

Where Are America's Volunteers?

A Look at America's Widespread Decline in Volunteering in Cities and States

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Executive Summary

While the United States recently experienced record highs in total volunteer hours and charitable dollars given to community organizations, these seemingly positive numbers mask a troubling trend: fewer Americans are engaging in their community by volunteering and giving than in any time in the last two decades.

The importance of recognizing and addressing this decline in American's participation in their community cannot be overstated. Throughout the country, volunteers work with congregations, charities, and other nonprofit organizations to provide needed services of all types to people and communities. However, while people, communities, and organizations all rely on the work provided by volunteers, volunteering also generates indirect positive benefits for communities and for volunteers themselves.

Given the decline of charitable behaviors among Americans and the importance of these behaviors for the well-being of individuals and communities, this brief analyzes data from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) to explore – for the first time – how the recent national decline in American volunteering played out in all 50 states (plus the District of Columbia) and 215 metro areas. Every September between 2002 and 2015, the CPS collected national statistics on volunteering through a supplemental survey. Among its many strengths, the CPS sample includes more than 55,000 households that generate reliable statistics for all states and most major metropolitan areas.

Key Findings

- Despite recent record highs in total volunteer hours (peaking at 8.7 billion hours in 2014) and total charitable dollars (peaking at \$410.02 billion in 2017) given to nonprofit organizations, the United States has experienced a significant decline in the percentage of Americans who volunteer and give annually.
- Shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States volunteer rate reached its historical peak (28.8 percent) for three straight years between 2003 and 2005 and then suffered its first large and statistically significant decline in 2006 (falling to 26.7 percent).¹ The national volunteer rate bottomed out at a fifteen-year low of 24.9 percent in 2015.
- This decline in the national volunteer rate substantially decreased the number of Americans volunteering annually: if the volunteer rate had not declined at all between 2004 and 2015, over 9.8 more Americans would have volunteered in 2015.

FOOTNOTE: 1 Wilson, John. "Volunteering." *Annual Review of Sociology* 26, no. 1 (2000): 215-240. See also

<https://www.thebalancesmb.com/unexpected-benefits-ofvolunteering-4132453>. 2 Osili, Una, and Sasha Zarins (2018). "Fewer Americans are giving money to charity but total

donations are at record levels anyway.” The Conversation, July 3. Available at <https://theconversation.com/fewer-americans-are-giving-money-to-charity-but-total-donations-are-at-record-levels-anyway-98291>.

- Similarly, the percentage of Americans giving to charity annually declined from 66.8 percent in 2000 to 55.5 percent in 2014 according to recent research by the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy at Indiana University.²
- 31 states experienced significant declines in volunteering between 2004 and 2015, while not one state experienced a significant increase in volunteering over that time period.
- The decline in volunteering is surprisingly more prevalent in states historically rich in social capital. Social capital, which is generated by positive interactions between individuals, is closely related to how, and how often, individuals engage in civic and social affairs. Social capital networks give rise to group norms that can facilitate action, cooperation, trust, and reciprocity with others – norms that lead to positive ties among individuals and groups and stimulate more pro-civic actions. Communities rich in social capital tend to produce greater pro-civic attitudes, including trust and reciprocity in others and subsequently a greater desire to be active in community affairs. One would expect high social capital areas to resist the national decline in volunteering instead of being a leading source for the decline.
- Further illustrating this trend, rural and suburban areas – which traditionally exhibit much higher rates of social capital versus urban areas – experienced the most significant declines in volunteering over this period. Rural volunteering declined from a high of 30.9 percent in 2003 to an all-time low of 25.2 percent in 2015, while suburban volunteering declined from a high of 30.1 percent in 2003 to an all-time low of 25.3 percent in 2015. Meanwhile, the 2015 urban volunteer rate of 23.1 percent was the exact same rate recorded in 2002.
- Significant changes in volunteering occurred less often in cities. Of 215 metropolitan areas analyzed between 2004 and 2015, 147 metro areas did not experience a significant change in its volunteer rate, but 57 cities suffered a significant decrease in volunteering. Only 11 cities produced a significant increase in volunteering.
- Volunteer rates tended to drop significantly in metro areas that suffered higher levels of socioeconomic distress, possessed fewer places to volunteer (smaller numbers of nonprofits per capita), and in communities where people may be less likely to know their neighbors.

Volunteering has been shown to generate both direct and indirect positive benefits: it helps strengthen communities and also helps the volunteers themselves. Volunteers are more likely to stay stronger emotionally, mentally, and physically, especially as they age.³ Volunteering also encourages other types of civic participation, discourages antisocial behavior, and promotes socioeconomic achievement – yielding direct benefits for the volunteers and indirect benefits for

their communities.⁴ Volunteers also help to build a community's social capital by working together with their neighbors, finding ways to cooperate and compromise, and becoming more aware and understanding of each of our differences. Through behaviors such as volunteering with organizations, Americans ultimately construct ties, relationships, and bonds of trust with others.

On the other hand, communities with less engaged individuals can expect detrimental outcomes such as greater social isolation, less trust in each other, and poorer physical and mental health. To stem the troubling trends and pervasive findings in this brief, we must commit resources and time to the challenging work of putting more Americans back to work improving their communities.

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FOOTNOTE: 3Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Research and Policy Development (2007). The Health Benefits of Volunteering: A Review of Recent Research, Washington, DC 20525. Available at

https://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/07_0506_hbr.pdf. **4 Wilson, John. "Volunteering."**

Annual Review of Sociology 26, no. 1 (2000): 215-240. See also

<https://www.thebalancesmb.com/unexpected-benefits-ofvolunteering-4132453>.

Introduction

While the United States recently experienced record highs in total volunteer hours and charitable dollars given to community organizations, these seemingly positive numbers mask a troubling trend: fewer Americans are engaging in their community by volunteering and giving than in any time in the recent past. Immediately following the terrorist attacks of September 11, the volunteer rate surged to a peak level and stayed there for three straight years. After this record high in volunteering, the national rate of American volunteering declined and continued to slide throughout the decade from 2004 to 2015 while the percentage of Americans making charitable donations dropped similarly between 2000 and 2014.

The importance of recognizing and addressing this decline in Americans participation in their community cannot be overstated. Throughout the country, volunteers work with congregations, charities, and other nonprofit organizations to provide needed services of all types to people and communities. While people, organizations, and communities all rely on the work provided by volunteers, volunteering also generates indirect positive benefits for communities and for volunteers themselves. Over the years, studies have shown that volunteering promotes strong emotional, mental, and even physical health; encourages other types of civic participation;

discourages antisocial behavior; and promotes socioeconomic achievement, especially by encouraging educational advancement among high school and college students.

In addition to providing social services to those in need and providing benefits to the volunteers themselves, volunteer work also helps to strengthen communities by encouraging people to work together to solve pressing problems. The term “social capital” is frequently used to describe the resource that people generate through positive interactions that helps to keep communities and societies prosperous and productive. Social capital is distinguished from other forms of capital, such as economic (physical resources including tools and technology) or human (personal resources including education and skills), in that the benefits of social capital are only available in and through relationships with others. At the same time, social capital makes it easier for people to use their membership in social networks to secure benefits, including human capital and economic capital.⁵

Social capital can be characterized by studying the occurrence of interactions between individuals – especially how, and how often, they engage in civic and social affairs. Social capital networks give rise to group norms that can facilitate action, cooperation, trust, and reciprocity with others; norms that lead to positive ties among individuals and groups and stimulate more pro-civic actions. Communities rich in social capital produce greater pro-civic attitudes and subsequently a greater desire to be active in community affairs. Social capital even promotes positive outcomes at the national level: 6 more than two decades’ worth of research on international economic performance has shown that nations where social capital is plentiful tend to have more prosperous communities, economies, and even healthier residents.

