

The gift of time

Henry Pold

From blood donor clinics to the ski slopes, from hospital wards to school gymnasiums, from distress centres to rural firehalls - volunteers enrich society.

In 1987, Canada benefited from the efforts of more than five million unpaid workers doing over nine million volunteer jobs. These volunteers "worked" over one billion hours (an average of about two hours a week per job) over the 12-month period from November 1986 to October 1987. This was equivalent to more than 500,000 full-time, full-year jobs. ⁽¹⁾ If these jobs had paid even the minimum wage, they would have required a payroll of more than \$75 million a week.

Volunteers are involved in social welfare and health activities, artistic and cultural programs, sports and leisure activities, environmental protection, international relations and living conditions, social advocacy, politics, and even law and justice. This article looks at the different kinds of organizations that rely on volunteers and profiles the individuals who offer their time and energy in unpaid work.

Volunteer organizations

What kinds of organizations depend on volunteer labour? The top three are religious organizations; leisure, recreation and sports organizations; and education and youth development organizations. Together they accounted for almost one-half of all volunteer jobs in 1987.

Almost one-quarter of male volunteers were in the recreation field. Religion and education together accounted for another quarter of the jobs performed by men. Women were most likely to volunteer for religious organizations, accounting for one-fifth of all jobs held by women. Next were education organizations, followed by health organizations; combined, these two areas accounted for almost one-third of the volunteer jobs taken by women.

Volunteer activities

Volunteer jobs cover a wide range of activities, although some are more organization-specific than others. (2) For example, helping in a religious service was most common in religious organizations, while coaching, refereeing and judging were strongly associated with leisure, sports and recreation organizations. Overall however, the largest number of volunteer jobs involved fundraising (38%), providing information (36%), and organizing, supervising and coordinating activities (35%).

Although most activities were equitably shared by men and women, some stereotypical differences are apparent. More than a quarter of the women prepared or served food, but only about one-tenth of the men contributed in this way. On the other hand, 17% of the men repaired, maintained or built facilities, compared with 4% of the women. Although women were more likely to make items (18% versus 5%), men were more involved with coaching, refereeing and judging (20% versus 7%). Another area of difference was in board membership: one-third of the men sat on boards of directors, compared with only about one-fifth of the women.

Who volunteers?

By sex

Although women do hold the majority of volunteer jobs, it is a small majority. Overall, 57% of volunteer jobs were filled by women and 43% by men. But some types of organizations attracted quite different proportions of men and women, reflecting some traditional patterns. Organizations in the health, religious and international fields had much higher proportions of women. For example, three-quarters of volunteer jobs in health and two-thirds of those in religious organizations were taken by women. On the other hand over 60% of volunteers in sports and recreation and in economic organizations were men.

By age

Volunteers are not, as one might think, primarily middle-aged or retired. Almost one-half of all volunteers were aged 25 to 44, just over one-quarter were 45 to 64 and the remainder were divided between those 15 to 24 or over 64. In education and youth development, almost two-thirds of the jobs were handled by 25-44 year-olds, as were three-fifths of the jobs in leisure, recreation and sports. The 65 and over group were responsible for nearly one-fifth of the positions in the social services (care and support) field.



Table 2 Volunteer profile

Source: Survey of Volunteer Activity

By marital status

Most volunteers are married. In 1987 almost three-quarters of the volunteers were married, while only 17% were single (never married). One in ten was widowed, separated or divorced. Among social service organizations, widowed, separated or divorced individuals accounted for a much higher proportion - 17%. They also represented a sizeable fraction in health organizations. The proportion of single persons was relatively high in arts and culture organizations (26% of the total) and in international organizations (30%) areas where young children, and hence their parents, are less likely to be involved.

Impact of children

Overall, just over half of all volunteers were heads of families [\(3\)](#) with children at home, while only 38% were heads of families with no children at home. The presence of children in a family has a strong impact on the likelihood of an individual volunteering for certain types of organizations. For example, two-thirds of volunteers in education and youth development organizations were heads of families with children at home. Among female volunteers in these organizations, 71% had children at home.

