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WORKING PAPER

Deciphering Trends in American Volunteering



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DECIPHERING TRENDS IN AMERICAN VOLUNTEERING

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Abstract:

In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam found public volunteering in formal organizations to be one of the few exceptions to his long list of social capital activities that had suffered declining participation. More recently, declining response rates in surveys were cited as a reason for this apparent increase. The present article examines this issue by comparing longer-term [volunteering](#) trends since the 1970s from several sources of national data, most of which have paid close attention to maximizing response rates. Unlike Putnam's evidence, trends from each source suggest rather constant volunteering rates across time, particularly since 2002. The conclusion is reinforced by survey data on respondent estimates and time-diary surveys of the amount of *time spent* doing volunteer work. In contrast, there is diary evidence of declining time spent since 2003 in "informal volunteering" that is done directly, not through an organization. The latter finding thus seems to fit the thesis of declining social capital better than the constancies found for formal volunteering, even though informal volunteering was not explicitly examined by Putnam and many of the trend lines generated here have occurred since his publication.

In Chapter 7 of *Bowling Alone*, his comprehensive documenting of the decline of social capital in America in the second half of the 20th century, Putnam (2000, p. 127) noted how “Trends in volunteering over the last several decades are more complicated and in some respects more intriguing than the uniform decline that characterizes most dimensions of social capital in America in this period.” When Putnam (p. 128) analyzed the data by age group, he found greater volunteering by older, especially retired, persons accounted for most of the observed increase, although there was also an increase in volunteering among those 25 or under. On page 133, he concluded that “..... young Americans in the 1990s displayed a commitment to volunteerism without parallel among their immediate predecessors: This development is the most promising sign of any I have discovered that America may be on the cusp of civic renewal “ .

Much subsequent research has challenged Putnam’s main conclusions, however. Some time-series data show that the decline in association activity that Putnam pointed to for 1965-2000 has *not* appeared in other surveys. Andersen et al. (2006) used formal volunteering as measured by time-diaries from the mid-1960s to the late 1990s to show a decline in association activity in the USA, especially after 1975. Inconsistent with Putnam was the finding that the American decline in association membership involved only women, even when other social background and activity variables (including television watching, paid work, childcare, and physical activity) were controlled statistically. These findings refute the contention that the US decline in association activity -was due significantly to increased time in TV watching (and to a long American “civic generation” with its special civic engagement traits). Men also watched more TV, and many were part of that generation but showed no general decline in participation.

People in the three other comparable nations of Canada, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands countries also watched television more frequently over this period and were not part of America’s civic generation, but they showed no decline in association activity for either gender, let alone overall (Anderson et al, 2006). Research by Goss (1999), Tiehen (2000), and Rotolo and Wilson (2004) further supports the inadequacy of the television and of the civic generation hypotheses regarding the Putnam-observed American decline of association activity in the last half of the 20th century. Thus, the decline of memberships in traditional kinds of associations in the USA does not show up in *other* nations with any regularity. Research by Baer et al. (2001) and by Dekker and van den Broek (2005) from 15+ countries [also](#) refutes Putnam’s main conclusion about declining association membership, finding stability or growth to be the usual result. These same studies also show Putnam’s secondary thesis about declining association activity among association members not to hold also elsewhere in the world. If anything, there is stability or even growth for *active* memberships in nearly all countries studied than for passive (inactive) memberships.

It has now been more than 10 years since the publication of Putnam’s book, a period during which many new national survey data sources on the topic of volunteering have been established or updated in the USA. This has also been a period, particularly since 2008, of economic crisis that threatened and put a severe strain on this measure of the nation’s social “safety net.” This crisis could result in an increase of volunteering 1)

by those still employed to help those out of work or otherwise in need or 2) by those out of work to have more time to help others. It could also be the case that the effects of declining social capital would spill over and now threaten this “last bastion” of social capital.

The Importance and Impact of Volunteering: Volunteering and voluntary associations have been seen by some as a special American institution, starting with de Toqueville (1976) in the 1830s. However, Brown (1973) has argued that de Tocqueville would have seen much lower levels of volunteering and associations if he had arrived 50 years earlier. American social structure underwent massive changes due to industrialization and related factors in the period from 1780-1830. Moreover, almost 40 years ago, several chapters in Smith (1974) argued that volunteering and voluntary associations are present on all continents and probably in all contemporary societies. Other nations, especially in Scandinavia, are consistently higher in formal volunteering and association participation, although America remains quite high in these aspects of social capital. Most recently, the World Gallup Poll (Charities Aid Foundation 2010) studied representative samples in 153 nations, with significant formal volunteering being present in every nation, and 11 having the same or higher rates than America.

Volunteering has been shown to have many positive and substantial impacts on the volunteer and on the larger society. Formal volunteering tends to enhance the skills and human capital of volunteers (Peccianti 2006; Powell 2007; Wilson 2000:132-133). This particular impact is especially important for women not in the labor force, but also important for other kinds of volunteers as well. Ruiter and De Graff (2009) and Wilson and Musick (2003) have shown that voluntary association participation tends to result in higher status and better paying jobs.

North America is distinctive in the extent to which there is volunteer participation in social movements and political protest activities, although surveys do not generally pick up all of this activity (Statistics Canada 2009: 38; White 2006:69; Verba et al. 1995). Gamson (1990:53) has shown that such social movement organization activity over the period from 1800 to 1945 in America has been successful in achieving new advantages for participants. Other extensive research in North America has shown how **Formal volunteering (FV)** and even association membership alone has beneficial effects on length of life (longevity), physical health, mental health, recovery from illness, happiness/life satisfaction, positive emotions/affect, personal and psychological empowerment, political empowerment, sense of safety or security, information and ideas, religious worldview, personal growth for self-actualization, skills and human capital, and entertainment-recreation-fun (Smith 2010). It should not be surprising then that health-attentive citizens would become aware of and take advantage of these benefits.

