

# Rural Volunteerism: How Well is the Heart of Community Doing?

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## Introduction

Volunteerism drives innovation and change, creates connections between social groups that build resiliency and is the substance that maintains a community's culture and services. Without strong and vibrant volunteerism, the quality of life and health in rural communities begins to suffer.

The International Labour Organization defines a volunteer as "an individual who performs unpaid, non-compulsory work, either through an organization or directly for others outside of their own household." Using this definition, two essential characteristics that identify volunteers are: 1) monetary and/or in-kind compensation is not provided, and 2) there is no pecuniary obligation to perform the task, activity or service.

According to Statistics Canada, in the period from 2004 to 2013, between 43 percent and 50 percent of Ontario's non-metro population volunteered for a group or organization, donating their time, energy and skills to charities and non-profit organizations. These formal volunteering rates are similar (slightly higher) to the participation levels of volunteering in metro areas. The time donated is approximately two billion volunteer hours nationwide, or the equivalent to more than one million full-time jobs. The economic value of volunteering in Canada has been estimated at \$50 billion each year, a "conservative estimate that does not include any capital investment, nor improved skills and attitudes." (Alexander, Gulati, 2013)

The heart of volunteerism, however, reaches beyond monetary motivation. For some, volunteering is an expression of kindness that is motivated by a genuine care and concern for the well-being of others and the community as a whole. Others are also motivated by the networking potential or experiences gained that may result in increased social opportunity and cohesion. Regardless of an individual's motive, a community benefits from volunteerism by way of the investment of an individual's limited resources, such as time and talents, as well as the social capital gained through strengthened social networks. It is the essence of "neighbours helping neighbours" that has been the glue that helps to sustain one another through hardship and also makes for higher quality of life where recreational and cultural opportunities are part of vital communities. Community is not the only beneficiary of volunteerism, as volunteers themselves have the opportunity to try new job experiences before making costly investments in training and can develop and improve skills for future paid work.

Formal volunteering (unpaid help given as part of a group, club or organization to benefit others) is common in both urban and rural communities. Data from 2013 show that the percentage of individuals volunteering formally is somewhat higher in Ontario non-metropolitan communities, but not markedly so. There is a notable statistical distinction between the rural and urban experience, in that rural volunteers are more likely to volunteer for more than one organization. Informal volunteering — helping a neighbour or caregiving for a relative — is something that 83 percent of Canadians and Ontarians report they do.

Informal volunteering has historically been higher in rural communities, according to the report *Formal and Informal Volunteering and Giving: Regional and Community Patterns in Canada*, but that difference was also reported to be shrinking.

Volunteerism is a common characteristic of most communities; however, unique community features may affect its expression. It may be readily understood that the rural life experience is different from the urban life experience, even within the rural context, each community can vary in its culture, values, demographic make-up and life expressions. For example, a rural southern Ontario agricultural community may vary significantly from a rural northern Ontario forested community that is culturally focused on hunting and forestry.

To address such unique rural differences, the Huron County Health Unit has developed a Rural Lens. The Rural Lens is a process that considers the priorities, needs and unique values of a rural community whenever a new initiative is being developed or adapted. Using such an approach protects a community from having solutions introduced on the basis that they worked in another region only to have them fail locally because they did not consider the communities' unique priorities and needs.

## Historical Relevance of Volunteerism

Historically, volunteering to help one another was not only essential for survival, but was also an engrained social construct in rural communities. Many activities that were once primarily in the informal economy moved into the formal exchange economy as industrialization progressed. This process came to many remote, primarily resource-dependent communities later than elsewhere. Also, in many of these communities, organized service provision may not have been available, or was only available at great distances. This service gap resulted in a greater need to depend on one another, as family and neighbours gave their time and effort to support one another throughout the various stages of life. In this sense, in the rural context where formal service providers are still currently fewer and farther between, communities are still more reliant on the informal unpaid exchange of labour than other places.

Volunteering in rural settings was a mix of organized and unorganized activity. This mix, over time, fostered a sense of self-reliance for solving local challenges in many rural communities. Examples of this include the Grange Movement, which saw the development of rural co-operatives where farmers came together to buy supplies in bulk in order to combat increasing freight charges. Or the development of the Federated Women's Movement that taught domestic skills to rural women and implemented volunteer run "Well Baby" mobile clinics to assess the well-being and development of infants.

One of the major accomplishments of volunteerism in rural communities is that it has filled in the gaps of economic restraint and leveraged available resources for community benefit. Entire community infrastructures have been built and historically maintained through the efforts of volunteer service clubs and citizens.

Faith organizations, which are often overlooked in volunteerism research, represent one of the largest pools of volunteers. Historically, faith organizations were a more predominant hub of social activity that served a vital function in meeting the needs of local community members than they do today, although community needs remain just as great.

## Current Rural Demographic Trends

Many rural communities report a sense of community belonging that is higher than provincial averages. Nonetheless, there is a range of variability among rural places in terms of the strength of their social networks. Meanwhile, vast geographic areas and limited transportation options can also result in feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Many rural communities are experiencing a slow decline in population, although this is dependent upon where they are in the province, as there are also rural communities experiencing positive but small net in-migration. Outside the urbanizing fringe, rural communities experiencing net in-migration are having a net gain of residents in their later years (45–64 years). Across the board, rural communities typically experience the loss of a large percentage of younger adults (18–24 years) who move out of rural areas for job opportunities and/or schooling. This in-migration trend of older adults and net out-migration of youth eventually leads to larger percentages of senior residents in the population.

Since many seniors live on fixed incomes, are living longer and are also more likely to be living alone than in the past, the pressure on informal caregivers is increasing and well recognized. In some agricultural and remote areas the "old" elderly are moving into centers where services are more readily available but where they may have less well-developed social networks.

