

Volunteering & Civic Engagement among Recent Veterans

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Service is not a novel concept for America's veterans, who have served both international and domestic communities. According to a survey of Iraq and Afghanistan War veterans conducted by Civic Enterprises, over 90 percent of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) veterans agree that "serving the community" is important to them.² However, as data from the Census 2008 Current Population Survey (CPS) show, many recent veterans have not been engaged with their communities since returning to the United States. Older veterans, veterans who have spent more time back home, and veterans who have been reached out to by veteran or community organizations have high levels of engagement.

Serving in the military may have given a large portion of veterans the opportunity, motivation, and skills to participate more actively in their communities upon their return. For instance, 39% of veterans who have volunteered since their return from OIF/OEF were not regular volunteers before serving in the military. Although veterans' volunteering rates are slightly lower than that of the general public, data suggest that those veterans who have had more time to resettle into their civilian lives and develop stronger community connections – as with elder veterans – have high levels of engagement. Furthermore, findings suggest that volunteering in the community can help veterans transition back to the civilian life.

This fact sheet provides information from three sources. Civic Enterprises surveyed 779 OIF/OEF veterans who had served in either Afghanistan or Iraq after September 2001, using a snowball sampling method.³ This fact sheet also reports engagement rates of all veterans who served after 2001 from the Census 2008 Current Population Survey (CPS) Volunteering Supplement, a national survey with a random sample. In addition to this, we use the Civic Health Index, which includes a large sample of veterans, comprising 12% of the entire sample, from all generations; the Civic Health Index allows for broader analysis of veterans' civic engagement, because it asks more questions about civic attitudes and behaviors.

Who are the Recent Veterans?

For the purposes of this fact sheet, post-2001 veterans reflect all veterans who served after September 2001. In addition to this, Civic Enterprises OIF/OEF veterans represent only those veterans who served under Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom (in Afghanistan). The general veteran population refers to veterans of all generations.

As all the surveys show, there is an expected gender gap in the veteran population. According to the CPS data of the post-2001 veteran sample, 84% of veterans are male and 16% are female. Additionally, 77% are White and 23% are Non-White. Ten percent of all post-2001 veterans identified as Latinos/Latinas. Moreover, post-2001 veterans tended to be younger, as 63% were 35 years old or younger. Post-2001 veterans (age 18 to 29) were also more likely than the general public (age 18 to 29) to respond that they had at least some college experience. Approximately 57% of 18- to 29-year-old post-2001 veterans said they had either some college experience or a college degree, compared with 54.5% of all 18- to 29-year-olds. Though many younger veterans have not yet finished college, this shows that involvement in the military may help to boost college attendance rates.

The new GI bill gives returning veterans and their families resources to go to college; however, many find it difficult to readjust to civilian life while enrolled in institutions of higher education. Similar to those veterans who have been reached out to by veterans service organizations, veteran students have found it helpful to connect with other veterans, as well as other community members on campus, to successfully navigate the transition and academic process.

Returning Veterans Having Trouble Finding Meaningful Civic Opportunities at Home

Recent veterans show positive attitudes towards civic engagement and service, though it may take up to two years for them to start to volunteer. Sixty-one percent of OIF/OEF veterans strongly agree that public service should be a basic responsibility of all American citizens.⁴ According to 2008 CPS, post-2001 veterans volunteer at a slightly lower rate than the general public (25.1% vs. 26.4% respectively). Veterans have shown that they are willing to continue service back home given the right opportunities – veterans who had not volunteered since their return were likely to say that they would serve if a respected veteran approached them. In addition to this, those veterans who were reached out to by veteran service organizations and other community organizations were more likely to volunteer than those who were not contacted. It appears that, when supported by community members, veterans are likely to take advantage of service opportunities.

According to the Civic Enterprises data, the OIF/OEF veterans who had been back for more than two years were far more likely to volunteer than those who had spent less time back in U.S. This suggests that those veterans who have been back for a longer period of time were more successful in finding community service and volunteering opportunities. The time difference could represent the amount of time it takes for community-based, faith-based or veterans organizations to reach veterans and build relationships.