In leisure, recreation and sports organizations, 57% of the volunteers were family heads with children at home, while only 30% were family heads with no children at home (the rest were either single adults or children). About 70% of female volunteers working for law and justice organizations had children at home - not so surprising since one-third of all volunteers in these organizations were involved with the "Block Parents" program. Only organizations in the international and foreign category had appreciably more volunteers who were heads of families without children at home (58%).



Table 3 Profile of volunteer organizations

Source: Survey of Volunteer Activity



Chart A Proportion of women in volunteer organizations, 1987

Source: Survey of Volunteer Activity

What's their background?

Education

More than half of all volunteers had secondary school education or less. Overall, just over one-fifth of volunteer jobs were held by persons with a university degree. The highest proportion of volunteers with a degree was found among international organizations (40%), followed by arts and culture organizations (35%) and economic organizations (34%).

Household income

The largest group of volunteers belonged to middle-income households. Over 40% of all volunteers came from households with incomes between \$30,000 and \$59,999; 14% had incomes of \$60,000 or over; and only 5% had household incomes below \$10,000. Persons with household incomes over \$60,000 were proportionately most concentrated in economic and international organizations (19% and 21% respectively). Lower-income volunteers (those from households with incomes below \$20,000) were most highly represented in social services organizations - almost one-quarter of the total in this area. This may reflect the high proportion of older people in this area - fully 19% of the volunteers in social services organizations were at least 65 years old.

Occupation

Although volunteers come from all walks of life, the largest group comprises individuals with managerial or professional job experience. Overall, about one-third of the volunteers were, or had been, in these occupations. (4) Among men, the figure was 40%, while for women it was 29%. In law and justice organizations and in arts and culture organizations, over one-half of the male volunteers were in the managerial and professional category.

Among female volunteers, almost one-quarter had last worked at a paid job more than five years ago. The proportions were even higher for female volunteers in religious organizations (28%) and health organizations (27%).

Employment and volunteering

An old saw says that if you want something done quickly, give it to the busiest person you know. Does this have any validity for volunteers? Indeed it does. Almost two-thirds of volunteers also had a paid job (compared with 60% of all persons aged 15 or older). Among male volunteers, over three-quarters were employed, and among women, 53% were employed. Almost nine out of ten male volunteers in community organizations were employed, while in arts and culture organizations, over two-thirds of male volunteers were also employed.

About half of female volunteers were employed regardless of the type of organization they volunteered

for - the highest proportion being for economic organizations (78%) and the lowest, for international organizations (46%). (The high proportion of employed volunteers may also reflect the "networking" opportunities provided by volunteer activity.)

Time spent volunteering

How much time do volunteers devote to their volunteer jobs? The subject can be viewed from several perspectives: hours per week, months per year, or years with an organization.

Hours per week

Over the 12-month reference period, the average volunteer job involved about two hours a week. Only law and justice organizations were noticeably different, with an average of almost seven hours a week.



Chart B Proportion of volunteers with a paid job, 1987

Source: Survey of Volunteer Activity

This higher rate is likely caused by two of the main components of the law and justice group - Block Parents and Neighbourhood Watch, both of which are programs that allow people to volunteer at home while doing other activities.

The "average number of hours" variable is somewhat misleading because of the distribution of the hours volunteered. Over 90% of the volunteer jobs averaged five hours or less per week, but they accounted for only half of the total number of hours volunteered. In other words, a small core of volunteers supplied a large proportion of total volunteer time. For example, in law and justice organizations, about three-quarters of the total hours were put in by only 5% of the volunteers.

