



# Key Findings from the 2019 Current Population Survey: Civic Engagement and Volunteering Supplement

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## Executive Summary

Volunteering and national service are cornerstones of democratic participation and civility in American society. Unpacking trends in civic behavior is a first step toward developing a comprehensive plan to unify the country in this moment of national reckoning.

As the most robust longitudinal survey on the topic, the Current Population Survey (CPS) Civic Engagement and Volunteering (CEV) Supplement provides valuable insight into America's civic health over time. This report summarizes top-level findings from the 2019 data and identifies opportunities for future research.

**The national organization-based volunteering rate has remained stable over the past two decades.** In 2019, an estimated 30 percent of Americans or 77.9 million people reported they volunteered for an organization or association.

**Consistent with previous research, 2019 volunteering rates vary by demographic, socioeconomic, and family characteristics.** Unpacking these patterns requires an intersectional approach that understands social inequalities like race, class, and gender as deeply intertwined.

**Volunteering represents only one dimension of a much larger array of civic activity in the U.S.** Although volunteering has received the lion's share of attention in policy debates about national service, the 2019 CPS CEV echoes a growing body of AmeriCorps-funded research about how different groups engage in and are impacted by civic activity across communities, demographic characteristics, and geography.

**Several questions raised by the 2019 CPS CEV warrant further investigation.** For example, future research should examine variation in volunteering intensity, pathways and barriers to various types of civic engagement for different groups, and implications for national service programs.

**The most recent wave of CPS CEV data collected in September 2021 offers unique opportunities to examine the impacts of COVID-19 and policy interventions on America's civic health.** New questions will also shed light on the relationship between work and civic life.

Data from the CPS CEV is a necessary but insufficient piece of a larger puzzle: how can we best address the urgent challenges facing our nation in a way that reinvigorates our civic health? Situating findings from this report in broader scholarship and policy conversations will help the nation begin charting a new path forward.



## Why Measure Civic Engagement and Volunteering?

An extensive body of research documents links between well-being and civic life. Since Alexis de Tocqueville (1839) first proposed that civic participation is foundational to democracy in America, scholars have found that the vitality of the civic sphere is closely associated with indicators of social, economic, physical, and mental health. For example, studies have found links between educational outcomes and social capital (Turley et al. 2017), social relationships and mortality risk (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2010), and neighborhood-level collective efficacy and crime rates (Sampson et al. 1997). Civic ties are also crucial for community resilience in the face of natural disasters and other tests of collective strength (see e.g. Erikson 1976, Klinenberg 2015). Taken together, the evidence suggests that addressing intersecting crises like climate change, racial inequality, and political polarization requires understanding and investing in America's civic infrastructure.<sup>i</sup> National service programs that systematically build volunteer capacity in communities are one crucial piece of the puzzle. Federal statistics are another.

Since 2002, the nation's most robust longitudinal data on Americans' civic engagement and volunteering behavior has come from AmeriCorps-sponsored supplements attached to the Current Population Survey (CPS).<sup>ii</sup> The CPS has a unique research design that not only provides vital monthly labor force statistics but also permits reliable estimates at the state level and panel analysis at one-year intervals.<sup>iii</sup>

In 2010, the AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation sponsored the convening of a group of experts to assess existing data collection efforts related to social capital, civic engagement, and social cohesion and make recommendations about how best to measure these constructs in the CPS. The resulting report (National Research Council 2014) informed the launch of a new supplement on Civic Engagement and Volunteering (CEV)<sup>iv</sup> to be administered biennially starting in 2017. The findings discussed below are based on the second wave of CPS CEV responses collected from 139,217 households in all 50 states and the District of Columbia in September 2019.

The National Research Council (2014) also recommended complementing the CPS with more research at the subnational or local levels by using diverse research approaches to tap into the complexity of volunteering and civic engagement. In response, the AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation developed a research grant program for institutions of higher education and awarded 34 cooperative agreement grants from 2015 to 2018.<sup>v</sup> These studies are demonstrating the wide variety of ways that different groups civically engage across communities, demographic characteristics, and geography (see e.g. Crittenden et al. 2020, Nesbit et al. 2018), including the prevalence of informal forms of volunteering among youth of color (Wray-Lake and Abrams 2020). They also show how volunteering and national service impacts members, organizations, and communities – especially in terms of employment outcomes (Benenson et al. 2016, CIRCLE 2021, Konrath et al. 2020, Whitsett et al. 2018)<sup>vi</sup> and subjective well-being (Velasco et al. 2018). Taken together, these results show that triangulating robust national survey data with administrative records, in-depth



interviews, ethnographies, and other types of qualitative and community-based data provides an even richer picture of civic engagement and volunteering across the United States.

