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Volunteering Waning in Recession, Report Says

By [STEPHANIE STROM](#)

As the recession took hold, most Americans cut back on volunteer work and other civic activities, according to a survey conducted for the [National Conference on Citizenship](#).

That finding undercuts anecdotal reports of volunteers' flooding nonprofit groups as unemployment has increased and suggests the challenges faced by the Obama administration, Congress and foundations working to encourage greater volunteer service and civic participation.

"They're not saying they've stopped volunteering, but they are cutting back on the time spent on volunteering and civic engagement," said David Smith, executive director of the National Conference on Citizenship, which conducted the survey as part of a study titled America's [Civic Health Index](#).

The conference has produced the index for the last four years, though it has compiled similar data going back to 1975. Mr. Smith noted that the survey of 3,889 people was done in May, a low point in the economic slide.

"That was really when we started to see how badly people are hurting," he said.

Still, Mr. Smith said the results came as a surprise because in previous downturns, the survey had shown an increase in civic engagement. He said the only other time its index had fallen was during the recession in the early 1980s.

The survey found that 72 percent of Americans said they were devoting less time to volunteering and other civic activities, like providing food and shelter to those in need and participating in public discussions like town-hall-style meetings.

Research by the [Corporation for National and Community Service](#), a government agency, using data collected last September [found](#) that volunteering held steady in 2008, compared with the previous year.

"That was then," Mr. Smith said. "[Lehman Brothers](#) hadn't collapsed, the stock market was still at 11,000 or higher, and unemployment wasn't close to knocking on the door of double digits."

Robert Grimm, director of research at the corporation, said the data in the Civic Health Index complemented, rather than contradicted, his organization's findings. "One of the areas where these two studies intersect is in showing the growth of more informal civic engagement, what I call do-it-yourself civic engagement," Dr. Grimm said.

In fact, 50 percent of respondents to the Civic Health Index reported giving food or money to someone in need who was not a relative. That type of public service does not necessarily involve volunteering or work through any organizational structure.

Dr. Grimm offered the example of Peter Norback, a resident of the Miles neighborhood in Tucson, who asked his neighbors to put one can of food on their doorsteps each Sunday that he could collect and take to the local food bank.

The ad hoc effort has been so successful that Mr. Norback now has a [blog](#) devoted to it, complete with a how-to guide.

The decline in volunteerism is not good news for nonprofits, which are relying on volunteers to help offset declining revenues. In a [study](#) by the [Listening Post Project](#), affiliated with the Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies, about 4 in 10 of the responding nonprofits said they had increased their use of volunteers, and almost half said they planned to use more volunteers over the next year.

"With the index, we're sharing a snapshot of what people were doing at the lowest point in the economic crisis," Mr. Smith said. "We're seeing the government and the corporate sector stepping up, and hopefully we'll see these numbers rebound."

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