

Third Sector Research Centre

Working Paper 6

## **Individual voluntary participation in the United Kingdom: an overview of survey information**

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## Abstract

The measurement of voluntary activity is not straightforward; definitional and methodological questions affect the responses. This is true within the context of the UK but also in other countries of the developed world (Archambault 1993, Kendall and Knapp 1993, Gidron and Katz 1998, Salamon and Sokolowski 2001). The existence of definitional difficulties and ambiguities has a detrimental impact on the quality of academic research and policy-making in this sphere. Firstly, it impedes orderly collection of statistical information on volunteering in administrative sources. Also, it complicates the collection of survey information: the absence of well-understood and widely-agreed concepts of voluntarism in the public mind introduces uncertainty in people's responses. To date, however, there has not been an attempt to compare findings of different surveys systematically. This paper aims to fill the gap in research by reviewing the available surveys for the UK. It focuses specifically on the methods used to obtain information on volunteering and the comparability of the results generated by different surveys.

### Keywords

UK; volunteering; surveys.

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## 1. Introduction

The third sector is an area beset by definitional difficulties. These apply both in general, to the definition and mapping of the third sector, and in particular, to specific questions such as involvement in volunteering. This is true within the context of the UK but also in other countries of developed world (Archambault 1993, Kendall and Knapp 1993, Gidron and Katz 1998, Salamon and Sokolowski 2001). Despite the attempts of certain research bodies to offer definitions of what constitutes the voluntary sector the concept is still beset with numerous ambiguities. Definitional difficulties and ambiguities have a detrimental impact on the quality of academic research and policy-making. They impede orderly collection of statistical information on volunteering in administrative sources -- for example, if people do not understand what the voluntary sector or third sector stand for, they are likely to be unsure in their responses to questions about organised volunteering. Similarly the absence of a well-understood and widely-agreed concept of volunteering itself introduces uncertainties into people's responses.

One reason why we might want to improve our understanding of statistics on volunteering is that, as Rochester observed in 2006, the 'current weight of expectation about the contribution [volunteering] can make... has never been greater'. In the UK the promotion of volunteering is firmly established as a priority for government action although this is only the latest manifestation of initiatives that can be traced back to the establishment of the Volunteer Centre UK. Increasing the level of volunteering was seen as a key challenge ahead for the Labour government in its third term of office and local authorities could now choose to be judged on volunteering rates as one of a battery of performance indicators. Furthermore, the Big Society proposals of the Coalition government are of course predicated on an increase in voluntary effort; a Green Paper has already been published on giving and volunteering, with a White Paper expected to follow. It is reasonable, therefore, to ask what evidence there is about levels of volunteering.

Voluntary activity carried out by individuals has been documented in the UK surveys since the early 1980s. A number of publications have presented and analysed the results of different surveys. The Citizenship Survey has been used for description of levels and trends in volunteering in a special publication of the Home Office (2004) and in the UK Civil Society Almanac (Reichardt et al. 2008, Kane et al. 2009). The Institute for Volunteering Research issued a number of research bulletins presenting findings from the National Survey of Voluntary Activity (Institute for Volunteering Research, unknown years). An overview of statistical sources on volunteering produced by Tarling (2000) presented and compared estimates of involvement in voluntary activities in the General Household Survey and the National Survey of Voluntary Activity. To date, however, there has not been an attempt to compare the findings of different surveys systematically. This paper aims to fill the gap in research by reviewing the available surveys. It focuses specifically on the methods used to obtain information on volunteering, and on the comparability of the picture of volunteering supplied by different surveys.

We distinguish between three types of surveys that address an issue of involvement in volunteering. First, a number of surveys addressed a specific aim of assessing the proportion and characteristics of the population involved in voluntary activities. These are referred to as 'topical'

surveys'. These are the National Survey of Voluntary Activity (NSV) and the Citizenship Survey (CS)<sup>1</sup>. These surveys were sponsored by the government departments or units specialising in society and community issues and/or by the bodies specialising in volunteering research<sup>2</sup>. Topical surveys allow an in-depth study of the phenomenon of individual volunteering but also of related activities such as informal individual help, charitable donations and receipt of voluntary help by the general public. Second, there are 'general purpose' surveys, such as the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and the General Household Survey (GHS) which included questions or modules on volunteering. As a rule, the general purpose surveys collect less detailed information on volunteering relative to the 'topical' surveys but the former typically have longer histories of operation. Finally, there are some surveys which are not dedicated to the issue of volunteering but which nevertheless address issues of social attitudes, values and the scope and nature of civil participation, such as the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA), the European Social Survey (ESS) and the National Survey of Culture, Leisure and Sport (NSCLS) which, too, included single questions or modules on voluntary activities. These are referred to here as 'specialised' surveys.

The John Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project (JH-CNS) defined voluntary action as an action that (1) take place within some sort of formal organisational structure, (2) is self-governing, (3) not profit distributing, (4) independent of government, and (5) voluntary (Salamon and Sokolowski 2001)<sup>3</sup>. This paper focuses on formal volunteering, i.e. volunteering taking place in the form of unpaid help 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 given not as a part of a group (help extended to a friend or neighbour). This paper only analyses formal volunteering. Firstly, this definition of formal volunteering corresponds most closely to the definition developed by JH-CNS and implemented within the UK context (Kendall and Knapp 1993). Secondly, some previous research indicated that formal and informal volunteering are two separate phenomena, governed by different forces, and that the former has a 'primary' status in that it is seen as encouraging and driving the latter, while the converse is not true (Wilson and Musick 1997)<sup>4</sup>. Other papers have provided descriptive accounts of informal volunteering and argued that its pattern differs from that of more formal voluntary activity (Williams, 2003). Thirdly, the aspect of formal volunteering is the one that proved comparable across different surveys.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to tackle 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, why not?
3. Do different surveys lead to similar conclusions in relation to basic socio-demographic characteristics of the phenomenon of individual volunteering?

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as the People, Families and Communities Survey and Communities Study.

<sup>2</sup> The National Centre for Volunteering (formerly The Volunteer Centre) and the Institute for Volunteering Research.

<sup>3</sup> An additional criterion which is relevant for legal definition of what comes under the umbrella of voluntary activity is 'public benefit' (Kendall and Knapp 1993).

<sup>4</sup> For a recent criticism of inclusion of informal volunteering in total estimates of involvement in volunteering from the policy-related perspective in the UK see Saxton and Baker (2009).

