

## **Measuring Volunteering: A Behavioral Approach**

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## ABSTRACT

*This article presents the results of studying two different forms of probing about volunteering. One is the standard perceptual approach used by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) in which respondents are asked if they volunteer. The other is an experimental approach that uses behavioral prompts in which respondents are asked if they did certain things or performed certain behaviors. These two sets of questions were asked of the same respondents in the same survey, using the same data collection organization, the US Bureau of the Census that conducts the annual BLS survey of volunteering, thus eliminating many of the common sources of measurement error. The results show that behavioral prompts are more accurate than the perceptual prompts in identifying who is and isn't a volunteer. Behavioral prompts result in higher estimates of volunteer engagement (more are classified as volunteers) and higher levels of commitment (more volunteer hours are captured).*

*Keywords: volunteering; measurement; methodology*

What does it mean to ask someone if he or she volunteers? It means that we have an answer totally dependent on how individuals define volunteering, without any consistency between individuals. The research, reported herein, shows that there are a significant number of people who engage in what we consider volunteering (for example, coaching) who answer no to the standard volunteering question, "Do you volunteer?" As such, we underestimate the volunteering rate when we ask the volunteering question in such a way that we depend on individual definitions of volunteering. The challenge is to measure a concept, volunteering, in a way that carries with it a clear, reasonable, and consistent definition. The only way to meet this challenge is to probe the behaviors that we, as experts in volunteering, agree are the things that volunteers do. This research investigated if this methodology was a viable alternative to the standard perceptual methodology used since the 1980s.

### **BACKGROUND**

The history of this proposal goes back to when Independent Sector (IS) conducted its first few studies of giving and volunteering in the late 1980s. (The author was on the IS team conducting the surveys, and hence has background knowledge of the IS methodologies.) We used an in-house interview methodology. The interviewer literally knocked on the door and followed rules about which household member to interview in such a way as to achieve a male-female balanced sample. What was key about this methodology is that the respondent was handed a sheet of paper that listed on it approximately 16 different specific behaviors that we, as the researchers, believed constitute volunteering. The respondent was able to scan the list of volunteer activities and identify which, if any, they had done. (See Appendix A for a copy of the response card.)

The in-house methodology, however, became too expensive and we turned to a telephone interview based methodology. It was impossible to continue using the 'scan the card' procedure, and people were instead asked if they volunteered.

This is when the change from the behavioral to the perceptual took place. We stopped asking people if they had done something specific and started asking them if they thought they had done something undefined. This new methodology, asking people if they volunteered, was quickly adopted by others in the field as the standard way to probe volunteering, including the volunteering supplement to the Current Population Survey (CPS) conducted annually by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). (For a comprehensive list of volunteering studies, see the Independent Sector web site at [www.IndependentSector.org](http://www.IndependentSector.org).)

This simple solution was adopted by BLS when it started collecting data on volunteering in 2004, asking respondents if they volunteered. But this simple solution has a major problem at its core: what does any one respondent mean when saying yes or no to that simple volunteering question? Asking respondents about volunteering might seem straightforward to those of us in the field, but the term has no intrinsic meaning. As an example, what if you were asked if you are politically engaged? What does it mean to be politically engaged? Is your definition of political engagement the same one the researchers have in mind when they ask the question? Did you vote? Did you have a bumper sticker on your car? Did you hang a sign in your window? Did you wear a button? Did you contribute to a candidate? Can researchers draw any inference about political engagement when they really have no idea what you included in giving your answer? Cannot the same be true for volunteering? Can researchers draw any conclusions about volunteering when they really have no idea if your personal definition of volunteering fits their research-based definition? The challenge, as Michael Hall of Imagine Canada says, is to ask questions that are "actually comprehended by respondents" (Hall, 2001 p517). To that I add, the challenge is to ask questions that are actually understood by researchers. A perceptual question "Did you volunteer?" is neither easily comprehended by the respondent nor easily understood by the researcher.

