

NYCivIC ENGAGEMENT: NEIGHBORHOOD VOLUNTEER STUDY & PLAN

NYC Service™

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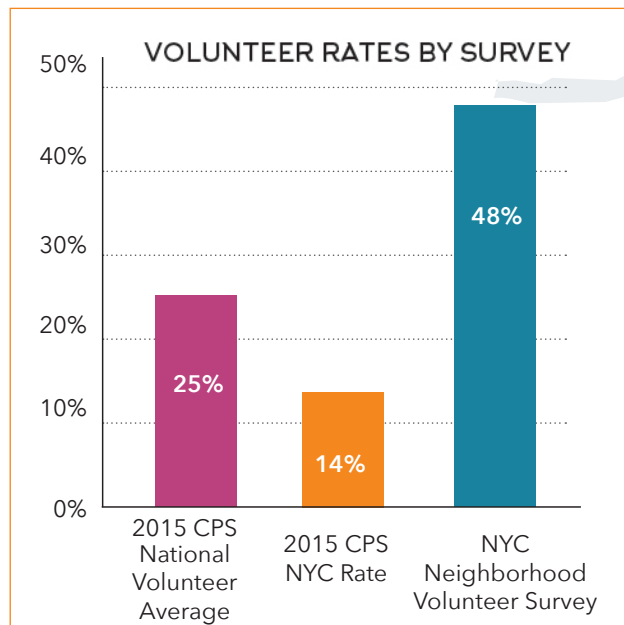
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WHY DOES NEIGHBORHOOD CIVIC ENGAGEMENT MATTER?

As research shows, volunteerism and civic engagement are critical to helping residents – and the neighborhoods of New York City in turn – thrive.¹ Volunteers live longer, healthier lives. Volunteers gain skills and confidence through regular service, meet others who care about causes central to their neighborhood lives, and join networks identifying with a community or cause. And as the NYC Neighborhood Volunteer Study shows, volunteerism positively correlates with other modes of civic engagement such as voting in local elections and attending community meetings. Civic engagement drives community economics, education, health, and public safety.²

As measured by the Current Population Survey (CPS) September Volunteer Use Supplement, New York City has consistently shown lower percentages of residents volunteering than in other parts of the country.³ The most recent rate (2015) reported in *Volunteering and Civic Life in America*⁴ for metropolitan New York was 17 percent, among the lowest volunteer rates of any major metropolitan area, and the rate for New York City alone was even lower at 14.3 percent.⁵ Two theories might account for this difference: that New York City has a particular blend of demographic factors such as racial and ethnic diversity and income inequality that correlate with low volunteer rates, and that New Yorkers on average have long commute times (averaging 45 minutes one way), cutting into time for volunteering.

A door-to-door survey in Western Queens found residents engaging at more than three times higher than has traditionally been reported.



The new study described in this report has discovered important information that offers a more inclusive look at volunteer rates in the City, and **its most important finding is a volunteer rate (48 percent) that is more than three times higher than has traditionally been reported. It also underscores the need for greater efforts at reaching people on their own terms in the communities where they live and thrive.**

This study illuminates the collective fabric that helps

all NYC communities to create strong and resilient neighborhoods – a goal of OneNYC – and the critical importance of further developing local, neighborhood-based opportunities for City residents to engage with their own communities. Uniting through service, neighborhood volunteer networks have the ability to help residents connect with each other, increase access to community services, and strengthen the relationship between volunteering and overall civic engagement.

¹ Saegert, S., J. P. Thompson, and M. Warren, eds. (2001). *Social capital and poor communities*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

² Sampson, R. J. (2012). *Great American city: Chicago and the enduring neighborhood effect*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

³ The Current Population Survey (CPS) is a monthly survey of about 60,000 households conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics to measure labor force characteristics. It often has supplements on key topics like voting, volunteering, and civic engagement.

⁴ Corporation for National and Community Service. (2016, November 15). *Volunteering and Civic Life in America*. Retrieved from <https://www.nationalservice.gov/vcla>.

⁵ All New York City CPS data were calculated by Dr. John Mollenkopf, CUNY Graduate Center.

NYC NEIGHBORHOOD CIVIC ENGAGEMENT REPORT OVERVIEW

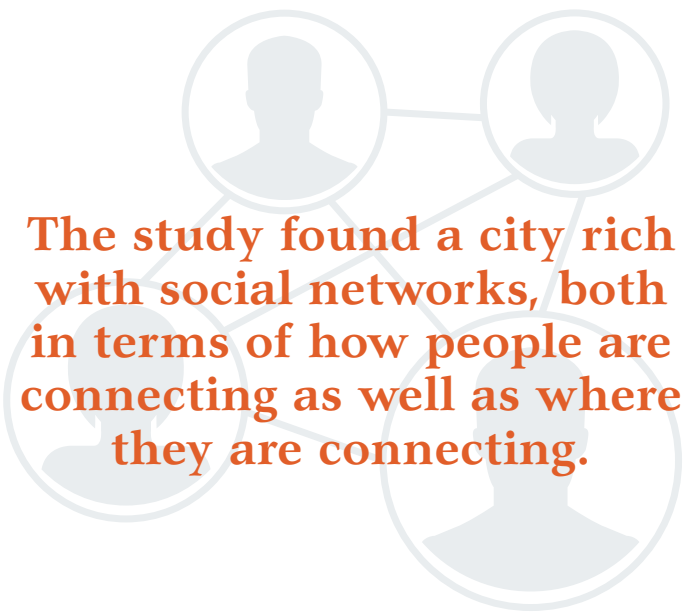
The study found a city rich with social networks, both in terms of how people are connecting as well as where they are connecting. We also found that traditional ways of defining and talking about volunteerism – formal opportunities on behalf of an organization – often do not fit the lives of many residents, limiting the City’s ability to fully embrace the dynamic and important ways our residents come together in informal ways to contribute to their local communities. This indicates further support is needed to connect city services and volunteer support with communities to foster the important work being done on a neighborhood level.