In this brief, we explore possible explanations for the recent decline in volunteering with an organization – both because volunteering provides such a wide range of benefits to society, and because volunteering is a well-known indicator of social capital. In *Bowling Alone*, social scientist Robert Putnam describes declining social and civic engagement in American life throughout the mid- to late twentieth century – but observes that volunteering, which grew more prevalent during this period, may be the only prominent exception to this rule.

“Fewer Americans are engaging in their community by volunteering and giving than in any time in the recent past.”

Data collected since that time reveals that national volunteer rates have declined dramatically since the early 2000s, especially in recent years. We find America’s decline in volunteering was particularly prevalent in: (1) states with the highest historical reserves of social capital; (2) rural and suburban areas (more so than in urban areas); and (3) metropolitan areas with higher levels of socioeconomic distress and a less well-developed nonprofit sector.

FOOTNOTE: 5 Portes, Alejandro. “Social capital: Its origins and applications in modern sociology.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 24, no. 1 (1998): 1-24. **6** Please see Knack, Stephen, and Philip Keefer, “Does social capital have an economic payoff? A cross-country investigation.” *The Quarterly journal of economics* 112, no. 4 (1997): 1251-1288; and Alesina, Alberto, and Paola Giuliano, “Culture and institutions.” *Journal of Economic Literature* 53, no. 4 (2015): 898-944.

Annual Volunteer Hours and Charitable Donations to Nonprofits Hit Historical Highs While Fewer Americans Actually Volunteer and Give

The Do Good Institute recently published research with worrisome implications for American civil society.⁷ The research outlined a significant gap between young adults’ historically high interest in helping others and actual volunteering among young adults as well as a very significant decline in volunteering among adults age 25 and over.⁸ As Figure 1 illustrates, the national volunteer rate for all American adults ages 16 and over⁹ has also declined much more often than it has increased in the last fifteen years. Shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the volunteer rate reached its historical peak (28.8 percent) for three straight years between 2003 and 2005. The national volunteer rate suffered its first large and statistically significant decline in 2006 (falling to 26.7 percent). The volunteer rate never rose above 27 percent or below 26 percent between 2006 and 2012 – including in the years during the Great Recession – but then the volunteer rate declined between 2013 and 2015, bottoming out at a fifteen-year low of 24.9 percent in 2015. This decline has had a substantial impact on the size of the volunteer workforce: if the volunteer rate had not declined at all between 2004 and 2015, over 9.8 million more Americans would have volunteered in 2015.

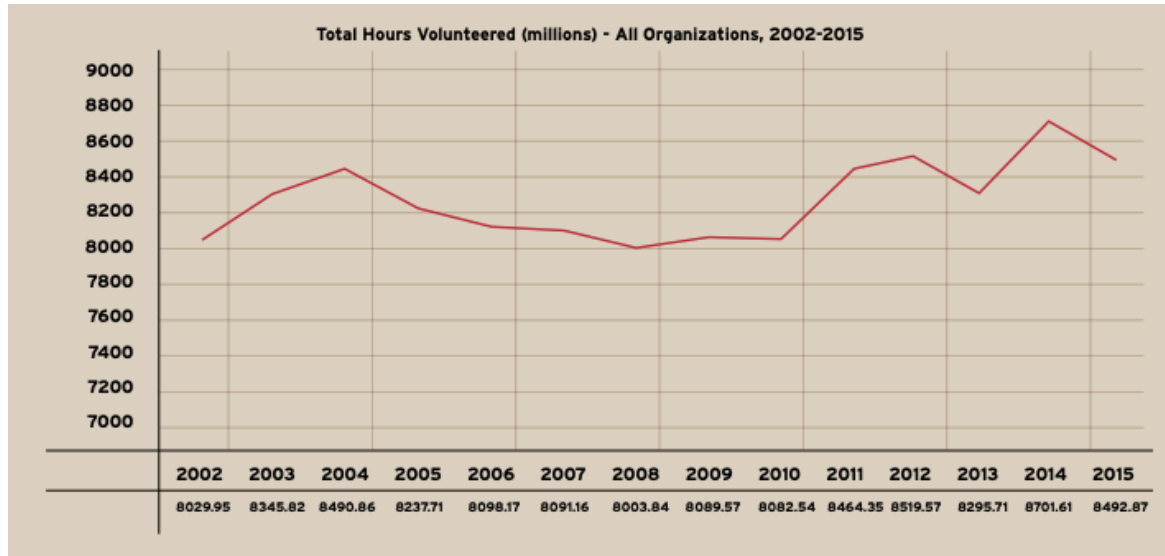
Surprisingly, despite the drop in participation, the total amount of hours contributed by volunteers (ages 16 and older) to community organizations has not declined. Instead, total volunteer hours given to community organizations recently hit an all-time high. Figure 2 shows the total amount of hours contributed by volunteers to all the organizations where they serve. This national total remained remarkably consistent between 2006 and 2010, fluctuating between 8.0 and 8.1 billion hours, before reaching a peak of 8.7 billion hours in 2014.¹⁰

Figure 1: National Adult Volunteer Rate (Ages 16 and Over), 2002-2015



FOOTNOTE: 7 Grimm, Robert T., Jr., and Nathan Dietz. 2018. “Good Intentions, Gap in Action: The Challenge of Translating Youth’s High Interest in Doing Good into Civic Engagement.” Research Brief: Do Good Institute, University of Maryland. Available at <http://ter.ps/gapinaction>. 8 It is important to note that the volunteer rate for youth and young adults under age 25 has not changed much in the same period. 9 We report statistics for the 16-and-over population, even though the CPS collects data from respondents who are 15 years old, to follow the convention of the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). In the annual brief series, *Volunteering in the United States*, BLS defines adult volunteers as people ages 16 or older who did work through an organization in the previous 12 months for which they were not paid. BLS imposes a minimum age of 16 because, in most states, residents must be 16 to work for pay without their parents’ permission. 10 In the CPS Volunteer Supplement, volunteers are asked to report the hours that they spent volunteering during the previous year in up to seven organizations. The annual total for each organization was based on the respondent’s answer to the number of weeks they volunteered at the organization, the average number of hours they served during the weeks in which they volunteered, and the total number of hours (which was usually estimated by the product of the reported week-per-year and hoursper-week quantities). In 2011, to preserve respondent privacy, the U.S. Census Bureau began to “topcode,” or censor, very large values of the hours-per-week and hoursper-year variables. The totals in Table 2 use average values for the topcoded observations, which were provided by the Census Bureau, to correct the censored values in the public-use dataset. Details about this procedure, and the average values provided by the Census Bureau, are available from the authors upon request.