Michael O'Neill of the University of San Francisco notes that survey questions "flexibly deal with respondents" reactions to, ambiguity about, and even misunderstanding of particular words and phrases" (O'Neill, 2001, p 510). Therefore, it is important that steps be taken to remove ambiguity from volunteering surveys. Since volunteering researchers are more likely to have a clear understanding of what is meant by the term volunteering – that people do certain things, perform certain behaviors, act in certain ways – we should strive to reduce respondents' misunderstandings by asking about those things that we believe comprise volunteering. We need to ask questions that are both comprehended and readily interpreted. This is not to imply that there already exists an agreed-upon comprehensive list of volunteering behaviors, but it does imply that work should begin to create one, which is one of the recommendations of the work herein reported.

Patrick Rooney and his colleagues at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis have studied the important role and influence of memory prompts in gathering data about giving and volunteering. Rooney reports, "longer, more detailed prompts led respondents to recall giving and volunteering at higher incident rates...and at higher levels compared to methodologies with fewer prompts" (Rooney, 2004, p 628). Here it is important to understand the skip logic that is required in most telephone surveys, including the IS and BLS surveys. Many times there is a response to a question that branches to different places in the overall survey. If you say you volunteer, you are passed into the detail volunteering questions; if you say you do not volunteer, you skip those questions and go to another part of the survey. Therefore, many of the memory prompts that Rooney finds useful were never asked in the IS survey and are not asked in the BLS survey of people who said they were not volunteers to the basic perceptual "Do you volunteer?" question. That is, people were screened out of the very questions that would have been useful in determining if they were, in fact, volunteers.

When BLS started its volunteering supplement to the Current Population Survey, they considered, but rejected, asking a set of behavioral questions, with more and better prompts, in addition to the standard perceptual question. They did, however, agree to add one follow-on question (memory prompt) to the standard question. The two questions they use are:

1. Since January 1, 200X, have you done any volunteer activities through or for an organization?

- (1) Yes
- (2) No

2. Sometimes people don't think of activities they do infrequently or activities they do for schools or youth organizations as volunteer activities. Since January 1, 2004, have you done any of these types of volunteer activities?

- (1) Yes
- (2) No

The first question is the standard question, with all the problems that have been discussed in this paper. The second is a memory-prompt question that was asked only of those who said 'no' to the first question. Analysis of the current data showed that about 8% of those who said 'no' to the first answered 'yes' to the second. As Rooney suggested, the additional prompt helped people recall activities that they had done. There was, measurably, a non-trivial percentage of people who did things they did not, at first read, include in their definition of volunteering. But even so, this one extra prompt was neither "long and detailed," nor was it behavioral. This result, however, supports the core claim of this paper, that the standard way of asking the volunteering question is inadequate.

Returning to the work of Michael Hall, he realized that a more useful approach to studying volunteering involved "asking people about a variety of specific behaviors rather than relying on a general question that is prone to subjective

interpretation" (Hall, 2001, p 518). Asking respondents if they have done specific things, such as coaching or tutoring, is a better way to obtain estimates of volunteering. In the Canadian National Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participation, Hall asks 15 questions about specific behaviors that respondents may or may not have done (Hall, 2001, p522):

1. In the past 12 months, did you do any canvassing, campaigning, or fundraising as an unpaid volunteer?
2. In the past 12 months, were you an unpaid member of a board or committee?
3. In the past 12 months, did you provide information or help to educate, influence public opinion or lobby others on behalf of an organization?
4. In the past 12 months, did you help to organize or supervise activities or events for an organization?
5. In the past 12 months, did you do any consulting, executive, office, or administrative work as a volunteer?
6. In the past 12 months, did you teach or coach for an organization as an unpaid volunteer?
7. In the past 12 months, did you provide care or support as a volunteer through an organization, including counseling and friendly visiting?
8. In the past 12 months, did you provide any health care (not already mentioned) as a volunteer through an organization such as a hospital or a senior citizens home?
9. In the past 12 months, did you provide assistance to anyone as a member of a self-help mutual aid group such as a single parents group, a bereaved parents group or AA [Alcoholics Anonymous]?
10. In the past 12 months, did you collect, serve, or deliver food or other goods as a volunteer through an organization?
11. In the past 12 months, did you help as a volunteer to maintain, repair or build facilities for

an organization?

