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Volunteering Among Young People

By Mark Hugo Lopez, Research Director¹
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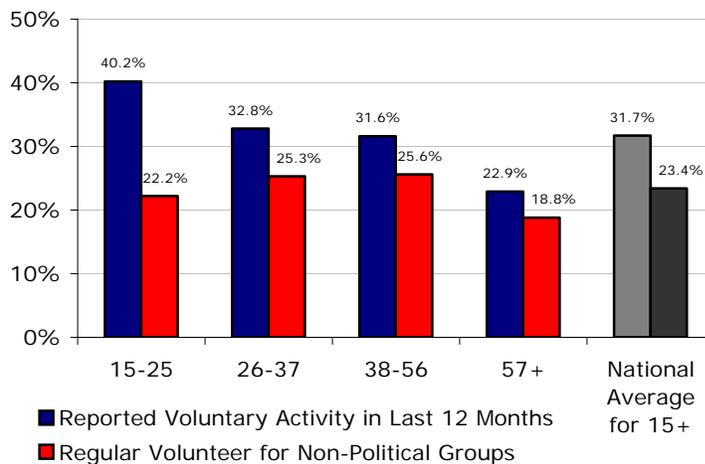
Volunteering rates among young people are generally higher than they are among adults 26 and older. However, measuring volunteer rates among all adults is a difficult task.² In recent years, efforts at measuring volunteering have produced widely different estimates, largely because of the methods employed to measure volunteering.³ For example, the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Current Population Survey estimated the national volunteer rate among adults age 16 and older at 27.6 percent in the year prior to September 2002.⁴ Alternatively, Independent Sector, a major source for information on volunteering and giving, reports a national volunteer rate of approximately 44 percent in 2000.⁵

While issues regarding the measurement of volunteering are not entirely resolved, most surveys suggest a growing volunteer rate among young people in recent years. Furthermore, these surveys also suggest young people volunteer at rates higher than their older counterparts. This fact sheet presents information on the frequency of volunteering, trends in volunteering, and the organizations for which young people volunteer utilizing data from many sources.

Frequency of Volunteering

As shown in Graph 1, young people generally report greater levels of volunteering than their adult counterparts. According to the report the *Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait*, during the spring of 2002, 15 to 25 year olds reported volunteering at the rate of 40.2 percent over the previous 12-month period

Graph 1: Volunteering by Generation, September 2002



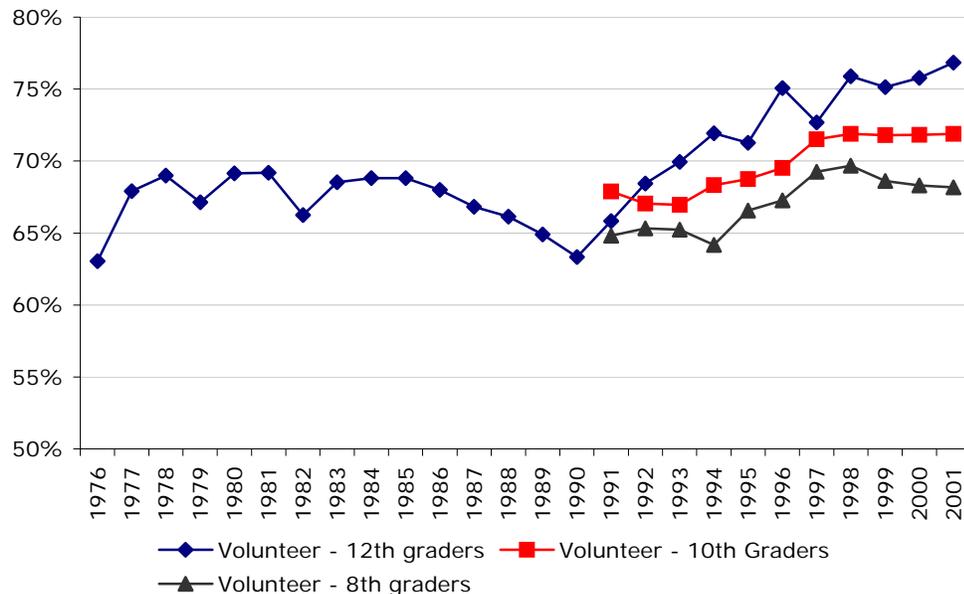
Source: *Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait*, September 2002.

compared with a national volunteering rate of 31.7 percent.⁶ However, as shown in Graph 1, while 40.2 percent of young people report that they volunteered, just over half, 22.2 percent, volunteered regularly, suggesting that they engage in episodic volunteering more often than their older counterparts.