Months per year

The door-to-door canvasser, calling once a year to raise money for a specific disease or illness, is one common stereotype of a volunteer. Volunteer jobs in health organizations contribute to this image. About one-third of these jobs spanned one month or less compared with only about 16% of all volunteer jobs. Jobs in religious organizations, on the other hand, were more likely to involve close to a year-round commitment - almost 40% of these jobs involved ten or more months compared with less than one-quarter of all volunteer jobs.

Volunteer tenure

Most volunteer positions involved only a limited commitment: 42% of all volunteer jobs had been held for two years or less at the time of the survey. Nonetheless, another 30% of all volunteer jobs had been occupied for more than five years. Law and justice organizations had the highest proportion of short-tenure volunteers (59%), while religious organizations had the largest proportion of long-tenure volunteers (46%).

Time of day

Not surprisingly, the majority of volunteer work is done in the evenings - over half the men and more than a third of the women doing volunteer jobs reported evenings as their usual time for this activity. Only religious organizations involved a significant proportion of morning volunteer duties (23%). Volunteer jobs in environmental and wildlife organizations were the most likely to last full days (31%), with jobs in community organizations running a distant second (23%).

Day of the week

As one might expect, most volunteer jobs were performed Monday to Friday (75%). Weekday volunteer jobs were slightly less common in religious and environmental organizations (67%). Overall, only 13% of volunteer work was done on Saturdays - among that done by men the proportion was 17%. About one-fifth of the jobs in leisure and environmental organizations were performed on Saturdays. Sundays were the quietest days for volunteer activity, with only 7% of volunteer jobs overall. The exception was religious organizations, in which 15% of volunteers were active on that day.



Chart C Months spent volunteering for an organization, 1987

Source: Survey of Volunteer Activity

Conclusion

What does the future hold for volunteer organizations? A rising demand for social services in an era of fiscal restraint implies that more activities will have to be assumed by volunteers. In addition, the changing age profile of the Canadian population will have an impact on the types and amounts of services required.

For volunteer organizations, the challenge will be not only to attract and hold members, but also to adjust

to changes in the demand for their services. For example, social service (care and support) organizations will probably find their activities more in demand in the future. But at the same time, these organizations will probably find it easier to recruit new volunteers from the larger pool of persons aged 65 and over.

The Survey of Volunteer Activity

Although their impact is great, the amount of information about volunteers is small. To obtain more extensive data, the Department of the Secretary of State sponsored the Survey of Volunteer Activity as a supplement to Statistics Canada's monthly Labour Force Survey. Conducted in October 1987, the Survey of Volunteer Activity identified persons who had volunteered for an organization at some time between November 1986 and October 1987 inclusive. Those who reported volunteering were then requested to complete a follow-up questionnaire that asked for detailed information on up to three organizations volunteered for.

For analytical purposes, each organization reported on in the survey constitutes one "volunteer job", regardless of the frequency or duration of volunteering. Persons who volunteered for two (or more) organizations are considered to have performed two (or three) volunteer jobs. Altogether, 5.3 million volunteers reported on 9.2 million jobs ([Table 1](#)).



Table 1 Volunteers and volunteer jobs

Source: Survey of Volunteer Activity

This article presents an overview of the results from the second phase, completed in January 1988. It focuses on volunteer jobs, which are examined according to the various characteristics of the persons performing them (for example, the proportion of jobs held by married women). However, for convenience, the text frequently refers to "volunteers" instead of "jobs held by volunteers". For example, a statement such as "6% of male volunteers served health organizations" should be taken to mean 6% of jobs held by male volunteers were in health organizations". In other words, volunteers are counted as many times as they have jobs, up to a maximum of three times.

Notes

Note 1

This estimate is based on 40 hours per week, 50 weeks per year.

Note 2

Volunteers usually report doing several activities for each organization served, for example fundraising, sitting on the board, recruiting new members and providing information. A volunteer can be counted not only in several different activity categories, but also two or three times in the same category (for example fundraising) if he or she performed that activity for two or three different organizations.

Note 3

In this study, heads of families comprise both spouses, when present, as well as lone parents in single-parent families.

