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Volunteerism and Community Development: A Comparison of Factors Shaping Volunteer Behavior in Irish and American Communities

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Abstract

Individual volunteer efforts and voluntary organizations serve to meet a wide variety of community needs, and significantly contribute to local quality of life. This is particularly true in the rural communities of Ireland and Pennsylvania. This international comparative study was designed to assess factors shaping volunteerism in both locations. A mixed methods framework was used that included extensive key informant interviews and household survey data. Important differences were noted in the communities studied. In Ireland, sociodemographic characteristics and volunteer motivations largely shaped volunteerism. In America, social interaction variables alone shaped volunteer decisions. In both locations, the social interaction variables were the strongest predictor of voluntary behavior. From these findings, implications for future research and policy are presented.

Key Words:

volunteerism, community development, Ireland, behavior

Introduction

A need exists for program and policy interests in America and other industrialized nations to better understand the impact of volunteers in the rural and community development process (Brown & Swanson, 2003; Commins, Hamrick, Jansen, Murphy & Stenberg, 2000). Volunteers fill gaps in meeting social, economic, and community needs, and provide opportunities for individual selffulfillment in places that often have limited capacities to meet such needs. Voluntary action is vital to protecting,

retaining, and maintaining rural communities (Luloff & Bridger, 2003; Wilkinson, 1991). Similarly, as increased dependence on the voluntary sector occurs, it is important that we identify the factors contributing to participation in related activities. To facilitate this understanding, a central research question is presented: What conditions shape voluntary action and do these conditions differ in Irish and American communities?

The communities of Pennsylvania and Ireland are well suited for comparison

(Commins et al., 2000). Both areas have large rural populations, important natural resource bases, and have experienced extensive attempts at development by extra-local forces. Likewise both have had troubled rural economies characterized by consistent declines in agriculture and major extractive industries. Most important, both locations have seen a consistent trend of devolution where rural residents and, in particular, volunteers; have taken on an increased role in providing services and related functions. Some have suggested that the voluntary efforts of residents are necessary conditions for mitigating the negative forces impacting communities and enhancing the positive factors associated with social well-being (Luloff & Bridger, 2003; Luloff & Swanson, 1995).

To explore volunteerism and its connection to community development, an interactional perspective is presented. Following this perspective, people sharing a common territory interact with one another over place-relevant matters (Wilkinson, 1991). Voluntary action evolves out of these interactions and sets the stage for purposive efforts designed to meet common needs. Community development is therefore a process of building relationships that increase the adaptive capacity of people who share a common locality (Luloff & Swanson, 1995; Wilkinson, 1991). These capacities reflect the ability of local people to voluntarily organize, manage, utilize, and enhance those resources available to them in addressing local needs.

Review of Literature

Volunteers and their contributions are central to the development of community. To better identify volunteerism's role in the community development process, an understanding of community, voluntary action, and the factors shaping volunteerism

are needed.

Community, Voluntary Efforts, and Interaction

Many usages are associated with the concept of community. Sociological definitions tend to emphasize locality, structural components, and personal bonds that derive from a shared territory. Community is, however, much more than a geographic location. It is a social and psychological entity that represents a place, its people, and their interaction (Luloff & Bridger, 2003; Wilkinson, 1991).

In this setting, voluntary action and social participation are viewed as quintessential to the development of community.

From an interactional perspective, the community is a dynamic field of interaction rather than a rigid system (Brown & Swanson, 2003; Luloff & Bridger, 2003). This process reflects the building of relationships among diverse groups of residents in pursuit of common community interests (Luloff & Bridger, 2003; Wtlkinson, 1991). Through voluntary efforts, individuals interact with one another, and begin to mutually understand common needs (Luloff & Swanson, 1995). From this interaction, voluntary efforts to improve the social, cultural, and psychological needs of local people emerge.