Understanding the local demographic pattern is central to forecasting the impact on volunteerism not just because demographics drive social needs but also because volunteering patterns are different for different age groups.

Overall, there has been a slow decline in formal and informal volunteerism as societal pressures increase and responsibilities change. As Baby Boomers transition from being active older adults to frail older adults, middle-aged adults are increasingly going to have to care for both their children and aging parents.

Visible minorities often make up a very small portion of the rural population. In 2015, a little more than five percent of newcomers to Canada settled outside of the five major urban centers. The proportion of new Ontario immigrants settling in non-metro Ontario is even lower. Moreover, retention of newcomers to rural areas is a concern and those who do leave rural communities for urban centres suggest they found it difficult to develop a sense of belonging in smaller communities. The report *Newcomer Engagement: Building Social Capital in Rural Communities* from the Rural Ontario Institute provides examples of rural regions integrating newcomers and volunteerism is often central to that positive experience.

First Nations communities are among the fastest growing rural communities. Activities that would be considered volunteering in southern rural communities are not necessarily looked at the same way in First Nations communities. Rather, it is viewed as a part of being in a community and taking care of one another. It is a mindset where community members have a place to belong and a tangible role to play in their community.

## Impact of Volunteering on Rural Communities

Volunteerism is a driving force and heartbeat of rural communities. Many services that are available in rural communities continue to exist because of the generous investment of volunteers.

The quality of life in rural communities is better because of volunteers. It is primarily through the efforts of volunteers that community service providers and churches are able to run programs and serve those in need around them. A recent report by the Social Research and Planning Council called *The Heart of Community: A Report on Volunteerism in Perth and Huron Counties* found that 84 percent of local non-profit organizations surveyed said they simply would not exist without the volunteers that help to offer the services.

Volunteerism is more than just doing a task. It supports life as community members' journey through the various stages of life and is a social and emotional engagement with community. Lack of public transportation and large geographic areas in rural communities limits active transportation possibilities (e.g., walking, cycling) and creates a dependency on owning a personal vehicle for transportation and increased feelings of loneliness and isolation. A positive impact of volunteerism is that it can reduce social isolation for both the volunteer and recipient of service.

Volunteerism promotes philanthropy and community engagement, and results in tangible benefit to the community. The personal investment of the volunteer creates a sense of ownership and responsibility while building a sense of belonging. Comradery from teamwork influences community morale and is vital in fostering a sense of community spirit and pride. This community-building element can be lost when planning and implementation activities shift in a non-profit organization from a volunteerism base to a staff responsibility.

The close-knit nature of rural communities makes it easier for community members to know when a neighbour is experiencing difficulties and how they might help them. Working together and caring for the needs of others helps people feel connected and provides the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships. By the same token, in a rural community where "everyone knows your business" there is a flip side where the lack of anonymity can inhibit people from seeking help formally for fear of stigma.

Integrating into a close-knit rural community can be challenging for newcomers. Community members may be resistant to changing the tight social network they have relied on in the past and may treat the newcomer with suspicion. Volunteering is a positive way for a newcomer to integrate into a community. By giving of their time, newcomers are demonstrating a care for their new community while they learn the unique culture and values. Additionally, it offers newcomers an opportunity to develop social networks of their own. By establishing even as few as two or three relationships with well-networked people in a community, newcomers may very easily find themselves linked with many more.

The social capital (the network of relationships among people who live in a particular society that enables it to function more effectively) that volunteerism builds is significant. Although there may be a predominant focus on one or two organizations, about half of rural volunteers volunteer in multiple organizations. The resulting cross-pollination of people, resources, ideas and opportunities creates a stronger, more resilient community.

For younger generations, volunteering can offer access to a community's network of decision makers, such as local government officials, police or fire chiefs and community leaders. This kind of exposure provides insight into local opportunities, mentorship and expanded life experience. Leadership opportunities offered by local groups and organizations provide valuable experience as youth prepare for the workplace.

Utilizing volunteers may not always be the most efficient way to get a job done because of the ongoing need to train and manage volunteers, but it builds capacity and allows local clubs and organizations to continue serving those around them. Operationally, there may be a wider scope of responsibilities available to rural volunteers who may need to carry more of the operational load if smaller rural non-profits have less staff to carry out day to day activities.

Monitoring the need for volunteers can help to identify emerging need and gaps in service availability. With limited resources, rural organizations and volunteers need to collaborate and build strategic alliances in order to produce similar outcomes to those in more urban settings. These alliances help to keep the doors of opportunity and collaboration open and operating effectively. This intersection of social networks creates opportunity for new initiatives to begin, as relationships develop outside of the initial volunteering experience. For example, two people who initially meet as volunteering members of a non-profit Board may discover a common interest in environmental issues and co-launch an environmental community initiative.

Volunteers can be leaders in advocating and mobilizing community change as they are not bound by the same bureaucracies and protocols which may hinder professionals. Volunteers can create awareness with energy and passion, act independently without organizational restrictions and liabilities, and are often able to speak more boldly. They are independent sources of energy that can mobilize community change.

The impact of volunteerism is not easily quantified, but there is value in making the attempt. Craig Alexander and Sonya Gulait, analysts at TD Bank, calculated the impact of volunteering in Canada based on the following formula.

In 2010, more than 13.3 million people completed volunteer work (which totaled 2.1 billion hours, which is the equivalent to 1.1 million full time jobs)  
x average hourly wage in 2012 (\$24/hr)  
= roughly \$50 billion dollars annual economic impact.

Using simple estimation methodology where Canada's rural population was approximately 30 percent of the Canadian population in 2011 and Ontario's rural population of 2.5 million people was 25 percent of the total Canadian rural population of 10 million or so, then the value of Ontario's rural volunteerism could be placed in the ballpark of \$3.75 billion. Although this estimate is a starting point in understanding the true impact of volunteerism, much is missed as the benefit of volunteerism goes beyond time and money. After extensive research on calculating the value of volunteering, Volunteer Canada issued the following statement to summarize their views.