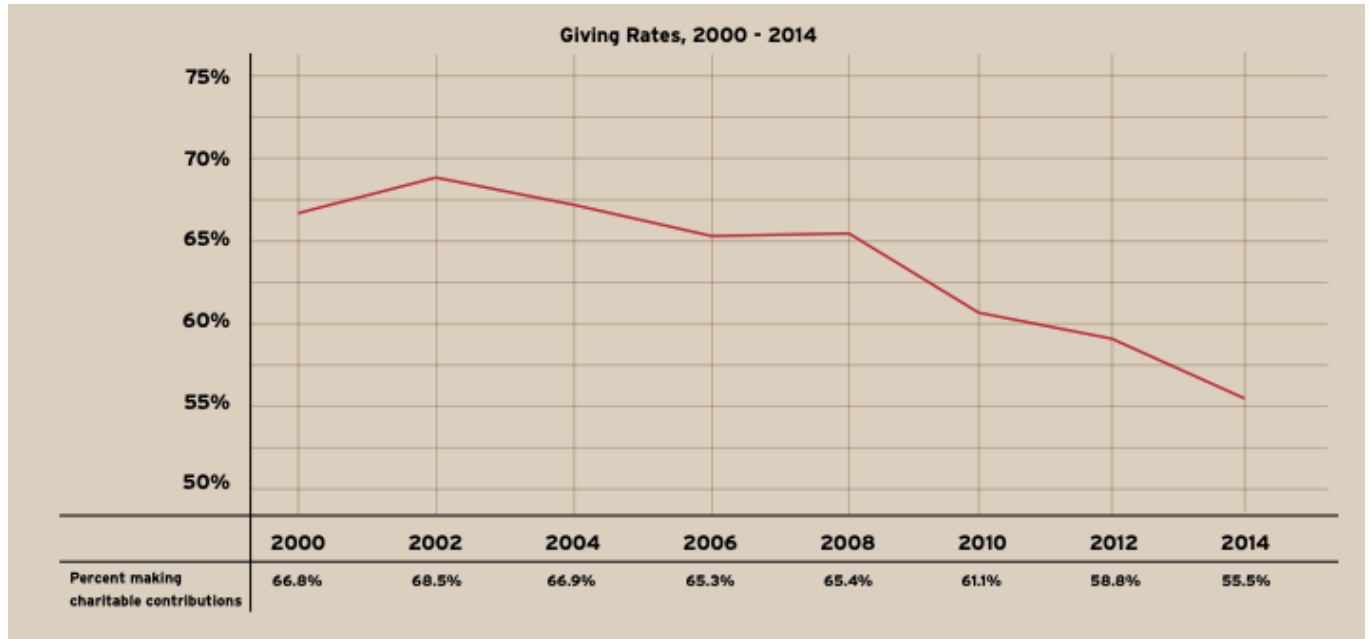
Figure 2: Total Hours Volunteered, 2002-2015



Trends for charitable giving show a similar paradox: the total amount of money contributed by individuals has increased in recent years, even though the percentage of individuals who annually make charitable donations has declined. According to the most recent Giving USA report, total charitable donations from all sources rose in 2017 to an alltime high of \$410.02 billion.¹¹ As seen in Figure 3, which is based on data recently published by Indiana University’s Lilly Family School of Philanthropy,¹² the share of people giving to charity has declined from 66.8 percent in 2000 to 55.5 percent in 2014 (the most recent year for which data are available). In the meantime, the average amount given by families who donated to charity increased (in real dollars) from \$2,041 in 2000 to \$2,514 in 2014. If more recent data exhibits a continuation of this trend from 2014 to the present, it will further explain how the total amount contributed to charitable organizations could reach a new record high every year from 2014 to 2017 while the percentage of Americans donating remains low.

FOOTNOTE: 11 See the infographic at <https://givingusa.org/tag/giving-usa-2018/> for more topline results from Giving USA 2018: The Annual Report on Philanthropy for the Year 2017. Giving USA 2018, which is published by the Giving USA Foundation, and researched and written by the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, is available online at www.givingusa.org. **12** Osili, Una, and Sasha Zarins (2018). “Fewer Americans are giving money to charity but total donations are at record levels anyway.” The Conversation, July 3. Available at <https://theconversation.com/fewer-americans-are-giving-money-to-charity-but-total-donations-are-at-record-levels-anyway-98291>.

Figure 3: Percentage of Americans Making Charitable Contributions



Even though these two “bottom line” measures of volunteering and giving – total dollars and volunteer hours contributed – have increased slightly in recent years, they hide an unsettling trend: declining participation in giving and volunteering by Americans. Social theorists argue that social capital is generated by widespread and frequent interactions with others, which strengthen society by helping to build interpersonal trust. Many authors, most notably Robert Putnam in the landmark 2000 book *Bowling Alone*, chronicled the decline in civic participation – and the ways in which we connect with others – as well as the negative consequences of these trends, including greater social isolation from individuals who are similar or different from us.

Many hoped that the events around 9/11 would spark a long-term civic renewal in the United States; however, our research suggests that did not come to pass. The analysis in *Bowling Alone* also suggests that volunteering was an exception to the general rule of declining participation. However, follow-up research¹³ attributed these results to the extraordinarily high participation rates of older adults. Many of these older adults were members of the cohort labeled the “Long Civic Generation” – and others have called the “Greatest Generation” – that has made lasting positive contributions to American society throughout their long lives.

Without discounting the “Long Civic Generation’s” positive influence on civil society, the recent declines in civic participation are certainly due to other factors besides generational replacement. These changes have been relatively slow to emerge, but what we observe at the national level only hints at what might be happening within communities across the country. We take a closer look at possible explanations for the decline in the national adult volunteer rate by analyzing government data and recent changes in volunteering among cities and states.