THE CURRENT RESEARCH QUESTION

The present article documents more recent trends in volunteering in America using additional data sources, especially recent time-diary data. Our specific research question is, how do such data relate to Putnam’s (2000) conclusions about increasing

volunteering in America in an era of declining social capital since 1965? Of particular interest is what the trend in volunteering is since 2000, particularly since the economic crisis of 2008.

Recently, Abraham et al. (2009) have provided an alternative explanation of the increases in volunteering observed by Putnam. They point to the recent declining public participation rates in surveys (itself a form of volunteering), with solid evidence from the American Time-Use Survey (ATUS). Those respondents who participated in this lengthy time-diary survey were significantly more likely to have also reported formal volunteering (in a survey conducted months earlier) than those who declined to participate in the ATUS. With the recent trend toward ever lower response rates in surveys (Curtin et al. 2003), one should expect increased reports of participation by those who volunteer to respond to surveys, who are on average also more active in volunteering. However, the Abraham et al. conclusions were based on a single point in time rather than in the context of other trend surveys, with the exception of their Figure 1 based on the 1974-91 increases of more than 20 points (27% in 1974 vs. 48% in 1991) in Gallup data as noted by Putnam. Two decades earlier, Robinson (1989) had shown 15-30% higher participation rates in *arts* participation in non-government surveys.

The present data analysis begins by re-examining these Gallup volunteering trends, but views them in the context of the many other volunteer surveys that have been conducted over the last 35 years. Many of these were conducted after the publication of *Bowling Alone*, or were not examined by Abraham et al. There are several viable sources of data on the important social capital measure of formal volunteering (through an organization) in America. Most use the time-estimate interview method, in which respondents answer simple and direct questions about whether they have done any volunteer activity through a voluntary organization in the previous year.

As shown in our Table 1, there is a wide disparity in how these research firms ask their volunteering questions. This is true even within the same survey firm, including most prominently the extensive government data collected by the Bureau of Census for the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). Unfortunately, none of the first BLS studies (conducted in 1965, 1976 and 1989) used precisely the same estimate question. But the BLS has repeated the second interview estimate measure in Table 1 annually since 2002. Additional questions in this BLS 2002-10 volunteer survey have also asked about the amount of time spent in formal volunteering among those who said they had done so. Gallup and other survey organization have asked similar time-estimate questions about formal volunteering since the 1970s for comparison. These data on *time spent* in volunteering will also be examined after the basic participation rate trends are reviewed.

Some of the volunteer questions in Table 1 are short and direct (items 1, 4, 5, 6, 9,10), others longer (items 2, 3, 7, 8,11). Some give examples of the type of volunteering involved (1, 2, 4, 7, 8), others emphasizing that it's work or the lack of pay (3, 6, 7, 8, 11), and still others conditions or "outs" that could increase or decrease a yes response (8, 10, 11). Some use wording in the form of "prompts" or examples, which might be expected to elicit a yes response (2, 3, 4, 8, 11).

TABLE 1: VOLUNTEERING QUESTIONS BY DIFFERENT SURVEY FIRMS
a) GALLUP-BASED AND INDEPENDENT SECTOR QUESTIONS
1) GALLUP 1975-91(cited by Putnam)

“Do you, yourself, happen to be involved in any charity or social service activities, such as helping the poor, the sick or the elderly?” (The December 1987 poll substituted “Are you involved...” for “Do you, yourself, happen to be involved...” and the November 1989 poll deleted “yourself” from “Do you, yourself, happen to be involved...” Also, the 1991 question is from a survey done by Princeton Survey Research Associates

2) GALLUP 1985-99 (Independent Sector)

“Listed on this card are examples of the many different areas in which people do voluntary activity. By voluntary activity, I mean *not* just belonging to service organization, but actually working in some way to help others for no monetary pay.

In which, if any, of the areas listed on this card have you done some volunteer work in the past 12 months.” (emphasis original)

SHOW CARD with 17 types volunteer activity

- A. Arts, culture & humanities
 - B. Education
 - C. Environment
 - D. Health organizations
 - E.
- Etc. for 13 other areas

3) WESTAT 2001 (Independent Sector)

V1. First I'd like to ask about your volunteer activity. By volunteer activity, I mean not just belonging to a service organization, but actually working in some way to help others.

Have you done volunteer work for any organization in the past month?

YES 1

NO 2 (SKIP TO V6)

V8. Now we'd like to focus your attention on the past 12 months. In the past 12 months, have you done volunteer work for any organizations {IF V1 = 1, DISPLAY, “other than the ones you've already mentioned?”}

YES 1

NO 2 (SKIP TO V11)

148 IN

4) GALLUP 2002-09:

“Which of the following things, if any, have you, personally done in the past 12 months?

- a) Volunteered your time to a religious organization
- b) Volunteered your time to any other charitable cause. “

5) GALLUP 2005-08 Worldwide

"In the past month have you done any of the following, how about volunteered your time to an organization?"