CPS data also suggest that post-2001 veterans were likely to volunteer for fewer hours and weeks than the general public. According to CPS data for 2006-2008,⁵ a typical post-2001 veteran volunteer served for seven weeks a year for a total of 37 hours – whereas a typical volunteer in the general population served for 12 weeks and 51 hours a year.

Older Generations of Veterans Show Stronger Commitment to Service than the General Public

Though younger veterans have slightly lower levels of engagement, older veterans volunteer at a higher rate and with greater intensity than the general public. It is possible that the more recent generation of veterans are having a more difficult time finding meaningful service opportunities, compared to the older veteran populations who have had more time to reconnect with the community. Similar to those veterans who have been back for two years or more, older veterans may also have existing community ties that the younger post-2001 veterans may not have.

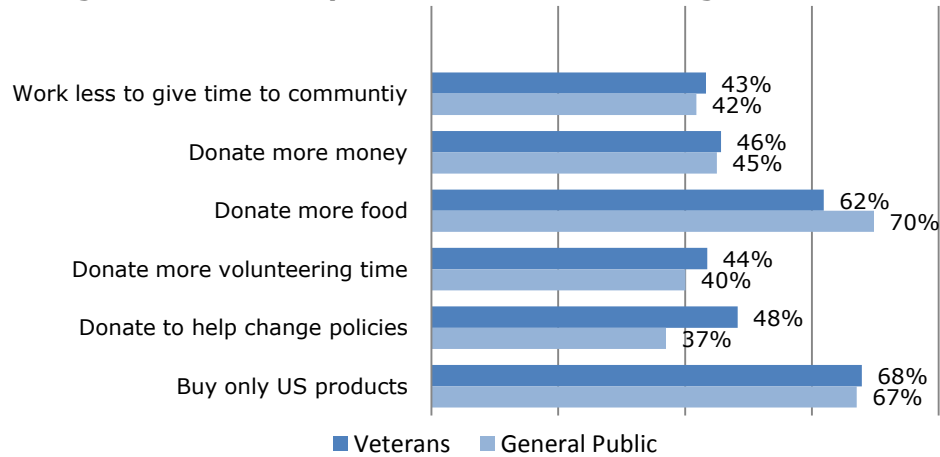
Moreover, CPS data show that post-2001 veterans were slightly less likely than the general public to participate in other civic activities such as donating money, fixing something in the neighborhood, or attending public meetings. However, the general veteran population (not restricted to post-2001) was more likely to fix something in the neighborhood compared to the general public (9.3% versus 8.5% respectively). The general veteran population (those who served at any date) is older than the post-2001 veteran sample and in turn has spent more time readjusting to civilian life.

Moreover, data from the Civic Health Index show that the general veteran population has strong levels of engagement when given meaningful opportunities. Compared to the general public, veterans of all generations were more likely to respond that they had gone to a community meeting in the past 12 months, worked on a community project, or worked with a neighbor to solve a community problem.

In addition, the Civic Health Index data also show that the general veteran population was more likely to respond that they would be willing to help with various civic activities than the general public. Veterans were particularly likely to say that they would be willing to donate to help change policies and donate more volunteering time. This, again, suggests that when given meaningful opportunities veterans are willing to give their time to help.



Figure 1: % of Respondents Who Are Willing To...



