

Briefing Paper 6

Individual voluntary participation in the United Kingdom

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Introduction

The extent of involvement in volunteering is a matter of considerable public interest and policy relevance. We might be interested in this as an index of civic health or social capital, or as a measure of the prospects for success of strategies designed to expand the role of the third sector. However, just as there are disagreements over definitions of the voluntary sector, so too are there differences in the way survey researchers ask questions about volunteering, which in turn affect the answers that are given. Nevertheless, despite variations in methods, the overall picture given by survey datasets is one of considerable stability in the level of volunteering.

Voluntary activity carried out by individuals has been documented by UK surveys since the early 1980s. A number of publications have presented and analysed the results of different surveys. For example, a Home Office publication (2004), and the Civil Society Almanac (NCVO, 2008/9), have used the Citizenship Survey to identify levels and trends in volunteering. An overview of statistical sources on volunteering produced by Tarling (2000) compared estimates of involvement in voluntary activities from the General Household Survey and the National Survey of Voluntary Activity. To date, however,

there has been no attempt to compare findings of different surveys systematically. This paper aims to fill this gap in the research. It focuses specifically on the methods used to obtain information on volunteering, and attempts to compare the picture of volunteering given by different surveys.

In this paper, a distinction is drawn between three types of surveys that address involvement in volunteering:

1. a number of surveys conducted have the specific aim of assessing the proportion of the population involved in voluntary activity, and characteristics of those involved. These are referred to as 'topical surveys'. Examples include the National Survey of Voluntary Activity (NSV) and the Citizenship Survey (CS). These surveys were sponsored by government departments specialising in society and community issues and/or by bodies specialising in volunteering research. 'Topical surveys' allow for an in-depth study of the phenomenon of individual volunteering, but also of informal individual help, charitable donations and receipt of voluntary help by the general public;
2. secondly, 'general purpose' surveys, were looked at, such as the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and the General Household Survey (GHS), which included questions or modules on

volunteering. The 'general purpose' surveys, as a rule, collect less detailed information on volunteering than the 'topical' surveys. However, these general purpose surveys typically have longer histories of operation and, in the case of the BHPS, they track the same people over time;

3. finally, there are some surveys that are not dedicated to the issue of volunteering but address broader issues of social attitudes, values and the scope and nature of civil participation. Examples include the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA), the European Social Survey (ESS) and the National Survey of Culture, Leisure and Sport (NSCLS). These also included single questions or modules on voluntary activities. These will be referred to as 'specialized' surveys.

The definition of volunteering

The John Hopkins Comparative Non-profit Sector Project (JH-CNS), arguably the major international comparative study of the non-profit sector, defined voluntary action as an action that (1) takes place within a formal organisational structure, (2) is self-governing, (3) is not profit distributing, (4) is independent of government, and (5) is voluntary (Salamon and Sokolowski 2001).

This paper focuses on formal volunteering, i.e. unpaid help taking place as a part of a group, organisation or club.

Potentially, there are a number of alternative ways to define volunteering and some surveys provide opportunities to implement and test the consequences of these alternative definitions. The GHS, CS and NSV, for example, collect information about informal volunteering, i.e. unpaid help which is not given as part of a group (to a friend or neighbour for example).

However, formal volunteering, focused on for the purposes of this paper, corresponds most closely with the definition developed by JH-CNS and implemented within the UK context (Kendall and Knapp 1993). Furthermore, previous research has indicated that formal and informal volunteering are two separate phenomena, governed by different forces (Wilson and Musick 1997). In addition, formal volunteering has proved the most comparable across different surveys.

Essentially this paper tackles the following questions:

1. what do different surveys tell us about the levels and trends in individual volunteering?
2. do their findings agree with each other? If not, what reasons might there be for the differences?
3. do different surveys lead to similar conclusions in relation to basic socio-demographic characteristics of the phenomenon of individual volunteering?