12. In the past 12 months, did you do volunteer driving on behalf of an organization?
13. In the past 12 months, did you help with first-aid, fire-fighting or search and rescue, as a volunteer for an organization?
14. In the past 12 months, did you engage in any activities aimed at protecting the environment or wildlife as a volunteer through an organization?
15. In the past 12 months, did you volunteer any time to a group or organization in a way you have not mentioned yet? Please include help given to schools, religious organizations, community associations, etc.

Notice that these questions focus on behaviors, not perceptions, allowing Hall and his colleagues to classify a person as being a volunteer based on researchers', not the respondents', definition of what it means to be a volunteer. Hall states that these are examples of "using questions that can be clearly and commonly understood by respondents, ensuring that respondents are able to answer the questions put to them..." (Hall, 2001, p525).

Both Hall and Rooney are correct, that more and better behavioral questions would be a better way to study volunteering. The opportunity to test this idea presented itself with the Survey of Youth Volunteering and Civic Engagement sponsored by the Corporation for National and Community Service (the Corporation) and Independent Sector. This survey presented the opportunity to study to ask a series of experimental behavioral questions about volunteering. These questions were patterned after the Independent Sector in-house handout, but were not meant to be exhaustive. These experimental questions tested the value of asking behavioral questions about volunteering in the same survey in which the standard CPS perceptual questions were asked. The findings are the topic of this paper.

## METHODS AND FINDINGS

In spring of 2005, the US Bureau of the Census

(Census) was commissioned by the Corporation to collect data from teenagers on their volunteering and civic engagement. Using a retired CPS rotation, Census drew a sample of US households that likely contained at least one teenager of the right age, from 12 – 18 inclusive. The initial survey instrument based on prior IS surveys, and the Corporation staff then added additional questions on civic-learning and other topics of particular interest to them. The final draft was submitted to both the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and Census for review, comment, and approval. (The entire survey is beyond the scope of this paper, but is available from the author.)

Because teenagers under the age of consent were being interviewed, OMB required that parental approval for the interview process. This ended up being a major source of unknown and unknowable measurement error in that an unusually high percentage (according to the Census standards) of parents refused to grant permission. Analyses by Census, as yet unreleased, indicates that there were no identifiable differences between participants and non-participants. However, information about non-respondents in terms of religiosity, family engagement, youth experiences, attitudes, and other factors that influence volunteering, it is not possible to say that non-respondents and respondents are the same in all ways. Again from unpublished Census analyses, once teenagers were cleared by their parents to participate, there were high cooperation and completion rates. The resulting sample of 3,178 interviews was weighted by Census to reflect the population of non-institutionalized 12- to 18-year-olds. The Corporation will release the analysis of non-respondents and the weighting methodologies from Census when the full report is released in late 2005.

Of pertinence to this report are the two sets of questions that pertain to defining who is a

volunteer. One set was taken verbatim from the CPS adult survey, as printed above. These two questions, called CPS questions, reflect the current and only U.S. national standard for probing about volunteering behavior. As with the adult survey, those who answered no to the first CPS question were asked the second question. The second set, called behavioral questions, was built following the suggestions of Hall and Rooney, and were based on the IS hand-out questions that had been used in the past. These questions, again, were not meant to be exhaustive, but were used to test the theory that behavioral questions had value when compared to the CPS questions with the same respondents at the same point in time.