## Organizational Volunteering in America

The 2019 CPS CEV finds that an estimated 30 percent of Americans or 77,949,981 people reported they volunteered for an organization or association in the previous year.<sup>vii</sup> This volunteering rate is comparable to 2017 and has remained largely stable over the past two decades. In total, these volunteers served an estimated 5.8 billion hours<sup>viii</sup> with an economic value of \$147 billion.<sup>ix</sup>

Although the average volunteer contributed 74 hours of their time in the previous year, the mean obscures substantial underlying variation. Total time volunteered from September 2018 to 2019 ranged from 1 to 500 hours with a quarter of volunteers serving 10 hours or less, another quarter serving 90 hours or more, and five percent serving 360 hours or more.<sup>x</sup>

Consistent with a large body of research, the 2019 CPS CEV suggests that volunteers for U.S. organizations and associations are disproportionately female, white, non-Hispanic, and middle-aged (Musick and Wilson 2008, National Research Council 2014). A third of women volunteered compared to a quarter of men, while 32 percent of whites volunteered compared to 25 percent of those of another race and 23 percent of Blacks. Only 19 percent of Hispanics (who may be of any race) volunteered compared to almost a third of non-Hispanics. The median volunteer is 47 years old and the volunteering rate is highest among members of Generation X born between 1965 and 1980 (35 percent).<sup>xi</sup>

Also consistent with previous studies, socioeconomic and family characteristics are associated with substantial variation in rates of organization-based volunteering (Musick and Wilson 2008, Wiertz and Lim 2019). For example, rates increase dramatically with educational attainment (12 percent among those with less than a high school diploma compared to 44 percent among those with a college degree or higher) and annual household income (approximately 20 percent among those in households making less than \$40,000 compared to 45 percent making \$150,000 or more). Rates of organizational volunteering are also relatively higher among part-time workers (37 percent) and parents of school-aged children (43 percent compared to 29 percent of parents of young children), who tend to have more discretionary time, network ties, and other personal circumstances that support civic engagement (Brady et al. 1995, Goldstone and McAdam 2001, Roth 2016).<sup>xii</sup>

These findings underscore calls for a more intersectional approach to investigating civic life in America that understands social inequalities like race, ethnicity, class, and gender as deeply intertwined rather than additive (Collins 2019). For instance, differences in organizational volunteering rates within racial subgroups vary widely by educational attainment in the 2019 CPS CEV. As Figure 1 indicates, the percentage-point difference



in volunteering rates between those with and without a college degree is highest among whites (23 percent), then declines to 19 percent among Blacks and 15 percent among those of another race.