This report serves two purposes. **First**, to share what we have learned in this exploration over the last several months and the important contributions our study makes to seeing NYC residents as engaged and thriving members of their communities. We detail three key findings:

1. New Yorkers are engaging at high levels.
2. Personal interests and identity drive volunteerism.
3. Significant obstacles to civic engagement include lack of time, as well as lack of knowledge of and access to service opportunities.

Second, we aim to further NYC Service’s commitment to growing volunteerism and civic engagement on a neighborhood level to ensure residents are offered opportunities to contribute to and benefit from local networks. This will include:

1. Strengthening communication networks surrounding volunteering and civic engagement.
2. Building community-based organizations’ capacity to develop and manage volunteer programs.
3. Tracking and documenting neighborhood volunteer rates to understand and celebrate the dynamic and diverse ways residents are engaged.



The study found a city rich with social networks, both in terms of how people are connecting as well as where they are connecting.

The NYC Neighborhood Volunteer Study strongly suggests that **service continues to be a unifying force in our City**. Our efforts will strengthen the important role service has to play in bringing residents together and ensuring opportunities to civically engage are available in every neighborhood across all five boroughs.

NYC Service’s plan will amplify this platform and contribute the greatest asset the City has to its success: our residents.



THE NEIGHBORHOOD VOLUNTEER STUDY

Working with Professor John Mollenkopf of the CUNY Graduate Center and the Mayor's Community Affairs Unit, as well as support from the Mayor's Public Engagement Unit, NYC Service spent several months studying volunteerism and civic engagement in New York City between August 2016 and March 2017. A specific desire was to dig deeper into the factors that raise volunteer rates and civic engagement practices, and to better understand why the CPS estimated New York City's volunteerism rate as being significantly lower than the national average – 14.3 percent as compared to 24.9 percent in the most recent 2015 survey⁶. In addition, when comparing volunteering rates by race and educational levels in New York City to similar populations in other large cities, the analysis of the CPS shows somewhat lower rates in New York City compared to their counterparts elsewhere.

To better grasp the dynamics of volunteering on a local level, we developed and administered a door-to-door survey in Western Queens neighborhoods that included the key questions asked on the national CPS survey as well as more detailed questions on civic engagement and social trust. The Viney Group also conducted focus groups in the surveyed neighborhoods in order to gain rich narrative information on what compels (or discourages) NYC residents to engage in civic life in various ways, including volunteering. The Queens neighborhoods, including East Elmhurst, Jackson Heights, Sunnyside, and Woodside, were selected based on their diverse economic, racial, and housing characteristics. Over 850 survey responses were collected, allowing an opportunity to look at variables that represent many New York City neighborhoods.

⁶ Volunteer Use Supplement to the September 2015 Current Population Survey (CPS).



METHODOLOGY

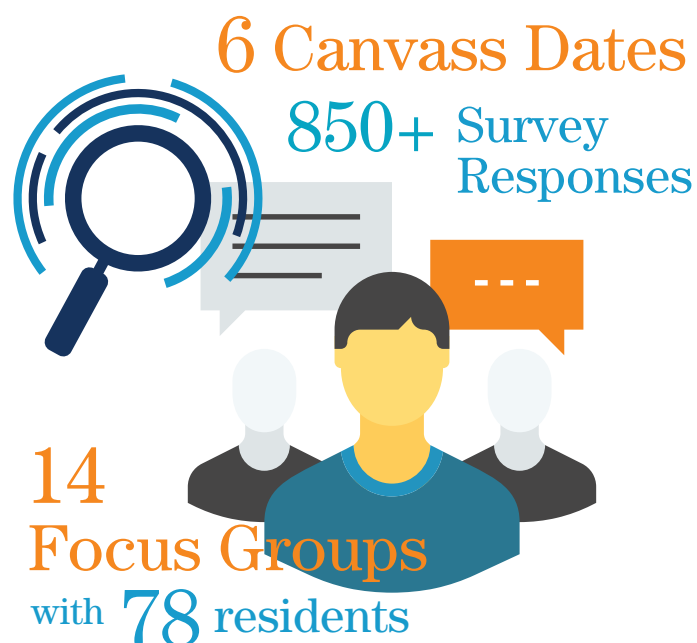
NYC Service organized six local canvass dates on Saturdays between August 2016 and March 2017, as well as several canvassing sessions on weekday afternoons and early evenings, recruiting volunteers to administer the survey door-to-door.

The first survey questions about demographic criteria and volunteering used the exact phrasing in the CPS Volunteers Supplement. Participants were randomly selected from the city's database of residential buildings in these neighborhoods. In addition to questions from the CPS, the survey also asked about why a person volunteered, what prevented people from volunteering, and all the different ways they volunteered, including in religious institutions. Surveys were also translated into Spanish, and both Traditional and Simplified Chinese.

In addition, NYC Service commissioned 14 focus groups with a total of 78 people throughout Jackson Heights, Sunnyside, and Woodside between October 2016 and January 2017. These were held at a range of locations including community centers, businesses, community-based organizations, houses of worship, and libraries. The focus groups provided the opportunity to capture qualitative, experience driven information about the participants' current opinions and beliefs about volunteerism in their communities. These included general insights about the experiences and challenges that different populations face and the diverse contexts in which individuals decide to volunteer.

STUDY CONSIDERATIONS

All information in this report was self-reported from residents in the study neighborhoods. It should be noted that the civic engagement and volunteer rates observed in the sample may be subject to non-response bias (i.e. people who are present at the time of the canvass and willing to answer their door to a canvasser and complete the survey; such people may be to some extent more likely to be civically engaged and to volunteer than the population as a whole). Regardless of possible non-response bias, it should be noted that



the resulting dataset included a large sample of both engaged and non-engaged people, and that the significant behavioral differences observed among the sampled populations represent important findings.