Before moving to the behavioral questions, an analysis of the CPS questions again proves out Rooney’s finding, that better prompts get more accurate results. From the first CPS question, 47% answered yes. Of those answering no, an additional 8% answered yes to the second CPS question, yielding an overall volunteering rate of 55%. Table 1 shows these results. (Decimals are excluded to avoid giving an unreasonable sense of precision.) Turning now to the experimental questions, there were four new questions asked of all survey

*Table 1: Additional Benefit to Asking the Additional Prompt in CPS Questions*

CPS Question	Percent Responding Yes
1. Since January 1, 2004, have you done any volunteer activities through or for an organization?	47%
2. Sometimes people don't think of activities they do infrequently or activities they do for schools or youth organizations as volunteer activities. Since January 1, 2004, have you done any of these types of volunteer activities?	8%
Overall Volunteering Rate	55%

participants. As can be seen, each question is an attempt to do three things: Focus on a service area (the first is religion) as was done in the IS survey; include memory prompts; and, focus on behaviors.

1. Over the last year, have you done any volunteer work for a religious organization, such as aiding the clergy, participating in the choir, teaching Sunday

school, or other general support work?

(1) Yes

(2) No

2. Over the last year, have you served or assisted as a mentor, tutor, coach, counselor, or some other activity that benefited youth?

(1) Yes

(2) No

3. Over the last year, have you done any volunteer work that helped people in places like hospitals, nursing homes, crisis centers, shelters, food or blood banks, or other such human service organizations?

(1) Yes

(2) No

4. Over the last year, have you done any community improvement work, such as volunteering at a museum or theater, supporting an environmental, animal welfare, or public safety organization, or serving at another organization that provides for community needs?

(1) Yes

(2) No

A volunteer was then defined as anyone who answered yes to any of these four questions, resulting in an estimated volunteering rate of about 61%, or about 6% higher than using only the CPS perceptual questions. Table 2 (below) shows how these questions were answered. Note that these are unduplicated counts; later responses are only counted if the respondent answered no to the previous question(s). Therefore, these can be considered the additional 'pull' each question gives when taking the prior answers into consideration.

Remember that respondents could have answered yes to any of the four questions, so the table shows only the additional percentage people who answered yes to each additional question. That is,

Table 2: Responses to the Behavioral Questions

Behavioral Question	Percent Responding Yes
1. Over the last year, have you done any volunteer work for a religious organization, such as aiding the clergy, participating in the choir, teaching Sunday school, or other general support work?	37%
2. Over the last year, have you served or assisted as a mentor, tutor, coach, counselor, or some other activity that benefited youth?	13%
3. Over the last year, have you done any volunteer work that helped people in places like hospitals, nursing homes, crisis centers, shelters, food or blood banks, or other such human service organizations?	8%
4. Over the last year, have you done any community improvement work, such as volunteering at a museum or theater, supporting an environmental, animal welfare, or public safety organization, or serving at another organization that provides for community needs?	3%
Overall Volunteering Rate	61%

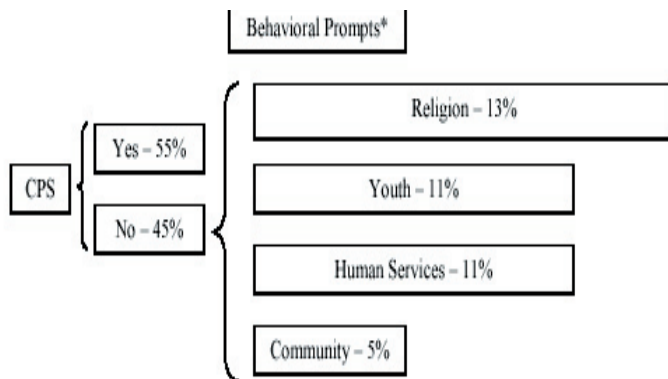
the last question picked up an additional 3 percent of those who had said no to the previous three questions. This means, as Hall predicts, that there is value in asking a series of behavioral questions and that as Rooney predicts that more and better memory prompts get better results.

