

COUNTING VOLUNTEERS: NEW RESEARCH PROVIDES RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEASURING THE VOLUNTEERING RATE

Chris Toppe, a social scientist at The Points of Light Foundation, contends that the current Bureau of Labor Statistic (BLS) survey method—used in the Current Population Survey (CPS)—does not accurately gauge the rate of volunteers. He finds that asking behavioral questions about volunteer activities increases the number of volunteers captured by the CPS.

His CIRCLE Working Paper (#43), entitled “Measuring Volunteering: A Behavioral Approach,” assesses the accuracy of two different sets of survey questions on the subject of volunteering. Taking advantage of the *2005 Survey of Youth Volunteering and Civic Engagement* sponsored by the Corporation for National and Community Service and Independent Sector, Toppe tests a total of six questions on volunteering. Only the first two questions—or first set—are currently used to measure volunteering in the CPS. These questions are perceptual questions designed to measure whether people think they volunteer or not. The last four questions—or second set—is an experimental approach designed to measure the respondents’ actual volunteer behavior. The two sets of questions were asked of the same respondents in the *2005 Survey of Youth Volunteering and Civic Engagement*. In the end, Toppe finds that the behavioral questions, or the second set, elicit a higher volunteer response.

The research suggests that asking behavioral questions produces a more accurate and higher rate of volunteerism (66% vs. 55%). Moreover, the behavioral questions resulted in a higher estimate of average annual volunteer hours (94 vs. 89).

BEHAVIORAL QUESTIONS CAPTURE MORE VOLUNTEER BEHAVIOR

The behavioral questions, which Toppe modeled after the research of Hall (2004) and Rooney et al. (2004), are memory prompts that ask about specific volunteer activities. According to the author, “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, thus eliminating many of the common sources of measurement error.”

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a more accurate and higher rate of volunteerism (66% vs. 55%). Moreover, the behavioral questions resulted in a higher estimate of average annual volunteer hours (94 vs. 89). According to Toppe, “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. The results show that behavioral questions are more accurate than the perceptual questions in identifying who is and isn’t a volunteer.”

Toppe emphasizes that the increased response rate is real. He cites the ability of survey participants 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.”

Toppe emphasizes that the increased response rate is real. He cites the ability of survey participants 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.” Thus, behavioral questions not only captured a larger set of volunteer activities, but these responses were more reliable.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE SURVEYS ON VOLUNTEERING

Toppe concludes, “This study shows that in a side-by-side test, the behavioral questions 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.” In order to better measure the rate of volunteering, Toppe suggests that the behavioral methodology be further validated. Upon completion of the validation, he recommends that researchers collaborate to form a standard set of questions that can be used to measure volunteering.

The complete Working Paper can be found on the CIRCLE Web site at http://www.civicyouth.org/research/products/working_papers.htm. 