

The decline of volunteering in the U.S explained

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Rebecca Nesbit, Ph.D. from the University of Georgia, and Laurie E. Paarlberg, Ph.D. from Indiana University – Indianapolis, initiate a discussion on the decline of volunteering in the United States. They emphasize the significance of this trend and suggest ways to address it

Volunteering is an important bedrock of democratic societies, but community context shapes citizens' willingness and ability to volunteer. Our research examined the economic and social factors associated with the decline in volunteering in the United States (U.S.) in the 2000s and 2010s, particularly the Great Recession of 2008 (Paarlberg et al. 2022; Nesbit et al. 2025).

In 2025, the U.S. is again facing economic uncertainty and social unrest, and our research findings can help leaders understand the impact that current economic jolts and social upheaval may have on volunteering behaviors. In this article, we briefly highlight the primary findings from two of our published articles and discuss what those findings mean for the future of volunteering. We also make recommendations for leaders and policymakers who are interested in supporting volunteerism.

Volunteering: Key research findings

Volunteering rates have historically been higher in rural areas, but this “rural advantage” has diminished over time and was no longer significant after the end of the Great Recession (Paarlberg et al. 2022; Nesbit et al. 2025).

The influence of place-based characteristics (e.g., nonprofit density, religious adherence, community education levels) differs markedly between rural and urban contexts.

Most notably, religiosity has a stronger effect in rural places (Paarlberg et al., 2022). Economic disadvantage, income inequality, and economic stagnation significantly suppress volunteering (Nesbit et al., 2025).

The Great Recession had a persistent dampening effect on volunteering, especially in previously advantaged, high-growth communities, undermining traditional predictors of civic health (Nesbit et al 2025).

Volunteering research implications

The combined findings from these two studies provide compelling evidence that volunteering is deeply intertwined with the structural and economic conditions of place. The steady erosion of rural volunteerism, once a hallmark of tight-knit, high-trust

communities, reflects not only demographic shifts but also broader transformations in institutional and economic life. The fact that the rural advantage in volunteering has disappeared since the Great Recession is especially alarming given the historical reliance of these areas on volunteer labor to maintain essential community services.

Furthermore, income inequality and economic stagnation may undermine civic life by reducing individuals' capacity to engage in volunteering and eroding the trust and solidarity needed for collective action. Economic disadvantage appears to compound itself: individuals in poorer communities volunteer less, weakening the very community-based organizations that might otherwise foster resilience. These dynamics reveal a troubling feedback loop where civic disengagement and economic hardship reinforce one another.

However, economic jolts do not solely affect the most vulnerable communities – they can destabilize civic norms and behaviors even in relatively healthy contexts. Consequently, economic recovery alone is not sufficient to restore volunteering as institutional disruptions and altered perceptions of the community may also contribute to lasting declines in civic participation. Strategies to rebuild volunteerism must address both the economic and social infrastructures that enable people to give their time and talents.

The evidence also suggests that volunteer opportunities must reflect people's lived realities. Nonprofits and governments in low-income communities must think carefully about removing barriers to volunteering – such as time, transportation, or mistrust. Flexible roles, community-driven programming, and inclusive outreach are essential for rebuilding volunteer engagement. Communities need durable, resilient systems supported by appropriate government policies to withstand economic and cultural shocks.

Finally, our results highlight the importance of civic infrastructure – the nonprofits and congregations that sustain civic life. Just as roads and broadband connect communities physically, nonprofits and civic organizations connect them socially. Strong organizations create opportunities for people to serve, building the capacity of communities to care for themselves and one another. Our results raise red flags as U.S. federal policy is withdrawing support for government programs that support local organizations. These policies may have devastating effects on communities, particularly in rural areas.

Recommendations for leaders and policymakers

We have several recommendations for community leaders, nonprofit managers, and policymakers who are interested in supporting volunteering and combating civic decline.

Community leaders:

Launch leadership pipelines with stipends and mentorship to reinvigorate civic leadership, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged places.

Enrich public buildings and spaces with visual symbols showing the nation's commitment to volunteering and civic engagement.

Leverage existing nonprofit organizations and places of worship to organize regular, visible community events and bring together diverse social groups that are open to the whole community (e.g., pancake dinners and barbecues).

Nonprofit leaders:

Expand outreach efforts that, while recognizing the existing social and cultural norms of the community, also appeal to the changing demographics of the community.

Collaborate with other civic organizations to map and build recruitment pipelines.

Design flexible micro-volunteering opportunities that reach low-income and time-or mobility constrained populations.

State and local policymakers:

Incorporate civic participation indicators into community development assessments and community well-being studies.

Support using federal and state grants (e.g. AmeriCorps) to build the volunteering infrastructure, particularly in economically distressed, low- volunteer communities.

Provide financial operating support to nonprofits that support volunteer programs, particularly in low- volunteerism and rural communities.

Declining volunteerism: Conclusion

Declining volunteerism in the U.S. is a symptom of deeper structural and contextual fractures – especially in rural and economically vulnerable communities. These trends require urgent, customized interventions integrating civic development with economic strategy. Leaders across sectors must act now to rebuild the systems that sustain American volunteerism.

We cannot both shrink government and expand volunteerism. A strong, stable, people-focused government goes hand-in-hand with volunteering and civic engagement. While volunteers can significantly impact their communities, volunteerism cannot replace the role of government in sustaining strong communities.

Disclosure: The authors used Chatgpt to help distill key findings and implications. All content has been reviewed, edited, and revised by the authors.

- Paarlberg, Laurie E., Nesbit, Rebecca, Choi, Su Young, and Moss, Ryan. (2022) “The Rural/Urban Volunteering Divide.” *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 33(1): 107-120. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00401-2>
- Nesbit, Rebecca, Paarlberg, Laurie E., Jo, Suyeon (2025) “The Decline of Volunteering in the United States: Is it the Economy?” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 54(3): 583-613, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08997640241264264>

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