Ultimately, the development of community is an active process involving diverse segments of the locality. The key component to this process is found in the creation and maintenance of channels of interaction and communication among diverse local groups that otherwise are directed toward more limited interests (Luloff & Bridger, 2003). Where these relationships can be established and maintained, increases in local adaptive capacity materialize. Through this process and through active volunteer efforts, community can emerge.

Factors Shaping Volunteerism

Recent research suggests that giving and volunteering have reached record highs in the last decade (Independent Sector, 2001). This behavior is shaped by a variety of factors. For example, sociodemographic variables have been linked to volunteerism and social participation. Most research indicates that older females, with higher levels of education, higher incomes, who are married, and have an overall higher socioeconomic status are more likely to participate in formal volunteer efforts (Cook, 1993; Cox, 2000; Smith, 1994).

Alternately, other research sees individuals of lower socioeconomic status as sometimes being involved in informal volunteerism. Smith (1994) suggests that such individuals may view voluntary activities as routine social support behaviors (common courtesy, neighborliness), and not as formal volunteer activities. Household size is also seen as being important, reflecting the importance of interaction between family members and the outside world in fostering opportunities for volunteerism (Independent Sector, 2001).

Volunteerism can also be the result of more practical conditions, such as a need to develop job contacts and enhance existing skills. In geographic areas where employment opportunities are limited, voluntary activities can offer a valuable alternative to paid employment (Clary, Snyder, & Ridge, 1992; Clary, Snyder, Copeland, & French, 1994; Independent Sector, 2001).

Individuals also volunteer for self-actualization (recognition, raising self-esteem) and social responsibility (setting an example, public duty) (Clary et al., 1994; Cook, 1993; Independent Sector, 2001). Finally, volunteerism is facilitated by participation in community-based groups. Interaction between social groups promotes awareness of needs and helps identify

volunteer opportunities (Luloff & Swanson, 1995; Wilkinson, 1991).

Overall, a variety of characteristics are seen as shaping volunteer behavior. Included are traditional factors (motivations and sociodemographics), but also the extent to which people interact with each other. Such conditions speak to the need for administrators to closely consider the unique local context in which these emerge and shape volunteer activity.

Methodology

Multiple research sites in Ireland and Pennsylvania and a mixed-methods research design were used to explore factors shaping volunteerism. Individual community residents served as the units of analysis. Their attitudes and opinions were used to determine levels of voluntary action, and factors that contributed to it. From these, generalizations to the wider community were drawn.

Communities were identified for study based on a typology of geographic location" (rural) and volunteer conditions (active volunteers). Killala, Ireland and Bedford, Pennsylvania were selected and matched for analysis. Both are situated in rural areas with a limited urban presence, have low population densities, and are characterized by population changes over the last decade due to in- and out-migration. The communities are similar with large farms, natural resource extractive industries, and limited manufacturing. The economies of Killala and Bedford are stable, but often threatened by changes in market demands and declines in local manufacturing industries.

In the two communities 24 key informant interviews were conducted. Key informants are individuals who, as a result of their knowledge, experience, or social status can provide insights and access to information valuable in understanding the issues, prob-

lems and needs of a community. These individuals consisted of public officials, activists, residents, religious representatives, local business members, and community development agents.

Among the positive conditions noted in the interviews were increased tourism to the areas, improvements to environmental quality, and the success of locally-based community improvement efforts. Concern was also voiced over declining economic conditions, infrastructure needs, outside development, and out-migration of younger residents. In both locations respondents indicated an active interest in enhancing locally based decision making.

These interviews helped guide the development of survey items and also facilitated the identification of appropriate existing measures to include in the questionnaire. The latter were reliably used in previous research (Claude, Bridger, & Luloff, 2000; Jacob, Bourke, & Luloff 1997; Luloff, et al., 1995).

Subsequent to the key informant interviews, a household survey of the local population was conducted to assess the relationship between local characteristics and volunteerism. In Killala, survey collection took place between March and June 2003 using a drop-off/pick-up methodology (Melby, Bourke, Luloff, Liao, Theodori, & Krannich, 2000). In Bedford, data was gathered between June and August 1995 through a mail survey (Luloff et al., 1995). Responses did not differ significantly between the two data collection methodologies or time periods.