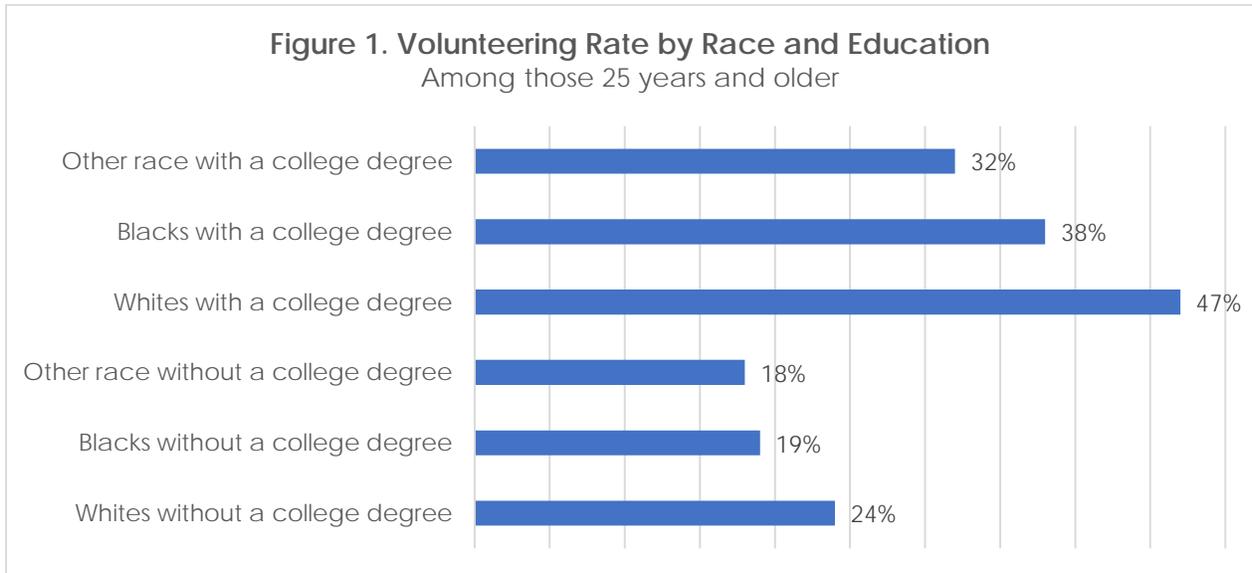
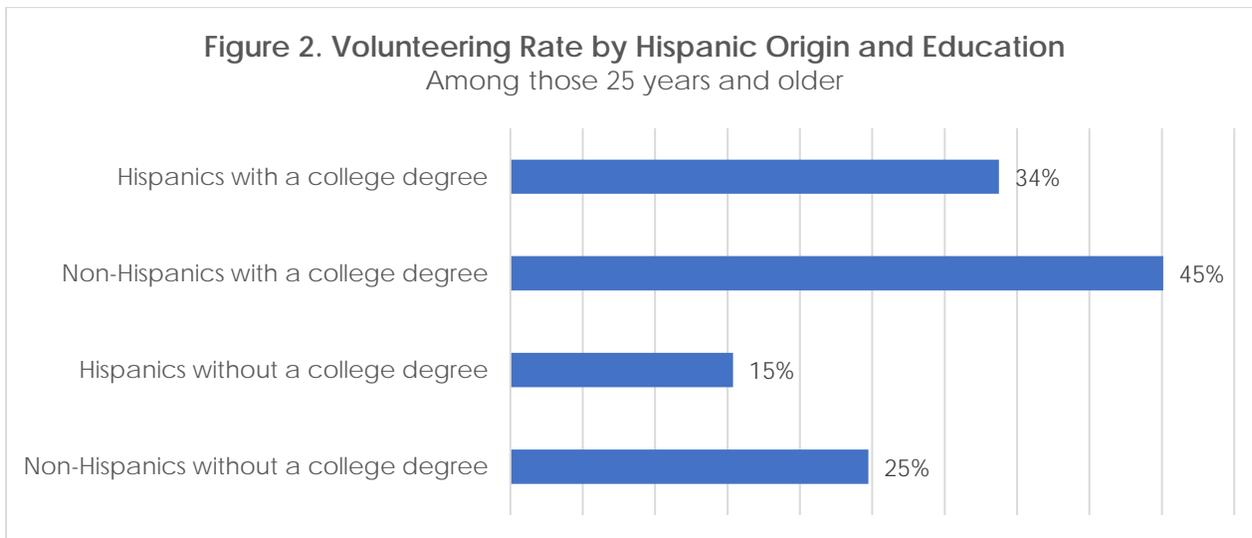


Figure 2 suggests a similar pattern except the percentage-point difference in organizational volunteering rates between those with and without a college degree is about the same for people who are and are not of Hispanic origin.



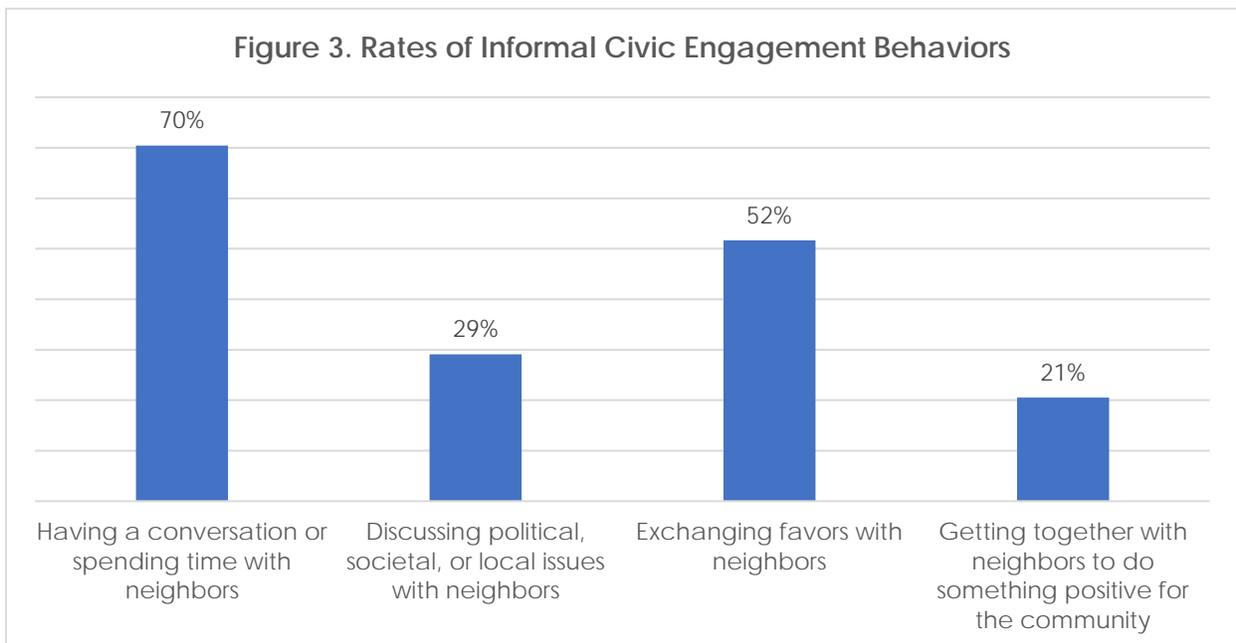
These types of patterns raise broader questions about the complex drivers of variation in organization-based volunteering rates and the distinction between volunteering and professional development.