It is important to stress an aspect that this paper does not attempt to solve: it does not attempt to provide an in-depth explanation as to why people volunteer or otherwise. The determinants and dynamics of volunteering in individual lives should constitute a focus of a separate study, possibly combining different kinds of survey methods and longitudinal qualitative research. The role of this paper is to create a foundation for such a study giving, as a first necessary step, a broad overview of the phenomenon of volunteering on the basis of the existing survey material. Future papers will consider other aspects of the measurement of volunteering, social and spatial differentiation in volunteering rates, and longitudinal studies of volunteering using panel data which track the same individuals over time.

## 2. Data and method

The basic research strategy employed here was examination of the questionnaires of all surveys known to include questions on individual volunteering and extraction of the numbers and proportions of people involved in volunteering from survey datasets.

Survey questionnaires were extracted from the Question Bank (2009). Survey datafiles were downloaded from the UK Data Archive (2009).

Table 1 summarises the principal characteristics of different surveys used in this paper: their methods, coverage in terms of periods, populations and geography, sampling procedure and number of cases available for analysis for each survey.

Questions on individual volunteering were asked, across all surveys, on 19 occasions between 1991 and 2007. At least two estimates belonging to different points in time are available for each survey, with the exceptions of the BSA and the NSCLS for which estimates were available for only one point in time. The BHPS, CS and NSV allow construction of trends in individual volunteering.

Tarling (2000) argued that differences in definitions of volunteering employed by different surveys could account for the observed differences between surveys' findings. Careful attention should be paid to the wording of questions and the possibility that question wording can affect the inclinations of the respondents to report (or not to report) certain types of activities. In some respects the questions used to identify involvement in volunteering are quite similar across surveys. Most surveys define voluntary activity as a group activity, i.e. activity implying involvement in groups or organisation to draw clear distinction between volunteering and informal individual help. All surveys ask about involvement within a period of 12 months prior to the survey date. Most surveys ask about frequency of involvement and those that do employ similar response categories (once a week, at least once a month etc.). In a separate paper, the question of survey methodology is considered in more detail (McCulloch, 2011).

**Table 1: Summary of characteristics of various British surveys that included questions on volunteering**

Survey	Survey objective	Method	Period covered by survey	Times when the question on volunteering is included	Population coverage	Geographical coverage	Sampling procedure	Response level	Number of cases available for analysis
BHPS	'general purpose'	longitudinal	1991 onward	1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008	Age 16 and over	United Kingdom	multi-stage stratified random (initial selection)	57%-62%	~10,000
GHS	'general purpose'	repeated cross-sectional; transition to longitudinal in 2006	1971 onward	1992, 2004	Age 16 and over	Great Britain	multi-stage stratified random	80%-83%	18,000-21,000
BSA	specialised	repeated cross-sectional	1983 onward	1998	Age 18 years and over	Great Britain	multi-stage stratified random	59%	3,000
ESS	specialised	repeated cross-sectional	2002-2006	2002, 2006	Age 15 years and over	United Kingdom	multi-stage stratified random	55%	2,000-2,400
NSCLS	specialised	cross-sectional	2005	2005	Age 16 and over	England	multi-stage stratified	66%	28,000
CS	topical	repeated cross-sectional; continuous from 2007	2001-2007	2001, 2003, 2005, 2007, continuously 2008-10	Age 16 and over	England and Wales	multi-stage stratified random	63%-68%	10,000-14,000
NSV	topical	repeated cross-sectional	1981-2006	1991, 1997, 2006	1991/1997: age 18 years and over 2006: age 16 years and over	1991/1997: United Kingdom, 2006: England	multi-stage stratified random	1991: 63% 1997: 51% 2006: 60%	1,500-1,600 (years 1991 and 1997) 2,700 (year 2006)

**Note:** More detailed information on the response rates can be obtained from the following sources:

BHPS – Taylor et al. (2009).

BSA – Thomson et al. (2001); Fitzgerald and Widdop (2008).

CS – Smith and Wands (2003); Michaelson et al. (2006); Munton and Zurawan (2004).

ESS – Billiet et al. (2007); European Social Survey Coordinating Team (2008).

GHS – ONS (2009).

NSCLS – Williams (2006).

NSV, 2006-Low and Butt (2007); NSV, 1991, 1997-BMRB International (1998).

Table 2 presents the questions used in different surveys for capturing the phenomenon of volunteering. In certain cases the involvement in volunteering was measured with a single question; in others a set or a sequence of questions was presented on the basis of which involvement in volunteering was derived. Table 2 also presents some other relevant information for understanding of the survey process and interpretation of results: mode of data collection, contextual information about surveys and instructions to interviewers of each survey.

Still, however, despite the general impression of quite consistent methods of identification of people involved in volunteering, some inconsistencies remain and need to be taken into account in interpretation of results. The BHPS treats the issue of voluntary activity explicitly as part of leisure, but it is not unreasonable to think that some volunteers would see their own involvement in it as a form of work which *may* mean that they are less inclined to mention it in the context of leisure (see also McCulloch, 2011). The ESS in 2006 does not make clear that it is unpaid help that is being investigated, so one can expect that some people who are paid employees of charities, for example, would answer positively. Also, in 2006 the ESS also does not explicitly ask respondents to exclude charitable donations. In the 2002 ESS, the questioning was more specifically linked to voluntary work in organisations as the structure of the response grid enables respondents to distinguish between charitable donations, membership and voluntary work. The GHS in 1992 (but not in 2004) asks the respondent to exclude involvement in trade union activities and political parties. The wording of a question in the GHS in 2004 (but not in 1992) was such that charitable donations could be included by the respondents.

All surveys enable us to identify volunteers as those who do unpaid voluntary work within the span of the past 12 months. All survey questions make it clear that informal help to friends and neighbours, as well as charitable donations, should not be included in response to questions presented in Table 2. With the single exception of the BHPS survey questions specifically ask about volunteering conducted under the auspices of groups or organisations. Also, most surveys ask about frequency of involvement – a feature which makes it possible to identify those most consistently involved in volunteering, for example, those involved with frequency of at least once a month. As in certain cases volunteering was identified with a set of questions with later questions conditioned on the type of response at an earlier stage, special algorithms were applied for production of counts and proportions in this paper.

All but one surveys supplied by the UK Data Archive included weights designed to adjust for survey design and for non-response. On all but two occasions appropriate weights were applied to the survey counts. In the case of BHPS these were cross-sectional weights. The exceptions are the NSV in 1991 and 1997, where no information on survey weights was available. Also, weights supplied by the ESS do not adjust for non-response but only for survey design.