Trends in Volunteering

There are two primary sources of information for trends in volunteering among young people. The first is Monitoring the Future (MTF), a data collection conducted annually among 8th, 10th, and 12th graders nationally by the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center in the Institute for Social Research designed to measure the life styles of over 50,000 high school students. One of the many questions in MTF's large survey effort asks about participation "in community affairs or voluntary activities." The trend in volunteering among high school seniors, 10th graders, and 8th graders is shown in Graph 2. Since 1976, volunteering rates among high school seniors remained steady through 1990 at approximately 67 percent, but have since risen to over 76 percent in 2001. Similarly, for 8th graders and 10th graders, volunteer rates have risen since 1991 with a volunteer rate of approximately 72 percent in 2001 for 10th graders and 66 percent in 2001 for 8th graders.

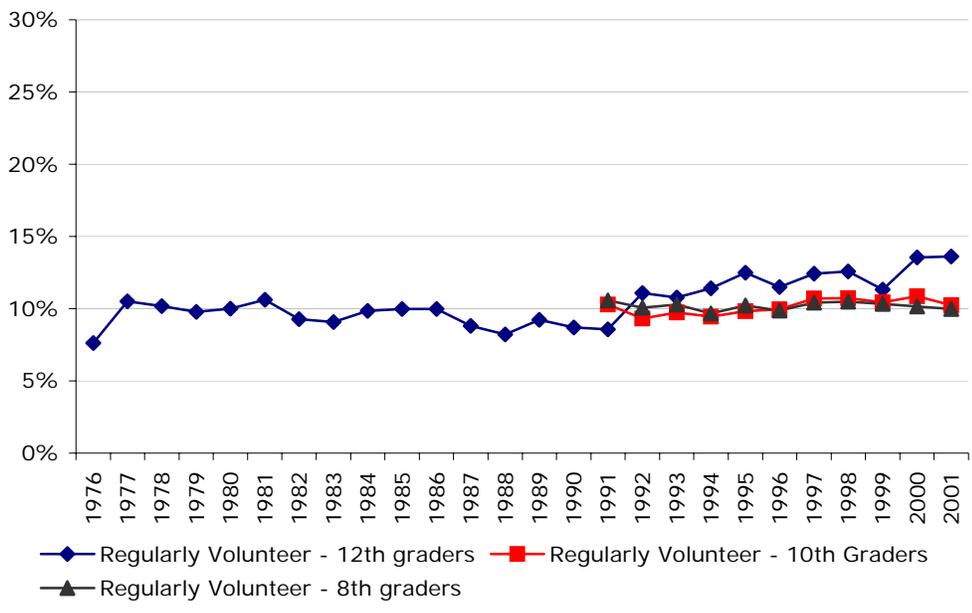
**Graph 2: Volunteering in the Past Year
among 8th, 10th and 12th Graders**



Source: Monitoring the Future, 12th grade, 10th grade and 8th grade surveys, 1976 to 2001.