Note 4

For those volunteers currently working in a paid job, the occupation refers to that job; for all other persons, the occupation referred to is that of the most recent paid job held in the previous five years.

Reference

Duchesne, D. *Giving Freely: Volunteers in Canada*, Labour Analytic Report No. 4, Cat. 71-535. Ottawa: August 1989.

List of volunteer organizations

Volunteer organizations were classified into 14 broad groupings for analytical purposes. The following list describes the types of organizations contained in these broad groupings.

Health

- Hospitals and hospital auxiliaries

- Other health facilities (e.g. nursing homes)
- Specific diseases (e.g. Canadian Cancer Society)
- Addiction (e.g. Alcoholics Anonymous)
- Eating habits (e.g. Overeaters Anonymous)
- Family planning, prenatal, infant care
- First aid

Education and youth development

- Youth development (e.g. Boy Scouts, Big Sisters)
- Early education
- School (excludes sports and artistic programs)
- Parent-teacher groups
- School boards
- Postsecondary education
- Art school
- School artistic programs (e.g. choirs, theatre)
- School sports
- Official language education
- Literacy programs
- Special education
- Public and adult education (e.g. Toastmasters)
- Student organizations

Social services (care and support)

- Economic assistance (e.g. food banks, soup kitchens)
- Homes and shelters
- Care and assistance (e.g. citizen advocacy, home care)
- Child care
- Support in emotionally or socially difficult situations
- Multi-purpose services (e.g. Children's Aid Society)

Sports and recreation

- Recreational and sports facilities
- Recreational organizations
- Recreational events and activities
- Hobby groups and common interests groups
- Social clubs and events
- Vacation camps

- Physical activity and fitness
- Sports events and competitions

Law and justice

- Legal aid and education
- Crime prevention (e.g. Block Parents, Neighbourhood Watch)
- Offenders and ex-offenders (e.g. John Howard Society)

Employment and economic interests

- Employment opportunity (e.g. job counselling, sheltered workshops)
- Business interests (e.g. Junior Achievement, Chamber of Commerce)
- Consumer protection
- Finances (e.g. Caisse Populaire, tax advice)
- Housing interests
- Labour unions
- Occupational and professional associations, professional development
- Occupational health and work safety

Religious organizations

- Organizations providing religious services
- Church and other religious choirs and musical ensembles
- Formal religious education
- Groups with religious affiliation
- Camps under church auspices
- Church and temple groups providing secular services

Arts and culture

- Historic preservation
- Museums and galleries
- Libraries
- Theatre
- Choirs and musical ensembles
- Dance ensembles
- Other art disciplines
- Communication (e.g. radio, TV, newspapers)

Society and public benefit

- Agricultural society
- Pro-life and right-to-life
- Allied youth
- Running of the community (e.g. town councils)
- Community facilities and integration (e.g. Welcome Wagon)
- Volunteerism
- Groups serving the community
- Political parties and associations
- Canadian and citizenship issues
- Human rights and social justice (e.g. abortion, women's rights)
- Firefighting
- Search and rescue, emergency and general safety
- Cemetery maintenance

Environment and wildlife

- Pollution
- Resource conservation
- Wilderness and wildlife protection
- Animal care and protection

Foreign and international organizations

- Organizations concerned about living conditions (e.g. Oxfam)
- Culture, ideology, peace and human rights (e.g. Amnesty International)

Multi-domain

- Service clubs, fraternal organizations, lodges and Masons
- Multi-purpose native, ethnic and women's organizations
- Other (e.g. Red Cross, Salvation Army, YM/YWCA)

Other

- Organizations not elsewhere classified

Unidentified or not stated

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Source

Perspectives on Labour and Income, Summer 1990, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 75-001E). This is the fourth of six articles in the issue.