In addition, the study was conducted in several neighboring communities in Western Queens and does not reflect sampling across all New York City neighborhoods. However, as described above, the neighborhoods were chosen as a representative sample of the larger city and are representative in many ways of New York City at large. The sampling procedure (i.e. assigned canvassing locations) took into account the adult population by Census tract and sampled housing units in different tracts in proportion to their population. The survey team randomly picked different sized buildings in each tract and attempted to contact every household in each building, knocking on every possible door to ensure a random sample.

In order to ensure that the final group of respondents accurately represents the populations of the communities surveyed, weights were constructed and applied to each survey response. Please note that the demographic figures and charts contained in the report are based on weighted surveys.

STUDY FINDINGS

FINDING 1: NEW YORKERS ARE ENGAGING AT HIGH LEVELS

The first study finding was abundantly clear: Volunteerism is alive and well in New York City. While the volunteer rate measured for the entire New York metropolitan area by the 2015 CPS Volunteer Supplement was the third lowest among the 51 largest metropolitan areas in the U.S.⁷, the **canvass found the volunteer rate in the study neighborhoods of Western Queens to be more than double the national figure at 48 percent** (See Figure 1.1) What is more, high levels of volunteering cut across nearly all demographics groups surveyed; even those groups who have been traditionally believed to engage at lower levels – such as single, lower income, immigrant, urban-dwelling residents – are volunteering at significant rates. We believe two factors contribute to better understanding volunteering and civic engagement in New York City:

ENGAGEMENT BY GROUPS TRADITIONALLY VIEWED AS ‘LESS ENGAGED’

Analysis of the national CPS Volunteer Supplement shows that people who are older, homeowners, native-born English-speakers, college-educated, and higher income, tend to have higher volunteering rates. The most striking pattern we found in the course of the study was **high levels of volunteering even among New Yorkers who don’t fit many of these characteristics**. As Figures 1.2-1.4 show, rates significantly higher than the national average were seen across the characteristics listed above.

Survey respondents were engaged primarily in localized opportunities – through their houses of worship, their children’s schools, or local organizations that focus on specific issues of concern to their neighborhood or community (see figure 1.5) – painting a picture of New Yorkers as participants in vibrant communities where substantial numbers of residents engage with those issues most important to them and their neighbors.

Figure 1.1

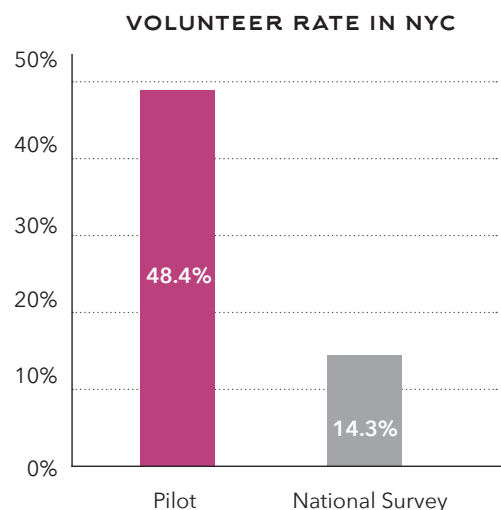
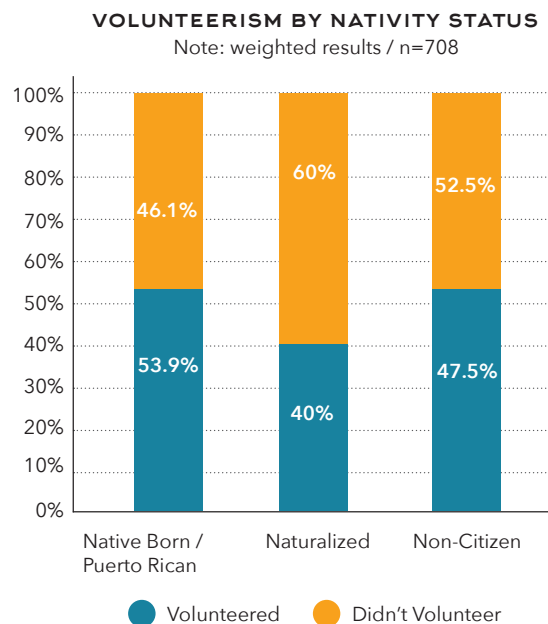


Figure 1.2



⁷ Corporation for National and Community Service. (2016, November 15). Volunteering and Civic Life in America. Retrieved from www.nationalservice.gov/vcla/city-rankings-volunteer-rate.

HIGH LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT WITH RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

The study found another significant pattern relating to the large share of New Yorkers engaging within their houses of worship – a type of volunteering that the national survey does not explicitly ask about, but rather leaves as a possible answer to the more general question.

Volunteering for religious organizations (outside of attending worship services) is clearly the most significant way New Yorkers participate in civic life. While the neighborhoods surveyed were highly diverse in terms of religion, ethnicity, and culture, respondents most often chose religious organizations as the main way they volunteered within the last year (see Figure 1.5). When broken down further, this type of volunteering was particularly strong for Black and Hispanic residents, with 58 and 44 percent of respondents from these groups, respectively, volunteering for a religiously-based purpose (see Figure 1.6).