## The Multidimensional Nature of Civic Engagement

Historically, organizational volunteering has received the lion's share of attention in policy debates about national service. Yet the 2019 CPS CEV echoes a growing body of AmeriCorps-funded research that it represents only one dimension of a much larger array of civic activity in the U.S.

Some types of civic engagement are more institutionally oriented. For example, 53 percent of eligible voters participated in local elections and half of Americans donated to a non-political group between September 2018 and 2019. As Figure 3 indicates, others are more informal. In the 2019 CPS CEV, 70 percent of Americans had conversations with their neighbors and 29 percent discussed political, societal, or social issues with neighbors at least once in the past year. About half exchanged favors with their neighbors and 21 percent participated in a local effort to do something positive for their community.



Civic engagement scholars have historically conceptualized informal helping and formal volunteering as distinct (Crittenden et al. 2020, Tang et al. 2010), yet the 2019 CPS CEV data suggests a positive – albeit weak – relationship between these constructs that persists across racial, ethnic, and educational attainment subgroups.<sup>xiii</sup> Our exploratory analysis of how various measures in the CPS CEV cluster together finds that measures as diverse as informal helping, organization-based volunteering, public meeting attendance, and consumer activism share a common underlying construct.<sup>xiv</sup> In short, deeper analysis of the multidimensional nature of civic engagement is clearly needed.



## Opportunities for Future Research

These top-level findings from the 2019 CPS CEV shed light on several questions of interest to researchers, policymakers, and the public. They also point toward several issues that warrant further investigation. For example:

- Who are the “supervolunteers” who contribute such significant amounts of time to organizations and associations? Prior research has largely treated volunteering as a binary variable, but considerable variation in total hours volunteered suggests a more complex approach is warranted.
- How do pathways and barriers to various types of civic engagement vary by education, race, income, age, and geography?
- What are the implications of these questions for recruitment into national service programs and goal-setting?

The most recent wave of data collected in September 2021 also offers unique opportunities to examine the impacts of COVID-19 and policy interventions on America’s civic health. For example: How have social distancing and quarantine guidelines affected organization-based volunteering? Are significant investments in AmeriCorps through the American Rescue Plan evident in localized civic engagement behavior? To what extent does volunteering provide pathways to employment (Spera et al. 2013) for communities disproportionately impacted by the pandemic-induced recession? Two new questions designed to facilitate the transition between the core CPS labor force module and the CEV will also shed light on methodological issues related to response and drop-off rates and the relationship between work and civic life.<sup>xv</sup>

The AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation anticipates the possibility of revising the survey instrument again in 2023 based on lessons learned from the 2021 administration. For example, we are thinking about key questions like the following:

- Are we learning anything from research at the subnational and local levels that warrant inclusion in this national survey?
- Do Americans conceptualize national service as a form of volunteering – or professional development?
- How do the spheres of work, civic engagement, and family intersect and inform each other over the life course?

As the National Research Council (2014:15) writes, civic engagement and social cohesion “can be powerful drivers affecting the quality of life among a community’s, a city’s, or a nation’s inhabitants and their ability to achieve both individual and societal goals.” With the unprecedented challenges facing America at this moment, studying and strengthening our civic infrastructure is more urgent than ever.



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<sup>i</sup> “Civic infrastructure” is defined as the “invisible structures and processes through which the social contract is written and rewritten in communities,” “the formal and informal processes and networks through which communities make decisions and solve problems”, or “the network that exists among local groups such as community development corporations (CDCs), foundations, other nonprofits, local governments, public housing authorities, businesses, and voluntary associations.” (Lang and Hornburg 1998).

