

# Canadians Overseas, Canadians Back Home – Volunteerism Without Borders

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Since the early 1960s, around 65,000 Canadians have volunteered in developing countries on international development projects. In 2005, we undertook a research project to assess the volunteer activity of these Canadians after they return home. To do this, we gathered information about the volunteer activities of returned overseas volunteers during the 12 months preceding our research project. We gathered these data as follows:

- 1) A mail-out survey answered by 647 respondents who volunteered through CUSO, Canada's oldest international volunteer sending agency. Many of these volunteers also served abroad on postings through other international nonprofit organizations.<sup>1</sup>
- 2) In-depth interviews with 40 of these survey respondents.

## Volunteer activity in Canada

We found that two thirds (66%) of our survey respondents had volunteered in the 12 months prior to our survey. This contrasts with the results of the 2004 Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating (CSGVP), which found 45% of all Canadians 15 years or older volunteered during the year prior to the CSGVP.<sup>2</sup> The respondents in our survey also contributed an average of 235 volunteer hours per year, compared with 168 hours for Canadians over 15 years-of-age reported in the CSGVP.

There is a “chicken and egg” question at the heart of our research. Did the Canadians in our survey go overseas because they were already active volunteers committed to nonprofit service? Or did service overseas awaken a desire to volunteer once back in Canada? Many of the returned volunteers we interviewed said they were already volunteering and committed to nonprofit service in Canada before they volunteered overseas. One interviewee summarized this perspective by noting:

*“The kind of person that takes on a volunteer position overseas is naturally a volunteer.”*

Interviewees commented, however, that their overseas experience reconfirmed their commitment to volunteering. One person said:

*“At first, working in the context of a developing nation gave me an overwhelming sense that nothing one does will ever be enough to really make a difference. By the end of my stay, my perception was completely altered and I had accepted the fact that any volunteering one does, no matter how small it seems, is worthwhile.”*

Our respondents were highly educated. Eighty-three percent (83%) had post-secondary education, compared to 59% of all Canadian volunteers. The 2004 CSGVP found that volunteer rates rise with increasing level of education. Therefore, high volunteering rates among our survey respondents may be related to their high level of education.

## Volunteer activity by age and gender

The volunteer rates of our respondents varied with age, with the 25-34 age group having the lowest rate (43%) and 65+ age group having the highest (74%). Our interview results suggest that the lower rate in the 25-34 age group is due to individuals in this group focusing on establishing families and secure employment after returning to Canada. However, volunteers in this age group contributed, on average, the highest number of volunteer hours per year (284).

Volunteer rates among men (51%) were very similar to those among women (49%), as were the average number of hours volunteered per year (234 for men and 238 for women).

1. CUSO was founded in 1961 and since this date has sent 11,000 Canadians overseas.

2. Hall, M., Lasby, D., Gumulka, G., & Tryon, C. (2006). *Caring Canadians, involved Canadians: Highlights from the Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating*. (Catalogue No., 71-542-XIE). Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada. Last retrieved October 23, 2006 from: <http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/71-542-XIE/71-542-XIE2006001.pdf>. All CSGVP results in this fact sheet are taken from this source.

**Table 1: Volunteer rates and volunteer hours of returned overseas volunteers by age category**

Age category	Percentage volunteering	Average volunteer hours per year
16 – 24	67	228
25 – 34	43	284
35 – 54	67	201
55 – 64	70	243
65+	74	263

### Volunteer activity and household income

For respondents with household incomes of \$20,000 or more, volunteer rates varied between 63% and 73%. Those with incomes below \$20,000 had the lowest volunteer rate (53%) but contributed the most hours on average per year (389). Average volunteer hours contributed per year fell as income rose, which is similar to the findings of the 2004 CSGVP.

**Table 2: Volunteer rates and volunteer hours of returned overseas volunteers by household income**

Annual household income	Percentage volunteering	Average volunteer hours per year
Less than \$20,000	53	389
\$20-39,000	65	310
\$40-59,000	64	244
\$60-79,000	73	195
\$80- 99,000	70	180
Over \$100,000	63	177

### Types of Canadian organizations for which our respondents volunteered

In our survey, 44% of respondents volunteered with three or more organizations on return to Canada, 85% volunteered for at least two, and only 15% limited their volunteer activities to one organization. In the 2004 CSGVP, 50% of all volunteers limit their volunteering to one organization and only 22% volunteer for at least two. Thus, it seems that not only are returned volunteers more active in volunteering but they spread their activities over more organizations than do most Canadians who volunteer.

The most common choices of organizations to volunteer for were those that focused on:

- community development and poverty (25%);
- education, literacy and research (25%);
- arts and culture (24%);
- religious activities (22%);
- international and global issues (21%); and
- health care (21%).

We asked survey respondents how focused their volunteering was on international issues, since returning from overseas, and how focused it was on Canadian or local community issues. Fifty-five percent volunteered for organizations that focused mostly on Canadian issues, 39% volunteered for organizations that dealt with both Canadian and international issues, and 6% volunteered for those focused solely on international issues.

### Volunteer activities undertaken by returning overseas volunteers

Respondents indicated that the most common volunteer activities they engaged in were:

- serving as volunteer board or committee members (67%);
- organizing and supervisory activities (45%);
- fundraising (30%); and
- public education and advocacy (27%).

In summary, returned overseas volunteers seem to have a much higher volunteer rate than the general Canadian population. They also tend to volunteer for more organizations and for activities that require leadership, supervisory, and management skills. Taking on such challenging volunteer positions is to be expected because, as one returned volunteer said of his overseas experience:

*“It was a very quick maturing process where the development of my leadership and organization skills was constantly tested. In simple terms, I became a ‘can do guy’ for the causes I believe in.”*