

Volunteerism Declined Among Young People

Yet interest in doing good reached a high point

By Sarah D. Sparks

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High school and college students are less likely to volunteer or give to charity today than they were 15 years ago, even as young adults express the most interest in community engagement in a half-century.

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The University of Maryland's Do Good Institute, which studies civics, used U.S. Census data to **track rates of volunteering and charitable giving by Americans from high school age to retirement age, from 2002 to 2015.** Across every age group, volunteering has declined since 2005, it found. About 25 percent of teenagers volunteered in 2015, down from 28 percent in 2005—ending 30 years of rising volunteerism among high-school-age Americans. Less than a quarter donate to charity, a rate that has been flat since 2008.

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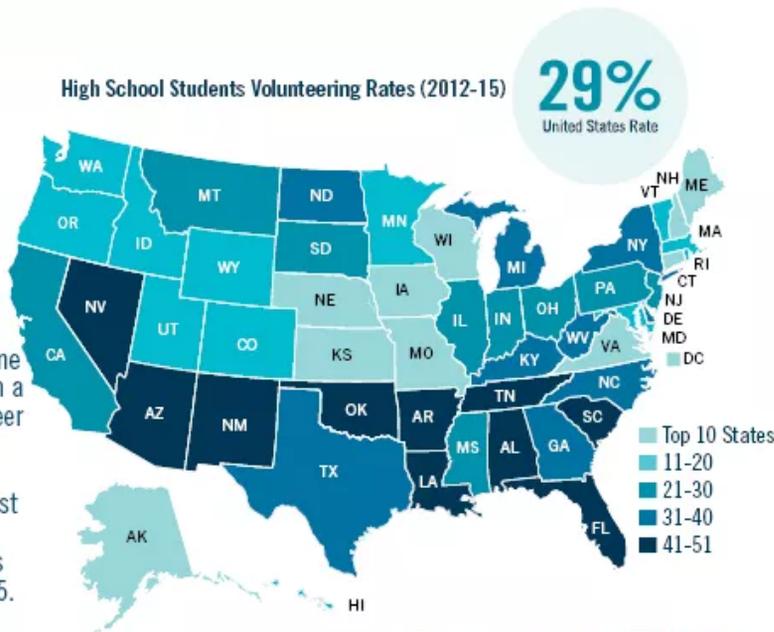
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"Civic engagement is much like a sport; you can't jump into a game without understanding the rules and practicing it. But many people think that citizens can get to age 18, jump in, and do well and care about [community service]," said Jennifer Bloom, the executive director of the Learning Law and Democracy Foundation, a nonprofit civic education organization in St. Paul, Minn., that was not involved with the study.

The study comes as states and districts debate the best way to engage young people in civics and community service in the wake of student protests in the spring against school shootings.

DOING GOOD: RATES BY STATE

While 29 percent of high school students across the country spend time volunteering or donating to charities, the rates vary dramatically among states. Maine tops the scale, with a high school volunteer rate of 44 percent. In Louisiana, the state with the lowest rate, just under 14 percent of students volunteered in 2015.



SOURCE: "Good Intentions, Gap in Action," Do Good Institute Research Brief

While tragedies like the shootings or the hurricanes that struck Texas and Florida last year often spark immediate sympathy from young people, they don't necessarily lead to longer-term engagement, said Nathan Dietz, an associate research scholar with the Do Good Institute. He co-wrote the study with Robert Grimm Jr.

"A disaster is self-initiating [for volunteers], but ... the key is learning to harness that energy to do things when there isn't a traumatic event," Dietz said. "Teaching engagement and ... innovation can help people have that experience on a smaller and less-traumatic scale."

The study found the civic drive at an all-time high among rising high school graduates. Of incoming college freshmen surveyed by the Census, nearly half wanted to become leaders in their communities, and 80 percent wanted to "help others

who are in difficulty."

Those rates are higher than any time since the Census began tracking the attitudes in the mid-1960s.

Learning Engagement

Teenagers overwhelmingly volunteer through organizations, the Do Good study found, with school-sponsored service activities leading the pack.