**Table 2: Summary of questions on volunteering and a brief description of interview practices and settings in selected British surveys**

Survey	Mode of data collection	Questions	Context	Interviewer instructions
British Household Panel Survey	Mainly Face to face CAPI/CATI	<p>A. We are interested in the things people do in their leisure time, I'm going to read out a list of some leisure activities. Please look at the card and tell me how frequently you do each one.</p> <p>Play sport or go walking or swimming            Go to watch live sport            Go to the cinema            Go to a concert, theatre            Have a meal in a restaurant, cafe or pub            Go for a drink at a pub or club            Work in the garden            Do DIY, home maintenance or car repairs            Attend leisure activity groups such as evening classes, keep fit, yoga etc            Attend meetings for local groups/voluntary organisations            Do unpaid voluntary work</p> <p>a. At least a week            b. At least a month            c. Several times a year            d. Once a year or less            e. Never/Almost never</p>	Single question	No special instructions
General Household Survey 2004	Face to face CAPI	<p>A. During the last 12 months have you given any unpaid help to any groups, clubs or organisations in any of the ways shown? (card is presented)</p> <p>Raising or handling money/taking part in sponsored events 1            Leading the group/ member of a committee 2            Organising or helping to run an activity or event 3            Visiting people 4</p>	<p>The survey contains a special module on social capital</p> <p>Cards are presented containing descriptions of any groups, clubs or organisations</p>	No special instructions

Survey	Mode of data collection	Questions	Context	Interviewer instructions
General Household Survey 1992	Face to face interview	<p>Befriending or mentoring people 5  Giving advice/information/counselling 6  Secretarial, admin or clerical work 7  Providing transport/driving 8  Representing 9  Campaigning 10  Other practical help (e.g. helping out at school, religious group, shopping) 11  Any other help 12  None of the above 13</p> <p>B. Thinking about the unpaid help you have mentioned, would you say you give this kind of help...  CODE FIRST THAT APPLIES  at least once a week? 1  at least once a month? 2  at least once every three months? 3  or less often? 4  Other 5</p> <p>A. We are interested in any voluntary work people may do, that is work for which they are not paid, except for expenses. We only want you to include any unpaid work you may do through a group or on behalf of an organisation of some kind but not for a trade union or political party ? (card is presented)</p> <p>B. Have you done any voluntary work through a group or on behalf of an organisation in the last 12 months, that is since... (TODAY'S DATE) 1991?</p> <p>C. Thinking of the work you do for (one or more of various group(s) mentioned), which of the types of voluntary work shown</p>	<p>The survey contains a special module on social capital</p> <p>Cards are presented containing descriptions of any groups, clubs or organisations</p>	

Survey	Mode of data collection	Questions	Context	Interviewer instructions
		on this card have you done in the last 12 months? (card is presented)		
British Social Attitudes Survey 1998	Face to face CAPI and self-completion	<p>Have you done any voluntary activity in the past 12 months in any of the following areas? Voluntary activity is unpaid work, not just belonging to an organisation or group. It should be of service or benefit to other people or the community and not only to one's family or personal friends.</p> <p>During the last 12 months did you do volunteer work in any of the following areas?</p> <p>a. Political activities (helping political parties, political movements, election campaigns, etc.)</p> <p>b. Charitable activities (helping the sick, elderly, poor, etc.)</p> <p>c. Religious and church-related activities (helping churches and religious groups)</p> <p>d. Any other kind of voluntary activities</p> <p>***for each type of work the response options are: no, not last year; yes, once or twice a year; yes, 3-5 times a year; yes, 6+ times a year.***</p> <p>If the same voluntary activity falls under two or more of the categories listed above, please report it only once under the first relevant category. For example, if you were involved in political campaigning for a candidate endorsed by a church or religious group, you would report it under a. Political activities not under c. Religious and church-related activities.</p>	The survey contains a special self-completion module on citizenship but information on volunteering is collected with a single question	Self-completion in relation to the module on citizenship
European Social Survey 2006		<p>In the past 12 months, how often did you get involved in work for voluntary or charitable organisations? Please use this card.</p> <p>At least once a week 01</p> <p>At least once a month 02</p>	The survey contains a special module on social trust	No special instructions

Survey	Mode of data collection	Questions	Context	Interviewer instructions
European Social Survey 2002		<p>At least once every three months 03  At least once every six months 04  Less often 05  Never 06  (Don't know) 88</p> <p>For each of the voluntary organisations I will now mention, please use this card to tell me whether any of these things apply to you now or in the last 12 months, and, if so, which.</p> <p>... Firstly, a sports club or club for outdoor activities?  ... an organisation for cultural or hobby activities?  ... a trade union?  ... a business, professional, or farmers' organisation?  ... a consumer or automobile organisation?  ... an organisation for humanitarian aid, human rights, minorities, or immigrants?  ...an organisation for environmental protection, peace or animal rights  ... a religious or church organisation?  ... an organisation for science, education, or teachers and parents?  ... a social club, club for the young, the retired/elderly, women, or friendly societies?  ... any other voluntary organisation such as the ones I've just mentioned?</p> <p>CODE ALL THAT APPLY FOR EACH ORGANISATION  None  Member  Participated  Donated Money  Voluntary work</p>	The survey contains a special module on citizen involvement. Responses are collected using a grid.	No special instructions

Survey	Mode of data collection	Questions	Context	Interviewer instructions
National Survey of Culture, Leisure and Sport 2005	Face to face CAPI	A. During the last 12 months, have you done any voluntary work? 1. Yes 2. No -1. Don't know	The survey contains a special module devoted entirely to volunteering	Interviewer is instructed to say that this could be organising or helping to run an event, campaigning, conservation, raising money, providing transport or driving, taking part in a sponsored event, coaching, tuition, mentoring etc.
Citizenship survey (2001, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2008-10)	Face to face CAPI	A. I'd like you to think about any groups, clubs or organisations that you've been involved with during the last 12 months. That's anything you've taken part in, supported, or that you've helped in any way, either on your own or with others. Please exclude giving money and anything that was a requirement of your job.  B. Now I would like you to look at this showcard. In the last 12 months have you given unpaid help to any groups, clubs or organisations in any of the ways shown on this card?  C. Overall, about how often over the last 12 months have you generally done something to help this/these group(s), club(s) or organisation(s) Would you say ... (1) at least once a week, (2) less than once a week but at least once a month, (3) or less often? (4) OTHER	The survey contains a special module devoted entirely to volunteering  Cards are presented containing descriptions of any groups, clubs or organisations	Interviewer is instructed to leave cards in front of the respondent  Interviewer is instructed to say that the cards may not contain the necessary information/do not exhaust the possibilities of involvement.  In 2001 interviewer is also instructed to encourage the respondent to mention organisations by name

