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How Individuals Begin Volunteering

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When volunteers are asked how they initially become involved in community service activities at a particular organization, most report either that they approached the organization themselves, or that they were asked by someone to become involved. Those who are asked are usually approached by the organization, a family member, or a friend.² As with other volunteer measures, the percentage of individuals becoming involved through the different means varies across state and age groups.³

The Current Population Survey (CPS) September Volunteer Supplement of 2003 records how individuals initially become involved in volunteer activity at their primary volunteer organization.⁴ As seen in Table 1, the older group (comprised of those aged 26 and older) is more likely to be asked to volunteer, particularly by the organization or school. Other than that, though, there are few and small differences across age groups. Across all age groups, approximately equal percentages of volunteers report approaching the organization as report being asked. When individuals are asked by someone, most report that the organization asked them, though family members and friends account for a sizeable portion of all volunteer beginnings.

Table 1: Volunteers:
How did you initially become involved in volunteer activity?*

	16-18 yrs old	19-22 yrs old	23-25 yrs old	26+ yrs old
2003				
Approached the organization/school	42%	44%	40%	41%
Was asked by someone	42%	41%	42%	44%
Asked by someone in org/school	23%	22%	23%	28%
Asked by family or friend	17%	15%	15%	12%

(*) % of volunteers in age cohort

Source: Current Population Survey September Volunteer Supplement: 2003

In 2003, a few states noticeably differed from the national trend, as seen in Table 2. For example, 59% of 16-25 year old volunteers in Virginia took the initiative when beginning volunteer activity, approaching the organization. Volunteers in Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Washington had a more proactive approach as well, with at least half of 16-25 year olds approaching the organization. On the other hand, in some states, organizations were more likely to lead volunteer recruitment. In Utah, 57% of 16-25 year old volunteers reported that they initially became involved with the organization after it asked them to be involved. Second to Utah's volunteers in this group were Idaho's, with 41% of volunteers in Idaho reporting an organization asked them to become involved. Generally, a smaller percentage reported that a

family member or friend had first asked them to become involved. Volunteers age 16-25 in Illinois and Vermont were more likely to have been asked by a friend or relative to become involved, at 27% and 23% of volunteers in the state, respectively. In contrast are 16-25 year old volunteers in Utah, where only 4% were initially asked to become involved by a family member or friend.

Similar patterns emerge with 26+ year olds in 2003. In Massachusetts, Oregon, and Missouri, 46% of individuals first became involved after they approached the organization. On the other hand, it was more common for volunteers 26 years old and older in Utah to be initially asked by the organization, as 57% of volunteers in the state reported such. Volunteers in Nebraska trailed Utah, with 40% reporting the same. In this older group, family members and friends played a smaller role. They were most important in New Mexico and Kansas where 17% and 15% of volunteers, respectively, reported being asked by a friend or relative to become involved. Again, Utah's volunteers were least likely to report such initial contact, with only 6% of volunteers reporting such.

Table 2 – 2003
Volunteers: How did you initially become involved with this organization?⁵

<i>State</i>	16-25 years old			26+ years old		
	% approaching organization	% asked by organization	% asked by family or friend	% approaching organization	% asked by organization	% asked by family or friend
Alaska	43%	24%	9%	38%	21%	12%
California	48%	22%	14%	43%	26%	14%
Colorado	47%	20%	13%	39%	29%	9%
Connecticut	42%	10%	10%	40%	21%	14%
Florida	42%	16%	16%	42%	26%	9%
Georgia	37%	22%	19%	41%	29%	11%
Idaho	25%	41%	12%	35%	34%	11%
Illinois	34%	25%	27%	44%	25%	10%
Indiana	48%	22%	11%	44%	21%	12%
Iowa	37%	26%	15%	39%	30%	12%
Kansas	36%	35%	8%	34%	29%	15%
Maine	40%	22%	17%	37%	31%	13%
Maryland	33%	31%	13%	42%	28%	13%
Massachusetts	55%	10%	15%	46%	27%	8%
Michigan	38%	26%	13%	38%	28%	12%
Minnesota	39%	19%	22%	38%	35%	9%
Missouri	47%	18%	20%	46%	29%	12%
Nebraska	41%	29%	11%	33%	40%	10%
Nevada	28%	39%	21%	45%	32%	10%
New Hampshire	44%	14%	13%	41%	17%	11%
New Jersey	55%	17%	17%	41%	27%	12%
New Mexico	42%	17%	13%	39%	20%	17%
New York	42%	21%	15%	43%	21%	14%
North Carolina	35%	19%	15%	39%	30%	10%
North Dakota	29%	32%	13%	35%	31%	14%
Ohio	33%	24%	15%	42%	26%	12%
Oregon	45%	22%	16%	46%	21%	14%
Pennsylvania	39%	22%	17%	39%	32%	11%
South Dakota	42%	26%	15%	35%	33%	12%
Texas	43%	29%	12%	41%	28%	13%
Utah	32%	57%	4%	24%	57%	6%
Vermont	35%	14%	23%	38%	25%	14%
Virginia	59%	10%	13%	45%	28%	12%
Washington	52%	14%	22%	42%	27%	14%
Wisconsin	46%	21%	16%	39%	28%	12%
Wyoming	34%	31%	20%	30%	38%	12%
National	42%	23%	15%	41%	28%	12%

Source: Current Population Survey, September 2003 Volunteer Supplement. Statistics for a number of states, including Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Delaware DC, Hawaii, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Montana, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, and West Virginia were not included due to small sample sizes.⁶

Notes

¹ Sincere thanks to Peter Levine, Mark Hugo Lopez, Carrie Donovan, and Emily Kirby for their helpful comments on earlier drafts. All remaining errors in fact or interpretation are my own.

² I focus on these two means of initial involvement in volunteer activity because they account for an overwhelming majority of volunteers. As seen below, more than 80% of individuals either approach the organization or are asked by someone to become involved in volunteer activity. Further, of those who are asked, a majority report that they were asked by the organization/school at which the volunteer activity took place. Including those asked by a family member or friend accounts for more than 90% of all responses to this follow up question.

	% of volunteers
Approached the organization	40.8%
Was asked	43.6%
Includes CPS Volunteer Supplement respondents age 16 years old or older Source: Current Population Survey September Volunteer Supplement, 2003	

³ For example, see *Youth Volunteering in the States: 2002 and 2003* and *Patterns of Volunteering: 2002 and 2003* by Sara Helms, available through CIRCLE.

⁴ CPS Volunteer Supplement data are available for 2002 and 2003. For the most part, they tell a consistent story, so this fact sheet uses the 2003 data. However, certain states have sizeable differences between the years. For example, in Massachusetts, the percentage of volunteers age 16-25 who approached the organization was 24 percentage points higher in 2003 than in 2002. Correspondingly, the percentage of volunteers who were asked by someone to volunteer was 24 percentage points lower. Nonetheless, such changes do not constitute a consistent pattern.

⁵ All calculations computed only for supplement respondents age 16+ who reported volunteer activity in the past 12 months. Approximately 2 percent of volunteers age 16+ do not report a valid answer for 'How did you first become involved in volunteer activity?' (About 2.7 percent of volunteers age 16-25 and 2.3 percent of those 26+ did not have a valid answer.) I omitted these individuals from the tabulation of how respondents first became involved in volunteer activity.

⁶ While I am not confident of the meaning of the results, the statistics for these states' volunteer activity among 16-25 year olds are available upon request.