Source: Civic Health Index, 2009

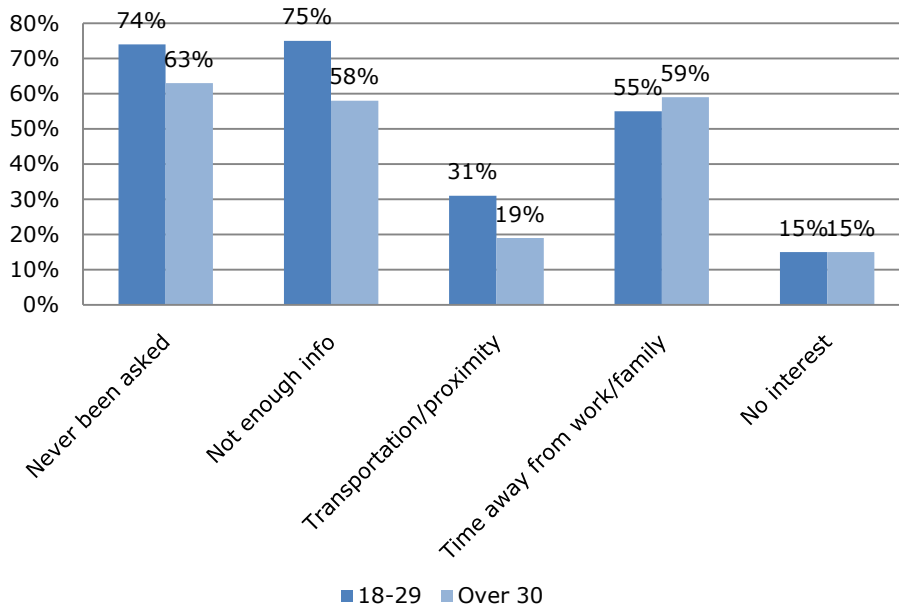
Younger Veterans Having a More Difficult Time Reintegrating than Older Veterans

According to the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), more than half of OIF/OEF veterans are under the age of 30; as IAVA data show, there exist important distinctions between the needs and overall engagement levels of younger veterans versus older veterans. In general, younger veterans are slightly less likely than older veterans to have volunteered. According to the Civic Enterprises data, those veterans who are under 30 are having a more difficult time transitioning back to civilian life than those veterans who are 30 and older; 46.5% of veterans 29 and younger agree/strongly agree that their transition is going well, whereas 56.6% of veterans 30 and older agree/strongly agree with the same statement. Moreover, older veterans are more likely to say that the needs of both themselves and their families are being met, compared to younger veterans.

Younger veterans may not have the resources (such as time and money) to be connected with their communities or they may have fewer previously established connections in the community compared to older veterans. Seventy-four percent of young non-volunteer veterans responded that they had never been asked to serve, compared to the 62.8% of non-volunteer older veterans. In addition to this, 75.4% of young non-volunteer veterans said they do not have information on meaningful opportunities (whereas only 57.6% of older non-volunteer veterans have). If the issue is a lack of prior knowledge and connection to the community, it would be beneficial for community organizations to reach out to younger veterans to help increase awareness of available opportunities.



**Figure 2: Reasons for Not Volunteering by Age
% of Veterans who Agree/Strongly Agree**

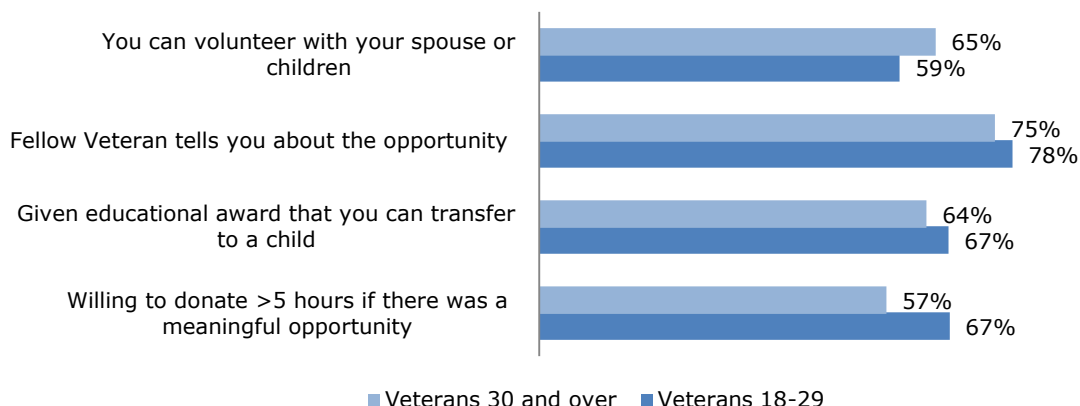


Source: OIF/OEF Veterans Survey

Younger veterans and older veterans responded favorably to different incentives to volunteer more in their communities. Younger veterans were much more likely to get involved if a respected fellow veteran told them about the opportunity, reemphasizing the theory that if younger veterans knew of volunteer opportunities they would be more likely to be involved. Younger veterans (under 30) were more likely than older veterans to respond that they would be willing to volunteer more than five hours a month if they found an opportunity that was meaningful enough. Older veterans responded that they would participate more if they could volunteer with their spouse or children.