Survey	Mode of data collection	Questions	Context	Interviewer instructions
National survey of volunteering (1991, 1997, 2006)	Face to face CAPI in 1997 and 2006  Face to face interview in 1991	<p><u>National Survey of Voluntary Activity 2006</u> *:</p> <p>There are many things that people spend time on apart from their paid job, their household responsibilities and things connected with them. I'd like you to think about any groups, charities, clubs or organisations that you currently take part in, support, or help in any way, or which you have done in the past, either on your own or with others.</p> <p>A. In a moment I'll give you some cards. Please pick out the ones which best describe any groups, charities, clubs or organisations you've taken part in, supported or helped, over the last 12 months that is since [date 12 months ago (month/year)]. On each card are some examples, although what you do may not be on the cards. Please exclude giving money and anything that was a requirement of your job. If you are not sure whether something counts, please include it now - later on we will check to see what kind of involvement it is.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Schools, colleges, universities and other education</li> <li>2 Children or young people</li> <li>3 Sports/exercise</li> <li>4 Religion</li> <li>5 Politics</li> <li>6 The elderly</li> <li>7 Overseas Aid / Disaster relief</li> <li>8 Health and Disability</li> <li>9 Safety, First Aid</li> <li>10 Social Welfare</li> <li>11 Conservation, the environment and heritage</li> <li>12 Animal welfare</li> <li>13 The arts and museums</li> <li>14 Justice and Human Rights</li> </ol>	<p>This is a special survey devoted entirely to volunteering and charitable giving</p> <p>Cards are presented containing descriptions of any groups, clubs or organisations</p> <p>A lot of stress is put on identifying the organisations in which the respondent is involved by name</p> <p>Effectively, the respondent is given more than one chance of reporting involvement (due to repetitive nature of some questions)</p>	<p>Interviewer is instructed to leave cards in front of the respondent</p> <p>Interviewer is instructed to say that the cards may not contain the necessary information/do not exhaust the possibilities of involvement.</p> <p>Interviewer is instructed to encourage the respondent to mention involvement in groups even if the respondent not sure whether what he/she does actually counts-promising that the exact details will be collected later</p>

Survey	Mode of data collection	Questions	Context	Interviewer instructions
		<p>15 Local community, neighbourhood or Citizens' groups  16 Hobbies / Recreation / Social clubs  17 Trade union activity  96 Other  97 None of these</p> <p>B. Thinking about the category of [Category] what is the name of the [first/second/third] organisation you were involved with in the last 12 months?</p> <p>C. Thinking about the category of [Category] are there any other organisations you were involved with in the last 12 months?  1 Yes  2 No</p> <p>D. In the last 12 months, that is, since [date 12 months ago (month/year)], have you given unpaid help to [organisation helped in past year] in any of the ways shown on this card?  INTERVIEWER: CODE ALL THAT APPLY. PROBE 'What else?' UNTIL 'NOTHING'.  SET OF:</p> <p>1 Raising or handling money/taking part in sponsored events  2 Leading the group/member of a committee  3 Organising or helping to run an activity or event  4 Visiting people  5 Befriending or mentoring people  6 Educating/teaching/coaching  7 Giving advice/information/counselling  8 Secretarial, admin or clerical work  9 Providing transport/driving  10 Representing</p>		

Survey	Mode of data collection	Questions	Context	Interviewer instructions
		<p>11 Campaigning  12 Other practical help (e.g. helping out at school, shopping)  96 Any other help (PROBE FIRST)  97 None of these</p> <p>E. Overall, about how often over the last 12 months (since [date 12 months ago (month/year)]), have you generally done something to help [organisation helped in past year] - remember to include any time spent at home or elsewhere helping [organisation helped in past year]?</p> <p>1 On 3 or more days a week  2 On 2 days a week  3 On 1 day a week  4 On 1 day a fortnight  5 At least once a month  6 Quite often but not regularly  7 Just a few times  8 One-off activity  9 Help/work on a seasonal basis</p> <p>* Formulations are largely similar also in the National Surveys of Voluntary Activity in 1991 and 1997</p>		

Source. The Question Bank.



## 3. Results

### 3.1. Trends and levels of involvement in volunteering: general scope of the phenomenon

This section examines trends and levels of individual-level voluntary activity as shown by different surveys. Table 3 shows levels and trends in individual involvement in volunteering across different surveys. For each survey, if possible, we present two types of measures: an inclusive and a restrictive definition of volunteering. In relation to each survey an inclusive definition usually relies on a basic survey question clarifying whether the respondent did unpaid voluntary work during 12 months preceding the survey thereby approximating annual rate of involvement in volunteering. A restrictive definition focuses on those who did unpaid voluntary work with frequency of at least once a month. Certain figures in Table 3 (Panels A and B) are framed. These figures may be inflated due to particular wording of questions and therefore are not directly comparable to other figures in panels A and B.

Discussion first focuses on the findings of 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% without much change over the period of 1996-2006. The proportion of people with frequent involvement in volunteering is around 11%, also without major fluctuations or a clear upward or downward trend. According to the CS (inclusive definition), the proportion of those involved in volunteering in 2001-2006 was higher than in the BHPS by a factor of 1.7-2.4, i.e. it is about 43%, and it is around 28% according to the restrictive definition. In the NSV the proportion involved in volunteering is somewhat higher than in the CS and there is some indication of a possible upwards trend in volunteering between 1997 and 2006. The BSA, ESS and NSCLS indicate levels of involvement in volunteering that are in-between the 'topical' and the 'general purpose' survey, closer to the latter.

We were initially puzzled by an apparent anomaly in the data from the BHPS which indicated a short-term increase in volunteering in 2002 from 20% to 28% (which is why this figure is highlighted in the table) which appears to equally affect males and females on one hand, and to be especially pronounced in younger age groups and among people with higher levels of education, on the other hand. It was not clear what could account for this phenomenon. It is worth noting that the increase stems from the increase in infrequent (annual) volunteering and not from frequent (weekly or monthly) volunteering. This can be confirmed from the comparison of two series in Table 3: the series based on the restrictive definition does not show a peak in volunteering in 2002 while the series based on an inclusive definition show it clearly. Our initial supposition was that the increase might be related to a one-off event or a series of relatively rare events in 2001 (reference period for the reporting of volunteering in 2001). Incidentally, 2001 was the United Nations International Year of Volunteer (Institute for Volunteering Research 2002). The actions taken during this year could have resulted in an increase in numbers of volunteers resulting also in an increase in reporting of volunteering in 2002. However, this would have been a spectacular success, since it would have equated to roughly a 40% increase in volunteering.