Also note that as experimental questions, these behavioral questions were not meant to be an exhaustive, all-inclusive list of volunteering behaviors. Hall, as previously noted, uses 15 questions in his survey. And, there are obvious problems with the four questions. For example, there is no probe that would capture those who volunteer in adult literacy, disaster response, serving on a board, working on a political campaign, or international affairs to name a few. As experimental questions, they worked well. But this preliminary set of questions is not ready to be widely adopted.

That concern aside, it is interesting to note that there are relatively high percentages of teenagers who answered no to both CPS questions yet who answered yes to at least one of the behavioral questions (Table 3). In almost all of these cases, respondents were able to report where they

volunteered (by name), how often, and how much time they gave. This is strong evidence that they were not just giving the socially acceptable answer, but rather were in fact doing the volunteering in spite of their no to the CPS questions. This is just as predicted: there are people who engage in volunteering behaviors who do not consider those behaviors when responding to the CPS perceptual volunteering prompts.

Table 3: Responses to Behavioral Prompts for those who are not CPS Classified Volunteers



\*Respondents could have answered "Yes" to more than one prompt

It should not be surprising that, likewise, there are people who said yes to the CPS questions and no to all the behavioral questions. This is because the behavioral questions, as mentioned above, are not comprehensive or exhaustive. That is, there are volunteering behaviors that are not covered by the experimental behavioral questions, so we see people whose volunteering encompasses things other than those covered by those questions.

Is there an identifiable bias in the CPS questions that leads to an underestimate of volunteering for particular sub-groups of people? Is there, as O'Neill suggests, a difficulty with the term 'volunteer' that causes one group

to under-report their volunteering? This is not the case: the CPS methodology misses people of all types. The CPS methodology consistently under-counts volunteers by race, gender, and grade point average. In Table 4 below, it is shown that for every sub-group, there is a significant percentage of respondents who said no to the CPS questions but yes to one or more of the behavioral questions. The pure CPS volunteering rate, defined as only those who would be classified as volunteers using the CPS methodology (ignoring the behavioral prompts), is always lower than the pure behavioral volunteering rate (which, in turn, ignores the CPS prompts). This is in spite of the already stated fact that the behavioral questions were not comprehensive. Even non-exhaustive behavioral prompts capture more information than do the CPS perceptual prompts. Because the behavioral prompts were not exhaustive, the final column shows the best estimate of teenage volunteering, the combined volunteering rate. This classifies as a volunteer anyone who answered 'yes' to any of the six questions. This is the best estimate because there are things that volunteers do (such as adult literacy) that were not captured by the behavioral prompts yet were included in respondents' perceptual framework.

Perhaps of most interest is that when we combine the CPS and behavioral prompts to build one estimate of volunteering, we find that 66% of

Table 4: Relative Power of Behavioral Prompts

		Percent of CPS 'No' who said 'Yes' to Behavioral Prompts	Pure CPS Volunteering Rate	Pure Behavioral Volunteering Rate	Combined Volunteering Rate
All		26%	55%	61%	66%
Race	White	29%	59%	65%	71%
	Black	19%	47%	53%	58%
	Hispanic	24%	44%	49%	57%
Gender	Male	24%	51%	56%	63%
	Female	28%	60%	66%	71%
Grade Point Average	A Students	35%	71%	75%	81%
	B Students	27%	53%	60%	66%
	C Students	19%	39%	46%	51%



teenagers volunteer. That these are real volunteers is supported by nearly all respondents' ability to name the place they volunteered, tell how often they volunteered, and how much time they gave, regardless of which set of questions resulted in them being classified as volunteers.

Examining the average number of annual hours volunteers give shows further evidence of the value added by the behavioral questions. Annual hours were computed by adding together the hours given to up to two organizations for which data were collected. For those who reported volunteering to more than two organizations, the data were not collected, and the annual hours figure is an underestimate. There was a small but measurable difference in the annual hours for those who answered 'yes' to the CPS questions (mean=89 hours) and those who answered 'yes' to both sets of questions (mean=94 hours).