Figure 1.3

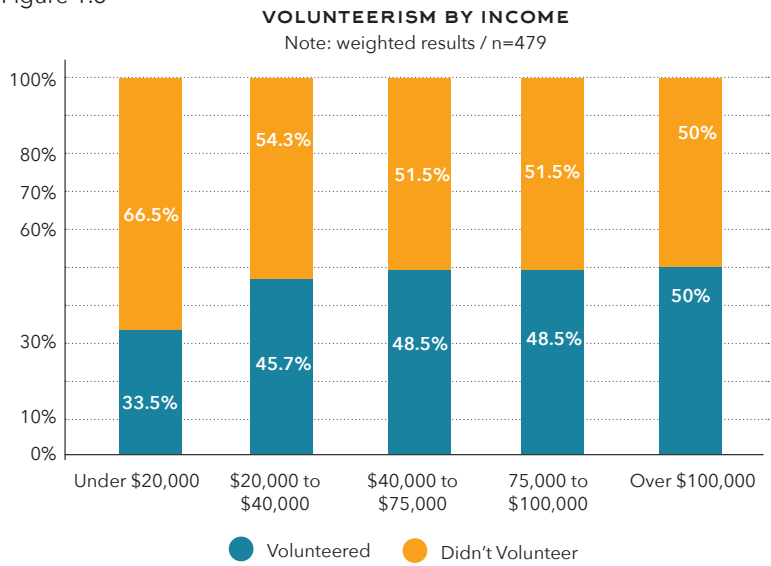


Figure 1.4

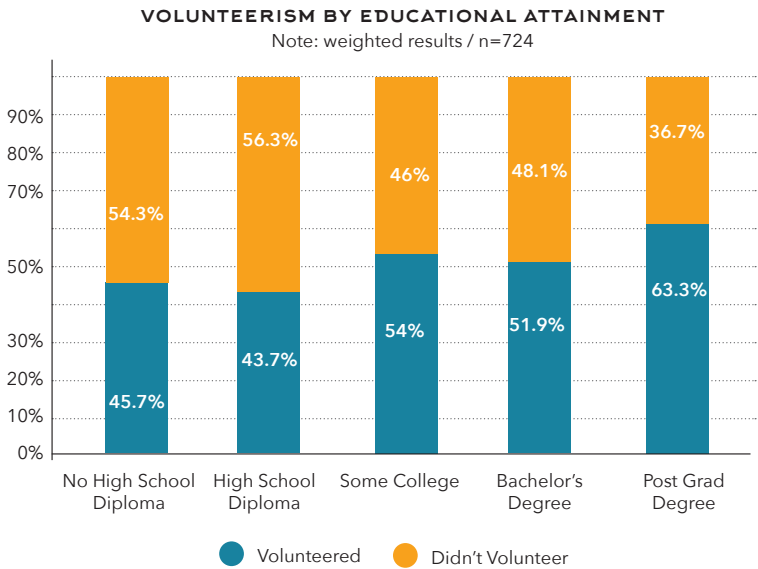


Figure 1.5

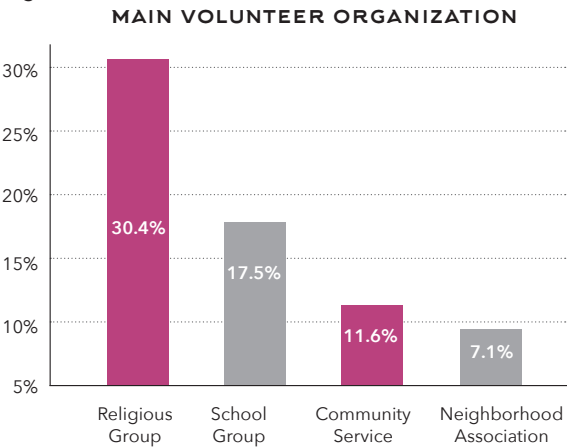
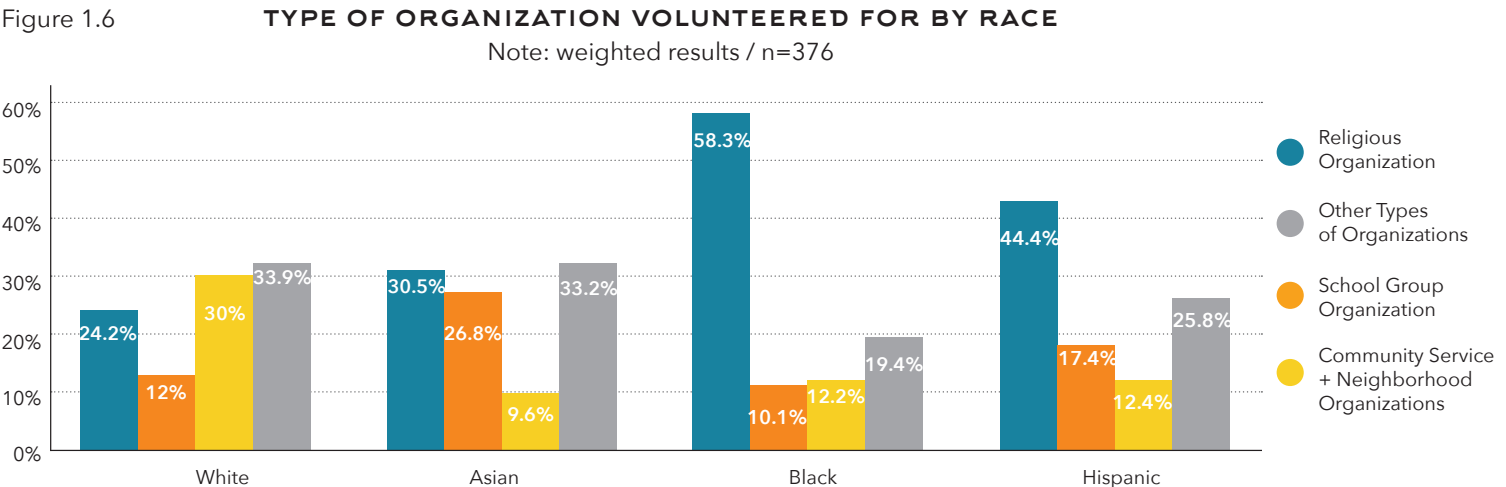


Figure 1.6



STUDY FINDINGS

FINDING 2: PERSONAL INTERESTS & IDENTITY DRIVE VOLUNTEERISM

When it comes to the factors that motivate New Yorkers to volunteer, the **study found most residents reported that relating to a higher moral cause and responding to a specific community need were the strongest influences on their activity.** Answers relating to personal gain – whether skill development, occupying free time, or networking – were less important (see Figure 2.1). This suggests that volunteering helps residents feel connected to something greater than themselves, connecting them with others and causes they care about.