**Table 3: Proportion of the population involved in volunteering: findings from different surveys – Source: UK Data Archive.**

Survey	1991	1992	...	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008-9	2009-10	April - Sept 2010	
<b>Panel A. General purpose surveys</b>																			
<b>BHPS</b>																			
Do unpaid voluntary work-incl. def.				20.0		18.7		19.1		<b>28</b>		19.4		18.3		23.1			
Do unpaid voluntary work-restr. Def.				11.4		10.7		10.9		11.0		10.5		10.3		13.4			
<b>GHS</b>																			
Given unpaid help to a group-incl. def.		24.2										36.0							
Given unpaid help to a group-restr. def.		N/A										21.6							
<b>Panel B. Specialised surveys</b>																			
<b>BSA</b>																			
Involved in volunteering-incl. def.						19.1													
Given unpaid help to a group-restr. def.						N/A													
<b>ESS</b>																			
Involved in work for voluntary organisation-incl. def.										23.3				40.8					
Involved in work for voluntary organisation-restr. def.										N/A				17.0					
<b>NSCLS</b>																			
Did voluntary work-incl. def.														24.1					
Did voluntary work-restr. def.														N/A					
<b>Panel C. Topical surveys</b>																			
<b>CS</b>																			
Given unpaid help to a group-incl. def.										39.1		42.9		44.6		43.1	40.5	40.3	38.9
Given unpaid help to a group-restr. def.										26.2		28.4		29.3		27.0	25.6	25.1	24.4
<b>NSV</b>																			
Current volunteer-incl. def.	48.9				46.9									58.8					
Current volunteer-restr. def.	28.0				27.8									38.7					

**Note.** (1) **BHPS:** Inclusive definition – does unpaid voluntary within last year work at least once a week, at least once a month, several times a year or once a year or less, restrictive definition - did unpaid voluntary work within last year and at least once a month. **CS:** Inclusive definition –involvement within past 12 months, restrictive definition- involvement within past 12 months and at least once a month. **NSV:** Inclusive definition – volunteered within the last year, restrictive definition - volunteered within the last year, with frequency of once a month or more. **GHS 2004:** Inclusive definition-gave unpaid help to any groups, clubs or organisations in any of the ways during the last 12 months, restrictive definition - gave unpaid help to any groups, clubs or organisations in any of the ways during the last 12 months with frequency of at least once a month. Information collected using a special module. **GHS 1992:** Inclusive definition: gave unpaid help to any groups, clubs or organisations in any of the ways during the last 12 months apart from trade unions and political parties. **BSA:** did any voluntary activity (unpaid work) in the past 12 months. **ESS:** inclusive definition- was involved in work of voluntary or charitable organisation over the past 12 months, restrictive definition- was involved in work of voluntary or charitable organisation over the past 12 months with frequency of at least once a month. **NSCLS:** Did voluntary work during the last 12 months.

(2) Data for the NSV in 1991 and 1997 and for the GHS in 1992 are unweighted. For the GHS no weighting was available prior to 2001, and weights are not supplied with the files in 2004.

The explanation in fact was much more prosaic. It relates to a change in the response options on the showcard presented to respondents by surveyors between wave 10 of BHPS (2000) and wave 12 (2002). In wave 10 respondents were offered five options (at least once a week; at least once a month; several times a year; once a year or less; never / almost never). In wave 12, the last option was dropped although it remained on the questionnaire script. The effect on response was that the proportions saying that they volunteered 'once a year or less' rose from 3.2 % to 11.7%, generating a substantial increase in the numbers reporting any volunteering at all (see appendix 1). A better estimate would therefore be around 20% for 2002.

To summarise:

- The overall impression in relation to the *level* of involvement in volunteering is that it is within the range of 20%-50% of the adult population when the annual rate of involvement is in question (inclusive definition) and in the range of 10%-30% in relation to volunteering on a monthly basis.
- The impression in relation to the *trend* over the period of 1991-2005 was one of relative stability of involvement in volunteering. Subsequently, however, the Citizenship Survey reports a decline and in 2009-10 was reporting volunteering at around 40% of the population on a broad definition, and under 25% volunteering once a month or more frequently.
- 'Topical' surveys consistently demonstrate a larger scope of involvement in volunteering than 'general purpose' or 'specialised' surveys.

In a review of statistical sources on the voluntary sector in the UK Tarling (2000: 259) established consistency of the annual estimates of involvement in volunteering *within* sets of selected surveys, on the one hand, and the existence of significant differences between surveys, on the other hand. Tarling's (2000) 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 extends it also to the BHPS and CS, on the one hand, and to the GHS and the NSV at a period not covered by Tarling (2000), on the other hand.

In the light of these findings two further questions for discussion are as follows:

- What accounts for the differences in levels of individual volunteering in 'topical' and 'general purpose' surveys?
- What set of figures should be treated as a reliable estimate of the scope of involvement in volunteering? Indeed, is it possible to obtain a 'reliable' estimate of volunteering?

### **3.2. Differences between the surveys: an attempt at explanation**

The existing literature on survey methodology may provide some explanations to the observed differences. Responses to surveys may be influenced by factors such as mode of data collection (self-completion questionnaire, telephone interview, face-to-face interview), the nature of the phenomenon about which information is sought, and the processes whereby people are differentially able to recall or remember aspects of their life (Tourangeau et al. 2000, De Vaus 2002, Groves et al. 2004, Czaja and Blair 2005). All the surveys reviewed here used broadly similar questions regarding volunteering.

They were all based on face-to-face interviews; consequently, we may discard the mode of data collection as a source of differences 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) indicated that the response process and, in particular, the retrieval of information from the respondents' memory is influenced by factors such as distinctiveness of events in question, the strength of impressions that they leave and the presence/absence of 'cues', i.e. clues that help extraction of information from memory (Tourangeau et al. 2000: 91-98, Groves et al. 2004: 201-208). It seems only reasonable that specialised surveys of volunteering would generate higher estimates of involvement in volunteering than 'general purpose' surveys. It appears that the exact wording and the context of interviewing may have a substantial influence on the responses. Volunteering is assessed in the BHPS using a single question within the larger survey framework while it constitutes one of the major foci of the CS and especially NSV with elaborate modules designed to capture various aspects of volunteering. Also, in the CS and the NSV the whole interviewing process is designed in such a way that helps the respondents to recall more about volunteering and adopt a more inclusive/broad understanding of it.

The inclusive definition of formal volunteering used in the CS was criticised by Saxton and Baker (2009) who presented a number of situations (such as a grandfather refereeing his grandson's football match) which, they argued, constituted questionable examples of 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 (2009) from volunteering. At present, the state of development of this field of study does not provide such reasons. Reliance on just one set of figures in the absence of clear analytical reasons and in the light of existing definitional uncertainties may be misleading. Consequently, for all purposes (academic research and policy analysis and decision making) we might be on safer ground to relate to a range of 20%-50% (on the basis of inclusive definitions) as the upper and lower estimates of annual involvement in volunteering and to a range of 10%-30% (on restrictive definitions) as the upper and lower estimates of involvement of a monthly basis.