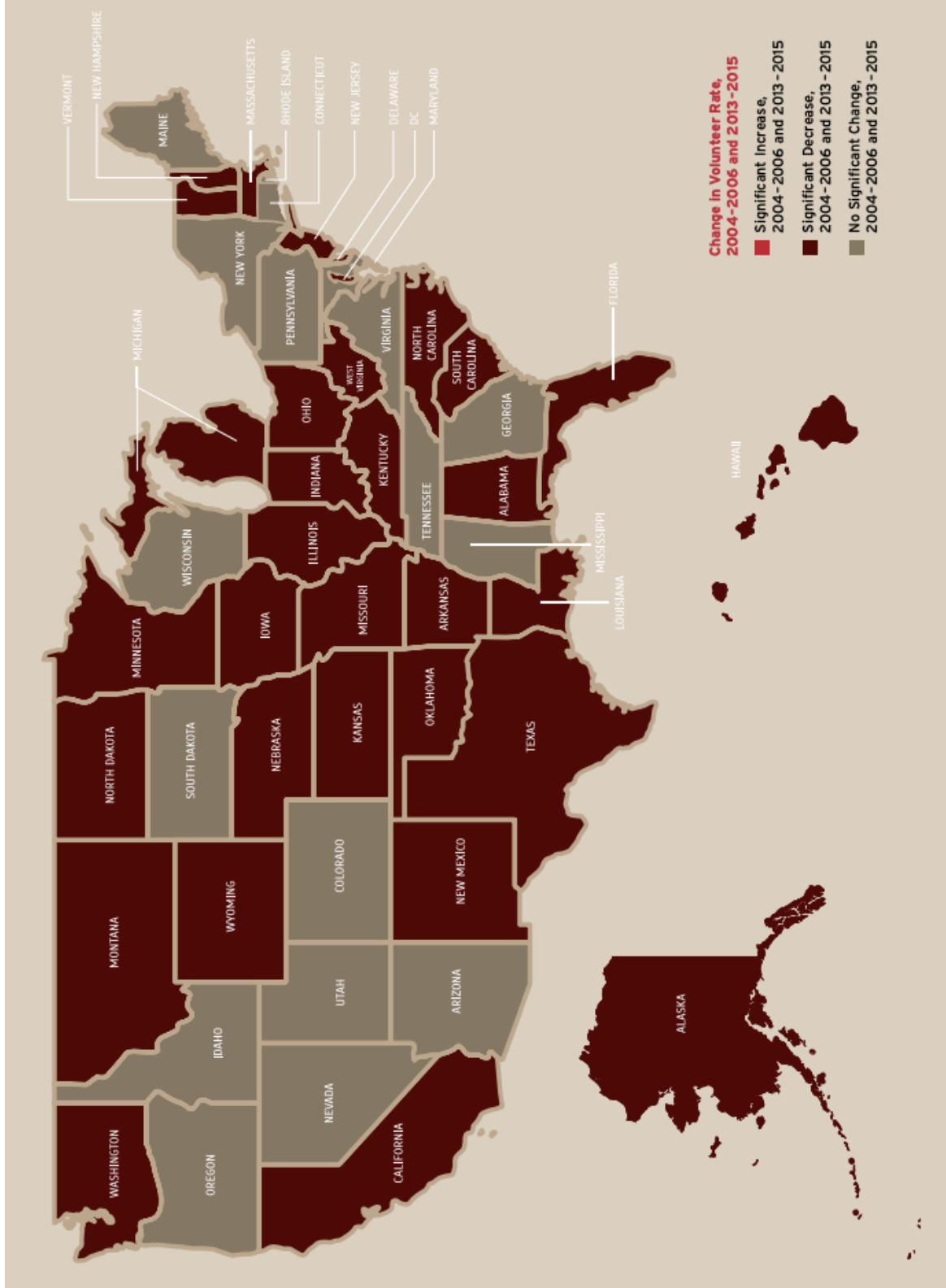
Historical Trends in State Volunteering

To address the question of what accounts for the overall decline in the national volunteer rate from 2004 to 2015, we use data pooled over four intervals – 2004-2006, 2007-2009, 2010-2012 and 2013-2015 – to calculate volunteer rates for all 50 states (plus the District of Columbia) and 215 metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs). These volunteer rates, along with notes indicating whether the observed changes are statistically significant, can be found in the brief's Appendix.¹⁴ Our primary data source for volunteer statistics is the Current Population Survey (CPS) Volunteer Supplement, which was conducted every September by the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau between 2002 and 2015. Among the many strengths of the CPS is its broad geographic coverage: the 55,000 households surveyed each year include representative samples of all 50 states plus the District of Columbia, and significant representation in most of the nation's metropolitan areas.

The state results contain part of the explanation for the changes we see in the national volunteer rate. Although the 2004-2006 period contains the huge one-year decline between 2005 and 2006, most of the data was collected during the post-9/11 period when the national volunteer rate reached its sustained high point. Between 2004-2006 and 2007-2009, the period where the national volunteer rate fell off its historic peak levels, the volunteer rate declined in 15 states by a statistically significant amount, and only increased significantly in Nevada. From 2007-2009 to 2010-2012, a period where the national rate changed very little overall, the rate declined significantly in four states (Alaska, Montana, North Dakota, and Ohio) and increased significantly in three (Idaho, Mississippi, and New York). Finally, between 2010-2012 and 2013-2015, the period that ended with the national rate at its lowest point, the volunteer rate declined significantly in 11 states without increasing significantly anywhere. All told, as seen in Figure 4, the volunteer rate declined significantly in 31 states between 2004-2006 and 2013-2015, without increasing by a statistically significant amount in any state.

FOOTNOTE: 13 Goss, Kristin A. "Volunteering and the long civic generation." *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (1999): 378-415. 14 The Appendix also contains details about the CPS sample design, the measurement of volunteering, and the significance tests used to determine whether an observed increase or decrease in volunteering was statistically significant.

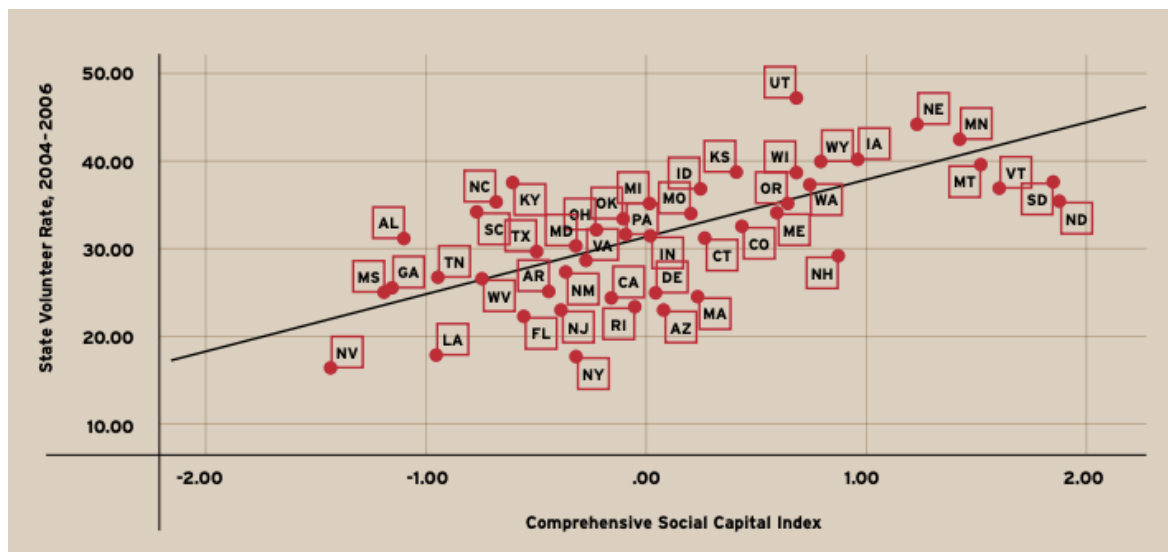
Figure 4: State Changes in Volunteer Rates, 2004-2006 to 2013-2015



Although the national trend line would certainly predict declines in the volunteer rate, why has the volunteer rate decreased significantly in some states and not in others? Our search for explanations included looking at the relationship between volunteering and overall social capital as determined by a state's value on the Comprehensive Social Capital Index (based on 14 indicators of civic and associational activities).¹⁵ The Index was originally developed by Putnam for *Bowling Alone*, but is still highly reliable compared to alternative state-level measures according to a recent study.¹⁶

Figure 5 is a scatter-plot, a special graph that illustrates the relationship between two variables – in this case, volunteering and social capital. Scatterplot graphs provide a visual sense of how state volunteer rates (as measured with pooled CPS data from 2004 through 2006) are related to the presence of a characteristic (in this case, social capital) within each state. The graph in Figure 5 has a solid line that represents the general relationship between state volunteer rates and state values on the Comprehensive Social Capital Index. Scatter-plots also contain dots that show how accurately this general trend describes the data for each of the 50 states plus D.C.; the stronger the relationship, the closer the dots are to the trend line. Figure 5 shows that the comprehensive social capital index is highly correlated with the 2004-2006 volunteer rate at the state level,¹⁷ even though states like Utah have a higher volunteer rate than their index score might suggest, and states like North Dakota, Nevada, and New York have lower volunteer rates than their index scores would predict.

Figure 5: Relationship Between Social Capital Index (from *Bowling Alone*) and State Volunteer Rate, 2004-2006



FOOTNOTE: 15 The Index is available for download on the Research page of the *Bowling Alone* website: http://bowlingalone.com/?page_id=7. **16** Social Capital Project (2018), “The Geography of Social Capital in America,” SCP Report No. 1-18 (April). Prepared by the

Vice Chairman's Staff of the Joint Economic Committee at the request of Senator Mike Lee. Available at