6) GALLUP International 2006

"During the last 12 months, did you do any volunteer work -- that is, devoting time to a job for a not-for-profit organization without receiving any wage or salary in exchange?"

b) QUESTIONS ASKED BY OTHER SURVEY FIRMS

7) BLS (Bureau of Labor Statistics) 1989

“And now we would like to ask a few questions about UNPAID volunteer work. This is the work that persons often volunteer to do, *without being paid*, for hospitals, churches, civic, political and other organizations.

(In the last 12 months) Did (you/household member) do any unpaid volunteer work?”

8) BLS (Bureau of Labor Statistics) 2003-10

"This month, we are interested in volunteer activities, that is, activities for which people are not paid, except perhaps expenses. We only want you to include volunteer activities that you did through or for an organization, even if you only did them once in a while.

Since September 1st of last year, have [you/NAME] done any volunteer activities through or for an organization?

IF NO: Sometimes people don't think of activities they do infrequently or activities they do for children's schools, or youth organizations as volunteer activities. Since September 1st of last year, have [you/NAME] done any of these types of volunteer activities?"

Respondents were considered volunteers if they answered "yes" to either of these questions. (Respondents who replied affirmatively were then asked for the number of organizations for which volunteer work was done, and the numbers of weeks and hours per week worked for each organization (or, if the respondent said the hours per week varied, the number of hours for the last month.

9) SPPA 1982-2008 (Survey of Public Participation in the Arts)

C26a “[During the last 12 months], did **you** do any volunteer or charity work?”

1 Yes

2 No

8 Don't know

10) ANES 1992-2008 (The American National Election Study) Asked this post-election

“Many people say they have less time these days to do volunteer work. What about you, were you able to devote any time to volunteer work in the last 12 months?”

11) PSID 2002-08 (Panel Study of Income Dynamics)

“Let's talk about volunteering through the kinds of organizations we've been discussing. By 'volunteering', we don't mean **just belonging** to an organization—we mean doing **unpaid work**. Some volunteering is **ongoing**, such as coaching, helping at school, serving on committees, building and repairing, providing health care or emotional support, counseling, delivering food, doing office work, and weekly church work. Other volunteering is **occasional**, like neighborhood clean-ups, fundraising drives, and special activities during the holidays.

In the **last month**, did you do **any** volunteer activity through organizations?

Now think about last year, January through December of **2002**. Did you do **any** volunteer activity through organizations?”

COMPARING VOLUNTEERING TRENDS SHOWN IN DIFFERENT SURVEYS

In this article, then, we compare and contrast diary and estimate measures of formal and informal volunteering in terms of their amounts of time spent, trends across time, and demographic predictors, with the following conclusions:

- 1) Time spent and participation in formal volunteering have changed little from earlier periods, particularly since 2003, both in terms of percentages participating and of amount time spent.
- 2) Time spent on informal volunteering is larger than the time spent in formal volunteering.
- 3) Time spent and participation in informal volunteering has declined by up to 30% since 2003, for both adults and children.
- 4) The age differences noted by Putnam do not seem as sharp or notable as in the trend data by cohort that we have available across time.

RESULTS:

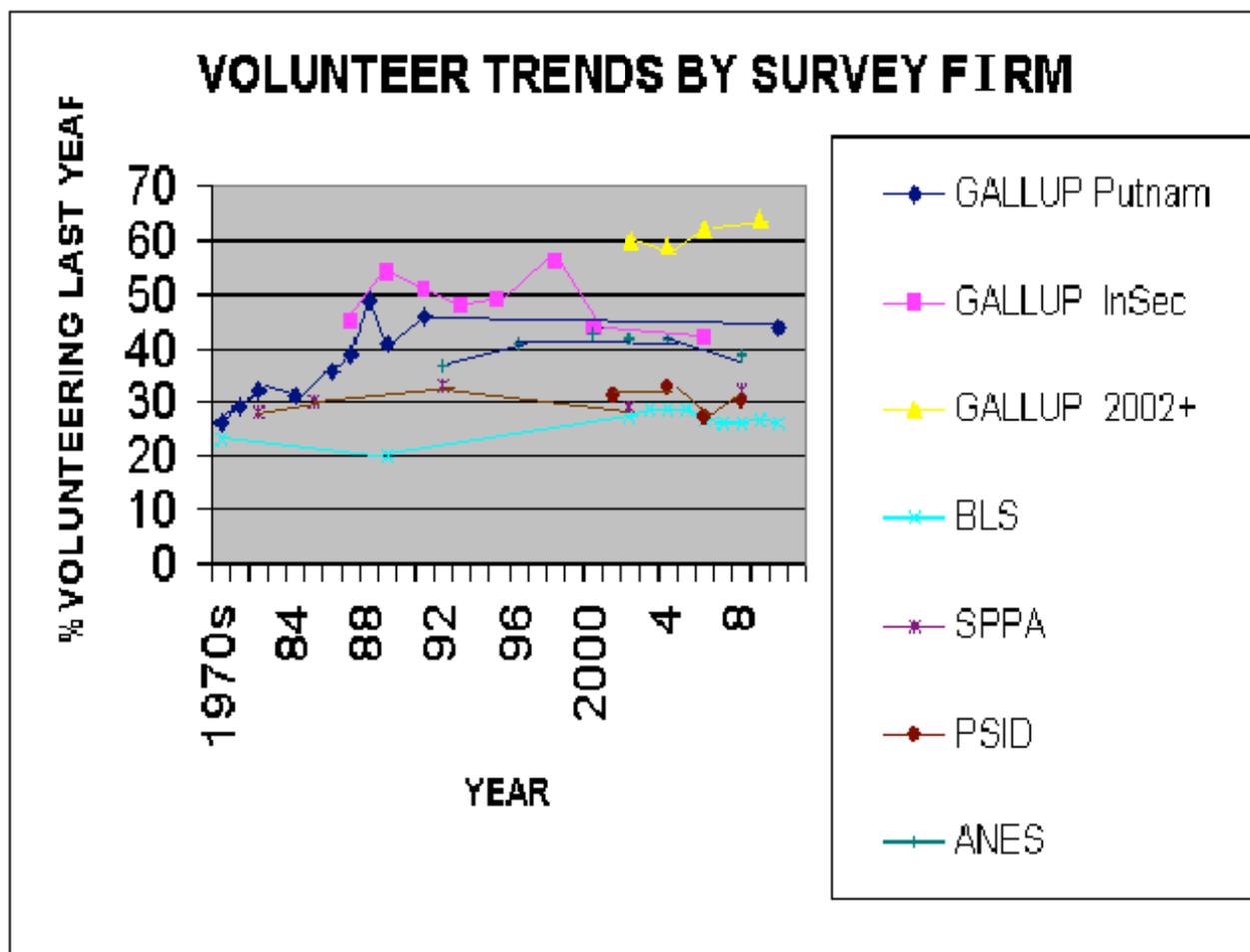
A) ESTIMATES OF VOLUNTEER PARTICIPATION RATES