Although 41 states require students to take a civics course to graduate, just 11 require students to be involved in service learning projects, and only Maryland requires students to complete a set number of independent community-service hours to earn a high school diploma, according to a separate study by the Brookings Institution.

But the University of Maryland researchers **found** that differences in policies on civics or volunteering were not associated with the widely disparate state-level rates of volunteering and giving, and volunteering in high school looked very different in different states. Kansas, Maine, and Nebraska led the country, with more than 40 percent of students volunteering—while in Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, and Tennessee, fewer than 1 in 5 teenagers got involved. (The institute plans to release a follow-up study later this month, digging into what might be behind the differences in states' volunteering rates.)

Top-10 states Maine and Michigan both have service-learning requirements in their civics standards, but fellow leading states Kansas and Nebraska do not. Among the 10 states with the lowest volunteer rates, Alabama requires service learning, while Tennessee does not. In Maryland, the only state that requires community service hours for graduation, 34 percent of high school students and 33 percent of college students reported volunteering. That puts the Old Line State in the top 20 states for volunteering among those age groups, but far below the top volunteering states.

State policies "just don't have as much influence as people think they do," Dietz said. "There are other factors—[such as] the availability of good, appealing opportunities to volunteer that make young people feel they can make a difference—that are much more important in determining how much volunteering takes place among teenagers."

Dietz and Bloom argue that how schools structure those activities can make the difference between students who later disconnect and those who become lifelong volunteers. One-off school "volunteer days" generally don't help students reflect on their volunteering experiences and plan for future engagement.

For example, Bloom recalled her own children spending a day working in a soup kitchen—a common school-sponsored volunteering activity.

"They weren't asked to reflect on the problem [of food insecurity], just on their feelings," she said. "Well, my kids felt bad because of how many kids are hungry and so on, ... and it's good to be compassionate and committed, but they didn't understand the problem in a bigger way at all. So they didn't see a way through it. They didn't see where they are or how their time could be put to good use other than this one volunteering piece."

Prior studies of mandatory community-service hours also suggest students who were required to volunteer in high school are less likely to do so as adults.

Jackie Viana, the district supervisor for social studies at the Miami-Dade County, Fla., public schools, agreed. "I think there's a straight correlation between civic education and volunteering," Viana said. "Meaningful civic education should have that approach where you tell the students, 'This is how your government works; this is what happens in a community; what are you going to do about it?' However, when you tell a child, 'Listen, this is a mandate, you have to do this to graduate,' I don't know how well that works."

Volunteering can be a more substantive part of civics education, she and other experts say, if teachers tie service opportunities into broader discussions of social problems and how students can solve them. In Miami-Dade, 20 secondary schools participate in Project Citizen, an initiative by the Center on Civics Education in which students research a specific problem in their community, identify possible solutions, and work to change local or state laws.

"You have to teach content, how the government works," she said, "but as a civics teacher, I also felt it was my duty to teach students the ways they can be active in their community, where they can actively put what they learn into practice."

Bridging Generations

Tying volunteering to content can also help schools find time for more service activities, Bloom noted. In Minnesota, civics competes with a wide array of history and economics courses in the high school social studies curriculum.

"When we talk about volunteering, I really want to stress that it's everybody's responsibility in a school to have respect and care about classmates and the community and to see the opportunities to help out. That's not limited to civics," Bloom said. "But I'm always looking for what's the connection to what we already have to do in our very limited amount of time."

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The Do Good study also suggests schools may benefit from more intergenerational volunteering activities.

Parenting-age adults, those between 35 to 54, have seen an even sharper decline in volunteering than high-school-and-college-age Americans, the study found, but teenagers whose parents volunteered were significantly more likely to do so themselves.

Susan Ellis, the president of the volunteer-coordinating group Energize Inc., argued that educators should work more closely with community volunteer groups when developing service learning and school-sponsored volunteering days. "The problem is the service-learning movement was started by academics and pushed by education at the state level ... so it is focused entirely on school perspectives," Ellis said.

"But people need to understand there are a lot of ways kids, young adults, and older people can serve their communities together," she added. "When you keep 'service learning' and 'volunteering' in separate tracks, that's a loss."

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