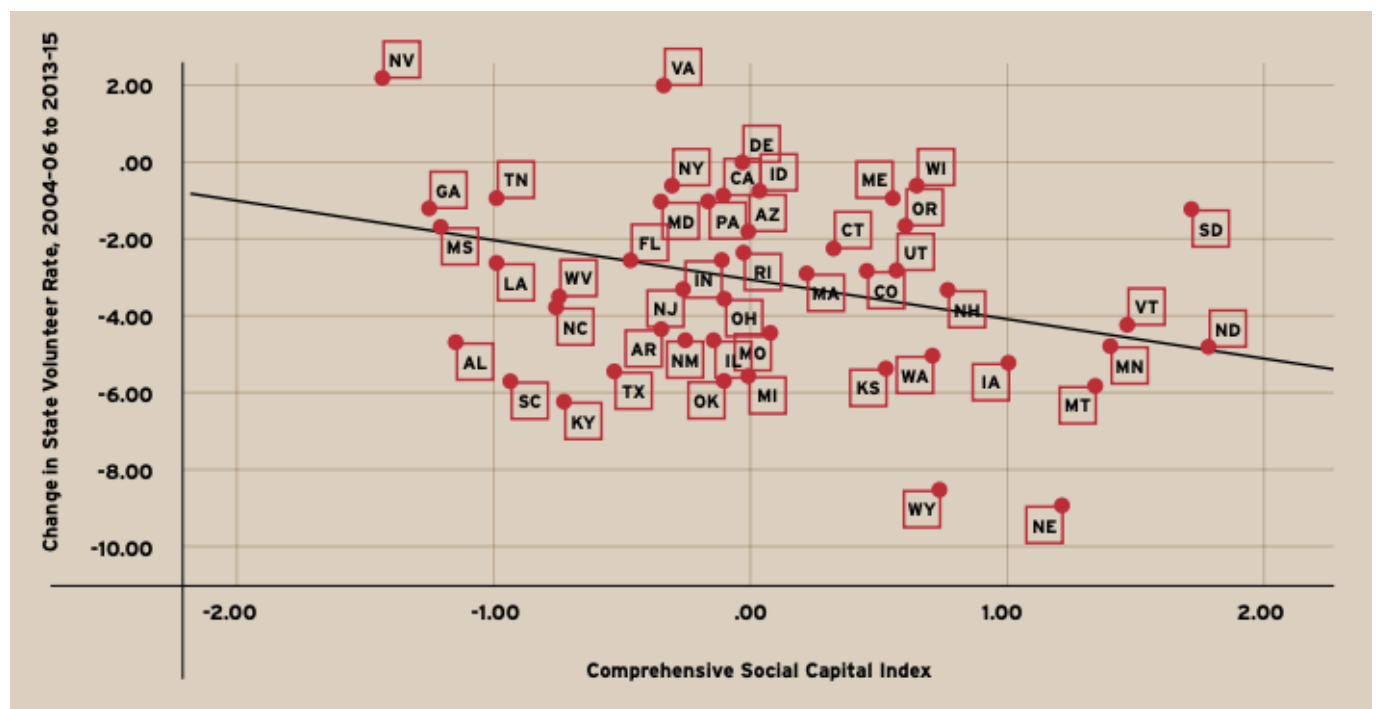
<https://www.lee.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/tagged?id=B109CC4F-BA12-43C2-BB70-356F0D1B3A2E>.

17 By comparison, the correlation between the index scores and the 2013-2015 volunteer rate is only slightly lower than the correlation with the 2004-2006 volunteer rate, which demonstrates the continued relevance of the index.

Figure 6 shows that social capital is also related to the change in volunteer rates between 2004-2006 and 2013-2015. The changes in volunteer rates are negatively associated with the social capital index values. In other words, the higher the level of social capital in a state, the greater the decline in its volunteer rate. The correlation portrayed in Figure 6 is not, however, as strong as the one in Figure 5. The volunteer rate in North Dakota, Massachusetts, Florida and Mississippi declined about as much as the national trend would have predicted, but there are many exceptions to the general trend. In high social capital states, including Wyoming and Nebraska, the volunteer rate dropped even more than the national trend would have predicted.

Meanwhile, Virginia and Nevada, which have below-average values on the social capital index, were the only states where the volunteer rate appeared to increase¹⁸ – which would not have been predicted by the relationship in Figure 6. Figures 5 and 6 suggest that differences in social capital are part of the story behind why some states experienced significant declines in their volunteer rates between 2004-2006 and 2013-2015, while other state volunteer rates did not change significantly. Notably, Figure 5 shows that the decreases in volunteering tended to be larger in states with a higher stock of social capital. This result is surprising since we might predict that areas with more social capital would be more likely to weather a national decline in community engagement. This result is typified by high social capital states that experienced substantial and significant declines in their volunteer rates between 2004-2006 and 2013-2015, such as Wyoming (where the volunteer rate dropped from 37.3 percent to 29.1 percent), Montana (where the rate dropped from 37.7 percent to 31.6 percent), and North Dakota (35.6 percent to 30.7 percent).

Figure 6: Relationship Between Social Capital Index and Change in Volunteer Rate, 2004-2006 to 2013-2015

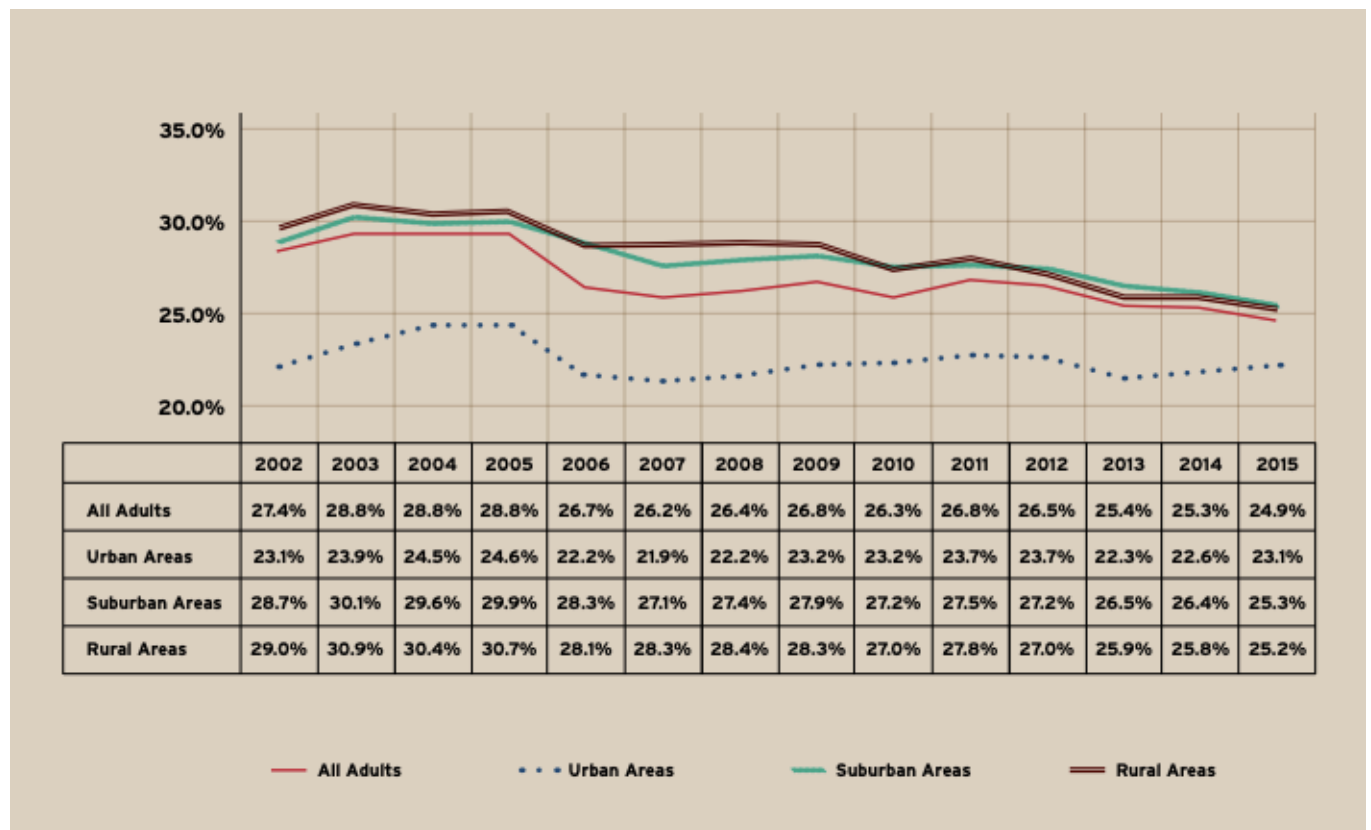


FOOTNOTE: 18For both states, the observed increases were not statistically significant.

These three states also have another common feature: large numbers of their residents live in rural areas (as opposed to suburbs or major cities). In fact, across all states, three variables are closely related: (1) declines in the volunteer rate are significantly associated with (2) the size of the rural population and with (3) the social capital index scores. All three relationships are statistically significant: states with larger rural populations tend to have higher scores on the social capital index ($r = 0.395$); states with higher social capital tend to experience larger declines (or smaller increases) in their volunteer rate ($r = -0.338$); and states with larger rural populations also tend to have larger declines in their volunteer rates ($r = -0.478$). Together, these results provide part of the explanation for the decline in the United States annual volunteer rate: the parts of the country with the largest rural populations and the most social capital were likely to experience the steepest declines in the adult volunteer rate.

