



# Center for Social Development

GEORGE WARREN BROWN SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

## RESEARCH BRIEF

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### A Decade of International Volunteering from the United States, 2004 to 2014

by Benjamin J. Lough<sup>1</sup>

Between 800,000 and 1,100,000 individuals in the United States reported volunteering internationally each year from 2004 to 2014. Young, white college graduates with higher incomes, those who were employed, and married people were the most frequent international volunteers, the majority of whom served with a religious organization.

Data for this report were gathered from the volunteer supplements to the Current Population Survey (CPS)—a monthly survey of approximately 60,000 households—from September 2004 through September 2014. The volunteer supplement includes questions about domestic and international service performed. Two items specifically assess the rate and frequency of international volunteer service. (See Appendix 1 for more detailed information about sampling, definitions, and analysis.)

#### Prevalence and Service Duration

The number of international volunteers peaked in 2007 and slumped in 2009—with a relatively steady increase in participation from 2009 and 2014 (Figure 1 and Table 1). In 2014, more than 958,000 people reported volunteering internationally. The volunteer supplements do not measure service duration specifically, but of those who reported spending most or all of their volunteering time abroad, nearly 45% spent two weeks or less. (For a full breakdown, see Table 2.)

Figure 1. Number (in Thousands) of International Volunteers from 2004 to 2014

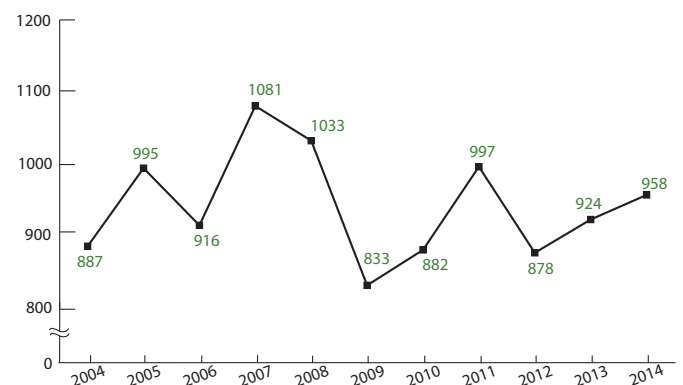


Table 1. Frequency of International Volunteers from 2004 to 2014

Year	Frequency
2004	887,120
2005	995,086
2006	915,923
2007	1,080,981
2008	1,032,780
2009	832,668
2010	881,797
2011	996,899
2012	877,820
2013	923,957
2014	958,073

**Table 2. Total Duration of Volunteering for Those who Completed All or Almost All of Their Volunteer Time Internationally from 2007 to 2014**

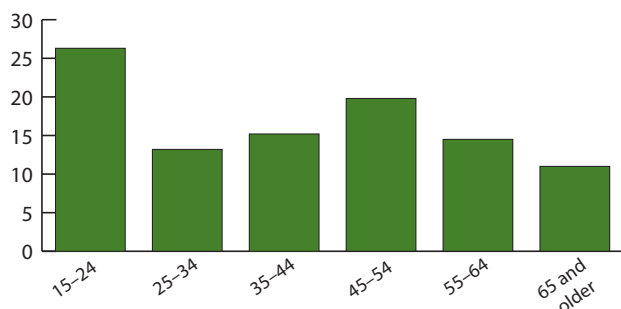
	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 2 weeks	841,864	44.7
3-4 weeks	330,086	17.5
5-9 weeks	166,986	8.9
10-26 weeks	274,134	14.5
More than 26 weeks	271,868	14.4

## Prevalence by Selected Demographics

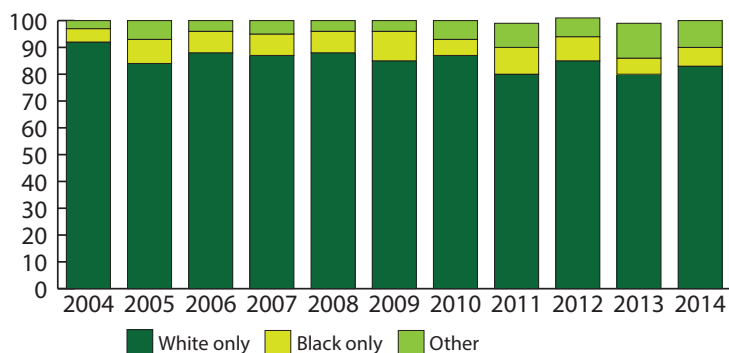
### Gender

Between 2004 and 2014, slightly more women reported volunteering internationally than men (52% and 48%, respectively). Considering the ratio of women to men volunteering domestically in the United States (58% and 42%, respectively), the gender difference for international volunteering is lower than the difference for domestic volunteering. Among those who volunteered at all in the previous decade, men were more likely than women spend their volunteer time abroad.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 2. International Volunteers by Age Group from 2004 to 2014**