### **3.3. Trends in volunteering by selected socio-demographic characteristics**

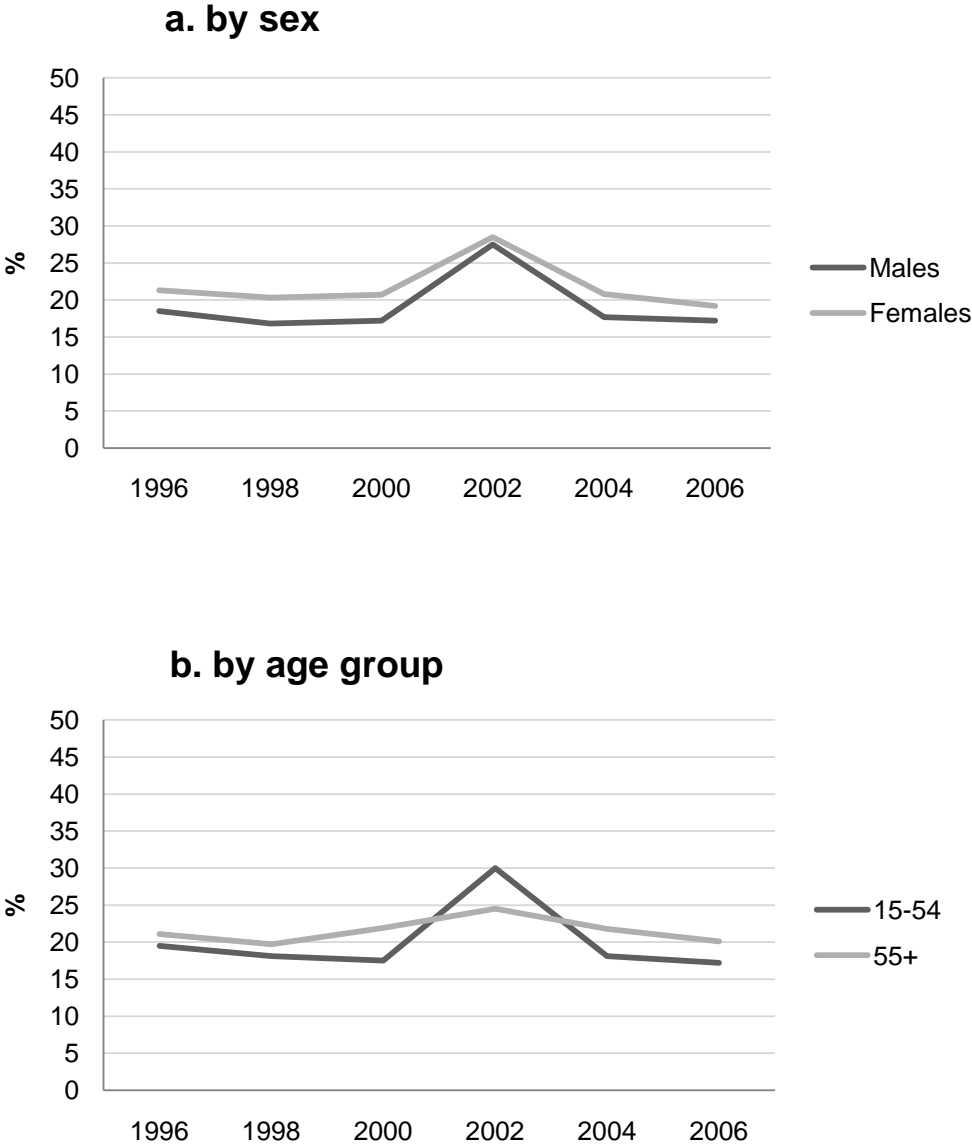
In this section levels and trends in individual volunteering will be presented by selected socio-demographic characteristics which were established as correlates of differentiation in volunteering in previous research: age, sex and educational level (Smith 1994, Wilson and Musick 1997, Mohan et al. 2006). Presentation of trends in this section will be limited to the two surveys allowing most consistent reconstructions of the trends (the BHPS and the CS).

Age, sex and educational level proved to be significantly associated most consistently with volunteering in the multivariate analyses of the determinants of volunteering reportedly in the BHPS (results not shown). Associations of other characteristics, such as household income, occupational level, home ownership, marital status, household composition, type of employment at the time of the interview and a year before the interview, and region of residence were not found to be consistently statistically significant after controls over age, sex and educational level were introduced.

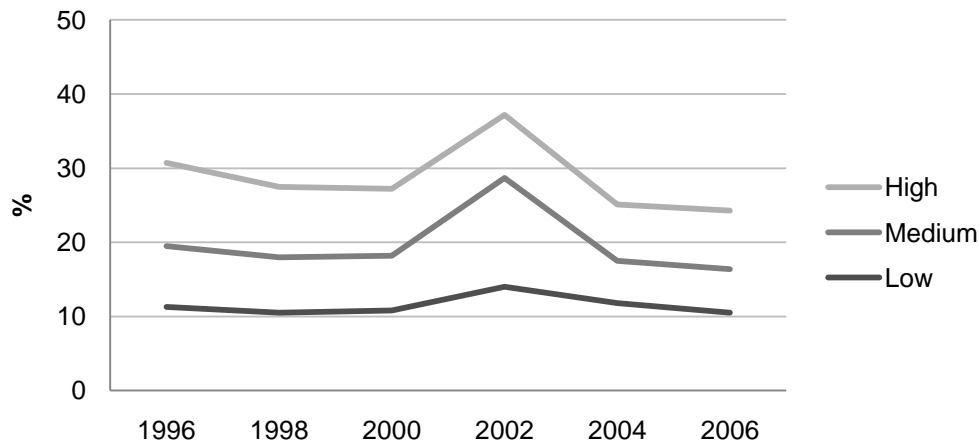
This analysis applies an inclusive definition of volunteering. We experimented also with the restrictive definition but no significant differences between the applications of two definitions were found.

Figures 1 and 2 present trends and levels in volunteering in the BHPS and the CS by selected socio-demographic characteristics. Note that we have **not** adjusted for the 'spike' in volunteering rates in the BHPS for 2002; the focus here is on the differences between subgroups in the likelihood of volunteering.