The trend lines in Figure 7 illustrate the connection between the rural and national volunteer rates. In recent years, the volunteer rate among residents of rural areas has declined even more than the volunteer rate for all adults. In the mid-2000s, rural residents volunteered at slightly higher rates than suburban residents, and the volunteer rate for both populations was much higher than the volunteer rate for residents of urban areas.¹⁹ By 2015, the gap between the suburban and rural volunteer rates had disappeared. Even more strikingly, the gap between the urban volunteer rate and the rural/suburban rates had begun to close quickly.

Figure 7: Volunteering with an Organization, 2002-2015:
Urban-Suburban-Rural Breakdowns



FOOTNOTE: 19In the public-use version of the CPS dataset, the exact location of the household is suppressed to protect the privacy of the residents. Most households, however, can be classified as being located in the “principal city” of a designated metropolitan area, in the “balance” of the metropolitan area (i.e., not in a principal city), or in a nonmetropolitan part of the state. We label households in principal cities as “urban,” households in the balance of the metropolitan area as “suburban,” and households in nonmetropolitan areas as “rural.” About 15 percent of CPS residents live in households that cannot be classified as urban, suburban, or rural with the public-use datasets. Please see the Appendix for details about the boundaries of the metropolitan areas used in this analysis.

Explaining Changes in Volunteering Rates: Metropolitan Areas, 2004-2006 vs. 2013-2015

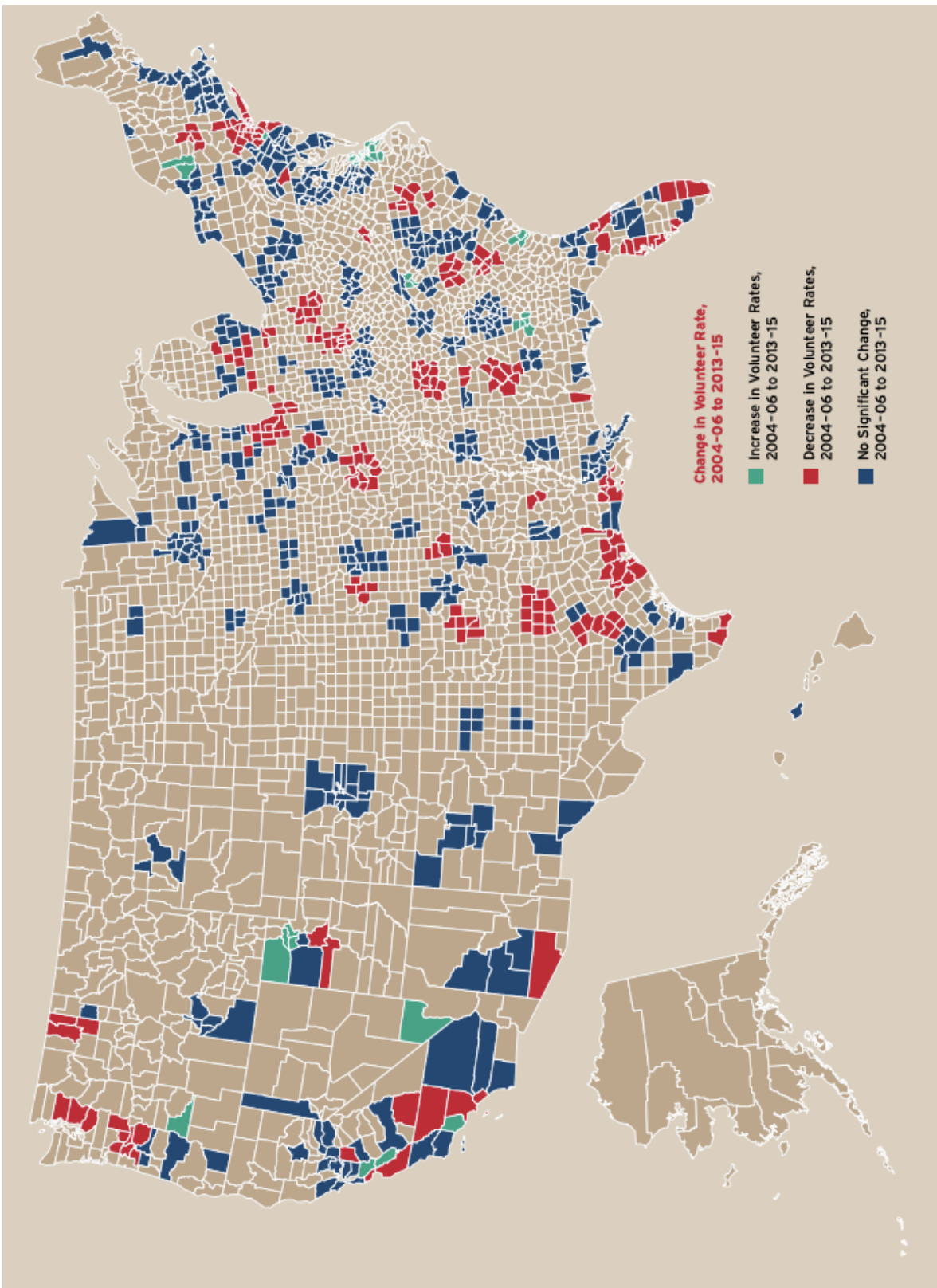
Although the rural volunteer rate has declined significantly in recent years, it can only serve as a partial explanation for the national decline given the size of rural America (only about 13 percent

of American adults lived in rural areas in 2015). Most of the adult population is located in metropolitan areas, with the majority of metro-area residents living in suburban areas. Between 2004 and 2015, the suburbs also experienced a large drop in volunteering: the 2015 rate (25.3 percent) was almost five percentage points less than the 2003 peak of 30.1 percent.

To further develop our understanding of the trends in the national volunteer rate, we exploit the size and diversity of the CPS sample. Each year, the CPS collects household data from more than 250 of the nation's metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs), the population centers where the nation's largest cities and their suburban surroundings are located. For 215 MSAs, the CPS sample includes 100 or more respondents for both 2004-2006 and 2013-2015.

Between 2004-2006 and 2013-2015, the volunteer rate declined by a statistically significant amount in 57 of the 215 metropolitan areas (see Figure 8) while increasing significantly in just 11 metro areas – including Las Vegas, San Jose and Virginia Beach, which are all among the 40 largest metropolitan areas in the country. Meanwhile, the volunteering rate did not change by a significant amount in the remaining 147 metro area. The patterns of change among MSAs mirrored the results we saw at the state level. Between 2004-2006 and 2007-2009, the volunteer rate increased by a statistically significant amount in only three MSAs, while declining significantly in 38 MSAs. Between 2007-2009 and 2010-2012, significant declines and significant increases were about equally common in MSAs (16 increases, 19 declines) – but between 2010-2012 and 2013-2015, significant declines were again much more common than significant increases (30 declines, 5 increases).