If you are passionate about a cause, you're always working for that cause.

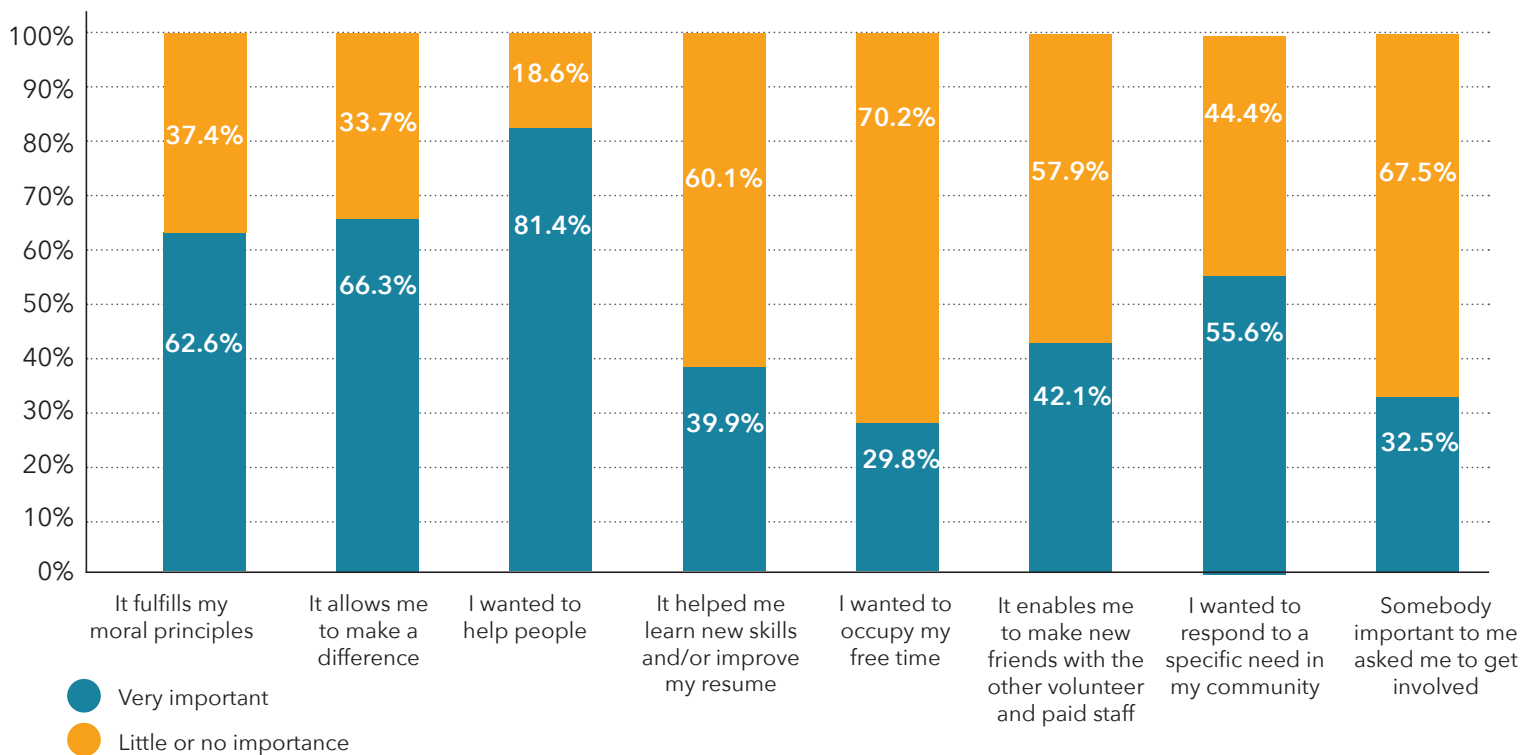
~Focus Group Participant



Figure 2.1

IMPORTANCE OF DIFFERENT REASONS FOR VOLUNTEERING

Note: weighted results / n=420



DEFINING VOLUNTEERISM

Volunteerism is a widely used term that the Census supplement defines in terms of giving time to an organized effort. Echoing the CPS question, the survey asked participants whether they had done “volunteer activities through or for an organization” in the last year, specifically highlighting experiences done on behalf of a formal body, resulting in the reported volunteer rate of 48 percent.

When focus group participants were asked to provide their personal definition of what it means to volunteer, however, they had a broader understanding of the term, including personal acts (such as unpaid babysitting for a neighbor or sitting with an elderly neighbor) and wider acts of civic engagement (like protesting and voting) that are not necessarily connected to specific organizations. Among the focus groups’ most engaged residents, it was difficult for them to discern the line between “volunteering” for an organization and simply acting in the service of a particular community or cause. As one participant shared,

I never use the word volunteering. It’s something [that is] my hobby, it’s my passion to serve and go out to help others.

While a significant number of New Yorkers volunteer, where and how they engage varies. Black and Hispanic respondents tended to engage most with their places of worship, white respondents volunteered more with community and neighborhood organizations, and Asian respondents tended to volunteer disproportionately with school groups (see Figure 1.6).

Beyond race and ethnicity, it is also noteworthy that **residents across a multitude of backgrounds sought out opportunities to address issues shared by others who hail from similar backgrounds.** Women spoke of their desire to work on women’s causes, immigrants who had to learn English wanted to help new immigrants learn English, and LGBTQ residents worked to further LGBTQ political rights. A focus group participant shared: “In our community as an immigrant, most of our sisters and brothers can’t read or write and work in nail salons. I know about that. So those who couldn’t read or write are facing a lot of issues [...] in job placement. I really want to give them their rights. That is why I volunteer.”



New Yorkers Seek Out Opportunities that Align with Their Community and Interests

VOLUNTEERISM CORRELATES WITH OTHER FORMS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Finally, survey **respondents who volunteered also tended to participate strongly in other forms of civic engagement**, such as voting, talking with neighbors, and attending community meetings (see Figures 2.2-2.4 on page 12). These findings indicate that New Yorkers who volunteer are also likely to be active in their local communities and the political process. Though the current study cannot indicate causality, we can conclude that volunteers are engaged residents and engaged residents tend to volunteer.