**Figure 1. Trends in individual volunteering: BHPS, 1996-2006**



### c. by level of education



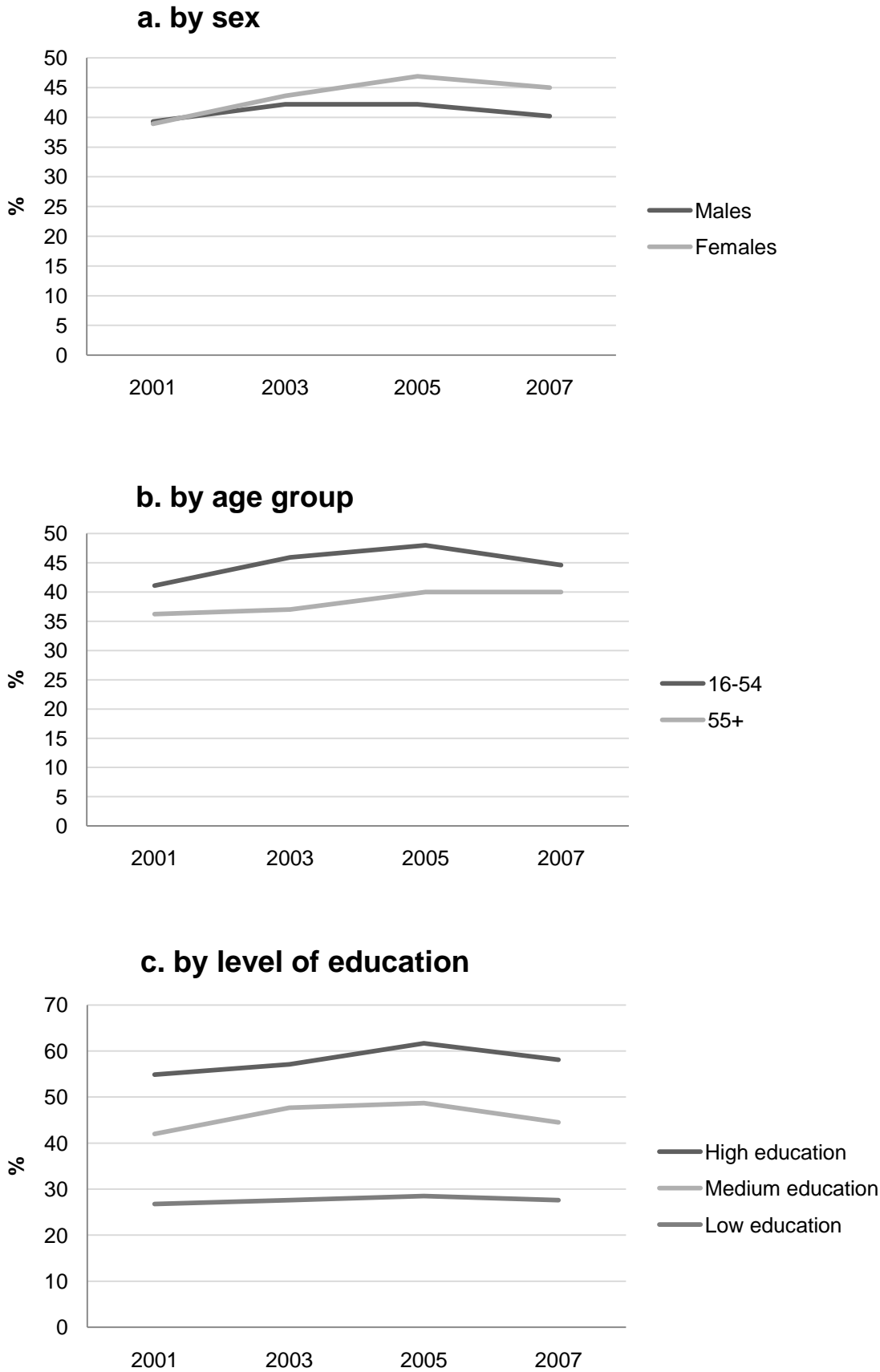
**Note.** High education: First of Higher degree, Teaching Nursing qualifications and other higher qualifications; medium education: GCE A Levels and O Levels or equivalent, commercial qualifications, no O Levels; low education: CSE grade 2-5 and equivalent, apprenticeships, other qualifications and no qualifications.

**Source:** UK Data Archive.

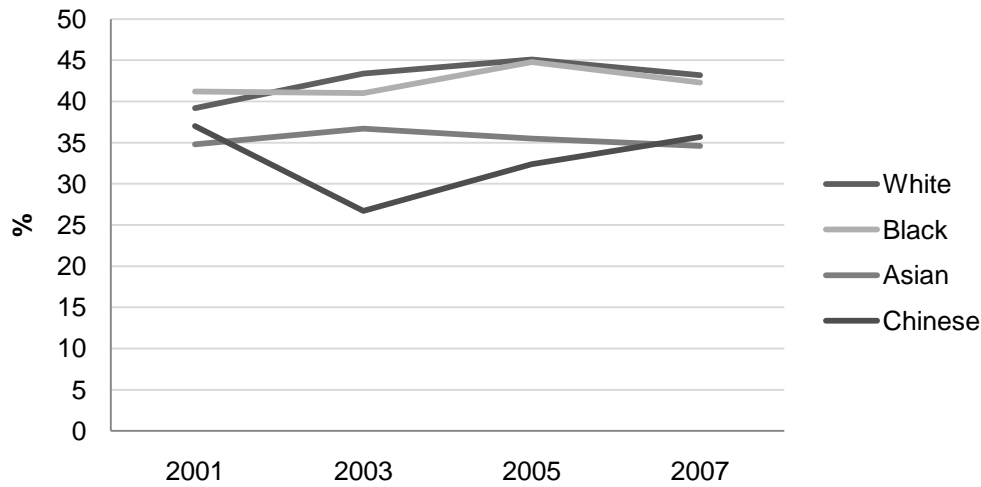
Figure 1 prompts the following observations. First, levels of individual volunteering in the BHPS differ by sex (females normally exhibit higher levels of volunteering than males), age (eldest display the highest levels of volunteering), and education (with those at higher levels of education having higher levels of volunteering). The described differentials in levels of volunteering are consistent with the wider volunteering literature and observed in all years, with very few exceptions, i.e. these are stable patterns. Second, all examined subgroups share a common trend of relative stability of volunteering between 1996 and 2006. The only group for which there are indications of a decrease in volunteering is persons at the highest level of education.

Figure 2 presents differentials and trends in volunteering observed in the CS. In addition to age, sex and educational level, we also present trends by ethnicity. Ethnicity is not included in the analysis of trends in the BHPS.

**Figure 2: Trends in individual volunteering: CS, 2001-2007**



#### d. by ethnicity/race



Source: UK Data Archive.