1) *Gallup-based Measures:*

We begin on the left-hand side of Figure 1 with the same graph trend line (black diamonds) used by Abraham et al. and Putnam (Table 34, top line). This line shows the steady increase in participation that both they and Putnam observed (from 26% in 1975 to 46% in 1991). This substantial increase stands in marked contrast to the much flatter trend lines from several other surveys reported in Figure 1 (from the questions described in our Table 1; since the lines in Figure 1 may be difficult to follow, we show the numbers underlying them in the Appendix).

Among these flatter trend lines are the mainly Gallup-based figures found for the Independent Sector surveys between 1987 and 2000. It will be remembered from item 2 in Table 1 that these Gallup in-home surveys began their questions by giving respondents a SHOW CARD listing 17 types of agencies doing volunteer work (item 1 in Table 1), rather than the single question used in the 1975-1991 surveys, which showed the large increase noted above. In contrast, the Independent Sector question shows a slightly higher participation rate at around the 1986-1995 interval, but then it increased to 56% in 1998.

At that high point, the Independent Sector switched to Westat as its data collection firm for 2002. Westat did a *telephone* survey, one that could not use a SHOW CARD. Table 1 indicates that the Westat survey began with a general question (item 3 in Table 1) about volunteering in the last month (and then a frequency question for that month, to be discussed below in the next section). Westat then switched the time frame to ask about volunteering in the last 12 months.



How much that time frame shift affected the 12-point decrease to 44% in 2000 is not clear, but that 44% figure is not much lower than the 45-49% levels reported between 1987 and 1995 (for item 2). The 44% is also very close to the 42-44% levels found in the Gallup Worldwide/International survey questions (items 5 and 6 in Table 1) in 2005-2009. If we can treat these latter figures as comparable to those in the other Gallup surveys, they indicate a rather steady or flat trend from around 1987 to 2009.

The highest percentage participation rate in Figure 1 (around 60%) is found for the paired Gallup question (item 4 in Table 1) asked starting in 2002 (trend line with yellow triangles). As noted in Table 1, this is a short pair of questions, first asking about volunteering for a religious organization and then about “any other charitable cause.” The first question elicits about a 40% volunteering rate and the second question elicits an additional 20% on top of that 40%, to reach the 60+% level in Figure 1. These paired

questions have also shown only a slight increase since 2002 in Figure 1, again mainly a flat trend.

2) *Government/Academic Survey Measures*

In general, Figure 1 shows that these other surveys indicate a notably lower rate of volunteer participation than surveys by Gallup, closer to 30% participation since the 1970s. (Again, it is not clear why it is lower, whether it's due to question wording or respondent selection, although it is in line with Robinson's (1988) finding about higher arts participation by commercial research firms). Here, the lowest of these in Figure 1 is for the BLS volunteer question. Its latest version (item 2 in Table 1) started in 2002 is quite lengthy, with some inviting elements ("...think of activities you do infrequently" and "...even if you only did them once in a while"). That may be why the latest BLS volunteering rates are 6-9 points higher than the earlier BLS survey done in 1989 (item 1 in Table 1), and why Hayghe (1991) argued items 7 and 8 were not comparable.

However, a Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS, 2006) report argued that by dropping the 2% of respondents agreeing to the follow-up prompt in item 8, that the higher figure in 2003-05 represented a 32% increase since 1989 (notably for seniors aged 65 and older, who also showed a notable increase since the 1974 BLS volunteer survey). Somewhat disturbing in these comparisons is Hager et al.'s (2007, p. 3) finding that respondent volunteer rates (29%) were higher than the rate for their proxy (usually the spouse) respondents (24%).

Lower volunteering rates are also found in Figure 1 for the simple SPPA question, which covers the longest period, starting from 1982 (28%) to 2008 (33%). Thus, while there is an increase across the 26 years, it is only 5 points and it is not a regular increase. The response rates for these surveys are in the 85-95% range, being done as part of CPS or other Census Bureau surveys. (There was a drop to 70% response in 1992, and that was accompanied by a higher than average participation rate of 33%, and when conducted by Westat in 1997 with a 55% response rate, the rate increased to 43% -- 10 points higher than in 1992 or any other SPPA survey done by Census Bureau).