Table 2

Volunteer profile

| | '000 | % |
|--------------------------------------|--------------|------------|
| Total volunteer jobs held | 9,179 | 100 |
| By sex | | |
| Men | 3,934 | 43 |
| Women | 5,245 | 57 |
| By age | | |
| 15-24 | 1,080 | 12 |
| 25-44 | 4,492 | 49 |
| 45-64 | 2,577 | 28 |
| 65 and over | 1,029 | 11 |
| By marital status | | |
| Married | 6,734 | 73 |
| Single (never married) | 1,558 | 17 |
| Other | 887 | 10 |
| By education | | |
| No secondary education | 716 | 8 |
| Some or completed high school | 4,029 | 44 |
| Some postsecondary education | 893 | 10 |
| Postsecondary certificate or diploma | 1,580 | 17 |
| University degree | 1,960 | 21 |
| By household income | | |
| Less than \$ 10,000 | 430 | 5 |
| \$10,000 - \$19,999 | 1,181 | 13 |
| \$20,000 - \$29,999 | 1,223 | 13 |
| \$30,000 - \$39,999 | 1,839 | 20 |
| \$40,000 - \$59,999 | 1,948 | 21 |
| \$60,000 or more | 1,293 | 14 |
| Not stated | 1,266 | 14 |
| By labour force status | | |

| | | |
|--|-------|----|
| Employed (in a paid job) | 5,848 | 64 |
| Unemployed | 396 | 4 |
| Not in the labour force | 2,934 | 32 |
| By selected activities* | | |
| Fundraising | 3,521 | 38 |
| Recruiting | 2,192 | 24 |
| Teaching | 2,023 | 22 |
| Coaching | 1,140 | 12 |
| Providing information | 3,338 | 36 |
| Promoting ideas | 1,983 | 22 |
| Providing care | 1,499 | 16 |
| Preparing/serving food | 1,871 | 20 |
| Making items | 1,180 | 13 |
| Selling items | 1,516 | 17 |
| Organizing events | 3,179 | 35 |
| Board member | 2,378 | 26 |
| <i>Source: Survey of Volunteer Activity</i> | | |
| <i>* Volunteers usually reported several activities.</i> | | |

Table 3

Profile of volunteer organizations

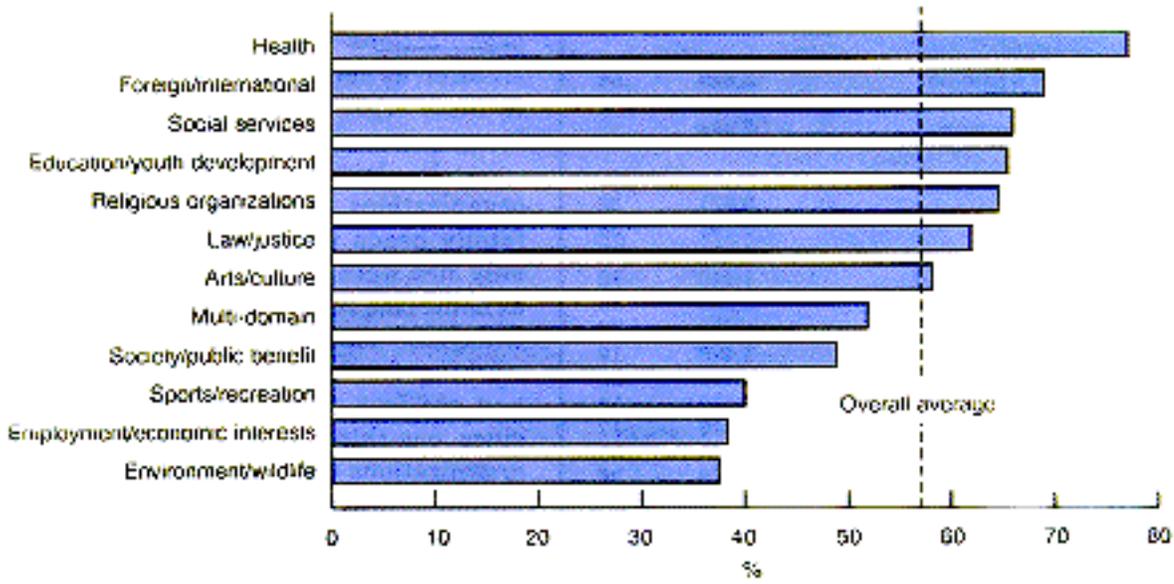
Proportion of jobs held by volunteers who are:

| | Women | Age 25- 44 | Family heads with children | University graduates | In a managerial or professional occupation | Active for one month only | In a household with an income of \$40,000 or more | Employed* |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|---|------------------------------------|--|-----------|
| | % | | | | | | | |
| All organizations | 57 | 49 | 51 | 21 | 34 | 16 | 35 | 64 |
| Health | 77 | 41 | 42 | 17 | 29 | 35 | 36 | 52 |
| Education and youth development | 65 | 64 | 66 | 24 | 36 | 10 | 40 | 65 |
| Social services | 66 | 40 | 42 | 22 | 32 | 18 | 29 | 53 |
| Sports | 40 | 60 | 57 | 18 | 32 | 12 | 38 | 75 |
| Law and justice | 62 | 59 | 64 | 23 | 36 | 10 | 34 | 64 |
| Employment and economic interests | 38 | 59 | 51 | 34 | 50 | 9 | 43 | 83 |
| Religious | 65 | 39 | 49 | 19 | 30 | 8 | 30 | 57 |
| Arts and culture | 58 | 41 | 37 | 35 | 43 | 8 | 34 | 61 |
| Society and public benefit | 49 | 53 | 56 | 22 | 34 | 24 | 38 | 75 |
| Environment and wildlife | 38 | 40 | 37 | 24 | 31 | 19 | 35 | 64 |
| Foreign and international | 69 | 38 | 28 | 40 | 49 | 23 | 42 | 54 |
| Multi-domain | 52 | 40 | 48 | 16 | 30 | 19 | 32 | 61 |

*Source: Survey of Volunteer Activity*** This refers to paid employment.*

Proportion of women in volunteer organizations, 1987

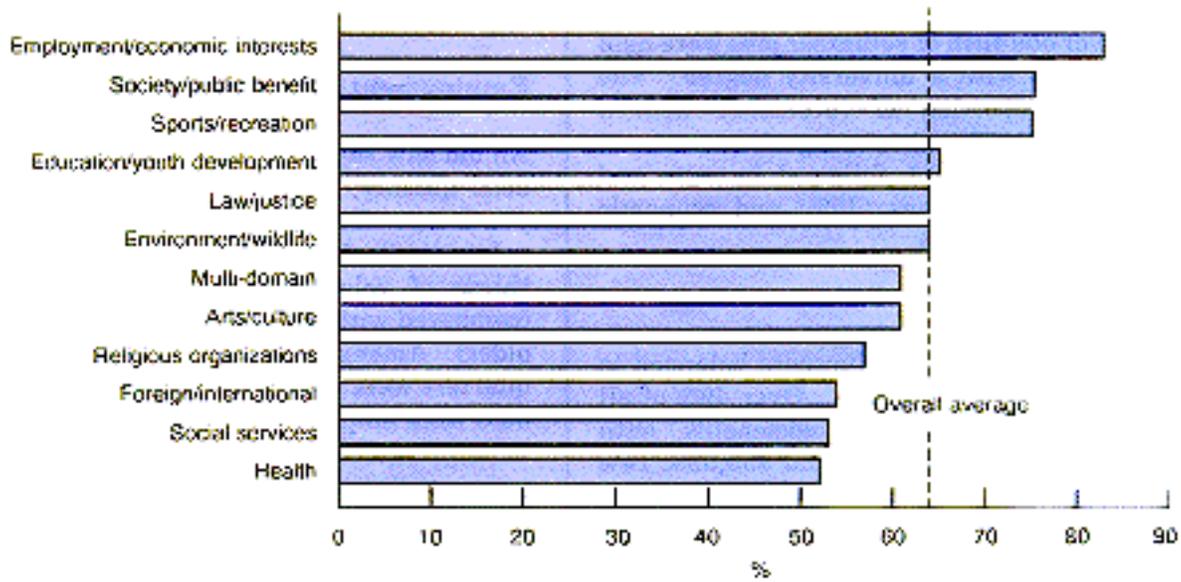
Jobs in health are dominated by women while jobs in environment/wildlife are more likely performed by men.