While several years existed between the survey data collection periods, the data is comparable. Sociocultural changes that took place between the two time periods were assessed during the key informant interviews. None were seen as dramatically changing the context in which local volunteerism emerged. Further, in both

datasets, the same site selection criteria, similar data collection methods, and identical question formats were used.

A total of 407 Killala and 800 Bedford households were randomly selected. In Killala, 255 completed questionnaires were obtained (response rate of 65%--excluding undeliverables). In Bedford, 343 completed questionnaires were obtained (54% response rate). These samples and response rates were sufficient to limit sampling error and be statistically representative of the population at a .05 level (Isaac & Michael, 1997).

A variety of characteristics including sociodemographics, volunteer motivation factors, and measures of social interaction were assessed in the questionnaire. Participation in voluntary action was measured by several questions: Do you belong to any local club, group or organization? Approximately how many clubs, groups or organizations do you belong to? How many hours a month do you spend in organized activities with other members of this community? How would you describe your level of involvement in local activities, events, or organizations? These variables were combined into a composite scale (Cronbach's Alpha = .81).

Sociodemographic variables included age, gender, household size, educational attainment, marital status, employment status, and income. Volunteer motivation items assessed the importance of monetary compensation, recognition, setting an example, the need for new ideas, the need for better services, dissatisfaction with local decision making, contribution of skills, enjoyment of local politics, the need for less spending, getting acquainted with people, public duty, being asked by local leaders, and being urged by friends.

Assessments of frequency of interaction include, How often do you meet with the following: family, close friends, acquaintances, neighbors." Interaction was

also measured by asking respondents if they interacted with others in nonrequired group activities. These variables were analyzed individually and also combined into a composite scale (Cronbach's Alpha= .73).

Analysis of Data

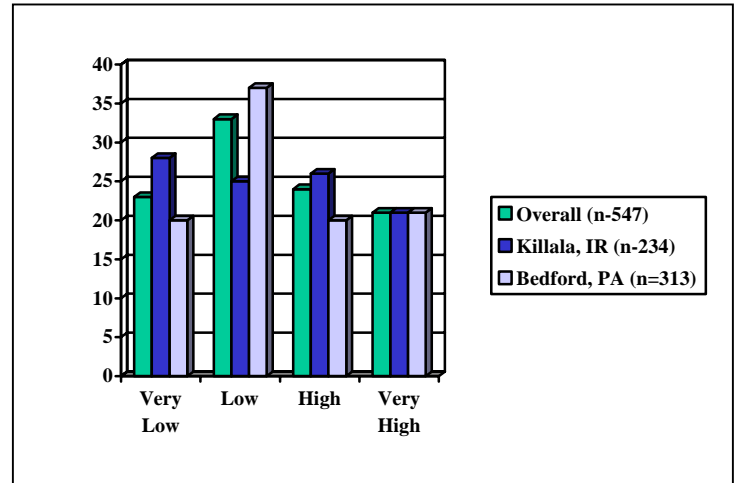
Sociodemographic characteristics were first assessed. Compared across communities, Bedford respondents showed a slightly higher proportion of males, lived in their community longer, had higher levels of education, smaller households, and had higher incomes than did the Killala respondents. Participation in voluntary actions was compared next.

Comparison of Voluntary Action

Half of all respondents belonged to local groups or voluntary organizations. Most of the respondents belonged to one or two groups (30%) and the majority (64%) contributed four hours or less per month to local groups. Sixty percent reported their level of involvement in the community as being "not very" or "not at all active." These four variables were included in the composite score reflecting voluntary action. Using this scale, 56% of respondents were categorized as exhibiting either low or somewhat low levels of voluntary action (Figure 1).