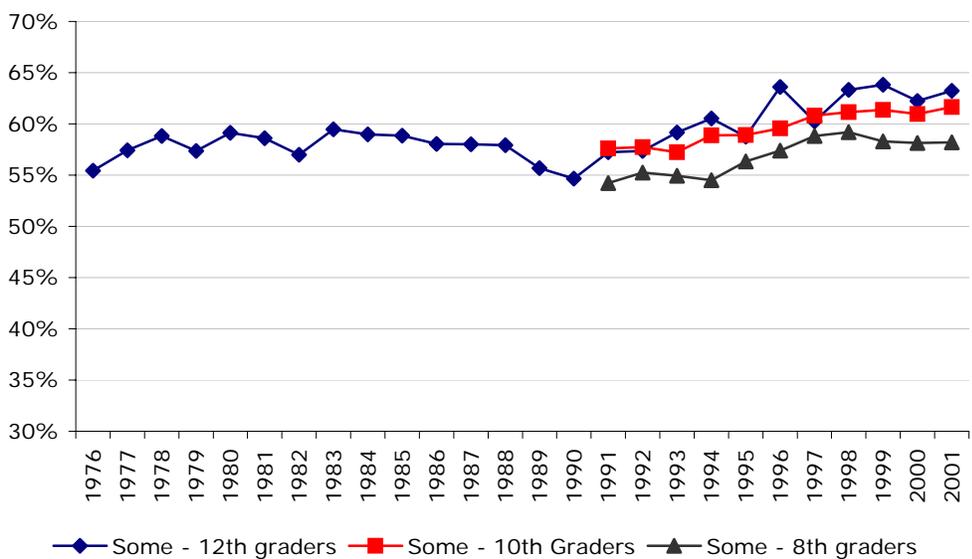
However, this trend masks a flat trend in the proportion of high school students who say they volunteer on a weekly or daily basis. Graph 3 indicates the trend in regular volunteering among 12th, 10th and 8th graders. While regular volunteering is up among 12th graders, it is still relatively flat compared to the growth in somewhat regular volunteering shown in Graph 4. Somewhat regular volunteers include students who volunteer once a month or less.

Graph 3: Regular Volunteers among 8th, 10th and 12th Graders



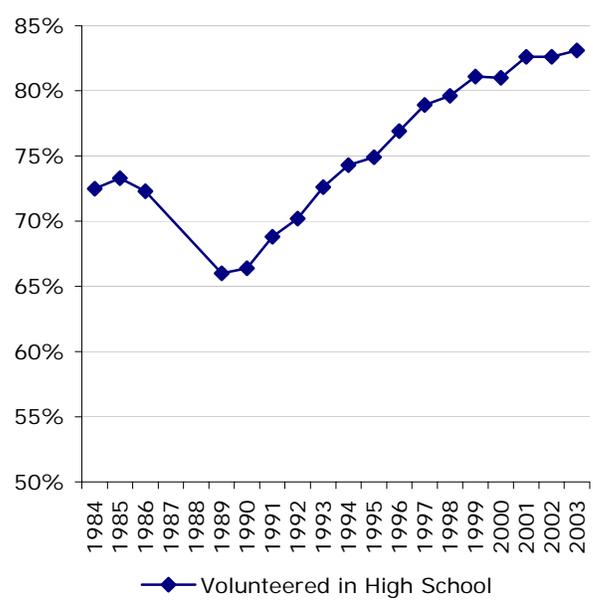
Source: Monitoring the Future, 12th grade, 10th grade and 8th grade surveys, 1976 to 2001.

Graph 4: Somewhat Regular Volunteers among 8th, 10th and 12th Graders



Source: Monitoring the Future, 12th grade, 10th grade and 8th grade surveys, 1976 to 2001.