Figure 8: Changes in Volunteer Rates, 2004-2006 vs. 2013-2015, 215
Selected Metropolitan Area



Significant change is certainly less prevalent among the nation’s major metropolitan areas. While 60 percent of states (31 of 51) experienced significant declines between 2004-2006 and 2013-2015, nearly 70 percent (147 of 215) of the MSAs experienced no significant change. However, while no states experienced significant increases in their volunteer rates between 2004-2006 and 2013-2015, 11 metropolitan areas experienced significant increases. These 11 MSAs are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Metropolitan Areas with Significant Increases in Volunteer Rates, 2004-2006 vs. 2013-2015

Census MSA Name	2004-2006	2013-2015
Bend - Redmond, Ore.	22.9%	37.2%
Columbus, Ga. - Ala.	16.2%	28.0%
Johnson City, Tenn.	14.3%	33.1%
Las Vegas - Henderson - Paradise, Nev.	14.4%	18.7%
Ogden-Clearfield, Utah	39.9%	50.0%
Oxnard - Thousand Oaks - Ventura, Calif.	27.7%	34.2%
San Jose - Sunnyvale - Santa Clara, Calif.	27.4%	32.6%
Savannah, Ga.	20.3%	45.0%
Trenton, N.J.	17.8%	29.6%
Utica-Rome, N.Y.	23.0%	34.1%
Virginia Beach - Norfolk - Newport News, Va.- N.C.	19.3%	29.4%

As a group, these 11 MSAs have several distinguishing characteristics. Four of the 11 (Johnson City, Savannah, Trenton, and Virginia Beach) experienced increases in volunteering between 2010-2012 and 2013-2015; only one other metropolitan area (Richmond, Va.) experienced a significant increase over this period. Several of these MSAs had 2004- 2006 volunteer rates that were well below the national average: Las Vegas, Trenton, Virginia Beach, Johnson City, and Columbus, Ga. all had extremely low volunteer rates (below 20 percent) while the volunteer rate in Savannah was 20.3 percent. The exception is Ogden, Utah, whose 2004-2006 volunteer rate ranked twentieth among our 215 MSAs, but rose to being ranked first among our 215 MSAs from 2013-2015.

An examination of MSAs helps explain the state-level trends outlined earlier. For instance, in Utah, which is perennially the state with the highest volunteer rate, the state's volunteer rate remained unchanged between 2004-2006 and 2013-2015. However, three of the states' metropolitan areas moved in very different directions during this time: Ogden's volunteer rate increased significantly, the rate in Provo decreased significantly, and Salt Lake City's rate remained unchanged.

In several other states, the volunteer rate in one or more of the state's MSAs ran counter to the statewide trend:

- In Georgia, the volunteer rate increased significantly in Savannah and Columbus while declining significantly in Augusta. Meanwhile, in Atlanta and several other large MSAs, there was no significant change, and no change in the statewide rate.
- In contrast, Michigan's decline in volunteering was driven by declines, many of them large, in the state's smaller MSAs (Lansing, Kalamazoo, Ann Arbor, Saginaw) – even though there was little change in the state's two largest metro areas (Detroit and Grand Rapids).
- While California's overall volunteer rate declined, its diverse metro areas went in a variety of directions: Santa Clara (San Jose) and San Benito counties experienced increases in the volunteer rate, while the rates in neighboring Santa Cruz (Santa Cruz Watsonville), Monterey (Salinas) and San Joaquin (Stockton-Lodi) counties decreased. The volunteer rate also declined in Los Angeles and Orange counties, increased in neighboring Ventura County, but declined in Kern (Bakersfield) and Tulare (Visalia) counties north of the Los Angeles metro area.

To further develop an explanation of why the volunteer rate decreased in some metro area but not others, we borrow a methodology used in a previously published Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) report²⁰ that examined the correlation between volunteer rates and four categories of demographic and socioeconomic factors:

1. Residents' attachment to their community, measured by homeownership rates, multi-unit housing rates, and population density
2. Commuting times, which reflect traffic-related time delays associated with routine travel, as well as time and energy for community engagement
3. Socioeconomic characteristics including percentage of residents who have high school educations or better, percent with college degrees, percent living in poverty, and percent unemployed
4. A community's capacity to provide civic opportunities, measured by the number of large and small nonprofit organizations per 1,000 residents

FOOTNOTE: 20 Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Research and Policy Development. Volunteering in America: 2007 City Trends and Rankings,

Washington, DC 20525. Available at

https://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/VIA_CITIES/VIA_cities_fullreport.pdf.

Table 2 contains the complete list of variables used in this analysis, and the expected correlation (based on previous research) between each variable and the likelihood of a decrease in volunteering.

These variables have been used to describe or explain the level of social capital within a community. For instance, in communities where more people own the homes they live in, residents may feel more invested and connected to their communities and to each other, which increases the frequency, quality, and positive impacts of interactions among neighbors.

In contrast, areas with a high rate of multi-unit housing and greater population density may indicate that individuals are less connected to their community. In such places, residents may find it harder to form strong ties with others in their community because staying anonymous is so easy, and because the transient population is so large.²¹ By exploring the relationship between these variables and changes in volunteering, we can learn more about whether, and under what circumstances, changes in volunteering can be associated with community characteristics.

Table 2: Metropolitan Areas with Significant Increases in Volunteer Rates, 2004-2006 vs. 2013-2015

Variable	Description	Declines in Volunteer Rates Are Associated with:
Homeownership	Percent of housing units that are inhabited by the homeowner	Lower homeownership rates
Multi-Unit Housing	Percent of housing structures that contain more than one housing unit	Higher % of homes in multi-unit structures
Commuting Time	Mean travel time to work (in minutes) of workers aged 16 years and over who did not work at home	Higher average commuting times
Percent with High School Education	Percent of adults aged 25 and over who have a high school diploma or the equivalent	Lower % of residents with HS degrees
Percent with College Education	Percent of adults aged 25 and over who have a college degree (B.A. or B.S.)	Lower % of residents with college degrees
Unemployment Rate	Based on annual average of seasonally adjusted monthly county-level unemployment rates	Higher unemployment rates
Poverty Rate	Percent of MSA residents with annual income at or below the poverty level	Higher poverty rates
Population Density	Estimated MSA population divided by estimated size of MSA land mass	More densely populated areas
Large Nonprofits per 1000 Residents	Number of 501(c) tax-exempt organizations with more than \$50,000 in gross receipts, divided by MSA population and multiplied by 1000	Fewer large nonprofits per 1000 residents
Small Nonprofits per 1000 Residents	Number of 501(c) tax-exempt organizations with \$50,000 or less in gross receipts, divided by MSA population and multiplied by 1000	Fewer small nonprofits per 1000 residents
Median Income	Median household income (adjusted for inflation)	Lower median income

FOOTNOTE: 21 Sampson, Robert J., Jeffrey D. Morenoff, and Felton Earls (1999), “Building Social Capital: Spatial Dynamics of Collective Efficacy for Children,” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 64, No. 5.

Since we are interested in the effects of these variables on the change in volunteer rates, we use data collected in the middle year (2005) of the 2004- 2006 interval. We expect these variables to have the same impact on changes in the volunteer rate as they have on the current volunteer rate: when a variable is expected to be positively associated with higher volunteer rates, it should be negatively associated with significant declines in the volunteer rate. In other words, we would expect areas with higher homeownership rates to be less likely to experience declines in volunteer rates.

Because the volunteer rate increased by a significant amount in only 11 of the 215 metropolitan areas, the variables in Table 2 do not add much to our understanding of why volunteering rates increased between 2004-2006 and 2013-2015.²² We did discover important differences between the metropolitan areas that experienced significant declines in the volunteer rate between 2004-2006 and 2013-2015, and those area that did not. Large MSAs – in particular, MSAs with high population density – were more likely to have declines in volunteering. Declines in volunteering were also more likely to occur in metro areas with high poverty and unemployment rates, and less likely to occur in areas where large and small nonprofit organizations were more prevalent. In sum, declines were more likely to occur in metropolitan areas with high population density, in areas with higher levels of socioeconomic distress, and in areas where the nonprofit sector is less well-developed.

These results support the conclusions from previous research about why volunteer rates are higher in some metro areas than in others.²³ The MSA analysis adds to our understanding of the decline in the nationwide volunteer rate, since it helps explain why volunteering became less popular in (at least some of) the nation's population centers. Although additional research is needed to further strengthen our understanding, the conclusions of the MSA analysis make intuitive sense: in the recent past, volunteer rates tended to decline in MSAs with fewer places to volunteer (large and small nonprofits) and in places where people may be less likely to know their neighbors, including neighborhoods where unemployment and poverty rates are relatively high.