Volunteer Canada recognizes the need to demonstrate the value and impact of volunteering through a clear measurement of volunteer time and volunteer programs and that in doing so, valuing volunteerism will take many forms.

Determining the impact of the contribution of volunteerism is complex and multifaceted, as there are benefits to people served, organizations, the community, and to the volunteer themselves. Volunteer Canada believes that any measurement on the value of volunteer involvement must consider the resources needed to support volunteering and the social and economic development volunteering generates, integrating qualitative and quantitative measurements. Both aspects of measurement must be considered equally valid and compelling and each measurement presented in isolation of the other presents an incomplete picture of the true value of the contribution of volunteers (Volunteer Canada, 2010).

## Current and Emerging Rural Volunteerism Trends

### *Demographic characteristics of volunteers*

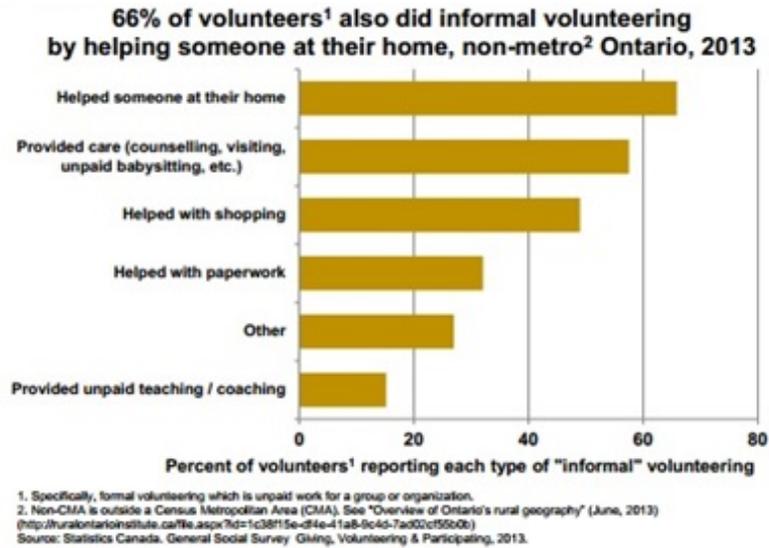
Volunteerism plays a key role in creating an engaged and sustainable civil and social services sector in rural communities. However, there are many different perceptions about the current state of volunteerism. Some feel that volunteerism as a whole is decreasing, while others feel that volunteerism is not suffering and that it is as much a part of communities as it always has been — although the expression of it is changing to be more lifestyle oriented. Still others believe that many volunteer opportunities are being professionalized, and the need and role of volunteers is changing. Which of these perceptions are an accurate reflection of volunteerism in communities and the trends that may be emerging?

In order to understand how volunteerism is contributing to the well-being of rural communities, it is helpful to identify whom in rural communities are the ones volunteering and how those trends may be changing. Analysis of data from the General Social Survey shows that women had a slightly higher tendency to volunteer than men did, a trend that noted a minor increase in 2013, and that compared with the number of Canadians who volunteer formally, twice as many people (83%) volunteered informally by providing direct help to family, friends and neighbours.

Those with higher levels of educational attainment volunteer more. In 2013, for example, over 60 percent of rural adults with a university degree reported doing volunteer work, as compared with about 37 percent of those with high school graduation. (An extensive set of charts and tables on rural volunteering [from which the chart below is drawn] is available from the Rural Ontario Institute, Focus on Rural Ontario, 2015.)

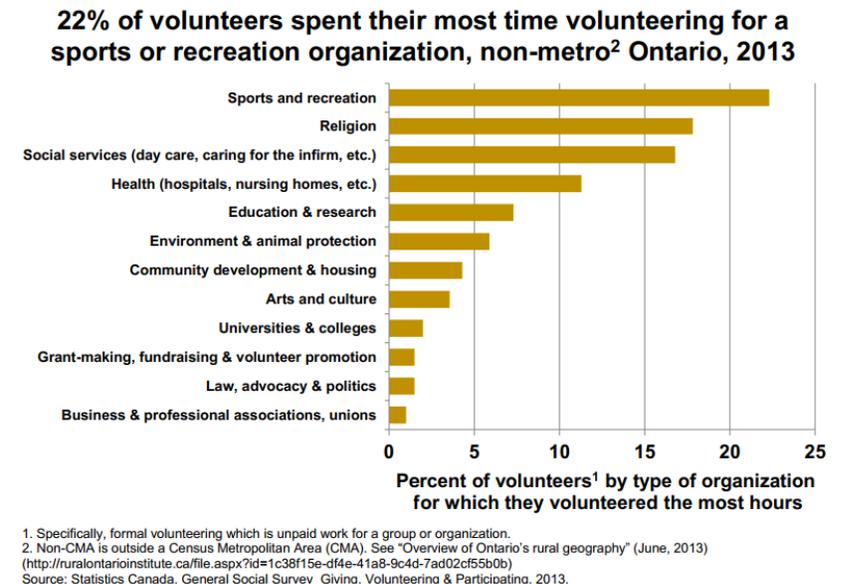
Income also had an impact on volunteerism rates; Statistics Canada reported that 58 percent of people with household incomes of \$120,000 or more volunteered, as compared to 33 percent of those with incomes under \$20,000. However, in general, people volunteering in the lower income group gave a higher average number of hours than those in the higher income group.

Chart 1



The need for volunteers, the type of volunteering opportunities available, and what volunteers are looking to do may not always line up. In rural Ontario, the top five types of organizations people gave the most time to were: sports and recreation; religion; social services; health; and education and research. This varies from urban volunteers where sports, social services, and education preceded religion and health.

