

Institute for  
Volunteering  
Research

# research bulletin

National survey of volunteering and charitable giving

## Regular and occasional volunteers

How and why they help out

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## **This research bulletin is one of a series published by the Institute for Volunteering Research to explore and disseminate aspects of *Helping Out: a national survey of volunteering and charitable giving (2007)*.**

The Helping Out study, carried out in 2006-07, encompassed a broad range of volunteers, from people who shake a collecting tin once a year to those who volunteer on a weekly basis for several causes. Two broad categories are used to describe the frequency with which people volunteer. Regular volunteers are defined as those who volunteer once a month or more and occasional volunteers are those who volunteer less frequently, or as a one-off activity.

Anecdotal evidence suggests the nature of voluntary activity is changing with a decline in regular volunteering in favour of occasional volunteering. This bulletin examines the differences between regular and occasional volunteers. It looks at why, where and how they volunteer, and it suggests how volunteer-involving organisations and other practitioners could use this information to leverage more support from all volunteers.

This bulletin focuses on volunteers' involvement in the main organisation in which they helped out. Overall, 42 per cent of respondents had volunteered occasionally with their main organisation in the previous year while 58 per cent of respondents had volunteered regularly with their main organisation. Many also helped other organisations.

### **Demographic differences**

There is no significant difference between regular and occasional volunteers in terms of gender or ethnicity. However, there are some significant age differences. For example, volunteers aged 25- to 44-years-old are more likely to be occasional than regular volunteers; while volunteers aged 65 and over are more likely to be regular volunteers (24 per cent compared with 14 per cent, occasional volunteers).

### **Motives for volunteering**

Volunteers reported a range of motives for starting to volunteer and many mentioned several (table 1). Looking at these motives in rank order, both regular and occasional volunteers primarily wanted to help people, believed the cause was worthwhile and had time to spare. The notion of giving something back was the least common reason for starting to volunteer.

However, despite the similarities, the table shows regular volunteers have a broader and more complex set of reasons for volunteering than occasional volunteers. Among occasional volunteers only seven motives for volunteering attracted a 20 per cent or higher response rate, while among regular volunteers eleven different motives attracted this response rate.

**Table 1. Reasons for volunteering**

	All Rank (%)	Occasional Rank (%)	Regular Rank (%)
To improve things, help people	1 (53%)	1 (51%)	1 (55%)
Cause was important to me	2 (41%)	2 (39%)	3 (43%)
Time to spare	2 (41%)	3 (36%)	2 (45%)
To meet people, make friends	3 (30%)	6 (22%)	4 (36%)
Connected to family/friends' interests	4 (29%)	4 (33%)	7 (26%)
A need in the community	4 (29%)	5 (24%)	6 (32%)
Use existing skills	5 (27%)	8 (19%)	5 (33%)
Philosophy for life	6 (23%)	8 (19%)	8 (25%)
Friends/family did it	7 (21%)	7 (20%)	10 (22%)
Learn new skills	8 (19%)	9 (11%)	9 (24%)
Religious belief	9 (17%)	11 (9%)	10 (22%)
No-one else to do it	10 (13%)	10 (10%)	11 (15%)
Help career advancement	11 (7%)	12 (4%)	12 (9%)
Had received voluntary help	12 (4%)	13 (2%)	13 (5%)
Get a recognised qualification	13 (2%)	14 (1%)	14 (3%)
Connected with interests/hobbies	13 (2%)	13 (2%)	15 (2%)
Already involved with organisation	13 (2%)	15 (-)	16 (1%)
Give something back	14 (1%)	14 (1%)	16 (1%)
Other reasons	-- (3%)	-- (3%)	-- (4%)
<i>Base (unweighted)</i>	<i>1349-1350</i>	<i>510-511</i>	<i>839</i>

*Base: All current formal volunteers. Percentages sum to more than 100 as respondents could choose more than one reason. Don't know/refusal responses excluded.*

Regular volunteers were significantly more likely than occasional volunteers to start volunteering because they:

- > had time to spare
- > wanted to meet people and make friends
- > saw a need in the community
- > wanted to use their existing skills
- > felt it related to their philosophy for life
- > wanted to learn new skills
- > saw it as part of their religious belief
- > felt no-one else would do it
- > believed it would help advance their career.