Graph 5: Volunteering Among College Freshmen, 1984 to 2003

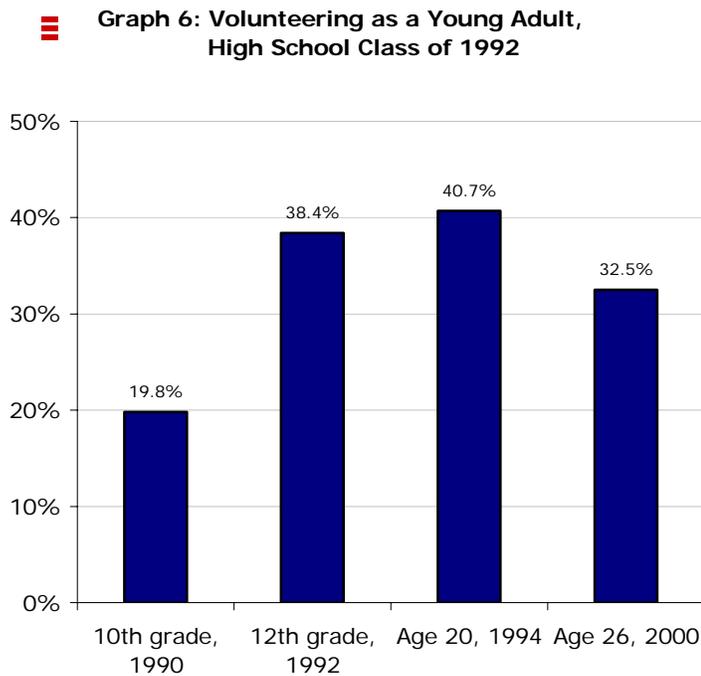


Source: HERI/UCLA College Freshmen Survey, 1984 to 2000.

As shown in Graph 5, the Higher Education Research Institute's annual survey of incoming first year college students suggests a rising volunteer rate since 1990, with over 83 percent of college freshmen in 2003 reporting that they had volunteered while in high school. The MTF data suggest, however, that this rise in volunteering is mostly an increase in episodic, rather than regular, activity.

When Does Volunteering Occur

Measuring volunteering at a point in time, as is done in the *Civic and Political Health of the Nation*, allows for a comparison of volunteering rates across age cohorts. It is also instructive to see changes over time for a single cohort. The Department of Education's National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 followed a single cohort of 8th graders from 1988 through 1999-2000. Data were initially collected on over 10,000 students from grades 8, 10, 12, and into college and beyond. In 2000, the majority of students were 25 or 26 years of age.



Source: National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988.

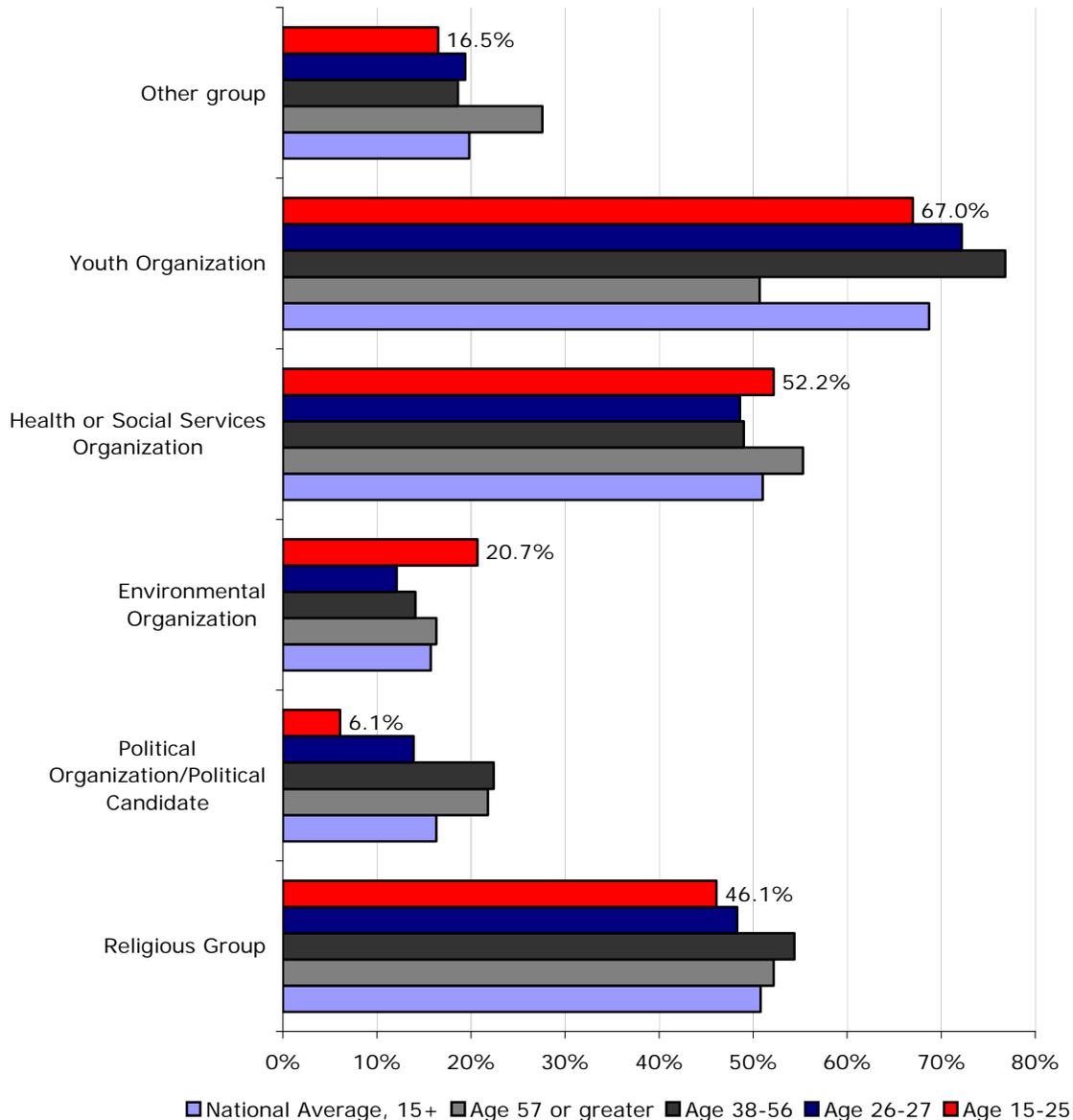
During the first decades of the life cycle, volunteering rates change substantially. Graph 6 displays volunteering rates for the high school class of 1992 as these young people progressed from 10th grade through the age of 26. As indicated, volunteering among the class of 1992 peaked at the age of 20, when a large number of these students were in college.

