

Volunteer Supplements to the Current Population Survey: Technical Notes

The Current Population Survey (CPS) – a monthly survey of about 60,000 households conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau for the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) – focuses on obtaining information on employment and unemployment among the nation’s civilian noninstitutional population age 16 and over. In addition to the baseline survey on labor force participation, most CPS respondents also complete a supplemental survey on a special topic.

To date, volunteering has been the subject of a CPS supplement on eight occasions: November 1965, April 1974, May 1989, and every September since 2002. This report uses data from the 1974, 1989, and 2003-2005 surveys. Data for the November 1965 and September 2006 CPS supplement were not publicly available while this report was being prepared.¹ The September 2002 volunteering supplement is very similar to the 2003-2005 CPS supplemental surveys, but because several of the demographic variables are measured differently than they are today, the survey was omitted.

To maximize comparability among the recent CPS surveys, we chose to pool survey data from 2003, 2004 and 2005, so that most if not all key variables are measured consistently. To ensure as much consistency as possible across the three survey eras, we made certain changes to all three surveys.

April 1974

The Volunteering Supplement was administered via mail to one-fourth of CPS households, selected randomly from the April 1974 sampling frame.² Response rates were extremely high; of the 24,795 respondents who received the supplemental questionnaire, 23,731 (95.7%) returned valid survey forms. Although all respondents aged 14 and older were eligible to receive the volunteer survey, we exclude all responses for those under age 16. The public-use dataset does not contain baseline CPS survey data for the other three-fourths of households.

The preamble to the first question lists several types of organizations which use the services of unpaid volunteer workers. Question 1 asks, “During the last 12 months, from May 1973 through April 1974, have you done ANY UNPAID volunteer work for a group such as those listed above, or for any other type of organization?” Of the 22,437 respondents aged 16 and older who answered the volunteer survey, 5,346 said that they had volunteered. Questions 2 and 3 follow up with volunteers, asking about how often they did volunteer work (Q2) and how many hours of work they did (Q3) in the last twelve months. The possible responses are categorical for both questions; the four possible responses for Q3 are “Less than 25 hours,” “25-

¹ While reliable survey data from an earlier time period would have been extremely valuable, the November 1965 survey instrument probably undercounted the number of Americans volunteering with religious organizations. This severely limits the usefulness of the 1965 data in cross-era comparisons. See Hayghe, Howard V., “Volunteers in the U.S.: Who Donates the Time?” *Monthly Labor Review*, Vol. 114 #2 (February 1991), pages 17-23, available at <http://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/1991/02/art2full.pdf>. Data from the September 2006 survey will be available to the public in June 2007.

² Information about the April 1974 Volunteer Survey comes from a report called “Americans Volunteer 1974,” published by ACTION, the parent organization of the Corporation for National and Community Service.

99 hours,” “100-299 hours,” and “300 or more hours,” with a followup asking respondents in the last category for the actual number of hours.

The survey contains a long series of followup questions for respondents who volunteered during the week of April 13, 1974: for each of the ten organizational types listed, respondents reported hours served per week, the type of work done (an open-ended response), and the age group(s) of the people they worked with. However, none of these questions were addressed to those who volunteered in the last twelve months, but not in the past week.

May 1989

The Supplement on Multiple Job Holding, Flexitime, and Volunteer Work comprised the last few questions on the May 1989 Current Population Survey. All respondents aged 15 and over answered these questions; for comparability with published BLS materials, we only include responses for those aged 16 and older. A sizable proportion (over two-thirds) of the May 1989 surveys were conducted via telephone rather than in person.³

For the May 1989 basic CPS, the household-level response rate was 98.2 percent. For individuals in households that completed the basic CPS, the person-level response rate for the volunteer supplement was 95.5 percent. The overall response rate for the 1989 survey is not available in published BLS material.⁴

The supplement contains only six questions about volunteer work; we use two of them to identify volunteers. As BLS has done in previously published work,⁵ we code a respondent as a volunteer if they answer “yes” to either of the following questions: “Last week, did [you/he/she] do any unpaid volunteer work?” and “Even though [you/he/she] did not do any unpaid volunteer work last week, did [you/he/she] do any unpaid volunteer work over the past twelve months?” Of the 107,378 respondents aged 16 and older, 23,186 said that they had volunteered. The other followup questions asked about weeks per year the respondent spent volunteering, total hours volunteered over the last year, and the type of organization where the respondent did most of his or her volunteer work. We coded the hours-per-year variable to match the 1974 categories.