Volunteerism was next compared across nations. Belonging to local groups, and the number of groups belonged to, did not statistically differ between the JM'0 sites. However, Bedford respondents contributed more hours per month and were more likely to view themselves as being very active in their communities than were Killala respondents. All of these influenced scores for American respondents on the voluntary action scale.

FIGURE 1
Level of Voluntary Activity



Sociodemographic Correlates of Volunteerism

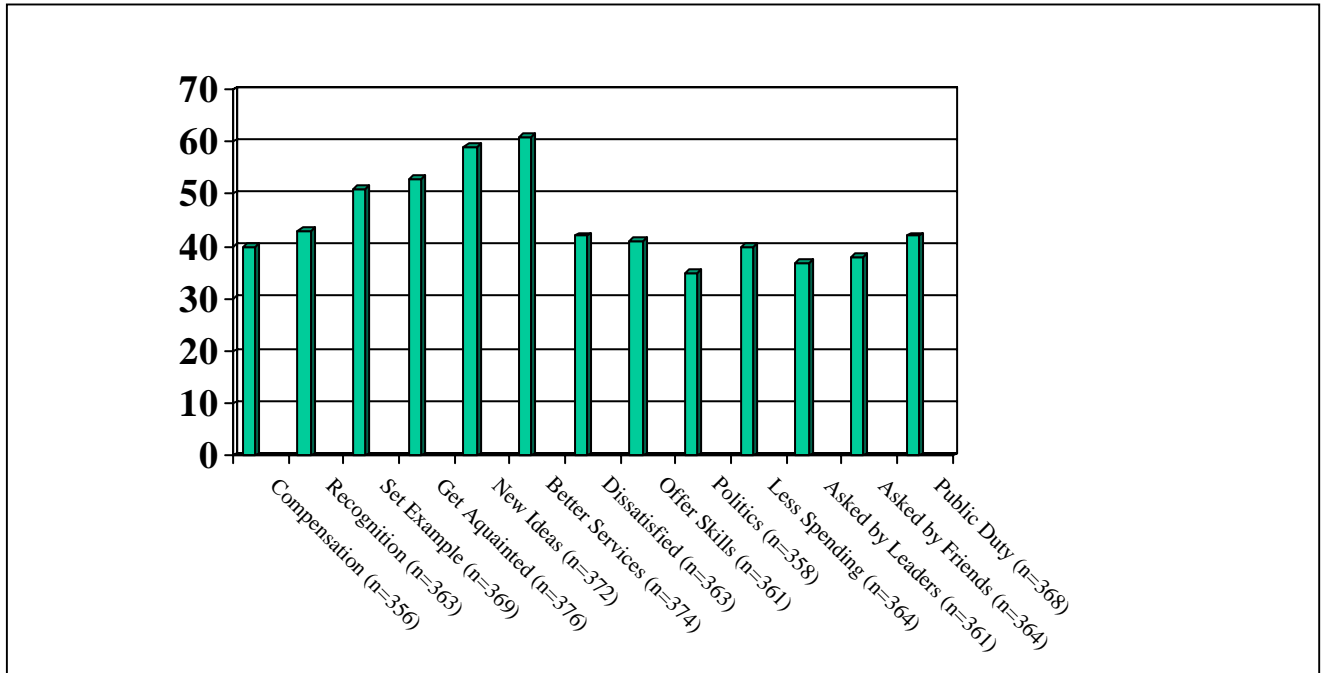
Several of the sociodemographic variables were significantly correlated to level of voluntary action. Included were household size, educational attainment, length of residence, and income. All were positively related, indicating that as they increased, so too did volunteerism. The significance of these variables differed greatly by community, however.

In Bedford, only educational attainment was significantly related to voluntary action, with more educated respondents being more active (Appendix 1). However, in Killala a variety of sociodemographics were important (age, marital status, household size, length of residence, employment status, and income).