**Figure 3: Incentives to Volunteer by Age
% of Veterans who Agree/Strongly agree**



Source: OIF/OEF Veterans Survey

Less Disparity between White and Latino Volunteering Veterans Compared to General Public

The Civic Enterprises data also suggests that the demographics of veterans who are volunteering are fairly consistent with the general population. As expected, those veterans with a college degree were more likely to volunteer; also, officers were more likely to volunteer than enlisted veterans.

Racial demographics, however, diverge from the general population for volunteering veterans. Non-White veterans were more likely than White veterans to respond that they felt motivated to volunteer in their community during their time in active duty, National Guard, or reserve military (75% versus 68% respectively). However, Non-Hispanic Whites and the Latino veteran sample were just as likely to volunteer after returning. The civilian Latino population has traditionally been less engaged in volunteer activities than the civilian White population⁶; this could suggest that military experience gave Latino veterans skills, opportunities, or encouragement to volunteer that they might not have otherwise.

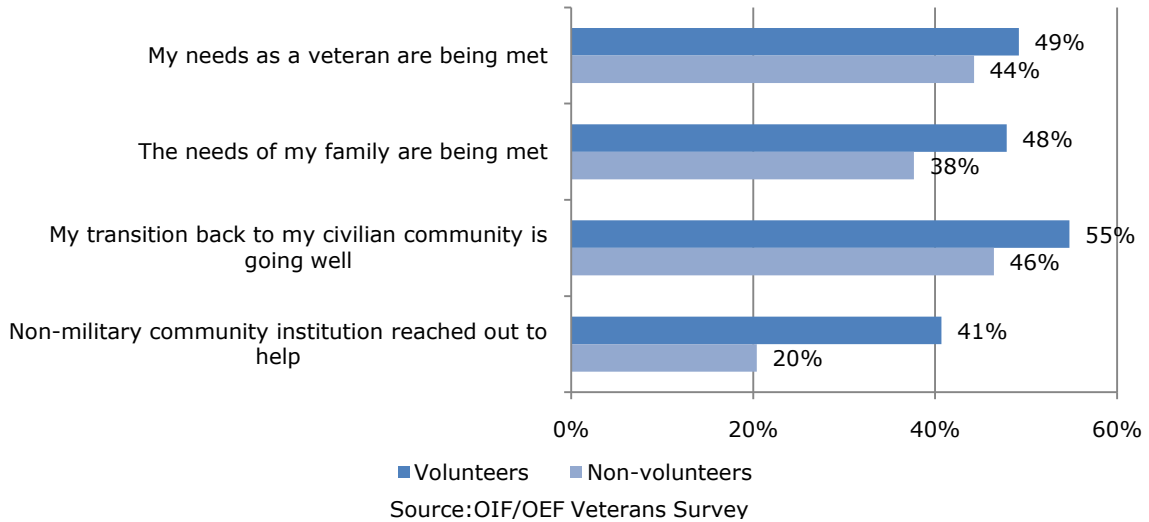
Volunteering Veterans Feel Transition Process is Going Well

According to the Civic Enterprises data, veterans who have volunteered since returning to the U.S. show better adjustment to their civilian communities than those who have not volunteered.

Fifty-five percent of the volunteering veterans felt that their transition is going well while 47% of non-volunteering veterans did. Volunteering veterans were also more likely to feel that both their and their family's needs were being met. These findings could indicate that volunteering is helping veterans reintegrate back into community life, or that veterans who are making successful transitions to civilian lives are ready to volunteer, or both.