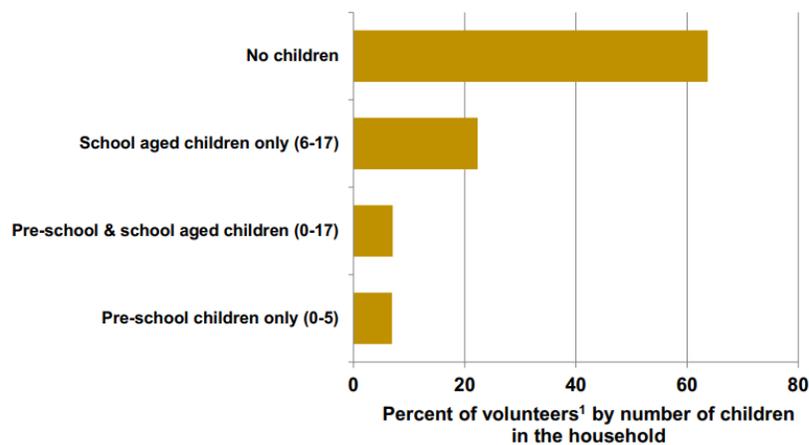
Chart 2



Canada-wide data suggest having children at home is associated with an increased likelihood of volunteering. It was reported that 56 percent to 59 percent of parents with school-age children at home were volunteers, compared with 41 percent of people without any children at home.

Chart 3

**64% of volunteers have no children in their household, non-metro<sup>2</sup> Ontario, 2013**



1. Specifically, formal volunteering which is unpaid work for a group or organization.  
2. Non-CMA is outside a Census Metropolitan Area (CMA). See "Overview of Ontario's rural geography" (June, 2013) (<http://ruralontarioinstitute.ca/file.aspx?id=1c38f15e-df4e-41a8-9c4d-7ad02cf55b0b>)  
Source: Statistics Canada. General Social Survey Giving, Volunteering & Participating, 2013.

By contrast, rural Ontario statistics suggest 64 percent of volunteers have no children in the household. For parents of children participating in sports and recreation activities, there is an expectation that they will contribute some of their time to reduce costs. However, while some parents may be willing to help out, the above data may explain why some minor sporting associations report an increasing challenge in finding enough core volunteers to meet the organization's volunteer coaching and administration needs.

A trend that is often overlooked is the decline in volunteer capacity of rural faith organizations as the population ages and participation in faith organizations diminishes. Being a member of a faith organization, and attending religious services, contributes positively to an individual's likelihood of volunteering. In the article entitled *Volunteering in Canada*, Statistics Canada stated that "almost two-thirds of Canadians aged 15 and over who attended religious services at least once a week (65%) did volunteer work, compared with less than one-half (44%) of people who were not frequent attendees (this includes people who did not attend at all)." While the propensity of religious attendees to volunteer might be higher than those not participating in faith organizations, fully 70 percent of rural volunteers reported in 2013 that they did not attend services weekly.

Today, the steady decrease in regular participation in religious service is accompanied by a shrinking volunteer pool among congregants. The rate of churches closing is increasing, some not because of a lack of money, but due to a lack of volunteers to do the work. It is becoming common place for clergy to now serve multiple congregations in rural communities. The cascading effect of this emerging trend is that the remaining congregants are having to step up to do the work of the internal church functioning, which further results in less available time for serving the community around them.

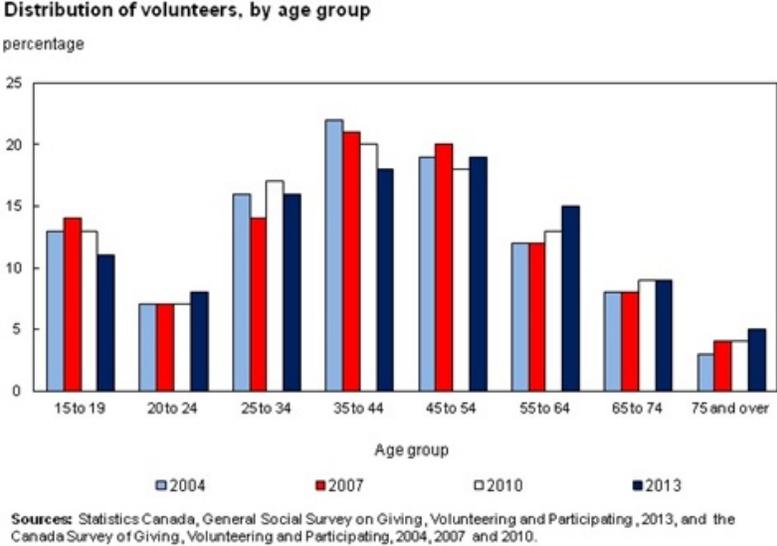
***Aging volunteers, small number doing majority of work***

In rural Ontario, 35–54 year olds are slightly more likely to volunteer than either 20–24 year olds or those 55+. This difference is seen across Canada and across rural/urban jurisdictions. Seniors (65+) had lower participation which may be partly due to poor health; however, seniors that did volunteer gave almost double the hours of younger volunteers.

In looking at the changes in the distribution by age over the four surveys that were done in Canada between 2004 and 2013, the most recent results show that the distribution is shifting towards higher proportions of older volunteers. In rural communities that have a higher than average senior population, this may ultimately lead to more volunteer hours available for a time. Lack of time is reported as one of

the biggest reasons that the working-age population does not volunteer. With an increase in the number of two full-time working adults in a home, extra-curricular activities, and faster social pace, families are looking for volunteering opportunities that fit with their time restrictions, which in turn is creating an increased reliance on older populations for volunteering needs.