September 2003 – 2004 – 2005

The modern-day CPS Volunteering Supplement is administered to respondents aged 15 and older. For comparability with published BLS materials, we only include responses for those

³ In April 1987, for the first time, BLS published CPS data that contained survey responses collected via telephone. Source: *Current Population Survey Design and Methodology*, technical paper 63RV, Bureau of Labor Statistics and U.S. Census Bureau, March 2002.

⁴ BLS and the Census Bureau no longer calculate the overall response rate for the CPS volunteering supplements. From the documentation for the September 2006 CPS (pages 16-3 and 16-4): “Since the basic CPS nonresponse rate is a household-level rate and the Volunteer Service supplement nonresponse rate is a person-level rate, we cannot combine these rates to derive an overall nonresponse rate. Since it is unlikely the nonresponding households to the basic CPS have the same number of persons as the households successfully interviewed, combining these rates would result in an overestimate of the “true” person-level overall nonresponse rate for the Volunteer Service supplement.”

⁵ Hayghe, “Volunteers in the U.S.: Who Donates the Time?”, *op. cit.*

aged 16 and older. Unlike 1989, slightly more than half of the 2003-04-05 surveys were conducted via telephone. For the September basic CPS surveys, the household-level response rate varied between 92 and 94 percent between 2003 and 2005. For individuals in households that completed the basic CPS, the person-level response rate for the volunteer supplement varied between 86 and 88 percent over this time period.⁶

The results in this brief differ from the annual results published in the BLS brief series, *Volunteering in the United States*, both because this brief uses pooled data from all three survey years (2003-04-05) and because we use a different definition of volunteering. The survey was introduced as follows: “This month, we are interested in volunteer activities, that is, activities for which people are not paid, except perhaps expenses. We only want you to include volunteer activities that you did through or for an organization, even if you only did them once in a while.” Following this introduction, respondents were asked the first supplement question: “Since September 1st of last year, have you done any volunteer activities through or for an organization?” If respondents did not answer “yes” to the first question, they were asked the following question: “Sometimes people don’t think of activities they do infrequently or activities they do for children’s schools or youth organizations as volunteer activities. Since September 1st of last year, have you done any of these types of volunteer activities?” Previously published work (by BLS/Census and CNCS) considers a respondent a volunteer if they answer “yes” to either of these questions. To ensure comparability with the 1974 and 1989 data, we use only the first of these questions to identify volunteers. Of the 275,329 respondents aged 16 and older in the pooled CPS dataset, 79,491 said that they had volunteered.

Volunteers are asked to identify up to seven organizations where they did some volunteer work in the past year. For each organization, the respondent reports how many weeks per year the respondent served there, average hours served per week during these weeks, total hours volunteered over the last year (in case this cannot be calculated from the first two questions), and the type of organization where the respondent did most of his or her volunteer work. Total hours volunteered at all organizations were coded to match the 1974 responses; as in 1989, the proportion of volunteers who were unable to report hours volunteered was much higher than in 1974, probably because the survey asked for a number. We use organization type for the main organization – the one where the respondent served the most hours – to maximize comparability with the 1989 data. Finally, weeks volunteered per year is collected separately for each organization, and these responses cannot be aggregated to form the variable “weeks last year during which the respondent did volunteer work with one or more organization,” even though this variable is available for 1989.

⁶ BLS and the Census Bureau no longer calculate the overall response rate for the CPS volunteering supplements. See note 4 above.