Figure 4: Transition to U.S. Among Volunteering and Non-Volunteering Veterans

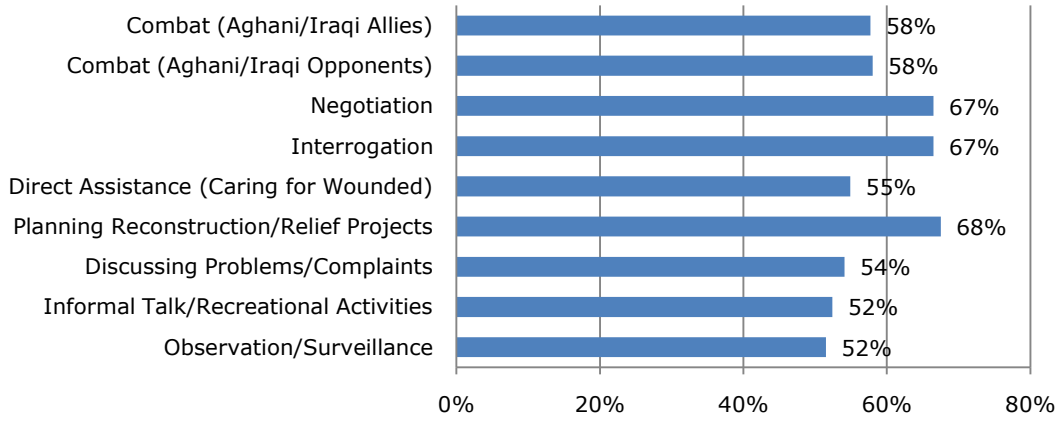


The most common volunteering activities among post-2001 veterans were fundraising, general labor, and collection/distribution of food for the needy. Forty-five percent of veterans became volunteers by being approached by the organization for which they served, 35% were asked by a friend, relative, or co-worker.⁷

Civic enterprises data also show how service abroad influences service back home. Those veterans who spent most of their time on planning and reconstruction (e.g., rebuilding roads, infrastructure, humanitarian assistance, training local leaders) were slightly more likely to volunteer back home than those who took part in other activities (such as combat, medical assistance, etc.). They were especially involved with serving military families upon return. On top of this, veterans who were involved with interrogation and negotiation had high levels of volunteering; these veterans, along with those veterans who reported that they had spoken informally with Iraqis and Afghans, had high rates of volunteering with at-risk youth back home. It could be the case that recent veterans are looking to find opportunities that fit their skill sets from their service abroad.



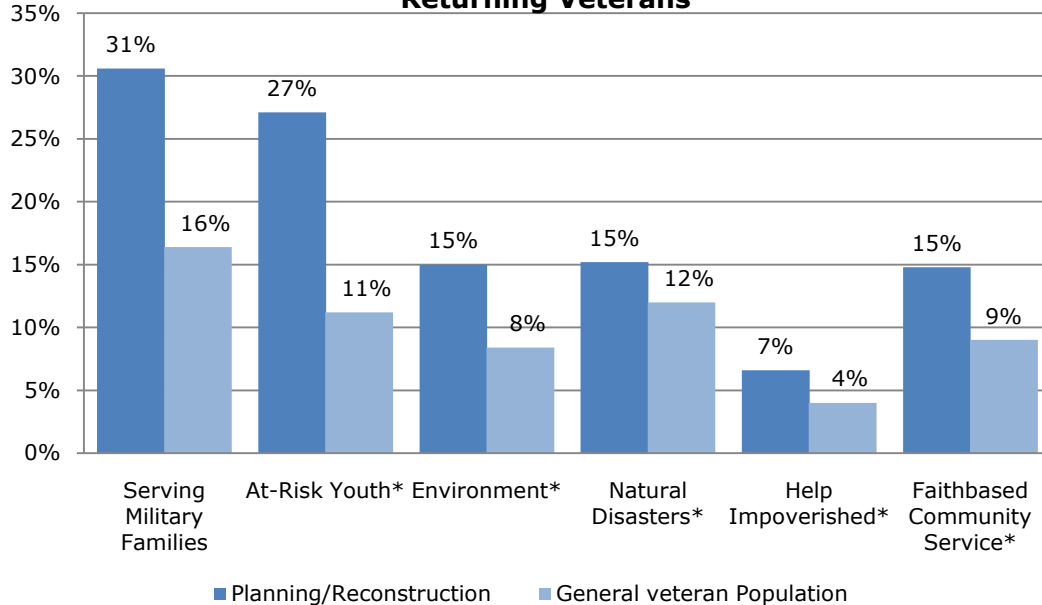
Figure 5: Volunteer Rates of Returning Veterans by Military Service Area