## Volunteering activities

The most common type of volunteering activity was fundraising or handling money (table 2). In rank order, this was followed by running an event, being a committee member, educating others and administration. The least common types of volunteering activity were befriending and campaigning.

The table suggests greater diversity in the activities that regular volunteers undertake. Occasional volunteers primarily help with fundraising and running events, with considerably fewer providing other forms of help. Regular volunteers also rank these activities at the top but a greater proportion of them are involved in other types of volunteering activity.

**Table 2. Types of volunteering activity**

	All Rank (%)	Occasional Rank (%)	Regular Rank (%)
Fundraising	1 (66%)	1 (63%)	1 (68%)
Running events	2 (50%)	2 (39%)	2 (58%)
Committee membership	3 (28%)	4 (11%)	3 (41%)
Educating	4 (25%)	3 (13%)	4 (33%)
Administration	5 (21%)	6 (8%)	5 (30%)
Transport	6 (19%)	4 (11%)	7 (25%)
Representing	6 (19%)	5 (10%)	6 (26%)
Visiting	7 (17%)	8 (5%)	7 (25%)
Advice	8 (16%)	6 (8%)	8 (22%)
Campaigning	9 (15%)	4 (11%)	10 (17%)
Befriending	10 (14%)	7 (6%)	9 (20%)
Other	-- (36%)	-- (32%)	-- (38%)
<i>Base (unweighted)</i>	1350	511	839

*Base: All current formal volunteers. Percentages sum to more than 100 as respondents could choose more than one type of help. Don't know/refusal responses excluded.*

## Routes into volunteering

Word of mouth was by far the most common route individuals took into volunteering. However, a significant number of volunteers got involved because they had previously used the organisation's services and/or seen a leaflet or poster (table 3).

Looking at the figures by rank order, the table suggests that routes into volunteering are similar for both regular and occasional volunteers. However, leaflets or posters have greater prominence for occasional volunteers with more than one in five citing them as their way into volunteering compared with just over one in ten regular volunteers. Occasional volunteers are also more likely to find opportunities through their employer and the national press.

Meanwhile, setting up their own organisation was a more significant way in for regular volunteers, who ranked this fourth, suggesting a notable proportion of regular volunteers develop their own initiatives.

**Table 3. Routes into volunteering**

	All Rank (%)	Occasional Rank (%)	Regular Rank (%)
Word of mouth	1 (66%)	1 (62%)	1 (69%)
Previously used organisation's services	2 (20%)	3 (18%)	2 (21%)
Leaflet or poster	3 (15%)	2 (22%)	3 (11%)
Local event	4 (7%)	5 (8%)	5 (5%)
Employer	4 (7%)	4 (10%)	5 (5%)
Organisation's website	5 (4%)	6 (4%)	5 (5%)
Set up own group	5 (4%)	9 (2%)	4 (6%)
Local newspaper	6 (3%)	7 (3%)	6 (3%)
Visited a volunteer bureau/centre	6 (3%)	9 (2%)	6 (3%)
TV (local or national)	7 (2%)	7 (3%)	8 (1%)
Other involvement with the organisation	7 (2%)	9 (2%)	7 (2%)
National newspaper	8 (1%)	7 (3%)	9 (-)
Local radio	8 (1%)	10 (1%)	8 (1%)
General volunteering website	8 (1%)	11 (-)	8 (1%)
National radio	9 (-)	10 (1%)	10 (0%)
Other	-- (4%)	-- (4%)	-- (4%)
<i>Base (unweighted)</i>	<i>1349</i>	<i>510</i>	<i>839</i>

*Base: All current formal volunteers. Percentages sum to more than 100 as respondents could choose more than one route into volunteering. Don't know/refusal responses excluded.*

## Where volunteers help out

The most common field of interest supported by volunteers was education (table 4). Also well supported were religious organisations, health and disability organisations and sports and exercise groups.

Ranking the types of organisations where regular and occasional volunteers help out reveals broadly similar preferences for each group but there are some interesting variations. For example, 25 per cent of occasional volunteers help out in educational organisations compared with only 15 per cent of regular volunteers. Meanwhile, 13 per cent of regular volunteers help in religious groups compared with only 7 per cent of occasional volunteers.