Chart 4



The activities older adults volunteer for also differ from younger generations. The General Social Survey found that older adults (55+) were more likely to provide health care or support, such as companionship (20 percent vs 15 percent for volunteers aged 35–54), and were less likely to teach, mentor, coach or officiate than younger adults. With the age of volunteers increasing, there may be an increasing shortage of volunteers willing to teach or coach.

Of those that do volunteer, a small number of people do the majority of work. Fifty-three percent of volunteer hours given in 2010 were given by only 10 percent of volunteers, these hours amount to roughly the equivalent of 10 or more weeks in a full-time job (Statistics Canada, 2013). Volunteering shortages may emerge if younger generations are not able to replace active adult seniors as they become frail seniors and are no longer able to contribute which may lead to major gaps in service.

***Changing society and competing responsibilities***

Although the number of people participating in volunteer activities has increased, the number of volunteer hours donated remains the same — meaning that they are contributing less time. Society as a whole is becoming increasingly busy and the pressures for time are mounting. Involvement in private entertainment activities, such as home movies rather than community social events, is also impacting volunteerism participation rates.

Historically, volunteerism has been viewed as an unskilled activity driven by a commitment to community rather than personal gain, but this mindset is shifting. It was not uncommon for someone to be a long-standing and committed volunteer to an organization, regardless of what the organization’s weekly need was. Today, people are less interested in long-term volunteering commitments; rather, they are looking for short-term, specific tasks that will fit with their schedules. This requires that organizations rethink their volunteer opportunities and retention efforts. As well, volunteer culture is moving to a focus on developing agency among the disadvantaged, with volunteers on the boards of non-profit and local organizations increasingly becoming advocates for quality support and dignity for all.

Baby Boomers have a different way of thinking about volunteerism than Millennials do. Many Baby Boomers want their volunteering experiences to have meaning; they do not necessarily see it as a skilled

activity but rather a way of helping others. The potentially hidden resource of professional skills found in retired active adults is something that could greatly benefit rural organizations. Identifying the skills and mindsets needed for particular sectors that go beyond unskilled experiences, or those that could easily be learned, could increase available opportunities to volunteer.

Younger generations more readily view volunteering as an opportunity for personal growth and skill development. In order to best engage the growing number of seniors and millennial generations together, it is important for non-profit organizations to provide types of experiences that respond across generations. Some of these mindset shifts may be emerging a little more slowly in rural communities to the extent that patterns of behavior may be more stable or that non-profits have less capacity to more readily adapt to societal shifts.

In the event of a death in the community, it was commonplace for the local women's church group to come together to help prepare for the funeral reception. Increasingly, however, there are fewer people available to provide this kind of support. Service clubs are witnessing a similar decline in volunteer resources. Throughout the 1940s to 1980s, rural service clubs were responsible for significant infrastructure development. Today, rural communities are not seeing the same level of development through services clubs. To accommodate a busier culture and changing perceptions, service clubs like the Rotary Club are re-examining membership requirements so that they are more focused on engagement than on regular attendance.

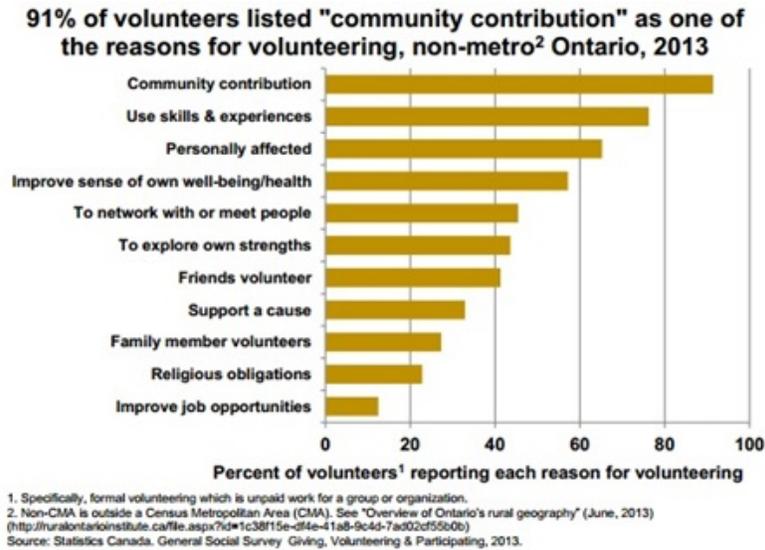
In his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Robert Putnam investigated whether declining, traditional associations were just merely being replaced by new ones. He found that many new organizations were forming that had a focus on issues of significant political importance, such as the environment or women's issues. Membership is high, but the nature of participation in these new associations is very different:

For the vast majority of their members, the only act of membership is consistently writing a check for dues or perhaps occasionally reading a newsletter. Few attend a meeting, and most are unlikely ever (knowingly) to encounter any other members. Their ties, in short, are to common symbols, common leaders, and perhaps common ideals, but not to one another (Putnam).

As society shifts to privatize recreation, outdoor recreational habits are also shifting. In northern Ontario, rural communities are seeing a decline in traditional outdoor organizations, as well as fewer trail guides and outdoor volunteers. This decline is leading to a diminishing volunteer base to maintain what has been developed. For example, in 2015 the entire Ignace Otters Snowmobile Club resigned, some of the volunteers had put in 22 years of volunteer service and needed others to step in. When a volunteer recruitment meeting was held, no one showed up. The Federation of Ontario Cottagers Associations has developed a focus on sharing ideas for engaging youth in their member organizations for similar reasons.

The good news is that although society is changing, the motivation for volunteering is still primarily altruistic with 91 percent of people volunteering to make a community contribution.

Chart 5



The popularity of an issue can also play a role in how easily volunteers can be recruited. Tragically, a few months before the opening of a men's shelter in Goderich, Ontario, a homeless man drowned invoking the sympathies of local community members that saw volunteer numbers for the shelter swell by up to 30 people willing to offer their time to help.