The PSID studies are done by an academic survey firm and they also detect about a 30% participation rate. They also show minimal trends across the 2001-08 period in Figure 1. The ANES is similarly conducted by an academic firm. This survey registers closer to a 40% participation rate in Figure 1, despite providing respondents an "out" in its introduction ("Many people say they have less time,....."). The data show only a minimal increase of 2 points between 1992 (37%) and 2008 (39%). (In relation to sampling issues, Abraham et al. [2009; p. 1133] show little difference in the participation rate for the 2002 ANES survey, with only 276 respondents and a 30% response rate.)

Across the board, then, *none* of these Gallup or government/academic surveys provide persuasive time-series evidence of the increased volunteering rates reported by Putnam (2000) and also by Abraham et al. (2009) for the Gallup surveys between 1975

and 1991. The bulk of the interview survey evidence shows a flat or stable trend over the past several decades, into the first decade of the 21st century.

B) TIME IN FORMAL VOLUNTEERING: COMPARING TRENDS FROM INTERVIEW ESTIMATES AND TIME DIARY DATA

1) *Social Desirability Response Set and Mis-estimated Activity Times*

Given the extensive prior reliance on time-estimate interview questions (“How many hours did you spend _____?”) prior to the availability of time-diary data, one could ask how well the two approaches compare on a side-by-side basis for some major types of daily activities. In general, estimate questions seem to be subject to the familiar survey response tendency for respondents to give “socially desirable” responses (Krosnick 1998), and volunteering tends to be viewed positively in society. Three desirable activities besides volunteering on which both estimate questions and time-use data are available for the US are paid work, unpaid housework and religious activities.

a) *Paid Work*: Like their counterpart government agencies in most Western countries, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) has been regularly collecting interview data on estimated work hours from very large national samples of workers for many decades. Robinson and Bostrom (1994) reported that BLS estimated work hours were 5-10% higher than work hours reported in time diaries, particularly for those workers estimating longer work hours. Gershuny and Robinson (1994) replicated these findings for 12 other Western countries. Jacobs (1998) has argued that these differences could be explained by the well-known phenomenon of “regression to the mean,” as did Frazis and Stewart (2004). However, whatever the explanation, it is still found that estimated work hours are 5-10% greater than diary reports of work hours.

b) *Unpaid Housework*: Marini and Shelton (1994) and Press and Townsley (1997) both reported that housework time estimates from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) were considerably higher than those reported in separate time diary studies. Bianchi, Robinson and Milkie (2006) replicated these results for both men and women in a national survey that collected diary and estimate questions from the *same* respondents, allowing direct comparisons on detailed housework activities (e.g., cooking, cleaning). For each activity, the estimate questions generated more than 50% higher hours than the figures from time diaries, even after “multi-tasking” was included. As in the case for paid work, the discrepancy was also higher for respondents’ who estimated higher housework time estimates.

c) *Religious Activities*: Compared to time diary data, as well as data from observational studies (Hadaway, Marler and Chaves 1993), attendance at religious services is also over-reported in traditional survey estimate questions, such as asked in the General Social Survey (Presser and Stinson 1996). Here, the estimates are about 20% higher than in the diaries and about 30% higher than the observed attendance.

In sum, for socially desirable activities, interview estimates in the USA tend to overestimate time spent by up to 50% as compared with time-diary data. For religious activity, there is similar over-reporting relative to observational data. Moreover, the social desirability response-set arguments hold even for less-desirable activities as well, in particular for interview estimates of sleep and free time.

d) *Sleeping*: While the National Sleep Foundation (2010) reported Americans as estimating they obtained less than 7 hours of sleep per day (even lower than what respondents reported in a similar 2002 survey), diary studies find sleep hours closer to 8 hours per day for those aged 18-64. This figure has remained virtually constant, going back to the first diary study in the 1960s (Robinson and Godbey 1999). This result has been replicated in Canada as well as other Western countries by Robinson and Michelson (2010).

e) *Free Time*: Regarding free time, Harris (1987) reported that Americans estimated they had only 17 hours of free time per week compared to 26 hours in the 1960s, although Hamilton (1991) noted the wording of this question had changed. Nonetheless, other surveys have also found interview estimates of less than 20 hours. By contrast, free time as measured in time diaries consistently shows totals more than 35 hours per week, about 75% higher (Robinson and Godbey 1998; Aguiar and Hurst 2009; Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010).

