

Volunteering and giving: a regional perspective

by Paul B. Reed and L. Kevin Selbee

This article was adapted from *Formal and Informal Caring and Giving: Regional and Community Patterns in Canada*, one in a series of reports from the Non-profit Sector Knowledge Base Project. This is the third of a series of articles *Canadian Social Trends* is publishing to commemorate the International year of the Volunteer.

Are Canadians equally likely to volunteer in any region of Canada? Does their style of volunteering change depending on the size of community they live in? Many studies have shown clear and consistent regional differences in the volunteering and charitable giving behaviour of Canadians.¹ In 2000, for example, residents of the Prairies reported the highest levels of formal volunteering and giving, which is done through organizations, while those living in Quebec reported the lowest. However, to provide a more accurate measure of contributory behaviour, it is also necessary to consider direct personal helping and giving, that is, efforts to help others independent of voluntary groups, charitable tax receipts or public recognition.

This article proposes that regional differences in giving and volunteering diminish markedly when both formal

and direct personal volunteering and giving are taken into account. In addition, the article shows that distinctive styles of giving and volunteering appear to characterize several regions and certain kinds of communities. The following analysis is based on data from both the 1997 and the 2000 National Surveys of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (NSGVP), along with some information from the 1987 Volunteer Activity Survey (VAS).

Regional differences decline when formal and direct volunteering are combined

According to the 1987 VAS, about 5.3 million Canadians or 27% of the adult population volunteered their time and skills to groups and organizations across the country during that year. Ten years later, in 1997, these numbers had grown to 7.5 million or 31% of Canadians. By 2000, however, the number of formal volunteers had

declined to 6.5 million, or 27% of the adult population. These data are important, but they do not provide a complete picture. Many Canadians prefer to assist others directly, in ways that do not involve organizations, and it is equally important to take measure of these personal, less structured ways of helping.

In fact, the incidence of direct personal helping far exceeds that of formal volunteering. Compared with

1. Caldwell, G. and Reed, P.B. 1999. *Civic participation in Canada: Why so much variation?* Reed, P.B. and Selbee, L.K. 2000. "Distinguishing characteristics of active volunteers in Canada." *Non-Profit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 29, 571-592. Reed, P.B. 1999. *Generosity in Canada: Trends in Personal Gifts and Charitable Donations over Three Decades, 1969-1997*. Statistics Canada. 1998. *Caring Canadians, Involved Canadians: Highlights from the 1997 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating*, Statistics Canada catalogue no. 71-542-XPE.

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What you should know about this study

Data used in preparation of this article come from the 1997 and 2000 National Surveys of Giving, Volunteering and Participating as well as the 1987 Volunteer Activity Survey. The purpose of these surveys was to ask Canadians 15 years of age and over how they gave money and other resources to individuals and to organizations, volunteered their time to help and care for others, and participated in civic and community activities.



Regional differences in rates of volunteering narrow when direct personal volunteering is combined with formal volunteer work

	Formal volunteering			Direct personal volunteering			Total volunteering		
	1987	1997	2000	1987	1997	2000	1987	1997	2000
	% of population age 15 and over								
Canada	27	31	27	64	73	77	68	76	79
Maritimes	30	36	32	69	76	80	72	79	82
Quebec	19	22	19	62	66	76	65	71	78
Ontario	26	32	26	62	73	73	67	77	76
Prairies	39	42	39	71	77	84	75	81	86
British Columbia	29	32	26	60	77	77	65	79	80

Sources: Statistics Canada, National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating, 1997 and 2000; and Volunteer Activity Survey, 1987.



People in smaller communities have consistently higher rates of volunteering

	Formal volunteering			Direct personal volunteering			Total volunteering		
	1987	1997	2000	1987	1997	2000	1987	1997	2000
	% of population age 15 and over								
Canada	27	31	27	64	73	77	68	76	79
Large urban areas	24	29	25	61	70	76	66	74	79
All other areas	31	36	30	67	77	79	71	80	81
Intermediate urban	29	34	n.a.	67	75	n.a.	71	78	n.a.
Small town and rural	32	37	n.a.	68	78	n.a.	72	81	n.a.

n.a. = not available.

Note: Large urban areas have a population of 100,000 or greater; intermediate urban areas 15,000 to 99,999 and small towns and rural areas have populations of less than 15,000.

Sources: Statistics Canada, National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating, 1997 and 2000; and Volunteer Activity Survey, 1987.

the approximately 3 in 10 Canadians who offered their time as formal volunteers in 1987, 1997 and 2000, nearly 8 in 10 reported helping directly in 2000, an increase from 6 in 10 in 1987.

According to the two NSGVP surveys, 66% of people in 1997 and 63% in 2000 provided direct personal help to relatives not living with them, and 71% and 79% respectively to people other than relatives. The most common activities included helping someone with shopping or driving

someone to appointments or stores (55% of people provided direct help in 1997 and 57% in 2000); babysitting without being paid (54% and 51%); helping others to write letters, solve problems, find information or fill out forms (47% and 38%); and visiting the elderly (47% and 45%).