**Figure 3. Percentage of International Volunteers by Racial Group from 2004 to 2014**



## Age

From 2004 to 2014, young people aged 15 to 24 years volunteered internationally most frequently (26%), followed by those aged 45 to 54 years (20%) (Figure 2). Participation of older adults aged 65 years or older had the greatest growth since 2004, increasing from around 72,500 in 2004 to around 118,400 in 2014, an increase of about 63%. Adults aged 55 to 64 years also showed significant growth from 102,000 in 2004 to around 156,500 in 2012, an increase of about 53%.

## Race and Ethnicity

From 2004 to 2014, considerably more individuals identifying as white reported volunteering abroad (85%) than those in other racial groups (15%). There does not appear to be a clear trend in volunteering year to year by racial group (Figure 3).

## Marital Status and Dependent Children

More than half of volunteers were married (54%), and about three in ten (36%) were single and never married (Figure 4). The remaining 9% were divorced, separated, or widowed. Three in four volunteers (76%) did not have children aged younger than 18 years living in the household.

## Education Level

Volunteers with higher levels of education were more likely to volunteer abroad.<sup>3</sup> About one quarter (27%) of all international volunteers had a bachelor's degree (Figure 5). An additional quarter (24%) had an advanced master's, professional, or doctorate degree. Three of four volunteers (75%) had at least some college. Among the 25% who had not started college, half (50%) were aged younger than 24 years.

## Employment Status

Almost seven of ten volunteers (67%) were employed part- or full-time (Figure 6). Only a small number of unemployed persons (4%) volunteered abroad. The remaining 29% of international volunteers were retired, disabled, or otherwise not in the labor force. Of those unemployed, 40% were aged younger than 24 years. In addition, 55% of international volunteers aged 16-24 years were students.

## Household Income

Higher household income was a significant predictor of international volunteer status (Figure 7).<sup>4</sup> Nearly one in five (35%) lived in households earning incomes of \$150,000 or more, and more than one in three (35%) lived in households earning more than \$100,000 per year. Although 9% of volunteers came from households earning less than \$20,000 per year, many of these low-income volunteers (40%) were aged younger than 24 years. Moreover, 73% of

volunteers aged younger than 24 years in these lowest income households were students. Volunteers from higher income households (\$100,000 and up) show an overall increasing trend, while volunteers from households earning \$60,000 or less show an overall decreasing trend (Figure 8).

## Number and Types of Organizations Sponsoring Volunteers

Respondents were asked the type of organization with which they volunteered, but it was not possible to isolate the type of organization by type of volunteer experience (i.e., domestic or international). To mitigate the issue, this section presents data from only those who reported spending “all or almost all” of their time volunteering internationally (Table 3).

