core commitments than someone without volunteering parents)

and being involved in youth groups (0.23). Team sports increased the expected average by 0.20.

However, the results suggest that the more important determinants of community involvement are adult experiences: having a university degree (0.39 more core involvements than those with less than high school graduation) and currently attending religious services regularly (0.31). After controlling for other factors in the model, age did not substantially increase the number of core involvements (0.04).

### Summary

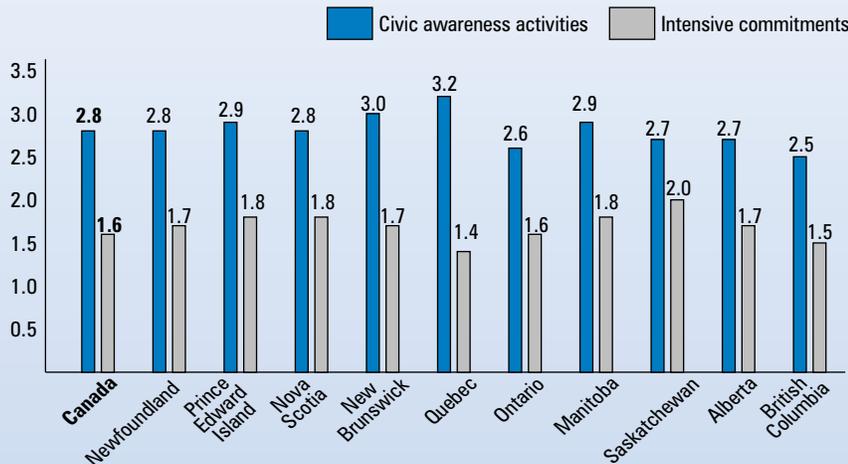
Data from the National Survey of Volunteering, Giving and Participation

9. The variables in the model were participation in religious organization when young, participation in youth groups, participation in team sports when young, parental volunteering, currently being very satisfied with life in general, age, sex, level of education, place of residence (rural or urban) and province.

# CST Does geography make a difference?

The provinces with the highest rates of community involvement were Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, with an average of 4.7 out of a possible 10 total community involvements. British Columbia had the lowest rate, with 4.0 total involvements. The average number of involvements was also higher among rural, compared with urban, residents — 4.7 versus 4.3 total involvements. A closer examination of only time intensive community commitments shows a similar geographic distribution, although the gap is slightly smaller.

Average number of community involvements



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

suggest that an adult's tendency to participate in community activities is influenced by both their childhood and adult experiences. As a youth, involvement in youth groups and having parents who volunteered influenced later community participation; as an adult, education and current religious attendance were significant predictors of involvement.

Of particular interest is the role that a religious background plays in the decisions that guide people's participation in community activities. Though association does not imply causation, for almost every indicator of community involvement, participation was higher for those with a religious background than for others. So far unexplored in community par-

ticipation research, religious background was found to be a significant predictor of the number of core commitments a person was likely to have and may prove to be an important missing link in explaining volunteer and other community behaviour.



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