Across Canada, in each of the three survey years, the gap separating the regions with the highest and the lowest proportions of formal volunteers — that is, the Prairies and Quebec — was 20 percentage points. In contrast,

the gap was only half as large in the case of direct personal helping.

As a result, when formal and direct personal volunteering are combined, regional differences fall markedly. In both 1987 and 1997, the overall rate of helping in the Prairies was 10 percentage points higher than in Quebec (which had the lowest rate in those years), and in 2000 it was 10 percentage points higher than in Ontario (the lowest rate in that year). More importantly, while the rate of formal volunteering rose and then fell between 1987 and 2000, the overall rate of helping climbed quite substantially in all regions; the smallest increase was a 9 percentage point rise in Ontario and the largest, a 15 point jump in British Columbia.

These regional patterns may be the result of different provincial preferences for formal and direct personal helping. Canadians in the Prairies clearly had a greater propensity to volunteer through formal organizations, while those in Quebec seemed to prefer direct personal helping.

Canadians in small towns and rural areas are most likely to volunteer

According to the NSGVP, the proportion of people who volunteered formally was highest in rural communities; it declined steadily as the size of community increased. In 1987 and 1997, in small towns and rural areas the rate of formal volunteering was 8 percentage points higher than that in large urban centers. Interestingly, the gap between urban and rural areas was about the same when direct personal volunteering is considered. While formal volunteering rose about 5 percentage points in large, intermediate and small communities between 1987 and 1997, direct personal helping increased by 8 to 10 points. Although directly comparable data are not available for 2000, the trend suggests that informal helping

has risen faster in large urban areas than elsewhere, to the extent that in 2000 the overall rate of helping was the same in large urban and other areas.

Full measure of charitable giving provides a more accurate picture

Charitable giving serves numerous essential purposes. It enables many charitable and non-profit organizations to provide the services that are important to the well-being of individuals and their communities, it provides a vehicle through which individuals can express their ideals and values, and it improves the quality of life of the beneficiaries of the donations.

In 1997, just over 19 million Canadians, 82% of the population aged 15 and over, reported money donations totaling \$4.5 billion to charitable and non-profit organizations. In 2000, just under 20 million Canadians, 83% of the population, gave \$5.0 billion to charities. In both years, about 80% of Canadians also provided financial support directly to individuals and non-financial support to organizations, that is, direct personal giving such as giving money to people on the street, making bequests or donating food or clothing.

In 1997 and 2000, 78% of people who made donations did so as direct financial donations either by approaching, or in response to a request from, an organization; 36% in 1997 and 41% in 2000 deposited spare change in cash boxes, usually located beside a cash register at store checkouts; and 3% in 1997 and 4% in 2000 reported leaving a bequest to a charitable, religious or spiritual organization. In-kind donations were also common: 63% in 1997 and 70% in 2000 donated clothing or household goods; and 52% in 1997 and 54% in 2000 gave food to a charitable organization such as a food bank.

The regional patterns for charitable giving are much the same as those for volunteering. In all regions, the

Hours of formal volunteering in 1997 and 2000

Volunteers contributed a total of just over 1.1 billion hours of their time in 1997, and over 1.0 billion hours in 2000, an average of 149 and 162 hours respectively per volunteer during each year. However, the annual averages include people who volunteered on only one occasion during the year as well as those who did so weekly or even daily. In fact, 22% of volunteers contributed over 200 hours in 1997 and over 208 hours in 2000. These figures highlight an important change that occurred during these years: while the proportion of Canadians who volunteered shrank, the aggregate time volunteered by those who gave a substantial number of hours rose. This resulted in an increasing concentration of volunteering in a shrinking group of individuals.

proportion of people who give directly is consistently higher than that of people who give through organizations, and combining the two measures narrows the gap between regions. In 1997, the combined rate of giving was highest in Ontario (91%) and lowest in Quebec (88%); in 2000, the rate was highest in the Prairies (94%) and lowest in British Columbia (89%).

A comparable pattern exists across communities of different size. The rates of combined giving diverge by less than 2 percentage points in 1997 and 2000, compared with a gap of 6 percentage points in 1997 and 3 percentage points in 2000 for formal charitable giving alone.

Summary

Direct personal giving and volunteering constitute a large part of contributory behaviour. Consequently, contributory behaviour in Canada can be better characterized and understood by taking account of both formal and direct personal volunteering and giving.

While regional and community differences in the incidence of volunteering and giving are considerably reduced when formal and direct personal styles are combined, they are not eliminated entirely. People in the Prairies prefer to volunteer and give

through formal channels, while residents of Quebec favour contributing directly. Finally, differences in the incidence and mix of total volunteering and contributing are considerably smaller across communities than across regions.

The existence of regional styles of helping and giving is not unusual or surprising — there is in Canada, after all, systematic regional patterning of numerous other social phenomena such as unemployment, marriage and divorce, and crime. What is it in certain regions that gives rise to their particular style? What is the role of regional values and subculture? Of different regional demographic features? Of social and economic conditions? Answers to these questions require further analysis.



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