A higher proportion of regular volunteers are also involved in sports and exercise groups and with children and young people. This implies that regular volunteers help out in a more diverse range of organisations.

**Table 4. Types of organisation helped**

	All Rank (%)	Occasional Rank (%)	Regular Rank (%)
Education	1 (19%)	1 (25%)	2 (15%)
Religion	2 (13%)	4 (7%)	1 (17%)
Health/disability	3 (12%)	2 (16%)	5 (9%)
Sports/exercise	4 (11%)	3 (9%)	3 (13%)
Children/young people	5 (9%)	4 (7%)	4 (10%)
Local community groups	6 (7%)	4 (7%)	6 (7%)
Hobbies/recreation	7 (6%)	6 (4%)	6 (7%)
The elderly	8 (3%)	7 (3%)	8 (3%)
Social welfare	8 (3%)	6 (4%)	8 (3%)
Animal welfare	8 (3%)	5 (5%)	9 (2%)
Arts/museums	8 (3%)	7 (3%)	7 (4%)
Overseas aid	9 (2%)	7 (3%)	9 (2%)
Politics	9 (2%)	8 (2%)	9 (2%)
Conservation	9 (2%)	8 (2%)	9 (2%)
Safety/first aid	10 (1%)	8 (2%)	11 (-)
Justice/human rights	10 (1%)	9 (1%)	9 (2%)
Trade union activity	10 (1%)	8 (2%)	10 (1%)
Other	-- (1%)	-- (-)	-- (2%)
<i>Base (unweighted)</i>	1350	511	839

*Base: All current formal volunteers. Don't know/refusal responses excluded.*

## Profiling regular and occasional volunteers

A profile emerges of regular and occasional volunteers:

- > Regular volunteers tend to have a broader range of motives for volunteering. There is also greater diversity in the type of help they give and the organisations they help. Regular volunteers are more likely to start their own groups.
- > Occasional volunteers cite fewer reasons for starting to volunteer. The majority are involved in fundraising and events with few giving other types of help. Occasional volunteers are more likely than regular volunteers to access volunteering via media sources and the workplace. They help with a narrower group of organisations and a large proportion help organisations associated with education and health and disability.

## Implications for practice

The motives that lie behind volunteering differ considerably between regular and occasional volunteers and this has a knock-on effect on the type of help they give and the organisations for which they volunteer.

The findings suggest that if occasional volunteers are to be used more effectively, volunteer-involving organisations should concentrate more on using media – leaflets, posters, newspapers and television – to promote different volunteering activities and organisations. By doing so, they are more likely to reach a substantial proportion of people who consider themselves to be occasional volunteers.

## Implications for future research

It would be useful to carry out a trait analysis of occasional and regular volunteers as part of a developing research agenda. This analysis could be used to enable volunteer-involving organisations to match occasional volunteers with suitable volunteering activities with a view to retaining their services or encouraging them to help out more often.

Another focus for future research would be to examine whether or not occasional volunteers become regular volunteers over time and, if so, how this is achieved and how it can be nurtured in individuals to increase social capital and community cohesion.

## The Helping Out study

The Helping Out study was carried out by NatGen and the Institute for Volunteering Research, on behalf of the Office of the Third Sector within the Cabinet Office. It was designed as a follow-up study to the 2005 Citizenship Survey, to represent the general (adult) population in England. Face-to-face interviews were carried out in October 2006–February 2007. In total, 2,156 respondents were interviewed for the main sample (a response rate of 62 per cent), and 549 for a separate minority ethnic boost sample (a response rate of 51 per cent).

This research bulletin presents additional findings on formal volunteering. The main findings can be found in Low, N., Butt, S., Ellis Paine, A. and Davis Smith, J. (2007) *Helping Out: a national survey of volunteering and charitable giving* London: The Cabinet Office.

Full copies of the study report are available on-line (pdf format) at:  
[http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third\\_sector/Research\\_and\\_statistics/third\\_sector\\_research.aspx](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third_sector/Research_and_statistics/third_sector_research.aspx)

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