According to data from Statistics Canada, almost half of the people currently not volunteering said it was because no one had asked them to. The potential for bridging this gap between those not volunteering because they had not been asked and those needing volunteers is significant.

In 2010, 14 percent of volunteers had sought volunteering opportunities online, up from 10 percent in 2007 and eight percent in 2004. This trend continues as technology presents new and innovative ways to connect with people.

A recent report released by the Government of Ontario on Community Hubs found that, due to declining populations and transportation challenges, focus group participants recommended that it would be helpful to explore virtual resources as opposed to traditional bricks and mortar building services.

Increasingly, the internet is facilitating greater awareness of issues as they emerge. Currently, virtual volunteer centers are emerging as a means to promote volunteer opportunities and find volunteer matches. Not surprisingly, urban online volunteer portals experience higher volumes of traffic; however, as virtual volunteer centers become more established as reliable community resources, the volume of traffic also increases. This is an approach that is showing great promise.

Volunteer Canada is currently working with Volunteer Attract to create a pan-national data hub for volunteer centres across Canada. Data is being collected through these online centres from both rural and urban settings to determine emerging trends. This information will be available to compare nationally, provincially and by region to understand volunteerism differences and similarities. Additionally, mapping capabilities available on these online volunteer portals can identify people willing to volunteer in other communities.

Additional initiatives in rural volunteering are being studied by Capacity Canada such as mapping available community resources online. Community capacity building refers to the identification, strengthening and linking of a community's tangible resources, such as local service groups, and intangible resources like community spirit.

### *Geographic challenges of a region*

A major challenge for volunteerism in rural communities is the vast geographic area. The cost and availability of transportation can hinder recruitment and retention of volunteers. The continued increase in transportation costs will at some point outweigh the intrinsic value of helping out.

Adjacent rural communities often have an identity that includes competition as much as cohesion with neighbouring communities — long-standing rivalries that are reflected in competition between sports teams for example. Municipal amalgamations often had to address such deep-seated attachments people had to their particular place even as their governance was shifting to include other communities. With this internalized community identity, it may be difficult for people to accept the idea of non-profits and volunteer networks operating inter-community collaboration. Raising money for local hospital equipment, for example, can run into these concerns when regional governance of health services seems distant. This creates a localized community approach that can make it difficult for people to come outside of their immediate community to lend a hand. It is hard to build a collective identity outside of immediate community circles when its members are not happy with inter-community collaborative efforts to achieve something greater. The long-term outcome of communities operating as silos is a fracturing of community efforts and services. Yet, there has been success in this area as many multi-county United Ways or Community Foundations, which cover large areas, have found ways to counteract such challenges.

### *Increasing liability standards and limited capacity*

#### *Screening*

With the increase in insurance liability requirements comes an increase in volunteer screening and paperwork. Many small rural non-profit organizations simply do not have dedicated staff or capacity to properly support volunteers effectively and respond to increasing liability requirements.

In order for someone to feel comfortable offering their time and service there needs to be a basic level of trust in an organization. The increasing liability requirements for such things as police screening can at times cause volunteers to feel criminalized and can work against the volunteer's sense of trust. The police screening process can be particularly offensive to people from different cultural backgrounds. An increased awareness that police screening is not solely conducted for the benefit of an organization and its clients, but also for the volunteer, may improve organizational trust.

Currently, there are three levels of police checks available but there is a lack of consistent police screening legislation across Canada. These include a police criminal record check, a police information check (includes any outstanding charges or police contact) and a police vulnerable sector check (which includes pardoned offences and non-criminal violent behaviour that may put others at risk).

There needs to be consideration regarding whether the level of screening being required is comparable to the level of risk involved through the volunteering activity. For example, while it is increasingly expected that anyone working with someone from a vulnerable population — such as children or seniors — would have a vulnerable sector police check done, someone that is participating in a park cleaning bee may not need to be screened as thoroughly.

The cost, as well as time and effort required to obtain a police check can be a barrier to volunteering. Screening that is inconvenient or takes significant time to accomplish can result in disengaged volunteers that do not complete the screening process.

#### *Evaluation*

There is an increasing need for organizations to demonstrate to funders what their program outcomes and overall community impact is for the funding they have received.

These increasing measurement and evaluation requirements create additional strain on rural staff who may already be juggling many hats at once, leaving less time for volunteer management. Although measurement and evaluation of services can be invaluable in understanding effectiveness of operations and identify potential challenges and strategies, it may also have the unfortunate effect of changing staff's perspective on volunteers and minimizing the value of their contribution. Quantifying the social capital developed or individual intrinsic impact of volunteering is difficult to capture and may have the potential of boiling down the value of volunteers into units of service. The need to have positive numbers to report to funders may also contribute to hoarding volunteers in order to achieve favorable numeric outcomes.

### *Government changes*

Changing government policies can also have a significant impact on the state of volunteerism in rural communities. Government resources are often more focused on urban centers and without volunteerism there would not be the same availability of services in rural communities. As larger government systems download responsibilities that may be manageable in larger urban centers, similar tasks become unreasonable to accomplish for smaller, rural communities. There simply may not be enough capacity within the social organizations that exist to make it happen.

At the local level, there are also changes in how local government operates. Increasingly, local governments are maintaining community infrastructure rather than the service club volunteers who may have helped build it in the first place. This governmental acceptance of responsibility also leads to increased liability requirements, bureaucracy, planning, policy and regulations to implement and uphold. With this trend toward professionalizing what was once done by volunteers comes the potential of lost community ownership as volunteers no longer care for local infrastructure.

Finally, as government systems look for ways to balance the budget and trim expenses, there are an increasing number of rural school closures. School closures can shift a sense of community as children are no longer going to school locally but are being bused to neighbouring communities. This community displacement may result in youth who have a decreased sense of community belonging that may lead to an increased out-migration and sense of local community responsibility.