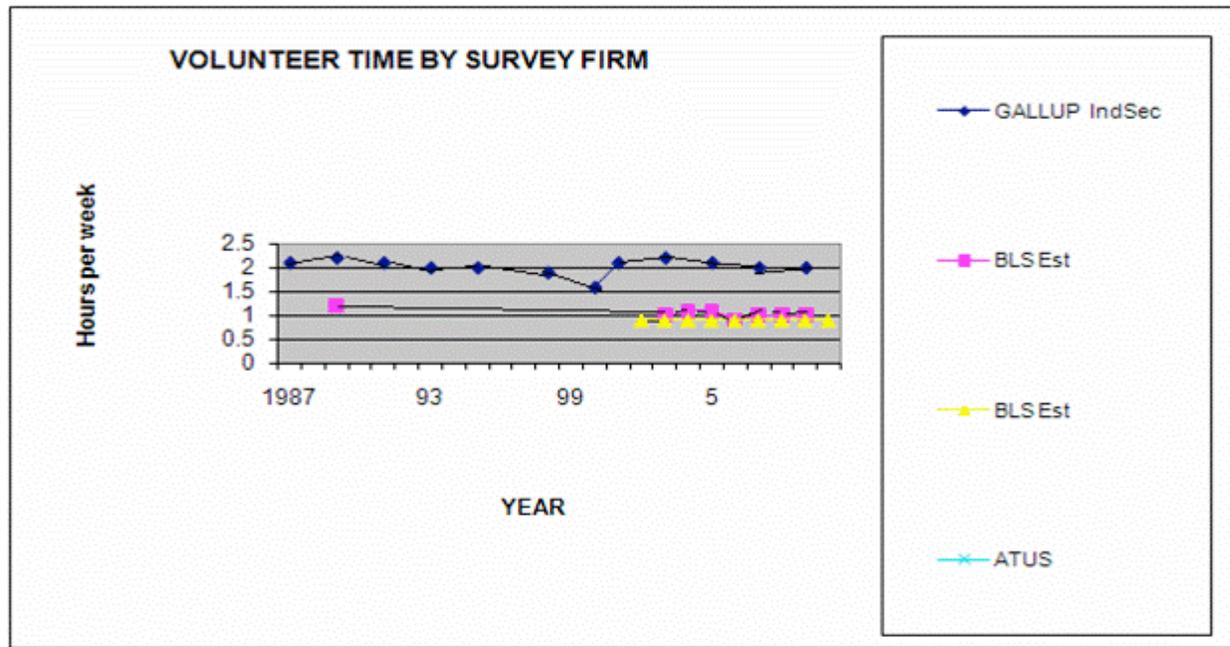
Note that while paid work, unpaid housework, and religious activities tend to be substantially *over*-reported, sleep and free time tend to be substantially *under*-reported. All these findings are consistent with the social desirability response set. The first three types of activities are usually seen as desirable in US society, while the latter two are less desirable. American cultural values emphasize work and productivity, while sleep and spending free time do not fit with this major cultural value, however common and necessary some sleep and some free time may be. Volunteering is generally seen as a socially desirable, productive activity in American society and culture (Mack 2005). Thus, volunteering seems particularly open to this social desirability response set.

2) *Comparing Alternative Data Sets on Time Spent in Volunteering*

On this question, we have estimated times from both the governmental (BLS) and commercial data sources (Gallup), as displayed in Figure 2. The BLS surveys appear to ask an estimate question using groupings from which to choose. In 1989 (Hayghe 1991), this question was framed in terms of hours *per week* (1-5 hours, 6-10 hours, etc.). But since 2002, it has been reported in terms of hours *per year* (1-14 hours; 15-49; etc.).

The BLS estimate line in Figure 2 then averages these yearly BLS 2002-2010 estimates (with 1-14 hours weighted at 7; 15-49 hours at 32; 50-99 at 75; 100-499 at 300 and 500+ at 700) to arrive at a yearly estimate for those who volunteered at about 127 hours per year. Averaging in the zero (0) hours for non-volunteers, and dividing by 52 (weeks), that works to about one hour per week across the whole population. That average has remained virtually constant since the first 2002 BLS estimate survey. (The

FIGURE 2: ESTIMATED HOURS PER WEEK FORMAL VOLUNTEERING



BLS analyses report annual median rather than average figures and that figure of 52 hours a year also translates to 1.0 hour per week).

Moreover, that current one hour estimate is also remarkably close to the 1.2 hour per week figure from the BLS 1989 survey question which was asked in terms of hours per week. Both figures are notably close to the 1 hour per week figure derived from the diary data in ATUS. This diary 1-hour per week figure has also remained virtually constant (0.15 hours per day) since 2003, using tables from the annual BLS press releases (e.g., BLS 2011).

In contrast, the estimate question data from the Gallup-Independent Sector surveys are closer to 2 hours per week -- or almost twice as high as in the various BLS sources. The Gallup-Independent Sector data on volunteer time are lowest (1.6 hours) for the year 2000 survey (which was conducted by Westat with a lower participation rate of 44%). The Gallup figures were obtained separately for each of the 17 types of volunteering described as item 2 in Table 1. It may be that the “prompts” used in the Gallup question were again a factor in these higher estimates. Such a result is consistent with methodological studies of the effects of prompts on reported volunteering rates (Rooney et al. 2004; Steinberg et al. 2002).

C) TIME TRENDS FOR *INFORMAL* VOLUNTEERING

Informal volunteering takes place in many circumstances, often without regularity, and for highly variable periods of time (from a few seconds to many hours or days). As a result, survey interview respondents may not remember or remember accurately its occurrence in response to estimate questions. There have been relatively few survey interview attempts to measure informal volunteering using estimate questions. The most common is Gallup's question on helping a stranger, but most informal volunteering probably does not involve strangers, but friends, neighbors, co-workers, and non-household relatives (Amato 1990).

Two great advances of the BLS ATUS survey are: (1) Diary data across the full year and covering the full range of informal volunteering, by employing a complex coding scheme with more than 30 varieties of informal volunteering. (2) Its large sample size compared to most estimate with usual sample sizes in the 1,000 range. (ATUS has now collected diaries since 2003 from over 100,000 respondents aged 16 and above). These features permit the ATUS to put these relatively infrequent or irregular volunteer activities in the same context as formal volunteering. The time-use data also permit contrasting informal volunteering, by definition done outside the household, with help given within the household both to children and to other *household* members.