Source: OIF/OEF Veterans Survey



Figure 6: Type of Volunteer Service Performed by Returning Veterans



*not statistically significant, small sample size

Source: OIF/OEF Veterans Survey

Both Military and Non-Military Institutions Could Help Encourage Veterans to Serve

The volunteering veteran was more likely than the non-volunteering veteran to be connected with veterans organizations. Because of the strong respect veterans have for their fellow veterans, it is not surprising that over half of the current volunteering veterans had been asked to serve by a veterans organization. Furthermore, according to Civic Enterprises data, 78% of those who had been asked to serve by a veterans organization have volunteered since their return.

Community-based, civilian organizations can also help veterans to serve and reconnect with their local communities. The Civic Enterprises survey suggests that those veterans who did volunteer (compared to those who did not volunteer) were twice as likely to have been contacted by non-military institutions looking to help or assist the veterans (e.g., churches, community-service-based organizations). According to the Civic Enterprises' open-response portion of the survey, many veterans stated that their local church was helpful in supporting them both during and after deployment in various ways (such as financial or spiritual support). Others suggested that nonprofits were helpful because such organizations provided services that the government or church did not provide (e.g., fitness awareness for amputees). This could mean that communities have not done enough to reintegrate recent veterans quickly into their communities and that perhaps expanding the outreach effort will successfully increase the number of veterans serving in the community.

The Civic Health Index asked respondents what incentives might make them serve more. Financial incentives were not as attractive for engaging veterans as they were for

the general public. Training opportunities (a non-financial incentive) attracted equal numbers of general veterans and the general public (19.3% veterans, 19.2% general public); this was also the second most attractive incentive for veterans after property tax reductions, whereas financial incentives were listed as the top three for the general public. Veterans were particularly less likely to respond to incentives that included winning rewards or raffles. According to open-ended responses from the Civic Enterprises survey, many OIF/OEF veterans stated that they have much to offer their local communities and the nation even after their time in service. Moreover, many felt that they'd be willing to donate their time if they received in return the support of the community to find ways their skills and leadership abilities could be used in civilian society.

Conclusions

Veterans are important members of the service field because of their commitment and skills acquired through their military training. Veterans who have been contacted by veterans service organizations or other community groups are more likely to be involved, suggesting that when reached out to and provided support by community members, veterans will continue to be champions of service. High levels of engagement from older veterans, as well as veterans who have been back for a longer period of time, could be an indication that given time to form meaningful connections with the community, veterans are likely to be civically engaged. Having meaningful connections with the community as well as volunteering appears to help veterans reintegrate back into civil society.

¹ Researcher, Research Intern, and Lead Researcher at CIRCLE. We thank Peter Levine, Abby Kiesa, Emily Hoban Kirby of CIRCLE and Mary McNaught of Civic Enterprises for helpful comments and technical assistance on previous drafts of this fact sheet. All errors in fact or interpretation are our own.

² OIF/OEF veterans data from this fact sheet were accessed from Civic Enterprises data; OEF started in October 2001, OIF started in March 2003. .

³ Snowball sampling is a successive method used to reach a target population that is normally difficult to identify. Under it, each identified member of the target population is asked to refer additional subjects. Bias is attributed with this method, for it is not a random sample. CIRCLE, which consulted in the design and administration of this survey, weighted the data to match the demographics of military personnel who have served in those conflicts.

⁴ Source: Civic Enterprises Survey of OIF/OEF veterans.

⁵ Computed from a three-year moving average for the number of weeks and hours from CPS, to achieve more reliable estimates.

⁶ As seen in Table A – Characteristics of Volunteers and Non-Volunteers by Age Group from “Volunteering Among Young People” by Mark Hugo Lopez and Karlo Barrios Marcelo, April 2007.

http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS07_Volunteering.pdf

⁷ Source: Current Population Survey Volunteering Supplement 2006-2008. To obtain reliable estimates from a relatively small sample in each year, we computed a 3-year moving average.