Volunteering for Organizations

Graph 7 shows, among volunteers, which organizations young people are most likely to volunteer with, based on data collected in the spring of 2002 for the *Civic and Political Health of the Nation*.

According to these data, 67 percent of young volunteers volunteered for youth organizations. The next most common venue for youth volunteering was a civic or community group such as a health service organization or a social service organization; collectively, they drew 53.2 percent of young volunteers. Compared to their older counterparts, young people are more likely to volunteer at an environmental organization, but are less likely to volunteer at a political organization or for a political candidate.

Graph 7: Volunteering by Organization
September 2002



Notes

¹ I thank Soumya Chattopadhyay and Michael Olander for excellent research assistance. I also thank Emily Kirby and Peter Levine for helpful comments on previous drafts of this fact sheet. All errors in fact or interpretation are my own.

² Difficulties with measuring volunteering rates stem from two measurement issues. First, survey participants often have difficulty remembering or classifying activities as volunteer activities. Second, surveys employ different methods to acquire information on volunteering rates from survey participants. For more information and discussion of issues surrounding the measurement of volunteering, see "Measurement of Volunteering: A Methodological Study Using Indiana as a Test Case" in the *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, Volume 31, issue 4, 2002 by Kathryn Steinberg, Patrick Rooney, and William Chin.

³ Kathryn Steinberg, Patrick Rooney, and William Chin have extensively studied alternative methods for measuring volunteering in the United States. One primary finding of their work is that the reported level of volunteering will depend crucially on the length of the survey. The longer the survey instrument, the greater the incidence of volunteering reported among survey respondents will be. For more information and discussion of issues surrounding the measurement of volunteering, see "Measurement of Volunteering: A Methodological Study Using Indiana as a Test Case" in the *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, Volume 31, issue 4, 2002.

⁴ See "Volunteering in the United States," December 2002 from the Bureau of Labor Statistics for a summary of the September 2002 Current Population Survey Volunteering supplement. This summary is available at <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/volun.nr0.htm>.

⁵ See Independent Sector's "Giving and Volunteering in the United States, 2001 – Key Findings" report for a description of the methodology used to measure volunteering, and for more information on the Giving and Volunteering survey series. This report is available at <http://www.independentsector.org/PDFs/GV01keyfind.pdf>.

⁶ See the *Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait*, by Scott Keeter, Cliff Zukin, Molly Andolina, and Krista Jenkins, September 2002. This nationwide telephone survey of 3,300 individuals was conducted from April 4 through May 20 2002. The report was funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts, and is available through the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at www.civicyouth.org.