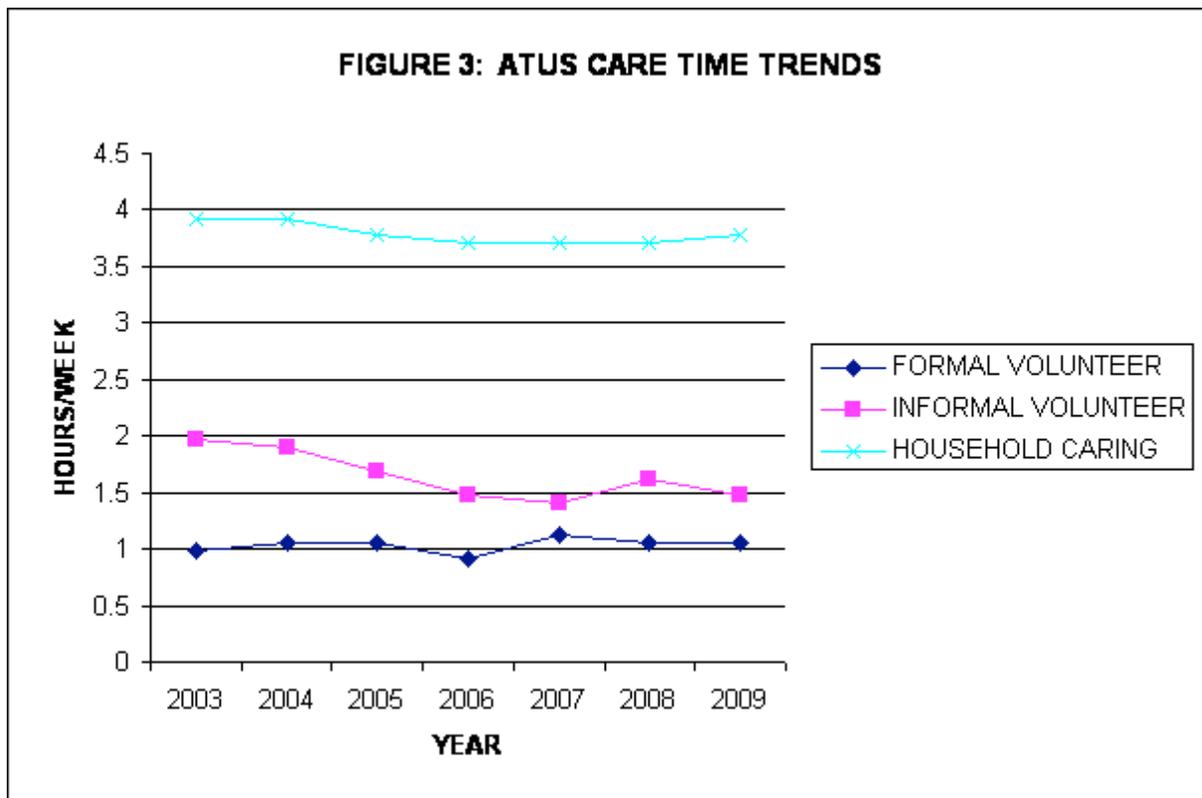
The ATUS data set thus allows one to track trends in informal volunteering over the same time period as we have considered for formal volunteering, although that time frame only takes us back to 2003. Nonetheless, there have been some noteworthy trends in informal volunteering time over this past decade, in contrast to the lack of change in formal volunteering time found in Figure 3).

Figure 3 shows the volunteering and *in-household* member care trends. To put the three types of care into perspective, it can be seen that care to household members (mainly children) has averaged about 3.8 hours per week since 2003, compared to 1.5 hours for informal volunteering and 1 hour for formal volunteering. In other words, informal volunteering averages about 50% more time than formal volunteering. However, Figure 3 shows that this ratio has been declining since 2003. Informal volunteering was almost double that of formal volunteering in 2003 (2 hours vs. 1 hour), but in 2009 it was only 1.4 to 1. Put the other way, informal volunteering time has dropped almost 30% since 2003. This trend became most pronounced about 2006, and has not changed much since. Informal volunteering dropped about as much for non-household children as for non-household adults.

D) AGE AND COHORT DIFFERENCES IN FORMAL VOLUNTEERING

Returning to Putnam's optimistic conclusion about the increased volunteering among young adults in 2000, Table 4 shows the differences by age groups in volunteering between the 1980s and now. All data come from Census Bureau surveys, the first for the SPPA item between 1982 and 2008 and the second from the BLS surveys of volunteering in 1989 and 2009. As noted above, the BLS comparisons cannot be exact because of the change in question wording, and because of the increased volunteering

FIGURE 3: TRENDS IN INFORMAL VOLUNTEERING



participation in the 2008-09 surveys (although, as noted above, the CNCS (2006) report treats the 1989 and 2002-05 questions as comparable, and finds notable gains for all age groups except those aged 20-44).

Nonetheless, it is possible to detect whether there are differential increases in each age group across the decades in Table 4, and there are some differences that are worth noting. Unlike the similar roughly 4 point increases in the SPPA item and the roughly 7 point increases for the BLS items, averages lower than that are found in the 25-34 age group for both the SPPA and BLS items and for the 35-44 age group on the BLS items. These are the young age groups that Putnam was optimistic about, and it appears that their age counterparts in 2000s were not able to sustain their levels in the 1980s. The differences are not large, but they are both in evidence.

There is an alternative approach to interpreting these age differences, and that is to examine them by cohort, following the same groups across the decades. This is done in the bottom b) portion of Table 4, and it again shows notable similarities. The largest increases (8-20 points) are found for those cohorts who were youngest in the 1980s, but these increases are of roughly the same magnitude as might be expected from the increased participation found for these age groups in the a) section of Table 4, and thus reflect minimal real change across decades. The same conclusion seems to apply for older age cohorts, who basically show minimal, if any, change across the two decades.