## **Future Considerations**

### *Service needs*

With the decline in such community supports and volunteer pools as religious organizations and service clubs, the burden of community care will increasingly need to fall on rural service providers. Rural service providers are generally small operations with limited resources and capacity, many of which are already indicating a deficit of volunteers relative to need. This increasing dependence on volunteers to assume roles formerly filled by service providers will result in a reduction of services. Of those that do volunteer, many are older adults and as the population continues to age there will be a volunteerism crisis should younger generations not be willing to take over.

### *Community engagement*

Interestingly, some rural communities — such as Perth and Huron Counties in southwestern Ontario — are finding that there are not enough employees to fill the number of vacancies available. An effective strategy to combat rural out-migration patterns and the need for skilled work is the recruitment of newcomers to rural communities. As previously mentioned, volunteerism is a great way for newcomers to become acquainted with the specific values and networks of a given community; however, it will be important for close-knit rural communities to demonstrate a willingness to embrace newcomers and the possibility of change in their communities.

Additionally, with an increasing shortage of available volunteers to provide ongoing service delivery, a new sense of inter-agency collaboration and cooperation will need to emerge. Eliminating duplication and

streamlining services will enable rural communities to maximize existing resources and capacity. This will require a true community spirit as agency and sector silos may need to be examined and dismantled for maximum effectiveness and service delivery.

The community as a whole will benefit from an attitude of generosity with their most valuable resource. Turf disputes between service providers may limit community capacity if volunteers are being hoarded rather than organizations being willing to share. Identifying that volunteering is not a means to an end, but rather is about helping to serve the greater good for a community is important. Everyone wins when there is a dedicated core of volunteers and there is a willingness to steer volunteers in the right direction, even if that means they no longer volunteer for the original organization.

### ***Shift in society***

Increasingly, the motive for volunteering is shifting to a more self-benefit approach, which is a trend that will most certainly continue, as will the need for incentives. For some organizations this may not be as much of an issue as it is for smaller, rural organizations with very limited resources and benefits. Some communities are seeing volunteerism benefits from running Community Currency programs.

Community Currency is complimentary currency (voucher or digital credit) that is used in a set geographical area to help encourage local civic engagement and development. These time credits encourage people to actively engage in their community while also developing local business by requiring that the vouchers or credits be used locally.

Community Currencies in Action (CCIA) a project of the New Economy Foundation stated in their report *Money with a Purpose: Community currencies achieving social, environmental and economic impact* that a key finding of those using community currency was:

Building motivation of volunteers who give time more regularly: feedback from organisations that use Spice Time Credits reported that their volunteers feel more valued and stay longer with the organisation. Over 50% of time credit users are volunteering in their communities for the first time and 80% state they are likely to continue giving their time in the future.

Tax credits for volunteer contributions have received some legislative deliberation. In 2008, Bill C-219 introduced the policy of amending the Income Tax Act to allow deductions for volunteer emergency service. In some jurisdictions, tax deductions for out-of-pocket expenses incurred while volunteering has been allowed, however there is currently no allowable deduction for volunteer time in Canada. Allowing a tax credit, or deduction, for volunteering could be of considerable benefit to those who may be on a fixed income (e.g., seniors).

### ***Resources***

One of the biggest barriers to rural volunteerism is creating awareness of the need for volunteers. The reality of limited capacity and resources that rural service providers must consistently work with creates a true reliance on volunteers. With technology continuing to develop and connect communities, it will become increasingly important to utilize the internet to create awareness of opportunities and to tap resources for rural volunteer recruitment, training and volunteer management professional development.

### ***Standardization of policy***

Standardizing policies and practices can serve to increase capacity by freeing up time spent on administrative tasks and re-allocating that time to active volunteer management and service delivery. Volunteer Canada has developed some excellent volunteerism codes and policy resources that could be adopted. Availability of low-cost toolkits and ongoing training would greatly increase capacity in rural communities. However, one challenge in over-standardizing is that informal volunteerism may be impacted, which could lead to a decline in community participation, sense of belonging and ownership.

## *Government*

The federal and provincial governments often consider ways to download service delivery responsibilities onto local municipal governments. There is a very real need for a rural lens to be applied to consider rural context and capacity issues in these situations and assess, for example:

- How will mandated objectives be accomplished in rural communities with less manpower and per capita funding?
- What additional resources and implementation tools can rural communities utilize that will reduce the workload that is falling onto local volunteers?

## *Consolidated Police Screening Database*

It would be beneficial for the government to consider investing in activities that would benefit everyone, such as legislation that is more consistent and the availability of a nation-wide consolidated volunteering Police Screening database. Such a database could be made available through an online portal that would reduce the need and inconvenience of volunteers making a costly trip to the police station. It would allow any organization who has written consent from the individual to access their profile and reduce the need for them to do multiple police screens should they want to volunteer in more than one location. Accuracy would also be enhanced as the record would be up-to-date and contain nation-wide information.

## *Evaluation*

Finally, the trend toward measurement and operational evaluation will help organizations and funders make choices and service delivery decisions that are more informed. Evaluation toolkits and training workshops will need to be available to help rural organizations increase their capacity to facilitate such evaluation and make it a standard operational practice. The development of standardized volunteering metrics with a rural lens that could be adopted by rural communities would greatly enhance this endeavor. The Ontario Nonprofit Network has been working on a number of resources and infographics on evaluation in the sector and this provides a good platform for such activities, see: <http://theonnc.ca/our-work/our-structures/evaluation/>.

## **Conclusion**

Volunteerism is a vital component in the continuation of a healthy, vibrant rural way of life. With aging populations and an increased dependence on older adult volunteers, rural communities may soon discover that how they serve the needs of community members may no longer be sustainable in the future.