It is important to stress that this paper does not attempt to provide an in-depth explanation as to *why* people volunteer or otherwise. The intention is simply to provide a broad overview of the phenomenon of volunteering on the basis of the existing survey material.

Firstly, the findings were focused on surveys that allow examination of trends, i.e. the BHPS, CS and NSV. According to the inclusive definition implemented by the BHPS, the proportion of people involved in volunteering is around 20%. In this context, "inclusive" means a definition, and associated questions, which are likely to enable more people to answer positively. The BHPS asks whether people "do unpaid voluntary work" and the inclusive definition relates to people who may do so at least once a year. This figure has remained remarkably consistent between 1996 and

2006. The proportion of people with frequent involvement in volunteering (doing unpaid voluntary work at least once a month) is around 11%, also without major fluctuations or a clear upward or downward trend.

According to the CS, the proportion of those involved in volunteering (inclusive definition) in 2001-2006 is around 43% - about twice as high as the BHPS. The reason for the higher response is that respondents to the CS are prompted with an extensive list of organisations and asked if they have taken part in, supported, or helped any of the named groups (other than by giving money) in the previous 12 months. By a more restricted definition (giving help at least monthly), the proportion of people volunteering is around 28%. In the NSV the proportion of involvement is somewhat higher than in the CS, and there is some indication of a possible upwards trend between 1997 and 2006. The BSA, ESS and NSCLS indicate levels of involvement in volunteering that are between the 'topical' and the 'general purpose' survey, but closer to the latter. In summary:

- depending on the survey questions used, the overall impression in relation to the *level* of involvement in volunteering is that it is within the range of 20%-50% of adult population for those who volunteer at least once a year. Estimates for volunteering on a monthly basis range between 10%-30%;
- the impression in relation to the *trend* is that, over a period of 1991-2007, there has been relative stability in rates of volunteering. There may be some indications of a growth in the level of volunteering, but there is no indication of a reduction;
- 'topical' surveys – that set out to specifically survey volunteering -

consistently indicate larger numbers of volunteers than 'general purpose' or 'specialized' surveys.

In a review of statistical sources on the voluntary sector in the UK, Tarling (2000) established consistency between annual estimates of volunteering *within* sets of selected surveys, on one hand, and significant differences between surveys, on the other. Tarling's conclusion was formulated in relation to the GHS from 1981, 1987 and 1991 and the NSV from 1981, 1991 and 1997. This paper confirms this conclusion and also extends it to the BHPS and CS, and to the GHS and the NSV at a period not covered by Tarling.

In the light of these findings, some outstanding questions arise:

1. how can we account for the differences in levels of individual volunteering in 'topical' and 'general purpose' surveys?
2. what set of figures should be treated as a reliable estimate of the level of involvement in volunteering? Indeed, can we realistically obtain an objective and reliable measure?

An attempt to explain the survey variations

The existing literature on survey methodology may provide some explanations to the observed differences. The literature lists factors such as the mode of interviewing, the nature of the information sought, and the recall (or remembering) processes as relevant to the quality of survey responses (Tourangeau et al. 2000, De Vaus 2002, Groves et al. 2004, Czaja and Blair 2005). All those surveys presented roughly similar questions regarding volunteering. All the surveys are based on face-to-face interviews. Consequently, we may discard the interview mode as a source of

difference between their results. However, there are significant differences between the surveys in terms of the *context* in which questions on volunteering are asked.

Groves et al. (2004) and Tourangeau et al. (2000) indicate that the response process and, in particular, the retrieval of information from the respondents' memory, is influenced by certain factors. These include the distinctiveness of events in question, the strength of impressions they leave, and the presence or absence of 'cues', i.e. clues that help people to remember (Tourangeau et al. 2000: 91-98, Groves et al. 2004: 201-208).

It seems plausible that specialised surveys on volunteering would generate higher estimates than 'general purpose' surveys. It appears that the exact wording of questions, and the context of the interview, will have a significant effect on the responses given.