TABLE 4: DIFFERENCES IN % VOLUNTEERING BY AGE ACROSS DECADES
(Census Bureau data)

a) BY AGE GROUPS

SPPA	<u>1982</u>	<u>(2002)</u>	<u>2008</u>	BLS	<u>1989</u>	<u>2009</u>	
In Table 1	<u>(item 9)</u>	<u>(item 9)</u>	<u>(item 9)</u>	<i>CHANGE</i>	<u>(item 1)</u>	<u>(item2)</u>	<i>CHANGE</i>
Sample size ()	(5549)	(6000)	(5614)	(2008-1982)	(190,000)	(63,361)	(1989-2009)
TOTAL SAMPLE	28%	(29% +3)	32%	+4 points	20 %	27%	+7
AGE:							
18-24	23	(25 +2)	27	+4 pts.	12	22	+10 pts.
25-34	28	(26 -2)	29	+1	20	24	+4
35-44	34	(33 -1)	38	+4	29	32	+3
45-54	31	(33 +2)	36	+5	23	31	+8
55-64	29	(28 -1)	33	+4	21	28	+7
65-74	25	(29 +4)	30	+5	17	24	+7
75+	15	(21 +6)	23	+8	NA	NA	

b) BY COHORTS

SPPA	1982	2002	2008		BLS	1989	2009	
		<u>Change</u>		<u>Change</u>				<u>Change</u>
		<u>2002-1982</u>		<u>2008-1982</u>				<u>(2009-1989)</u>
Born 1958-64	23	(33 +10)	38	+15 points	12	32	+20 points	
1949-57	28	(33 +5)	36	+8	20	31	+11	
1939-1948	34	(28 -6)	33	-1	29	28	-1	
1929-1938	31	(29 -2)	30	-1	23	24	+1	
1900-1928	29	(21 -8)	23	-6	NA	NA	NA	

Overall, then, the analyses in Table 4 reinforce the conclusion in Figures 1 and 2 of no fundamental or significant change in *formal* volunteering across the decades. That conclusion is largely reinforced by an analysis of the 1982-2002 difference profile in the SPPA data, which allows a more direct 20-year cohort analysis. As shown in the middle 2002 column (in parentheses), and with a participation rate (29%) basically the same as in 1982, the similarities in age participation become more clear as well, a small decline in the younger age groups, compared to the notable increase among those 65 and older since 2000.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This article has examined the hypothesis of increased volunteering in the past few decades in America, as suggested by Putnam (2000). We compared longer-term trends

since the 1970s using several sources of national time-series data, most of which have paid close attention to maximizing response rates. Unlike the Putnam evidence, trend lines from each source suggest rather constant or stable volunteering rates across time, particularly since 2002. This conclusion is reinforced by survey data using interview estimates and time-diary reports of the amount of *time spent* doing volunteer work. ~~However,~~ ~~w~~ We did not find that the younger generation Putnam identified in his analysis as the most optimistic source for renewed social capital do continue to be more active volunteers, but they do seem as active as earlier age cohorts. However, they are no less active.

The consistent diary evidence of a 30% decline since 2003 in informal volunteering seems to fit the thesis of declining social capital better than the consistent flat trends found here for formal volunteering. Informal volunteering was not explicitly examined by Putnam, and the trends noted here have occurred since his 2000 publication.

Future research could explore *why* informal volunteering has declined so markedly in the past decade in America. One possible cause is the chilling effect of the 9/11 terrorism scare and its aftermath. It will also be important to see whether similar declines have occurred in other advanced, post-industrial nations or elsewhere in the world. Clearly, future research on volunteering needs to include time use measures as well as interview estimates, since the latter tend to systematically overestimate formal volunteering time and underestimate informal volunteering (Havens and Schervish 2001).

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APPENDIX: TABLE NUMBERS UNDERLYING FIGURES 1-3

FIGURE 1 NUMBERS

FORMAL VOLUNTEERING % by yr

	1970s	1981	82	83	84	85	86	87	88	89	1990	91	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	2000	1	
LLUP	26	29	32		31		36	39	49	41		46										44	
LLUP IS LLUP								45		54		51		48		49			<u>56</u>			44	
10+																							
3	23									20													
PA				28			30							33									
ID																							
ES													37					41					43

FIGURE 2 NUMBERS

FORMAL VOLUNTEERING	HOURS PER WEEK										POPULATION								
	1987	88	89	1990	91	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	2000	01	02	03		
LLUP	IndSec	2.1		2.2		2.1		2		2		1.9		1.6	2		2.2		
S	Est			1.2													1		
US																0.9	0.9		
PERCENTAGES																			
LLUP %		45.3		54		51.1		47.7		48.8		55.5		44					
s/Wk		4.7		4		4.2		4.2		4.2		3.5		3.6					
TAL Hrs.		2.1		2.2		2.1		2		2		1.9		1.6					
S %				20												27	29		
s/Wk				6												2.9	2.9		
TAL				1.2												0.9	0.9		

FIGURE 3 NUMBERS

**Averages on which Figure 3 is based (In hours per week)

YEAR	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
FORMAL VOLUNTEER	0.98	1.05	1.05	0.91	1.12	1.05	1.05
INFORMAL VOLUNTEER	1.96	1.89	1.68	1.47	1.4	1.61	1.47
(NON-HH CHILD)	1.26	1.12	1.12	0.98	0.91	1.12	0.98
HOUSEHOLD CARING	3.92	3.92	3.78	3.71	3.71	3.71	3.78