Figure 4. International Volunteers by Marital Status from 2004 to 2014

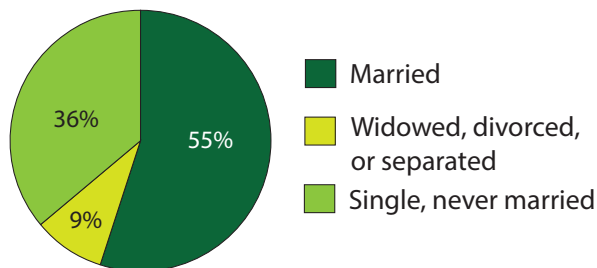


Figure 5. International Volunteers by Education Level from 2004 to 2014

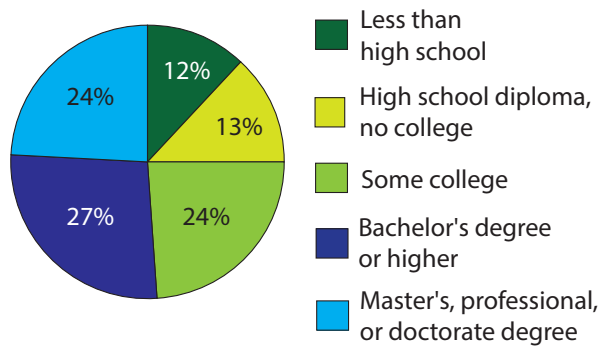


Figure 6. International Volunteers by Employment Status from 2004 to 2014

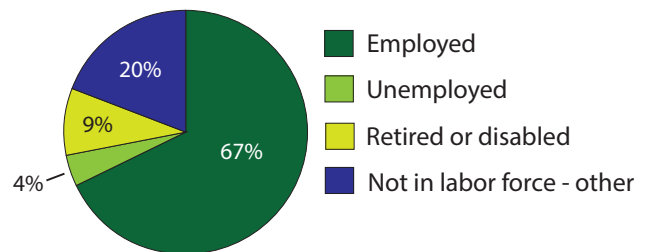


Figure 7. International Volunteers by Household Income from 2004 to 2014

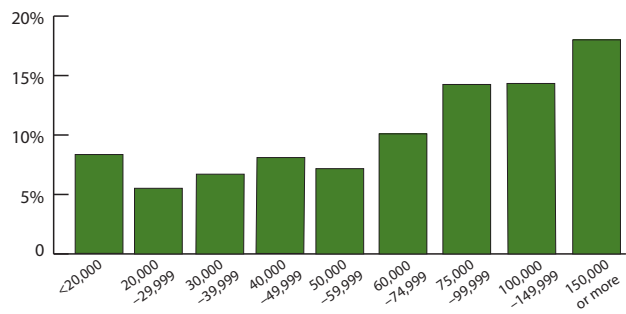


Figure 8. Number of International Volunteers from 2004 to 2014

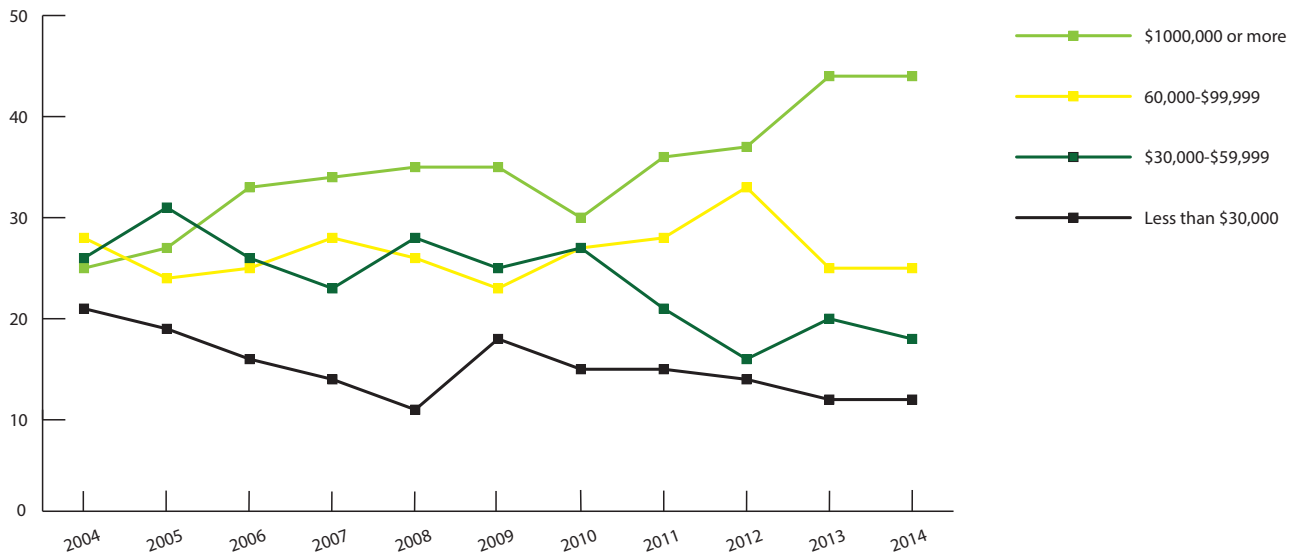


Table 3. Total Proportion of All Volunteer Time Spent Internationally among Those Who Volunteered from 2007 to 2014

	Frequency	Percentage
All or almost all	2,044,342	27.1
More than half	557,132	7.4
About half	679,380	9.0
Less than half	1,568,015	20.8
Very little	2,687,693	35.7

Of those, 44% volunteered with a religious organization (Table 4). This figure is significantly higher than for those who reported volunteering domestically only (36%).<sup>5</sup> Social or community service organizations accounted for the next most frequent type at 11%, followed closely by volunteering in hospital, clinic, or health-care organizations at 10%.

Types of activities performed in the international volunteer's main organization varied widely (Table 5). The most common activities of volunteers who spent all or almost of their time volunteering abroad included behaviors that do not require high professional skills, such as tutoring or teaching (28%), engaging in general labor (27%), and mentoring youth (26%).