There are important similarities between the BHPS and the CS but there are also some differences. Both in the BHPS and in the CS females volunteer more than males and people with high educational credentials volunteer more than people with less education. Uniquely, the CS indicates that whites and blacks are practically indistinguishable in relation to their levels of volunteering while Asians and Chinese have lower levels.

The main difference between the two sources lies in the association between age and volunteering: in the BHPS age groups above age 55 years have higher level of volunteering than younger groups while in the CS the opposite is true. It is possible that these differences can be explained by the different levels of 'inclusivity' that these two surveys exhibit. The nature of the interviewing process in the CS could result, for example, in a more consistent inclusion by the respondents of nursery/school/playgroup orientated activities that are typical of young parents but less prevalent among the old-aged. Clearly, this is only a suggestion and more work is needed to understand this issue. In both the BHPS and the CS the differentials in levels of volunteering are fairly stable across years.

## 4. Discussion

Returning to the initial research questions posed in the introduction, 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 investigation of volunteering or social engagement (i.e. 'topical' surveys) provide higher estimates of involvement in volunteering 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.



Whether this is something that matters is a question of judgement. For example, should we rule out voluntary acts simply because they benefit (directly or indirectly) one's own family? And do we have to scrutinise every conceivable instance of voluntary action for signs of such benefits? Referring to the examples cited by Saxton and Baker (2009), the grandfather giving his grandson a lift to a fixture is certainly benefiting a relative but the team as a whole will benefit from the son's presence; the parent reading to a class or helping run a Brownie pack is contributing not just to their child but to a wider public good. Rather than picking out possible illustrations of what may or may not conform with a normative definition of volunteering, one way forward might be to look at surveys which do provide a detailed breakdown of the type of volunteering activity undertaken: there may be fewer grandfathers driving their grandchildren to football games than we might think, and if so estimates of the aggregate levels of volunteering won't be affected all that much.

*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 generate higher estimates, and this is to be expected. It is important to note that the gap between the rates reported in 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. It may be more appropriate to discuss volunteering in terms of a range of estimates (20%-50% for occasional/infrequent volunteering, and 10%-30% for regular/frequent volunteering) of involvement in volunteering rather than to aspire to one 'true' estimate. Again, should we prefer one approach to the other? Simply asking individuals whether or not they volunteer presumes a consensus on the meaning of volunteering, yet individuals may not necessarily regard what they do as voluntary activity. More specific topical questions may be appropriate, therefore, to overcome this problem of differential response.

*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 BHPS and the CS) provided a similar picture of factors associated with high/low levels of volunteering. Some differences were observed in relation to the pattern of responses by different age groups, which probably could be accounted for by differences in the nature of the questions asked. All examined subgroups in the CS seem to share a common trend of stability in level of involvement in volunteering. In the BHPS a possible reduction in the level of volunteering was identified in groups with high educational credentials.

The picture overall is one of stability over time. There is broad consistency in the levels of volunteering reported by surveys with similar methodologies, and broad consistency in the differences between surveys using different methodologies. We have explained the reasons for the most surprising anomaly in the statistics which we have reviewed -- the apparent spike in volunteering rates in the BHPS in 2002. One possible inconsistency is between the 2006 and 2008 waves of the BHPS which appear to show an upturn in volunteering at a time when the Citizenship Survey was showing a downturn. Further investigation is necessary here.

In addition to the broad consistency in temporal trends, there is also consistency in the socioeconomic profile of volunteers. We have not demonstrated this beyond the 2007 waves of the Citizenship Survey, however, and a future exercise will consider socioeconomic gradients across the different waves of that survey.

The recent announcement of the results of the first six months of the 2010-11 Citizenship Survey appeared to show a further decline in the headline rate of volunteering. Compared to a peak of 44% in 2005, the proportion of the population engaging in formal volunteering in the previous 12 months has dropped from 44% to around 38% (we have not included these figures in our tabulations, as they are not based on a full year's data). This is statistically significant although some of the year-on-year changes in that period are not. Nevertheless, as can be seen from our tables, this only takes levels of volunteering back to where they were 10 years ago. If confirmed when the full year's data are available – unfortunately, this will be the last set of observations from the Citizenship Survey, which has now been cancelled – it would raise interesting questions about the degree of popular enthusiasm for the 'Big Society' agenda. On the other hand, on a more positive note, this paper has shown the underlying stability of volunteering rates; it may not be easy to shift them in an upward direction, but it is also unlikely that they are going to drop very substantially on the basis of the volume of survey evidence considered here.

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## Appendix 1: changes between wave 10 and wave 12 of the BHPS

Between the two waves of this survey, new questions were introduced to incorporate investigations of people's attitudes to devolution, and changes were made to the showcard presented to respondents by interviewers.

At wave 10 the responses on the showcard and on the questionnaire were:

1. At least once a week
2. At least once a month
3. Several times a year
4. Once a year or less
5. Never / almost never

And the resultant pattern of replies was as follows:

how often: do voluntary work	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
don't know	13	0.24	0.24
at least once a week	398	7.37	7.61
at least once a month	227	4.20	11.81
several times a year	270	5.00	16.81
once a year or less	172	3.19	20.00
never/almost never	4,320	80.00	100.00
Total	5,400	100.00	

At wave 12 the categories on the showcard were reduced to 4, as follows:

1. At least once a week
2. At least once a month
3. Several times a year
4. Once a year or less

Option 5 (never) remained, but only on the questionnaire script read by the interviewer.

The increase in volunteering is almost entirely due to an increase in people responding 4 (once a year or less):

how often: do voluntary work	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
don't know	9	0.18	0.18
at least once a week	381	7.81	8.00
at least once a month	244	5.00	13.00
several times a year	233	4.78	17.77
once a year or less	571	11.71	29.48
never/almost never	3440	70.52	100.00
Total	4,878	100.00	

This affected a whole set of questions so that participation in other activities such as evening classes and yoga also rises by similar proportions.

## About the Centre

The third sector provides support and services to millions of people. Whether providing front-line services, making policy or campaigning for change, good quality research is vital for organisations to achieve the best possible impact. The Third Sector Research Centre exists to develop the evidence base on, for and with the third sector in the UK. Working closely with practitioners, policy-makers and other academics, TSRC is undertaking and reviewing research, and making this research widely available. The Centre works in collaboration with the third sector, ensuring its research reflects the realities of those working within it, and helping to build the sector's capacity to use and conduct research.

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## Quantitative Analysis

This research stream is designed to improve our understanding of the third sector through a large-scale programme of quantitative work. It is designed to help us better explain the distribution of third sector organisations, analyse their contribution to society and the economy and understand their dynamics. We are interested in data not just on third sector organisations and their resources, but also on both financial inputs to the sector (funding flows from various sources) and human inputs (e.g. the paid workforce and volunteers).

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