Source: Survey of Volunteer Activity

Proportion of volunteers with a paid job, 1987

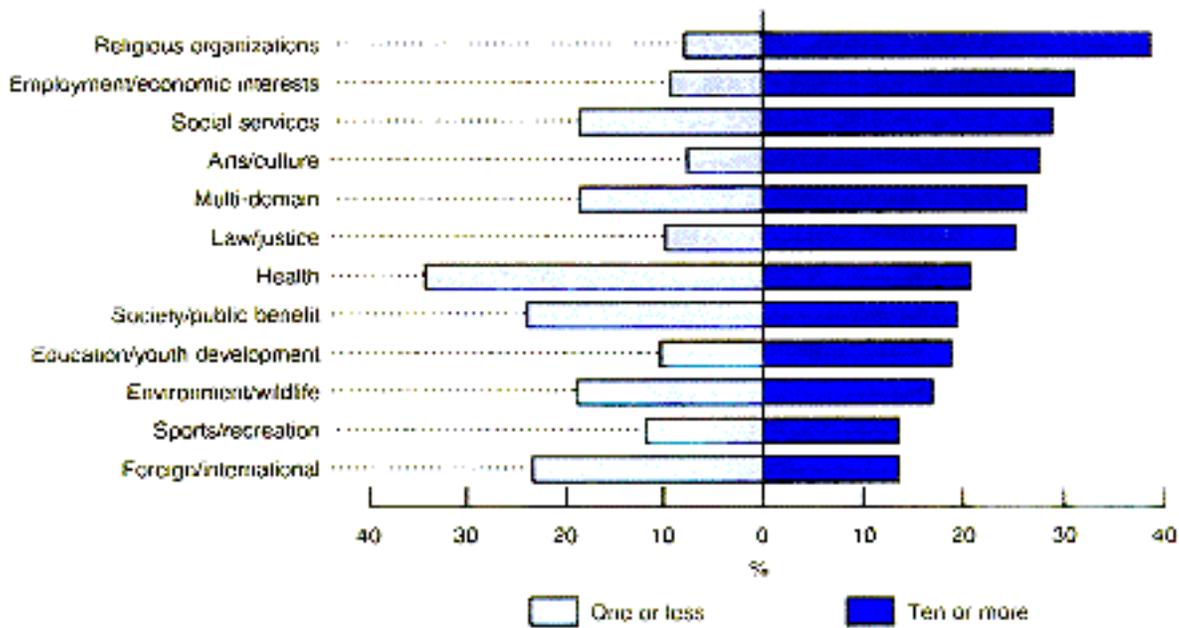
Over half of all volunteers have a paying job.



Source: Survey of Volunteer Activity

Months spent volunteering for an organization, 1987

Jobs in health organizations are often short-term while those in religion tend to be long-term.



Source: Survey of Volunteer Activity

Table 1

Volunteers and volunteer jobs

| | Volunteers | Volunteer jobs |
|---------------------------------|------------|----------------|
| | '000 | |
| Number of organizations served: | | |
| Total | 5,337 | 9,179 |
| One organization only | 2,655 | 2,655 |
| Two organizations only | 1,523 | 3,046 |
| Three organizations only | 797 | 2,390 |
| Four or more organizations | 363 | 1,088* |

Source: Survey of Volunteer Activity

** Information was collected for only three organizations.*