Table 4. Type of Main Organization for Volunteers who Spent All or Almost All of Their Time Volunteering Internationally from 2007 to 2014

Type of Organization	Frequency	Percentage
Religious	865,466	43.9
Social and community service	224,528	11.4
Hospital, clinic, or health-care	188,552	9.6
Children's educational, sports, or recreational	172,762	8.8
International	126,744	6.4
Health research or health education	86,524	4.4
Other type	81,737	4.1
Other educational group	72,239	3.7
Youth services group	45,837	2.3
Environmental or animal care	32,970	1.7
Cultural or arts	24,246	1.2
Civic	13,114	0.7
Sports or hobby	10,277	0.5
Labor union, business, or professional	7,445	0.4
Political party or advocacy	7,891	0.4
Immigrant/refugee assistance	5,297	0.3
Public safety	5,269	0.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,044,341</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 5. Type of Activities Completed by the Main Organization from 2007 to 2014\***

	Yes	Percentage
Tutor or teach	585,702	28.6
Mentor youth	544,681	26.6
Engage in general labor	539,280	26.4
Provide counseling, medical care, or protective services	431,401	21.1
Collect, make, or distribute clothing, crafts, or goods	373,933	18.3
Collect, prepare, distribute, or serve food	354,619	17.3
Fundraise or sell items to raise money	336,159	16.4
Engage in music, performance, or other artistic activities	199,265	9.7
Provide professional or management assistance	192,571	9.4
Provide general office services	156,561	7.7
Provide information or be an usher, greeter, or minister	136,170	6.7
Coach or referee sports	113,035	5.5
Any other type of activity	342,222	16.7

\*Categories are not mutually exclusive.

## Summary and Conclusion

Each year, approximately one million individuals reported volunteering abroad with marginal fluctuations year to year. It appears that annual fluctuations in volunteer rates may be associated with the national economy, but more research connecting volunteer trends to social, economic, and political trends is needed. Available data make it difficult to determine the type of organization that sponsored the volunteer experience and the activities that volunteers performed. Thus, this report provides a limited picture of international volunteer service among the U.S. population and the characteristics of those who engage in international volunteerism.

Young people aged 24 and younger were most likely to volunteer internationally. However, the number of older adult volunteers has increased significantly since 2004.<sup>6</sup> Opportunities or incentives to volunteer may have changed over this period, including a greater variety of alternatives for young adults, such as service as part of study abroad programs in higher education institutions.<sup>7</sup>

Less volunteering abroad by people with lower incomes may indicate less access to international volunteer service. Individuals with the highest volunteer rates were aged younger than 24 years, had no dependent children at home, and made less than \$20,000. About 30% of those in this group were students. An increasing trend of volunteers

from households making \$75,000 or more suggests that international volunteering may be becoming more exclusive or expensive or that there may be other social and economic factors influencing these trends.

Higher education was strongly associated with service abroad. Those in college may have had greater exposure to international volunteer opportunities or may simply have stronger motivations to engage in international service. Most of those who volunteered abroad but did not have college experience were in the youngest age category; thus, one could deduce they were still in high school or had not yet entered college.

Although demographic data offer a description of volunteers, indicators from the CPS on types of organizational sponsors and volunteer activities are not sufficient to draw conclusions. The ability to associate these variables with the type of volunteer experience would improve understanding of international volunteerism in the U.S. population and establish a benchmark from which to study volunteer status, form, and function over time. Overall, more specific data are essential for understanding the field, identifying dimensions for further study, and generating implications for program and policy development.

## Endnotes

1. The author is an assistant professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Faculty Director of International Service with the Center for Social Development at Washington University in St. Louis. He is also a senior research associate at the Center for Social Development in Africa, University of Johannesburg. He gratefully acknowledges John Gabbert for his editorial assistance with this report.
2. After factoring in sampling bias among those who volunteer, men were more likely to volunteer internationally ( $\chi^2 = 127, p < .001, df = 1$ ).
3. Wald  $\chi^2 = 16.74, p < .001, df = 1$
4. Wald  $\chi^2 = 7.32, p < .01, df = 1$
5. Corporation for National & Community Service. (2014). *Volunteering and civic life in America: Key findings on the volunteer participation and civic health of the nation*. Retrieved from <http://www.volunteeringinamerica.gov/assets/resources/factsheetfinal.pdf>
6. See Lough, B. J., Xiang, X., & Kang, S. (2014). Skills-based international volunteering among older adults from the US. *Administration & Society*. doi:10.1177/0095399714528179
7. Institute of International Education. (2014). *Open doors: Report on international educational exchange*. Retrieved from <http://www.iae.org/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors>
8. <http://www.census.gov/cps/methodology/tech-docs.html>
9. <http://www.census.gov/apsd/techdoc/cps/cps-main.html>

## Appendix 1. Methodological Notes

### Sampling

Data from the volunteer supplement of the CPS are collected from nearly 60,000 households during one week in September each year. All members of surveyed households are asked about their volunteer activities for the previous year. Those who answer “yes” to whether they volunteered are asked if any of their volunteer work took place outside the United States or its territories. Because the CPS is designed to obtain information about all members

in a household, about 70% of responses are self-reports, and the remaining 30% of responses are answered by another member of the household in proxy for inaccessible respondents.