<sup>ii</sup> The CPS Volunteer Supplement was administered annually in September from 2002-15. The CPS Civic Engagement Supplement was administered in November 2008, 2010, 2011, and 2013. The CPS Civic Engagement and Volunteering Supplement (CPS CEV), which merged and consolidated these two questionnaires, was administered in September 2017, 2019, and 2021. The CPS CEV has also been known as the CPS Volunteering and Civic Life Supplement.

<sup>iii</sup> The CPS also provides fairly reliable estimates for the twelve largest Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs). For details, see <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/about.html>.

<sup>iv</sup> The Civic Engagement and Volunteering (CEV) supplement has also been referred to as the supplement on Volunteering and Civic Life in America (VCLA).

<sup>v</sup> See <https://americorps.gov/partner/how-it-works/research-evaluation>.

<sup>vi</sup> These research grantees build on numerous social science and policy studies that use CPS data to investigate the relationship between volunteering and employment. See, for example, a CNCS report titled “Volunteering as a Pathway to Employment” (Spera et al. 2013) and Wiertz and Lim (2019).

<sup>vii</sup> All figures reported here are weighted to account for the random selection of eligible respondents and missing data due to nonresponse.

<sup>viii</sup> Total hours served nationally calculated by multiplying weighted average of hours served per volunteer (74.32) by total estimated number of volunteers nationally (77,949,982) = 5,793,524,025 hours.

<sup>ix</sup> Based on Independent Sector's estimate that the average value of a volunteer hour was \$25.43 in 2019 (see <https://independentsector.org/news-post/new-value-volunteer-time-2019/>).

<sup>x</sup> Those who served 500 hours in the previous year represent 3.5 percent of all volunteers. This group is more likely to be older and outside the labor force relative to volunteers overall.

<sup>xi</sup> By comparison, 30 percent of Baby Boomers, 28 percent of Generation Z and Millennials, and 25 percent of Silent Generation or older volunteered. Generational cohorts are defined based on thresholds from the Pew Research Center (see <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/essay/on-the-cusp-of-adulthood-and-facing-an-uncertain-future-what-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far/>). In 2019, members of Generation Z (born after 1996) were 22 years old or younger, Millennials (born 1981 to 1996) were aged 23 to 38, members of Generation X (born 1965 to 1980) were aged 39 to 54, and Baby Boomers (born 1946 to 1964) were aged 55 to 73. Since topcoding made it impossible to differentiate between members of the Silent (born 1928 to 1945) and Greatest Generations (born 1901 to 1927), all respondents aged 74 or older in 2019 were coded as “Silent Generation or older.”

<sup>xii</sup> Overall, parents of children under 18 years also volunteer at a higher rate (39 percent) than those who are not a parent of children under 18 (27 percent). Those who are employed full-time volunteer at a relatively higher rate (31 percent) than those who are not in the labor force (27 percent) or unemployed (24 percent).

<sup>xiii</sup> The Pearson correlation coefficient, a common measure of the strength of a statistical relationship between variables, is 0.2541 for organizational volunteering and exchanging favors with neighbors at least once in the past year and significant at the 5 percent level. Typically, a Pearson correlation coefficient between 0 and 0.3 implies a positive but weak relationship. The correlation remains positive, weak, and statistically significant when we restrict the analysis to racial and subgroups and respondents with versus without a college degree.



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<sup>xiv</sup> Exploratory factor analysis is a statistical technique that examines the structure of observed data and identifies clusters of variables that are interrelated through shared underlying constructs or “factors.” We used a specific type of exploratory factor analysis called principal components analysis (PCA) that is well suited for simplifying complex datasets. Our PCA of four CEV variables – exchanging favors with neighbors, volunteering, public meeting attendance, and consumer activism – identified one factor with an eigenvalue of 1.64. According to a mathematical rule of thumb called the Kaiser criterion, which uses the number of factors and absolute value of the eigenvalue to assess the strength of relationships in a covariance matrix, these findings suggest that these four behaviors share an unmeasured underlying construct.

<sup>xv</sup> The new questions were developed by ORE grantees who adapted constructs from AmeriCorps-supported research and the General Social Survey:

- Now I’m going to read you a list of statements that might or might not describe your main job. Please tell me whether you [strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree] with each of these statements:
  - I am proud to be working for my employer
  - My workplace contributes to the community
  - My main satisfaction in life comes from work
  - I contribute to the community through my work
- In the past 12 months, has your workplace or employer asked or encouraged employees to volunteer or contribute to a specific cause? Examples include participating in an employer-sponsored volunteering day, providing pro bono services, or donating to a charity. [yes, no]