In summary, behavioral prompts, in spite of their not being comprehensive and exhaustive, added important new information upon which to base estimates of volunteering commitment and intensity. Adding behavioral prompts resulted in a higher percentage volunteering (66% to 55%) and in a higher estimate of average annual hours (94 to 89). These two factors combine to increase the estimated number of total annual hours given by teenagers by about 20%, 15 million for the CPS methodology and 18 million for the combined methodology (CPS and behavioral). It is my belief that if we had more and better prompts (as Rooney suggests), focused on behaviors (as Hall suggests), with area-specific memory prompts (returning to the original IS methodology) we would see even higher participation rates, higher average annual hours, and find more total hours being given than we find from perceptual methodology surveys such as CPS.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

This research supports the earlier work of Hall and Rooney in that more and better prompts, focused on behaviors rather than perceptions, can communicate better to respondents, are more

easily interpreted by researchers, and lead to more accurate data. It is my recommendation that the behavioral methodology explored here be further validated. Following that, it is my recommendation that we collaborate to form a standard set of questions or prompts that can be used by researchers to create a common measure of volunteering. This study shows that in a side-by-side test, the behavioral prompts captured volunteers that were missed by the CPS methodology. This suggests that a move toward the behavioral will do a better job at defining the scope and commitment to volunteering. The Points of Light Foundation is willing to host a committee to achieve the goals listed below.

1. My first goal is to influence how BLS collects volunteering data. These data are being used to support public policy and hence should be as accurate as possible. I know from personal experience that BLS prefers to count things, not concepts. When they ask about employment, they ask if you worked for pay, a clear and unambiguous question. I believe they would be receptive to counting behaviors if they were presented with a valid and reliable way to do so. My colleagues at BLS are survey experts who lack content knowledge on volunteering. I would like to see us as a community come together to create and validate a behavioral methodology for measuring volunteering, one that could be used by CPS and others in the field.
2. My second goal, which is required for the first to succeed, is for collaboration among researchers at various levels and across national boundaries to create a common methodology for studying volunteering. Some unanswered questions will need to be tackled if we are to come to a common methodology for studying volunteering. Should we include informal volunteering or neighboring, such as the volunteering that occurs outside of organizations? Should we include court-ordered community service?

Should we include service required by a school or agency?

Should we make an attempt to value different kinds of volunteering, such as a CPS doing accounting versus that same person doing, say, gardening? Should we make an attempt to differentiate between a person giving one hour per week mentoring at-risk youth and that same person giving seven hours per week coaching his/her child's baseball team? Do we need to measure intensity and commitment, or is just being a volunteer enough?

What is needed is a comprehensive set of behavioral questions that experts agree encompass volunteering activities. I believe this can be accomplished, but I am not so sure it will be easy. Building a comprehensive set of behavioral prompts competes directly with the fact that there is a direct and unfortunate relationship between the number of questions asked and the cost of a survey. At some point, we will have to agree that enough is enough, and precision will take a back seat to the realities of survey research.

3. My third goal, which is required for the first two to succeed, is to re-invigorate the funding climate for volunteering research. The current funding climate for such research is difficult at best. I see little interest from potential funders to support work that is nothing more than a continuation of past ideas. Perhaps potential funders will be receptive to a new approach, one that has the promise to more accurately measure the commitment people make toward addressing societal problems, and one that has the potential to influence public policy. Again, collaborative work will be the key, showing that the results can have impact beyond a single project.

In summary, I am convinced that the study of volunteering using a perceptual methodology, as does CPS, has a systemic flaw that can be cured

only by turning to a behavioral methodology. The old way, which admittedly I played a role in forming, seriously underestimates the extent to which people are engaged. The commitment to volunteering is too important to underestimate and misrepresent. We need accurate measures of volunteering to inform practioners, supporters, funders, the press and the public, and policy makers. I believe a move away from the perceptual toward the behavioral is the best option we have for advancing the study of volunteering.

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