



research notes

The Vanishing Volunteer

Jewish organizations and institutions depend on volunteers. Social services, fundraising, cultural, social and religious activities all require substantial volunteer hours. Since the Reagan assault on human services programs, the need for volunteer help has become more critical. The Jewish community, like other American communities, includes substantial numbers of poor and disabled Jews and single-parent families. Populations with such basic needs are coupled with the particularistic agenda of American Jewish life: preserving Jewish identity, strengthening commitment to Jewish culture and values, and adding vibrancy to contemporary Jewish life. All of these require millions of volunteer hours.

But Jewish organizations and institutions are failing to attract enough volunteers. While the same people tend to volunteer repeatedly, most Jews do not volunteer at all. Recent studies from seven Jewish communities show some sobering patterns of volunteerism for contemporary Jewish organizations.

The Research

Demographic studies, sponsored by Jewish Federations between 1982 and 1987, collected data about the demographic, religious, and organizational characteristics of their respective Jewish populations.

Studies used in this analysis include Atlantic City, NJ (1985); Baltimore (1986); New Orleans (1987); Rochester, NY (1987); St. Louis (1982); Washington, DC (1983); and Worcester, MA (1987). A variety of sampling methodologies were used in each study to reach both affiliated and non-affiliated Jews. In most cases, telephone interviews were conducted to collect information which helps form a composite picture of contemporary Jewish life. Volunteer behavior is among the areas that have been explored. This research note presents a first look at the composite picture of volunteerism emerging from these community studies.

Major Findings

Major findings show that:

1. Most Jewish adults spend no time or less than one hour per month volunteering for any Jewish organizations.
2. With the exception of a few Jewish communities, Jews are even less likely to volunteer for non-Jewish organizations. Exceptions are Washington, DC, where Jews are more likely to volunteer for non-Jewish organizations, and Rochester, where time is allocated about equally between Jewish and non-Jewish organizations.

Brandeis University
Center for
Modern Jewish Studies
Waltham
Massachusetts 02254-9110

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In this issue...

Focus on Volunteerism

3. Most Jews will do volunteer work at some time in their lives, but volunteerism seems to be strongly related to life-cycle events such as having school-age children. Jews under 30 and over 65 are far less likely to do volunteer work.
4. Synagogues and temples receive the largest proportion of Jewish volunteer time.
5. Orthodox and Conservative Jews are more likely to volunteer than Reform Jews and Jews who identify themselves as being "just Jewish."
6. Higher-income Jews are far more likely to volunteer than lower-income Jews.
7. Women who are employed full-time are less likely to volunteer than those who are employed part-time or those who are full-time homemakers.
8. Volunteerism for Jewish organizations is very low among couples where one spouse is not Jewish.
9. Aside from demographic characteristics such as age and family formation, life style influences volunteerism. When asked why they do not volunteer, "too busy" is the most often listed response.
10. Most Jews, nevertheless, are at least somewhat receptive to volunteer tasks. "Nobody ever asked me to" is also a frequent explanation for non-volunteerism, and the studies show that most Jews could be volunteers.

The Data

In Washington, DC, St. Louis, and Atlantic City about four out of five adults spend less than one hour per month in volunteer time for Jewish organizations. In Rochester, almost two out of three spend little or no time doing volunteer work. In the rest of the cities studied, about three out of four adults spend little or no time volunteering.

City	Percent of Adults Volunteering No Time or Less than One Hour per Month for Jewish Organizations
Atlantic City	79%
Baltimore	78%
New Orleans	74%
Rochester	63%
St. Louis	79%
Washington, DC	85%
Worcester	71%

At the same time, a number of communities have a core of very dedicated volunteers; about 5% of the adult Jews in Atlantic City, Baltimore, Rochester, and Worcester spend 20 hours or more each month volunteering for Jewish organizations. Baltimore and Rochester also have about 4-5% of the adults volunteering 20 hours or more per month for non-Jewish organizations.

City	Percent of Adults Volunteering 20 Hours or More per Month for Jewish Organizations
Atlantic City	4%
Baltimore	4%
New Orleans	1%
Rochester	5%
St. Louis	2%
Washington, DC	1.3%
Worcester	5%

Washington and Rochester also have relatively high proportions—about one in four—of individuals who spend between one and ten hours each month volunteering for non-Jewish organizations. Other cities have 8-19% of the adult Jewish population volunteering one to ten hours for non-Jewish organizations.

City	Percent of Adults Volunteering One to Ten Hours per Month for Non-Jewish Organizations
Atlantic City	8%
Baltimore	11%
New Orleans	17%
Rochester	26%
St. Louis	12%
Washington, DC	24%
Worcester	19%

Where Do We Go From Here?

Increasing attention must be paid to attracting and training volunteers from all sectors of the Jewish population. Women labor-force participants, intermarried couples, and unaffiliated Jews now comprise increasing proportions of the total Jewish population. Members of these groups are less likely to volunteer their time than their counterparts: women who are not labor-force participants, in-married couples, and affiliated Jews. The data also show that those who volunteer are more likely to be bigger contributors to Jewish organizations, supporting the notion that philanthropic and volunteer efforts are mutually reinforcing.

Much more research is needed. What kinds of volunteer tasks will attract workers? How can organizations reach detached constituencies? Are there some organizations that are more appealing than others, and if so, why? More detailed analyses of these and other questions will be explored over the next few years.

In order to attract more volunteers, Jewish organizations must rethink their goals and procedures, taking into account the increasing professionalism and time constraints among potential volunteers:

- Volunteer tasks must be more creative, utilizing individuals' professional skills, rather than assigning menial tasks that alienate many individuals.
- Have people donate their work skills, i.e., physicians, accountants and others, to needy client populations.
- Schedules of meetings and tasks must accommodate the increasing number of women who are employed. This applies to both the frequency and the times meetings are scheduled.
- Fewer numbers of men and women seem to want meetings for their own sake, i.e. social interaction alone, with only a vague organizational purpose. It is easier to mobilize volunteers for organized, efficient work meetings around a clearly defined goal.

Without substantial changes, volunteerism for Jewish organizations is likely to attract smaller and smaller numbers of participants.

Gary A. Tobin, Director

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Lawrence Sternberg, Editor