Motivational Factor Correlates of Volunteerism

Several motivations for volunteerism were statistically significant. Included were volunteering because a need existed: for better local services (62%), new ideas (59%), as a way to get acquainted (53%), and to set an example for others (51 %) (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2
“Very Important” Motivations for Volunteering



In Bedford, an enjoyment of local politics was the only condition correlated with voluntary action; in Killala, setting an example, getting acquainted, dissatisfaction with local conditions, the need for new ideas, better services, and having valuable skills to contribute were significantly related (Appendix 1). Also important in Killala were an enjoyment of local politics, a need for less spending, being asked by local leaders or asked by friends, and the sense of public duty.

Social Interaction Correlates of Volunteerism

One third of the respondents reported interacting with others in non-required group activities outside work. Respondents also reported interacting once or more per week with family (77%), friends (54%), neighbors (54%), and acquaintances (28%). Taken together as a composite score, respondents who interacted more frequently

with others were more likely to take part in voluntary activities (Figure 3).

All five interaction variables were statistically correlated to participation in voluntary activity (Appendix 1). These measures of social interaction were among the highest correlations of volunteer behavior. Compared across communities, Killala reflected this overall picture. However, in Bedford, only interacting in nonrequired group activity and frequency of interaction with acquaintances were significant.

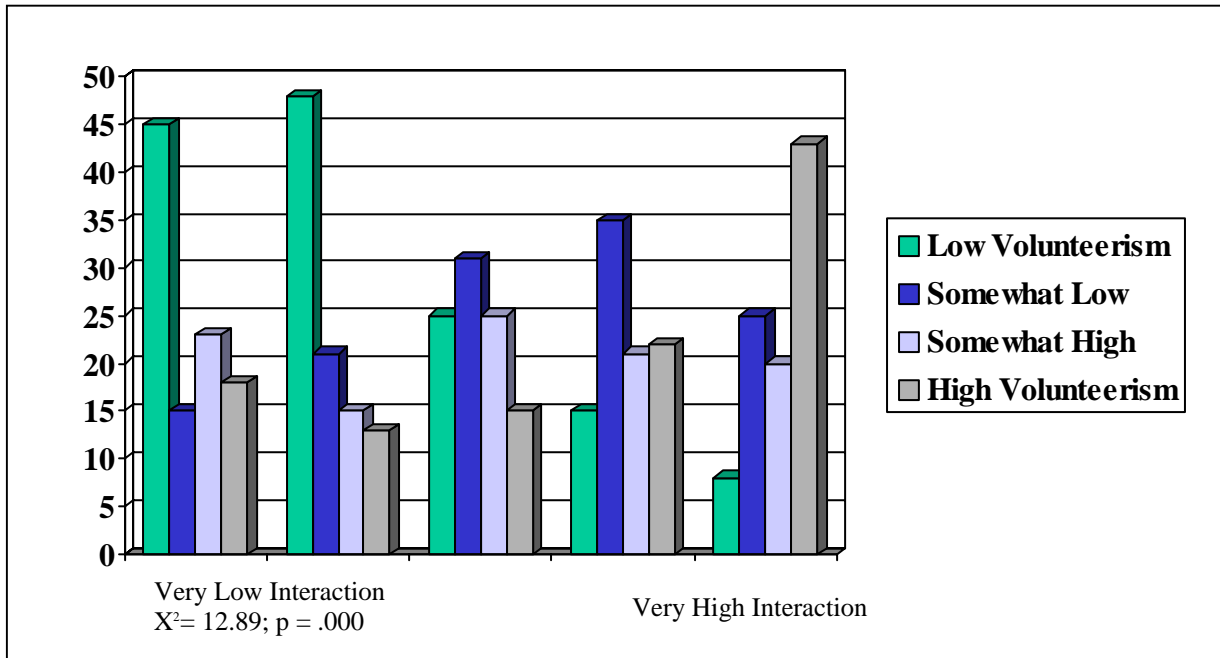
Implications for Volunteer Administration and Conclusion

The utilization of volunteers, and the services that they provide, continue to be of vital importance to community development efforts in Pennsylvania and Ireland. This study was based on the premise that through volunteering, local residents have the capacity to enhance local community well-

being. It reflects input from 24 key informants and 598 residents in Ireland and Pennsylvania who participated in a survey

assessing development and volunteer issues facing their communities.