Volunteering is assessed in the BHPS through a single question within the larger survey framework. On the other hand, it constitutes a major focus of the CS and especially NSV, which both have elaborate modules designed to capture various aspects of volunteering. In addition, the whole interview process of both the CS and NSV is designed in a way that helps the respondents to recall more about volunteering and adopt a more inclusive or broad understanding of it.

The validity of inclusive definitions of formal volunteering was the subject of criticism by Saxton and Baker (2009), who presented a number of situations (such as a grandfather refereeing his grandson's football match) which they felt could not be classed as volunteering. However, given the intrinsic difficulties of defining the phenomenon, it is not entirely clear that a more restrictive definition would do more justice to the descriptive picture of volunteering. We

need clear analytical reasons to exclude the types of activities described by Saxton and Baker from volunteering, rather than examples of particular situations.

In the light of these uncertainties surrounding the definition of volunteering, reliance on just one set of figures may be misleading. Consequently, for all purposes (academic research, policy analysis and decision making) we might be on safer grounds to refer to a range of 20%-50% (inclusive definition) as the bottom and the top estimates of annual involvement. A range of 10%-30% (using a more restrictive definition) can be referred to as the lower and upper estimates of involvement on a monthly basis.

Discussion

Returning to the initial research questions, the following conclusions can be formulated:

1. **what do different surveys tell us about the levels and trends in individual volunteering?**

Different types of surveys provide different types of estimates. Typically, surveys focused specifically on the investigation of volunteering (i.e. 'topical' surveys) provide higher estimates of involvement relative to the 'general purpose' surveys. This could be due to the nature of the interviewing process which generates greater 'inclusivity' in replies to the 'topical' surveys. It may also be due to particular aspects of question and survey design – for example, the nature of related questions in the survey may affect the likelihood of giving particular responses. We will explore this possibility in a future publication.

2. **do their findings agree with each other? If not-why not?**

Given the differences in the nature of the interviewing process it is not surprising that

the ‘topical’ surveys provide higher estimates. In fact, this is to be expected. It is important to note that the gap between the CS (an example of a ‘topical’ survey) and the BHPS (an example of a ‘general purpose’ survey) does not change dramatically over the years. Also, both surveys lead to similar conclusions regarding the trends in volunteering. Overall, relative stability is observed. Based on current data, it is only possible to estimate a *range* of volunteering (i.e. 20%-50% or 10%-30%) rather than one ‘true’ estimate. Given this stability in the overall results and in the differences between the different surveys, however, we can be reasonably confident that the surveys are consistently measuring levels of volunteering.

3. do different surveys lead to similar conclusions in relation to basic socio-demographic characteristics of the phenomenon of individual volunteering?

Two surveys that were used to answer this question (the CS and the BHPS) provided a largely similar picture of the factors associated with high or low levels of volunteering. Some differences were observed in relation to age patterns and marital status – although the BHPS indicated smaller levels of differentiation according to these characteristics. All the subgroups examined in the CS seem to share a common trend of stability in the level of involvement in volunteering, but some differences were observed in the

BHPS between socioeconomic and age groups.

Conclusion

The most consistent finding from this research is the clear evidence that levels of volunteering exhibit considerable stability. Regardless of differences in the way it is measured, the level of volunteering has changed relatively little over the period for which we have consistently surveyed it. There is occasional coverage of apparent increases or reductions in levels of reported volunteering, but the evidence from these surveys suggests that the reported figures fluctuate within a narrow range – typically between 26 and 29% using the restrictive definition in the CS, for example. Such variations are not likely to be statistically significant and we should not set too much store by them.

Although there have been reports, in the current recessionary climate, that more individuals are coming forward to volunteer, it remains to be seen whether that is a short-term variation. Welcome though an increase in volunteering might be, we do not have reliable survey evidence yet which would enable us to determine whether increased proportions of the population are volunteering, and whether, if so, there will be a return to previous levels of voluntary activity once the country moves out of recession.

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