

ISSUE BRIEF:

Baby Boomers and Volunteering: An Analysis of the Current Population Survey



Each year since 2002, the Bureau of Labor Statistics has collected data on the volunteering habits of Americans as part of the Current Population Survey (CPS), a monthly sampling of 60,000 U.S. households. To increase understanding of how to capture the experience and energy of the 77 million Americans born between 1946 and 1964, a generation commonly known as the baby boomers, the Corporation for National and Community Service looked at the most recent data, which was released in December 2005. It also commissioned RTI International to conduct a detailed analysis of data on the volunteering habits of boomers and other age cohorts that had been collected in the 2002–2004 CPS surveys. The analysis resulted in several findings that should inform the way we go about fostering volunteering and other forms of civic engagement among boomers — a highly educated, skilled, and talented generation whose involvement in volunteer activities will be critical to solving the social problems facing our nation. (The figures in the first three bullets below are based on the 2005 CPS data; all other figures are based on the analysis of the 2002–2004 surveys.)

- ▶ **One-Third of Boomers Volunteer.** Boomers traditionally have a poor reputation for their rate of volunteering and for their involvement in other forms of civic life. Yet nearly a third (33.2%) of all boomers — comprising some 25.8 million people — volunteered for formal organizations in 2005.
- ▶ **Boomers Have the Highest Volunteer Rate of Any Age Group.** The volunteer rate for boomers — 33.2% — is the highest of any age group, and more than four percentage points above the national average of 29%.
- ▶ **Boomers Volunteer an Average of 51 Hours a Year.** With the exception of people over age 65, boomers volunteer the most of any age group, with the

average boomer volunteer serving 51 median hours a year, or approximately one hour a week. If boomers follow the same volunteering patterns as their older siblings and parents, we can expect boomers' commitment to volunteer work to rise as they age and retire.

- ▶ **Boomer Volunteering Is Highest Among Those Who Work Part Time.** Almost half (46.3%) of all boomers who work part time also volunteer, compared to one third (33.7%) of boomers who work full time and one quarter (24.3%) of boomers who are either unemployed or not in the labor force. In several studies, a high percentage of boomers have indicated that they plan to work well into their

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later years, if only part time. Consequently, targeting boomers through their place of work may be a key to inducing boomers, and especially those with professional skills, to devote some of their time and talents to volunteering at nonprofit organizations.

- ▶ **Boomers Engage in Diverse Volunteer Activities.** Overall, boomers are following in the historical tradition of older generations by assuming leadership volunteer roles as they grow older, with about 23% reporting that they provide professional and managerial services to volunteer agencies. But boomer volunteers select many diverse types of volunteer opportunities that rely on a wide variety of skills and interests. Among the direct service activities favored by boomers are collecting and preparing food, tutoring and teaching, and mentoring. Among indirect services, boomers generally favor fundraising, professional and management services, and general labor.
- ▶ **Boomers Are More Apt Than Other Cohorts to Volunteer With More Than One Organization.** Although most Americans, including boomers, volunteer for only one organization, boomers are the most likely of all age groups to volunteer for more than one organization. That may indicate that boomers can be attracted to volunteering in several capacities.
- ▶ **Strong Community Ties Increase Volunteering.** Consistent with the importance that strong community ties play in areas such as community development and school reform, boomers who own businesses and are homeowners have higher volunteer rates — 45% and 34%, respectively — than do non-business owners and non-homeowners, who have average volunteering rates of 30% and 20%, respectively. That is true even after controlling for other factors, including education levels, race, and ethnicity.

- ▶ **Boomer Women Volunteer at a Higher Rate Than Boomer Men.** Approximately 36.9% percent of boomer women volunteer, compared to 29.4% of boomer men.
- ▶ **Boomer Males Volunteer at a Higher Rate Than All Other Male Age Groups.** At 29.4%, boomer males have the highest rate of volunteering of any age cohort of males. As a result, the gender gap in volunteering among boomers is lower than among all generations born after 1964.
- ▶ **College-Educated Boomers Have a Higher Volunteer Rate Than Boomers Without a College Education.** Almost half of all college-educated boomers (49.8%) volunteer, compared to 25.7% of all non-college educated boomers.
- ▶ **Non-College Educated Minorities Volunteer at Higher Rates Than Non-College Educated Whites.** Most people think of baby boomers as being well educated. Although it is true that boomers have higher rates of educational attainment than older generational groups, nearly 70% of boomers have not graduated from college. It is interesting, therefore, to note that among boomers with only a high school education, blacks (at 23.6%) and Hispanics (at 21.9%) volunteer at higher rates than do whites (20.9%).

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