FIGURE 3
Level of Voluntary Activity by Level of Interaction (n=547)



As seen in previous research, a variety of factors shaped volunteerism in both locations. Equally important, the value of these characteristics varied greatly across communities. This, in part, highlights the need to closely consider the unique context of local life that shapes the impact of these variables and ultimately volunteerism. In Killala, sociodemographic characteristics, volunteer motivations, and levels of interaction all played an important role. In Bedford, social interaction variables alone largely shaped volunteer decisions. However, in both communities, it was the social interaction variables that showed the strongest correlations to voluntary behavior. Such findings support those of previous research (Goudy, 1990; Luloff et al., 1995).

Volunteer administrators would do well to focus on social interaction as a key to

advancing volunteer efforts. This interaction provides an environment where awareness of community needs increases, social networks evolve, and opportunities for volunteerism are presented. Interaction with family and friends also increases awareness of issues with strong emotional ties that impact relatives, siblings, and children. Alternately, increased interactions with neighbors and acquaintances are likely to represent broad community needs and areas for contributing to local well-being (Granovetter, 1973).

Applied uses of these findings could take the form of linking volunteer activities with local social groups, clubs, and organizations in which residents freely participate. To benefit from the interaction with family and friends, volunteer programs could coordinate with educational groups, sports

clubs, social/civic groups, and religious organizations. Similarly, to capitalize on interaction with acquaintances and neighbors, volunteer efforts could be linked with local business/professional associations, neighborhood groups, religious organizations/events and homeowner associations. Such organizations could be made aware of community needs and encouraged to have outreach programs that partner with ongoing voluntary activities. By coordinating efforts between groups, greater impact can be made in meeting local needs and contributing to local well-being.

In addition to the social interaction variables, the impact of sociodemographics and volunteer motivation factors were unique in each community. By focusing on these in the context of local life, customized advances can be made to local volunteer efforts.

While the significant sociodemographic characteristics support previous research, these variables should serve as an indicator of who is involved in the community and who is not. It is possible that those identified as being active may volunteer because of self interest, whereas those who are not active may be discouraged to volunteer out of social exclusion conditions (income level, employment status). Administrators can use these sociodemographics to remain cognizant of such conditions. In this research, such local context can be seen. In Killala, for example, various socio-demographic indicators contributed to volunteerism, while in Bedford such factors were largely unrelated. Equally important, those significant in Killala reflect the importance of interaction. There, factors such as length of residence, household size, and marital status all shape the amount and substance of interaction with other community members.

Similarly, the significant volunteer motivation variables present opportunities

for volunteer administration. These variables can also be seen as being shaped by local context. In Killala many of these were significant, while in Bedford only one was important. Generally, significant variables represented social responsibility and personal conditions. In Killala, this was likely the result of the social and cultural factors present. There, volunteerism served as a social support function, as well as a means for personal and professional growth. In Bedford, local conditions dictated that such factors were less important in shaping volunteerism.

Applied efforts could include promoting volunteerism as a venue for civic engagement and social participation that directly contributes to local quality of life. Recruitment efforts could stress that local volunteers make a difference and play important roles in providing services, skills, and new ideas. Similarly, volunteer recruitment could stress that local people have a duty, responsibility, and clearly defined role in contributing to their communities. Capitalizing on more personal conditions, recruitment drives could include public and personal calls for volunteers from local officials, encouragement of friend/family volunteer partnership opportunities, and efforts to publicly highlight the benefits that volunteering brings to personal and community well-being.