I work with the PTA, [my children’s] swim, children liturgy here [at Queens of Angels] and I’m also a Girl Scout Leader...it’s all about empowering girls. We do park cleanup and help the women out at the women’s shelter... As a girl, I was seeing that men had advantages. I like to think of myself as a strong woman and so I like to help the girls realize in turn that they can be strong.

~ Focus Group Participant

Figure 2.2

VOLUNTEERISM BY VOTER REGISTRATION AND TURNOUT FOR CITY COUNCIL

Note: weighted results / n=536 (CC question), n=769 (voter registration) / CC=City Council

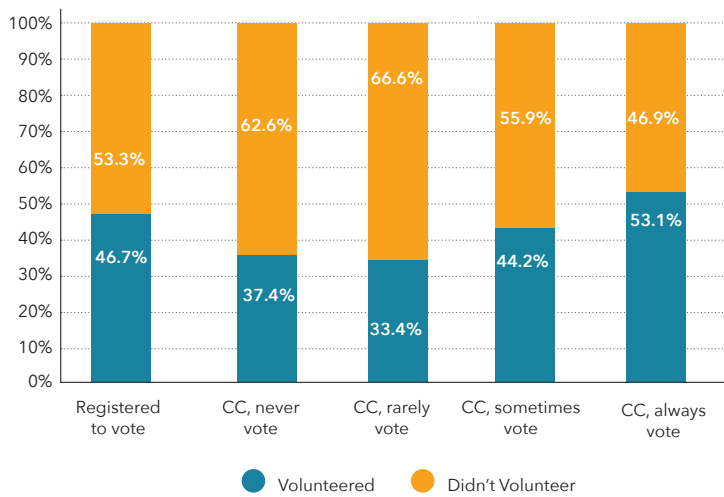


Figure 2.4

VOLUNTEERISM FOR PEOPLE WHO ATTENDED A PUBLIC MEETING OR NEIGHBORHOOD ACTIVITY

Note: weighted results / n=769

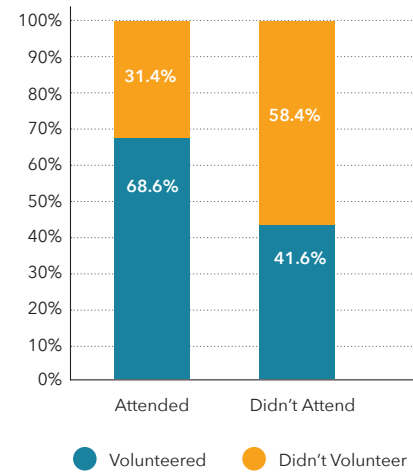
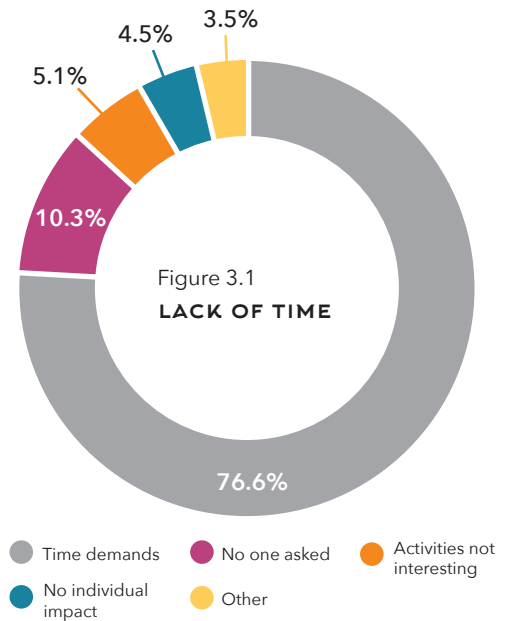
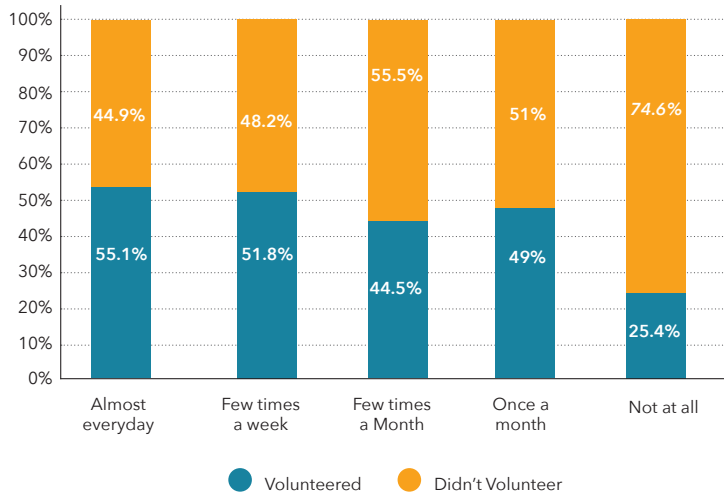


Figure 2.3

VOLUNTEERISM BY FREQUENCY OF TALKING TO NEIGHBORS

Note: weighted results / n=759



STUDY FINDINGS

FINDING 3: OBSTACLES TO ENGAGEMENT

While the study suggests far more New Yorkers volunteer than we previously thought, most residents face significant barriers to volunteering. The survey and focus groups both asked residents to share barriers and obstacles to volunteering. Three reasons significantly rose to the top.

LACK OF TIME


Lack of time is by far the largest inhibitor keeping New Yorkers from engaging with their communities (see Figure 3.1). More than three quarters of residents who reported that they did not volunteer in the last year cited “time demands” as the primary obstacle: “...Running a business is non-stop. I do help a lot of people that I love if you consider that volunteering. But I just don’t have time to volunteer formally or with an organization. I’m just too busy.”