FOOTNOTE: 22 These 11 MSAs do well in several measures of civic capacity: seven have above-average proportions of residents with college degrees, and six have above-average median incomes (with San Jose #2), both of which are positively associated with higher volunteer rates. However, six of these MSAs have above-average values for average commuting time to work, and higher commuting times tend to be negatively associated with volunteer rates. 23 Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Research and Policy Development. *Volunteering in America: 2007 City Trends and Rankings*, op. cit.

Conclusion

Individuals who volunteer build their community's social capital by working together with their neighbors, finding ways to cooperate and compromise, and becoming more aware and understanding of each of our differences. When Americans engage in their communities through behaviors such as volunteering with organizations, they build ties, relationships, and bonds of trust with others. These activities help us build and strengthen our social networks, which have been described²⁴ as THE glue that provides order and meaning to social life, and as a lubricant that helps us get things done. While volunteering strengthens communities by creating social capital, it also has other important benefits to the individuals who are helped by volunteer work – including the volunteers themselves, who are often happier and healthier than individuals who do not volunteer.

In America, volunteers historically provide more than eight billion hours of service to their communities by working with nonprofit and other community organizations. Although the decline in volunteer rates has not harmed the “bottom line” measure of volunteer productivity, further significant decline in community participation among Americans could not only threaten the capacity of these organizations to provide needed services, but it will also produce detrimental side effects for volunteers, including greater social isolation and poor physical and mental health. Given that recent declines in volunteering have been concentrated in rural and suburban areas (areas historically high in social capital), the nationwide decline in volunteering is certainly related to a profound societal change that struck America in recent years.²⁵

A political scientist recently characterized America as in a period of great “uncivil disagreement,”²⁶ which one could easily suggest is related to the troubling and pervasive findings outlined in this brief. The first step to turning around the decade-plus declines in volunteering and other civic behaviors such as charitable giving is recognizing and understanding their breadth and scope. The next step is to commit resources and time to the challenging work of pioneering initiatives and approaches that will reverse America's loss of its invaluable social capital. We must put more Americans back to work improving their communities in ways that will also improve their own lives and interactions with others.

FOOTNOTE: 24 Powell, W.W. and Smith-Doerr, L. 1994. Networks and economic life, in Smelser, N.,Sweberg, R. (eds), Handbook of Economic Sociology (Princeton University Press: Princeton). 25 In addition, further research that explores possible reasons for the increases in volunteer rates in urban areas – a trend that runs counter to the declines seen in rural and suburban areas – is also warranted. 26 Lilliana Mason. Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.

Appendix

CPS Sample Design, Significance Testing Methodology, and Definition of Volunteering

The Current Population Survey (CPS) is a monthly survey of about 55,000 households that has been conducted for more than 50 years. The CPS is the primary source of information on the labor force characteristics of the U.S. population.²⁷ The Current Population Survey's Supplement on Volunteering (Volunteer Supplement), which was conducted every September between 2002 and 2015 by the U.S. Census Bureau for the Bureau of Labor Statistics with support from the Corporation for National and Community Service, serves as the primary source of data for this report.

The CPS Volunteer Supplement began by asking respondents two primary questions about their activities in the preceding twelve months:

- This month, we are interested in volunteer activities, that is activities for which people are not paid, except perhaps expenses. We only want you to include volunteer activities that (you/ NAME) did through or for an organization, even if (you/he/she) only did them once in a while.
- Since September 1 of last year, (have you/has NAME) done any volunteer activities through or for an organization?
- Sometimes people don't think of activities they do infrequently or activities they do for children's schools or youth organizations as volunteer activities. Since September 1st of last year, (have you/has he/has she) done any of these types of volunteer activities?

The respondent was counted as a volunteer if he or she answered "yes" to either of these two questions. Most of the follow up questions on the Volunteer Supplement were devoted to details about respondents' volunteer service: which organizations they volunteered with (respondents can name up to seven organizations), what type of organizations they served with, how many hours they volunteered at each organization, how they became acquainted with their primary organization (the one where they served the most hours), and what types of activities they performed at their primary organization.

The statistics in this brief are based on data from the CPS Volunteer Supplements conducted annually between 2004 and 2015. In each case, the statistics are calculated using weights that account for the sample design, population characteristics, and nonresponse to the baseline labor force survey and the Volunteer Supplement. Furthermore, because the statistics are based on pooled data over three consecutive years, we use formulas that accounts for the 50 percent overlap between CPS Volunteer Supplement samples to calculate confidence intervals around the volunteer rates and the difference statistics. Details about the procedures we use can be found in

the Census publication “Source and Accuracy of Estimates for Income and Poverty in the United States: 2016 and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2016.”²⁸

For more information about CPS volunteer statistics, please visit the Volunteering and Civic Engagement in America website (<http://www.volunteeringinamerica.gov>), published by the Corporation for National and Community Service. This website contains a wide variety of volunteer statistics measured at the national, regional, state and metropolitan area levels; the Technical Note and Glossary, accessible at <https://www.nationalservice.gov/vcla/technical-note>, contains detailed information about these statistics.

FOOTNOTE: 27 For more information about the CPS, please visit:

<http://www.census.gov/cps/> or <http://www.bls.gov/cps/>. 28 This publication is available at <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/2017/demo/p60-259sa.pdf>.

Appendix

Metropolitan, Urban, Suburban, and Rural Areas

The federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) is responsible for determining and publishing the boundaries of Metropolitan Statistical Areas (metropolitan areas, metro areas or MSAs). In order for an area to be designated an MSA, the area has to have at least one urbanized area of 50,000 or more in population, plus adjacent territory that has a high degree of social and economic integration with the urban core as measured by commuting ties. MSAs, which are composed of counties, carry the name of one or more principal cities, the most heavily urbanized cities in the area. The names of the principal cities are used as designations for the MSA data published in the brief and in the tables in the Appendix.

OMB changes its MSA definitions once every 10 years, to reflect population changes documented by the decennial Census. In the intervening years, OMB will periodically update the MSA descriptions, usually to change the names and/or principal cities. The Current Population Survey uses the final version of the boundaries published by OMB every ten years. Thus, the MSA definitions used in the CPS Volunteering Supplements from 2004 through 2013 can be found in the Appendix to OMB Bulletin #03-04, issued June 30, 2003,²⁹ and the definitions used in the CPS Volunteering Supplements from 2013 to the present can be found in the Appendix to OMB Bulletin #13-01,³⁰ issued February 28, 2013. The 2013-2015 pooled statistics are based on the new, and current, boundary definitions of metropolitan areas. As a rule, the CPS generally does not release information about which counties are included in the sample, so it is not possible to calculate statistics from 2013-2015 based on the 2003-2012 MSA boundary definitions. The 2013 MSA boundary changes resulted in minor differences in population for most metropolitan areas; details about the size of these differences are available from the authors upon request.

For the New England states (Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine), the CPS uses NECTAs (New England City and Town Areas), which are composed of towns and cities, to describe metropolitan areas, rather than MSAs, which are composed of counties. Boundary definitions for NECTAs can be found in the Appendices to OMB Bulletins #03-04 and #13-01. Since the available CPS data does not allow respondents to be identified by county, we cannot calculate MSA-level volunteer statistics for population centers located in New England states. Instead, we use MSA-level measures of the socioeconomic and demographic factors described in Tables 2 and A-1 (These tables can be found by clicking [here](#)) for our analysis.

FOOTNOTE: 29 Available at

<https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/omb/bulletins/b03-04.html>. The appendix to the original OMB Bulletin is no longer available from the website, but the county definition files are available at

<https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/metro-micro/geographies/reference-files/2003/historical-delineationfiles/030606omb-cbsa-csa.xls>. 30 Available at

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/whitehouse.gov/files/omb/bulletins/2013/b13-01.pdf>.