Conclusions

In many ways, the attitudes, beliefs, actions, and opinions of residents in the American and Irish communities were similar despite vast historical, cultural, and social differences. While differences were noted in the areas of sociodemographic characteristics and volunteer motivational factors, it was social interaction that most directly correlated with volunteer behaviors in both nations. Volunteer administrators and program managers would do well to

focus on the importance of such interaction in their recruitment and management efforts. By incorporating both the research findings presented here, and the unique local context present in our communities, administrators can develop more effective and focused volunteer efforts. From these, significant contributions to community development and social well-being can be made.

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About the Author

M. A. Brennan's teaching, research, writing, and program development concentrates on the role of volunteerism and community involvement/action in the community development process. Of particular interest has been the impact of rapid social change on communities, natural resource management, tourism, and local culture. He has over 15 years of experience designing, conducting, and analyzing research. This work has resulted in over 20 publications in journals, books, reports and over 25 Cooperative Extension fact sheets. He has conducted comparative research extensively throughout America, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Japan.

**Appendix 1:
Bivariate Analysis of Factors Shaping Voluntary Action by Location**

	Bedford, PA		Killala, Ireland		Overall	
	(n=343)		(n=255)		(n=598)	
	Voluntary Action	Voluntary Action	Voluntary Action	Voluntary Action	Voluntary Action	Voluntary Action
	Correlation	Chi-Square	Correlation	Chi-Square	Correlation	Chi-Square
Social Interaction ¹						
How Often Meet Family	.01	14.74	.23**	45.10**	.12**	32.53**
How Often Meet Friends	.01	15.11	.32**	52.68	.15**	43.55**
How Often Meet Acquaintances	.21 **	26.98*	.19**	44.97**	.20**	51.38**
How Often Meet Neighbors	.11 *	18.75*	.16*	58.58**	.14**	55.17**
Interacting in Non Required Activities (Yes/No)	.41 **	26.14**	.79**	153.14**	.62**	152.19**
Sociodemographic Characteristics						
Length of Residence (In Years)	.01	6.08	.42**	59.66**	.26**	61.64**
Education Level (1-Less than High School to 5-Graduate Degree)	.18**	20.56*	-.05	13.85	.11 **	20.96*
Age (in Years)	-.02	8.92	.23**	31.94	.08	15.85
Marital Status (Never Married, Married, Divorced, Widowed)	.01	7.66	.04	54.50**	.03	52.94**
Household Size (Number of Residents)	.07	6.17	.33**	37.05**	.19**	25.93**
Employment Status (Employed, Homemaker, Unemployed, Retired)	.05	10.24	-.18**	41.66**	-.03	43.87**
Income (1- Less than \$10,000 to 6 - \$50,000 or More)	.08	31.85*	.21 **	34.74**	.12**	57.01**
Gender (Females=0, Males=1)	.05	.87	-.09	3.78	-.01	0.27
Volunteer Motivations²						
Monetary Compensation	.05	6.16	-.01	6.01	-.02	8.91
Recognition and Prestige	.17	8.33	.10	4.53	.07	8.48
Setting Example	.03	4.47	.29**	22.39**	.19**	15.43*
Getting Acquainted	.00	6.17	.24**	25.65**	.13*	8.12
Need for New Ideas	.77	5.03	.24**	18.88*	.14**	10.29
Need for Better Services	-.09	4.23	.14*	22.70**	.12*	6.97
Dissatisfaction	-.14	8.13	.14*	7.98	.02	2.97
Having Professional Skills	.04	9.68	.15*	8.85	.10	6.34
Enjoying Politics	.20*	11.85	.25**	19.93**	.19**	16.35**
Need for Less Spending	-.07	1.19	.22**	14.41 *	.12*	7.08
Being Asked by Leaders	-.06	1.99	.29**	22.23**	.15**	10.89
Being Urged by Friends	.12	5.41	.25**	17.10**	.19**	14.68*
Public Duty	-.02	4.57	.28**	25.51**	.17**	12.07

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

¹Response options for each were: 1) Never, 2) A few times a year, 3) Once a month, 4) A few times a month, 5) Once a week, and 6) More than once a week.

²Response options for each were: 1) Not at all important, 2) Important, and 3) Very important