Statistics obtained from the CPS contain both sampling and nonsampling error caused by data collection methods. A more detailed analysis of sampling error—including specific parameters for computing the standard error of various demographic characteristics—can be found under attachment 16 of the CPS supplement file for each year.<sup>8</sup>

### Definitions

*Volunteers* in this report include civilian noninstitutional individuals aged older than 15 years who self-reported performing unpaid activities in an organization outside of the United States and its territories at any time in the year before the survey was taken. Voluntary *activities* include unpaid labor (excluding expenses) specific to a formal organization (see Table 5). An *organization* includes one of 13 categories of structured groups that share a common goal (see Table 4). The organization under which the volunteers spent the majority of their voluntary activities during the year is classified as the *main organization*. If the individual volunteered for more than one organization, activities performed for the main organization may not necessarily refer to volunteer activities outside of the United States.

### Analysis

Tables were constructed by crossing the international volunteerism variable with sample demographic variables and volunteer variables. Frequency, type, and length of volunteer activities include only those respondents who reported that they had volunteered internationally. Tables that cover specific demographic characteristics include positive and negative responses to the question about international volunteerism.

Raw data were cleaned and recoded as categorized in the tables and weighted with the CPS volunteer supplement nonresponse weight based on the standard CPS weighting program to account for noninterviewed households and population distribution ratios. Final values as reported in the tables were weighted to approximate U.S. population parameters for individuals volunteering for an organization in a foreign country. A more detailed description of weighting issues can be found under attachment two of the CPS supplement file for each year.<sup>9</sup>



## Appendix 2. Number (in Thousands) and Percentage of Those Aged Older than 15 Years who Volunteered Abroad from 2004 to 2014 (Weighted CPS Volunteer Supplement Data)

Categorical variable	Volunteered internationally <sup>1</sup>		Categorical variable	Volunteered internationally <sup>1</sup>	
	Frequency	Percentage		Frequency	Percentage
<i>Gender</i>			<i>Dependent child status</i>		
Male	5,005,820	48.2	Not a parent	2,402,562	23.1
Female	5,377,284	51.8	All children are aged 18 years or older	5,503,823	53.0
<i>Age group</i>			One or more children under 18 years	2,476,719	23.9
15-24	2,735,861	25.9	<i>Employment status</i>		
25-34	1,368,481	13.2	Employed	6,937,174	66.8
35-44	1,573,261	15.2	Unemployed	417,988	4.0
45-54	2,050,665	19.8	Retired/not in labor force	985,997	9.5
55-64	1,509,263	14.5	Otherwise not in labor force	2,041,944	19.7
65 and older	1,145,573	11.0	<i>Student status<sup>4</sup></i>		
<i>Race</i>			Not in 16-24 age range	7,018,627	67.6
White only	8,865,000	85.4	Student	1,858,629	17.9
Black only	588,172	5.7	Nonstudent	1,505,848	14.5
Other	929,932	9.0	<i>Income level<sup>5</sup></i>		
<i>Educational attainment</i>			< \$20,000	879,540	9.0
Less than high school	1,248,882	12.0	\$20,000-\$29,999	581,175	6.0
High school diploma, no college <sup>2</sup>	1,345,668	13.0	\$30,000-\$39,999	684,667	7.0
Some college <sup>3</sup>	2,470,661	23.8	\$40,000-\$49,999	829,655	8.5
Bachelor's degree or higher	2,832,463	27.3	\$50,000-\$59,999	767,151	7.9
Master's, professional, or doctoral	2,485,430	23.9	\$60,000-\$74,999	1,087,893	11.2
<i>Marital status</i>			\$75,000-\$99,999	1,515,940	15.6
Single, never married	3,760,522	36.2	\$100,000-\$149,999	1,521,258	15.6
Married	5,647,191	54.4	\$150,000 or more	1,864,432	19.2
Divorced, separated, widowed	975,390	9.4			

1. Numbers may not sum to totals because of rounding.

2. Includes high school diploma or equivalent GED.

3. Includes associate's degree or no degree.

4. Student status is indicated only for volunteers aged 16-24.

5. Represents combined income of all family members in the household.

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