

Volunteering in rural and urban communities isn't one-size-fits-all

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Rebecca Nesbit and Laurie E. Paarlberg argue that volunteering cannot be a one-size-fits-all solution, as the experiences of rural and urban communities demonstrate

Volunteering looks different depending on where you live. Rural communities traditionally show slightly higher rates of secular volunteering than urban areas (Paarlberg et al 2022), but why that difference exists has never been clear. Most explanations lean on culture, norms, or personal networks. Our research takes a different approach. We ask: How does the mix of local organizations shape [volunteering in rural and urban places?](#)

Using more than a decade of national data, we compare how diverse types of organizations influence volunteering across rural and urban places. The results reveal that the organizational infrastructure does not operate the same way everywhere. Some organizations matter far more in rural communities. Others shape volunteering only in urban settings. Understanding these patterns helps communities strengthen their civic fabric with strategies that match local realities.

Key findings

1. Nonprofit density amplifies volunteering in both rural and urban communities. Across the country, one pattern is remarkably consistent: more nonprofits mean more opportunities and more volunteer engagement.
2. Rural volunteering is amplified by the density of commercial and nonprofit organizations, particularly small businesses, small nonprofits, and elite-oriented nonprofits (e.g. universities, and arts nonprofits). In rural counties, these organizations function as community anchors – highly visible, relationship-driven institutions that encourage participation through social ties and local leadership. Schools and welfare-oriented nonprofits, however, have a substitution effect that dampens volunteering.
3. Small businesses play a uniquely powerful civic role in rural America. These firms act as social and economic hubs, and their impact on volunteering is distinctly stronger in rural communities than in urban ones. If urban and rural counties experienced the same “civic boost” from small businesses, the volunteering gap would widen dramatically.
4. Urban volunteering is amplified by bridging nonprofits and dampened by bonding nonprofits. Urban residents respond most strongly to organizations that connect diverse groups and circulate opportunities across social boundaries. In contrast, bonding nonprofits – those rooted in homogeneous networks –dampen volunteering among people outside those circles.

5. Organizational effects – not the number of different types of organizations in the community – drive the rural/urban volunteering gap. Although rural and urban places differ in the size and density of local organizations, those differences do not explain the gap in volunteering. Instead, the gap is explained by differences in the effects of these organizations on volunteering across rural and urban areas.

Implications: Why organizational infrastructure matters for rural and urban communities

These findings reveal that place shapes how organizations operate as civic actors. The implications are instructive for leaders who want to strengthen engagement.

Rural communities may rely more on strong-tie, interpersonal networks, meaning that organizations in rural places work through relationships rather than formality. Small businesses, small nonprofits, and even elite-oriented nonprofits may foster volunteerism because they are locally embedded – residents know the owners, staff, and board members personally. In these settings, civic expectations are transmitted socially rather than bureaucratically.

Rural schools and welfare-oriented nonprofits can inadvertently substitute for volunteers. In rural areas, schools may take on multifunctional roles – community centers, gathering spaces, public venues – which can reduce the need for volunteer-run alternatives. Welfare-oriented nonprofits may rely more heavily on staff due to capacity constraints, dampening volunteer demand.

Urban communities operate differently. People engage through formal organizations and weak-tie networks, so bridging nonprofits – those that connect individuals across social classes – become essential civic intermediaries. Bonding nonprofits, such as nonprofit associations, have the opposite effect: their inward focus suppresses broader community volunteering and increases segmentation.

In summary, our decomposition analysis shows that organizational effects are stronger in rural areas overall. The civic boost from small businesses, elite-oriented nonprofits, and nonprofit density is simply more potent in rural counties. Community differences alone don't explain the volunteering gap; it is the differential impact of organizations that matters.

Together, these patterns underscore the simple but powerful idea: the same organization can play very different civic roles depending on where it is located. Strengthening civic life requires strategies tailored to place rather than one-size-fits-all approaches.

From insight to action: Recommendations

For community leaders

- Partner with small businesses to host volunteer events, sponsor local initiatives, or serve as civic “third places.”

- Strengthen cross-sector collaboration among schools, nonprofits, local government, and small businesses to ensure each institution's civic role is complementary rather than substitutive.
- Support efforts that expand bridging ties in urban areas and deepen inclusive engagement in rural communities without over-relying on existing bonding networks.
- Public schools in rural communities can foster volunteering by encouraging community residents to support other local nonprofits.

For nonprofit managers

- In urban areas, prioritize roles and programs that build diverse social connections, especially through partnerships with bridging organizations.
- In rural communities, partner with small businesses and elite-oriented nonprofits to bolster volunteering and civic engagement – they are often more visible and trusted than traditional nonprofits.
- Be mindful of substitution effects: ensure schools and welfare organizations strategically integrate volunteers rather than unintentionally crowd them out.

For policymakers

- Incorporate organizational infrastructure metrics – especially small-business presence and nonprofit density – into community vitality assessments.
- Support rural economic development that strengthens local ownership and builds community-rooted enterprises.
- Invest in bridging organizations in urban areas where social segmentation limits volunteer pathways.
- Formally validate the role that small businesses play in civic life through leadership awards and recognitions.

The bottom line

Our research shows that civic infrastructure operates differently in rural and urban communities. Rural places benefit most from small businesses, elite nonprofits, and nonprofit density. Urban areas rely on bridging organizations and struggle when bonding nonprofits dominate. These differences are not quirks – they are signals that communities need place-specific strategies to strengthen civic life. When organizations align their civic roles with the social dynamics of place, volunteer engagement can flourish across America's diverse communities.

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