LACK OF KNOWLEDGE

Focus group residents who wanted to volunteer but did not and had the time to do so cited a lack of knowledge of available opportunities: “A few years ago, I wanted to volunteer around my neighborhood because I really wanted to do something to help. So I went online but I really couldn’t find anything.” Another focus group resident shared: “...You never know that anybody needs volunteers. And that is the fault of the group that needs volunteers. They don’t put out information. If they sent some flyers, or a notice, or sent somebody from their group to speak to us and say, ‘We need volunteers to work with these children and we would love to have you. You are more than welcome and we really want you,’ then I’m sure a lot of people would volunteer.”

This lack of knowledge about volunteer opportunities extended to other forms of civic engagement – many focus group participants expressed challenges associated with understanding political candidates’ platforms and their resulting confusion discouraged them from voting in local elections: “I’ve never voted in a local election. How do you know who’s even

running? There’s just no information to let you know who to vote for or when to vote. You see the signs to vote for certain people but those flyers stay up so long do they really mean anything? Don’t get me wrong, it’s important to vote, but...[shrug]”



Residents whose first language is not English said that they gravitated toward service opportunities centered around their native language community, and that if such opportunities are not available, they did not volunteer.

LACK OF ACCESS

Finally, given the diversity in the communities being studied, **many cited language barriers as a difficult obstacle.** Residents whose first language is not English said that they gravitated toward service opportunities centered around their native language community, and that if such opportunities are not available, they did not volunteer. “I am a skilled carpenter and I have a lot of trades I learned in Ecuador. When everyone was asking help with rebuilding in Staten Island after Hurricane Sandy, I went to Staten Island to try to offer my trade. I went around looking for ways to help and no one seemed to notice. No one spoke Spanish and many people told me they didn’t need help at the time. I suppose it was because I didn’t speak English. I could have helped a lot of people but I had no way of helping.”

On the other hand, residents who only speak English thought it was challenging to engage communities where English is not spoken, despite their desire to branch out and serve in diverse communities: “It is difficult to help people when you don’t know their language or cultural system. You want to help but you simply can’t.”

NYC SERVICE NEIGHBORHOOD CIVIC ENGAGEMENT PLAN

PROVIDING A SPECTRUM OF ENGAGEMENT

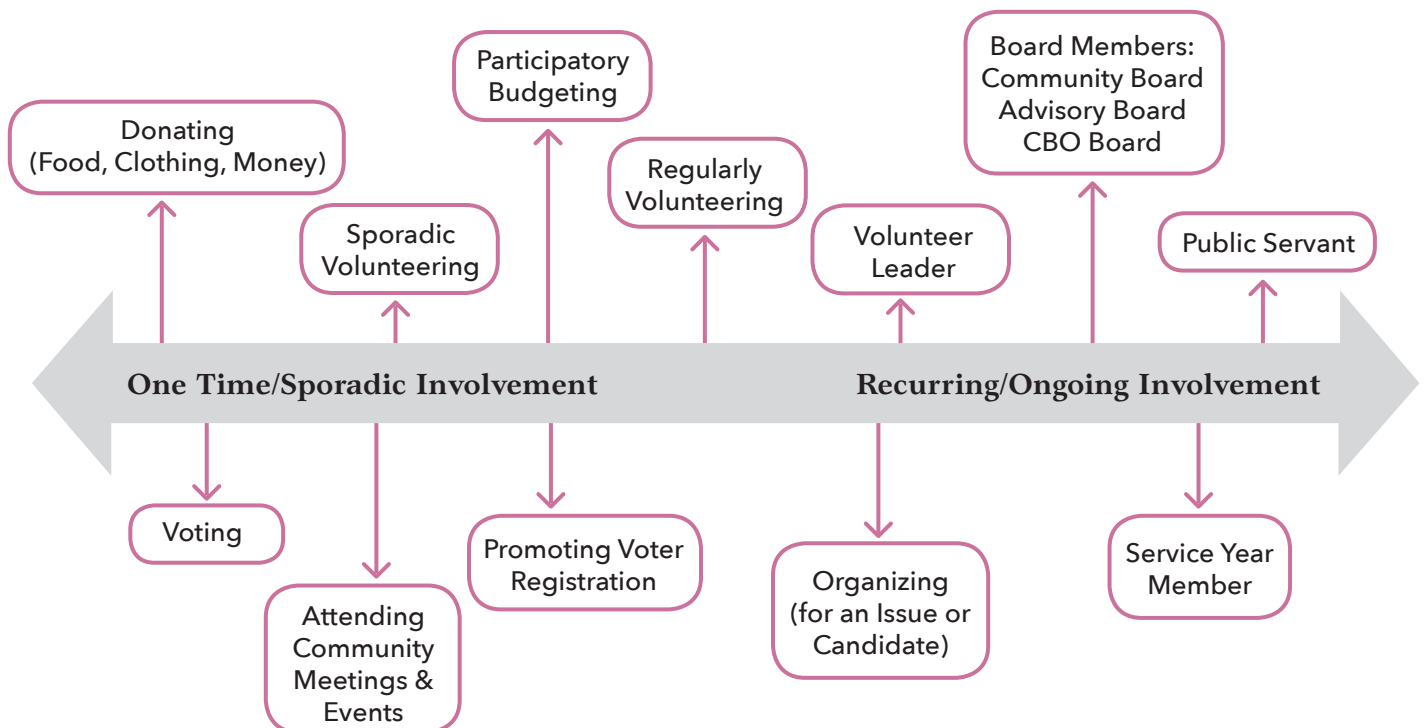
The survey results suggest that New Yorkers want to connect with their neighbors in ways that will help them build strong and resilient neighborhoods. **NYC Service is committed to building, supporting, and strengthening neighborhood volunteer networks across New York City.**

The survey and focus groups show that New Yorkers define volunteerism and civic engagement broadly. Our role as a City is to provide every city resident with a spectrum of engagement opportunities in their neighborhoods.