Taking advantage of the increased availability of online tools to amplify community resources and assist in the recruitment and advertisement of volunteer opportunities will help to address some of the current barriers to volunteerism.

As the pace of life increases and societies' mindset continues to shift towards being internally focused, it will be increasingly important to match volunteers with tasks of interest — rather than just what is needed by the organization or unwanted by staff. Developing incentives and rewards such as tax breaks or community currency may help to increase the attractiveness of volunteering. Of equal importance is the need to find creative ways to promote and encourage volunteer participation as an altruistic contribution to community.

Federal and provincial government systems can help to alleviate increasing pressure on rural organizations by ensuring that a rural lens has been applied to any initiatives that are being downloaded to municipal governments. Without such considerations, it is foreseeable that rural community systems will reach a point of maximum capacity that, if not attended to, will result in volunteer burnout, service provider closures and/or increasing mental health challenges. Investment by senior levels of government in rural transportation solutions and mobility would reduce the geographic barriers to volunteering. Additionally,

developing a system for a more accessible and nationally consolidated approach to police screening will increase efficiency and safety standards.

Another critical enhancement will be to further develop strategies that will increase collaboration in service delivery efforts, while providing additional resources and support to communities as they continue to navigate the changing landscape of volunteerism to ensure continued community care.

Volunteerism remains the backbone of service delivery in rural communities and is the true heart of community. Without it, the rural way of life as we now know it may cease to exist. Addressing some of the challenges that exist today will have a significant impact on rural communities of tomorrow.

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# NORTHERN PERSPECTIVES

## Rural Volunteerism: How well is the Heart of Our Community Doing?

Charles Cirtwill & Emma Helfand-Green<sup>5</sup>

Like rural communities in Southern Ontario, volunteerism has long been important in communities in the province’s northern regions. The most recently available data on volunteering, from the 2011 Statistics Canada General Social Survey, shows that there are in fact slightly higher rates of volunteerism for all age categories in northeastern and northwestern Ontario as compared to the rest of Ontario (see Table 1). As described by Birtch, those between the ages of 15–64 volunteer slightly more than those over the age of 65, although data for seniors in northwestern Ontario was too unreliable to be published.

**Table 1: Volunteering in the Past 12 Months, by age group (percent of total in age group)** (Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2010)

Geography	Volunteering in the past 12 months	15-64 years	65 years and over	Total, 15 years and over
Northeastern Ontario	Yes	45.9	43.7	45.4
	No	52.2	56.3	53.1
Northwestern Ontario	Yes	45.4	*	46.3
	No	53.6	*	52.8
Ontario	Yes	41.3	35	40.3
	No	57.5	63.7	58.5

\* Too unreliable to publish.

The demographic shifts highlighted by Birtch are already having significant impacts in the northern regions, which are experiencing both a declining and aging population. Informal feedback that NPI has received from all regions in Ontario’s north indicate this is already leading to challenges recruiting volunteers, while at the same time, increasing the demand for many volunteer-provided services. As an example, in the northwestern Kenora District, the population of individuals aged 65+ is projected to increase from 12.61 percent of total population in 2013 to 23.16 percent in 2041, and in the northeastern Sudbury District, this age group is expected to increase from 19.44 percent to 36.82 percent (Cuddy & Moazzami, 2017a; Cuddy & Moazzami, 2017b). This trend is common within all 11 northern districts signifying a substantial demographic change occurring across Ontario’s north.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, the growing Indigenous population in Ontario’s northern regions may represent a new source from which to draw volunteers as the existing pool shrinks. However, as Birtch highlights, volunteerism within First Nations communities is not typically seen as “volunteerism but rather as ‘helping out’” and it is a key aspect of Indigenous cultures (Native Women’s Association of Canada, 2015). This creates unique challenges in tracking volunteerism among this population and in encouraging more formal volunteerism, especially outside of First Nations communities and particularly as more Indigenous people move to larger centres. Simply put, this population is far more likely to just “help out”, without ever formally “signing up” or otherwise reporting their volunteer activity. This will likely result in the ongoing potential for underreporting of volunteer activity and a misconception about the level of participation of

<sup>5</sup> The authors gratefully acknowledge the contributions to this piece made by James Barsby.

<sup>6</sup> See Cuddy & Moazzami’s *Human Capital Report Series* for demographic information for all 11 Districts in Northern Ontario. Available at [northernpolicy.ca](http://northernpolicy.ca)

this population in the larger community.

Furthermore, as Birtch explains, the cost and availability of transportation options is a barrier to volunteerism in Ontario's northern regions. Lack of public transportation may discourage certain groups, especially younger and older volunteers, from making the effort to participate in volunteer opportunities. Relatedly, individuals in northern communities may already be engaged in significant travel and commutes to get to their primary employment. This could discourage additional participation in volunteerism as there is less time for individuals to engage in this type of activity.

A study conducted in a rural town in northern Ontario identified a few key barriers to volunteerism. Through interviews with community members (mostly seniors) and service providers, the following factors were identified as negatively impacting volunteerism in the community: a lack of volunteers; volunteer burnout; poor newcomer participation in volunteering; out-migration of individuals in the prime age categories for volunteering; and a transitory lifestyle which means that many community members are not willing or able to commit to volunteering as they spend significant time (weekends, summer or winter months) in other communities (Wiersma & Koster, 2013). The findings from this study are relevant to other rural communities — especially those with a large population of seniors — in Ontario's northern regions, although differences exist between communities.

Overall, there is a lack of specific data and research on volunteerism in Ontario's northern and rural communities. It is likely, however, that many of the challenges for rural communities remain the same across the province. The opportunities identified by Birtch for future considerations are important for communities and organizations to consider in order to ensure that volunteerism remains an active part of community life and that the services and programs provided by volunteers continue to exist.

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