Taking into account the deep insights provided by the survey and focus groups, NYC Service makes three key recommendations to strengthen neighborhood volunteerism and civic engagement:

1. **Strengthen** local communication networks around volunteering and civic engagement opportunities in a way that connects to residents' own backgrounds and interests, especially those not yet engaged.
2. **Build** community-based organizational capacity to develop effective management of their volunteer programs, and address the City's greatest needs.
3. **Track** and document neighborhood volunteer rates to understand and highlight the dynamic and diverse ways residents are engaged in their communities and New York City.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT SPECTRUM



NYC SERVICE NEIGHBORHOOD CIVIC ENGAGEMENT PILOT

Based on these findings, NYC Service will pilot a new neighborhood-focused platform to publicize volunteer and civic engagement resources across all five boroughs. Selected neighborhoods include:

Melrose (Bronx), Bushwick (Brooklyn), Harlem/East Harlem (Manhattan), Jackson Heights/Sunnyside/Woodside (Queens), and Port Richmond (Staten Island).

Working with these neighborhoods in the second half of 2017, **we will seek to build local capacity to recruit and manage volunteers, and increase the visibility and access of volunteer opportunities to local residents.** Based on the results, NYC Service will expand to additional neighborhoods in 2018.

The NYC Neighborhood Civic Engagement Pilot will work with community-based organizations in each neighborhood to improve their capacity to support volunteer outreach and engagement, based on recommendations drawn from the study. With an existing platform of tools and resources, NYC Service is poised to collaborate with neighborhoods to support the expansion of neighborhood volunteer programs to foster civic engagement.

1) Strengthening Communication Networks in NYC

NYC Service will assist organizations in highlighting volunteer opportunities that most closely align with each neighborhood's interests and needs. In addition, focus will be given to help neighborhood organizations build out and strengthen local communication networks so that information regarding engagement opportunities can be more easily shared. These strategies will increase residents' ability to serve by **bolstering awareness and access to local opportunities in their neighborhoods.**

NYC Service will work with key neighborhood partners to expand their neighborhood communication networks – be it online, through neighborhood meetings, houses of worship, or other community groups. The pilot will work with CBOs to identify informal and formal local leaders to share information connecting fellow residents to volunteer opportunities. Additionally, NYC Service will work with the organizations to develop multi-language outreach and recruitment campaigns so residents for whom English is not a home language can learn about

opportunities in their neighborhoods. Current tools to support this include the **NYC Service and CBO websites, social media campaigns, and newsletters.**

2) Building Nonprofit Capacity

As the study findings show, volunteerism is strongly influenced by the connection to an idea of helping others or a particular cause, and the availability of time to participate. Building CBO volunteer management capacity fosters the development of a variety of opportunities across the civic engagement spectrum (see page 14), creating greater opportunities for local residents to find causes they connect with in a variety of time frames and commitment levels.

NYC Service CBO tools include **capacity-building training and support via the Great Volunteer Management System and Good Governance Blueprint toolkits, Strategic Volunteer Planning-Service Enterprise program, Go Pass volunteer screening, and national service year member and pro bono volunteer support.** With the help of these and other resources, NYC Service will increase the availability of a variety of engagement opportunities for residents in their local neighborhoods, as well as the sustainability of those programs by increasing local CBO capacity to recruit and retain volunteers.

3) Tracking Volunteers

It is important for organizations to document their volunteer activities to understand where, why, and how residents engage with them. This also helps city government to understand how it can best support the CBOs. Such documentation also recognizes volunteers for their efforts—an important step that keeps them engaged and highlights their contributions to their local neighborhoods.

NYC Service will **strengthen neighborhood organizations represented in the annual NYC Volunteers Count Report and Mayoral Service Recognition Program and provide community-based organizations with support to develop tracking systems and document volunteers.** NYC Service will work to collect this data every year, both in the target neighborhoods and across the City, and will work closely with CBOs to ensure they have the tools necessary to accurately measure their work and the impact of volunteers. In these ways, NYC Service will support local organizations to promote and recognize a multitude of ways residents contribute to their neighborhoods and New York City.

NYC SERVICE NEIGHBORHOOD CIVIC ENGAGEMENT PILOT

NYC Service research shows:

1. New Yorkers are engaging at high levels.
2. Personal interests and identity drive volunteerism.
3. Significant obstacles to civic engagement include time, as well as knowledge of and access to opportunities.

NYC SERVICE FOCUS

Strengthening Civic Engagement Communication Networks

GOAL: Build out neighborhood communication networks to support volunteer engagement

NYC SERVICE TOOLS:

Multi-language marketing campaigns, Website, Social media, Newsletters

Building Capacity for Volunteer Programs

GOAL: Expand CBOs ability to develop and manage volunteer programs

NYC SERVICE TOOLS:

Toolkits & Training, Strategic Volunteer Planning-Service Enterprise, Go Pass screening, National Service members, Probono volunteers

Track and Document Neighborhood Volunteer Rates

GOAL: Celebrate diverse ways residents are engaged in their communities and in NYC

NYC SERVICE TOOLS:

Volunteers Count Report, Mayoral Service Recognition Program, Tracking system support

Increasing measures of success:

- # of volunteers engaged in local community-based organizations
- # of neighborhood volunteers reported in Volunteers Count
- # of neighborhood volunteers recognized by Mayoral Service Recognition Program
- # of National Service members working on issues of importance to their local communities

Leading to Increased Civic Engagement Outcomes in Neighborhoods:

- Defined supports for neighborhood residents
- Knowledge sharing amongst CBOs, community leaders, and neighborhood institutions
- CBOs with increased capacity to manage and support volunteers

Leading to Increased Civic Engagement Outcomes for New York City:

- Stronger, more resilient neighborhoods
- Neighborhoods organizing in times of need: disasters, crime waves, and other major events



Connect to volunteer opportunities at
nyc.gov/service



Stay connected. Follow @NYCService

8.5 MILLION NEW YORKERS. TOGETHER, SERVING EACH OTHER.

