



WHO CARES?

*A Fragile Workforce: Volunteering Is Weakening*¹

Audio Track #3, *Canada Who Cares?*

Linda L. Graff and Paul B. Reed

Linda Graff: this is a conversation about volunteering. It's a conversation about who cares. It's a conversation about community and how robust it is in this country. We want to talk about helping and caring and otherness and concern for common good. There's evidence that Canadians feel really strongly about community. But we're also seeing some patterns of Canadian volunteering that suggests that one of our most precious and defining characteristics as a people - the caringness of Canadians - may in fact be in decline.

We dropped a few tidbits of information on broad trends in volunteer participation in the introduction. Let's take a closer look at the key patterns that we're seeing. Paul, you've been working on an ongoing research project for better than 15 years, you've produced more than 50 published papers, tell us some of the high points of what's going on out there.

Paul Reed: volunteering is extraordinarily widespread on the face of it. Across Canada about 7.5-8 million Canadians volunteer each year. This means between about one-quarter to one-third of Canadians in some fashion across the span of 12 months offer their time and energy to a community organization. Other numbers however suggest that while there are ups and downs over time, volunteering may be softly declining perhaps as much as two per cent a year and even that's a conservative estimate.

Linda Graff: two per cent a year doesn't seem like very much.

Paul Reed: it isn't over a year or perhaps two years. What is it over 10 years? We're looking at at least 20 per cent decline and that's not even with compounding taken into account.

Linda Graff: what about hours?

¹ Graff, Linda L. And Paul B. Reed. 2007. *A Fragile Workforce: Volunteering Is Weakening*. Audio Track #3 of the Graff- Reed Conversations in the [Canada Who Cares? Project](http://www.CanadaWhoCares.ca). Dundas, Ontario: Linda Graff And Associates Inc. Audio file available from: www.CanadaWhoCares.ca

Paul Reed: the amount of time that volunteers contribute in this country totals better than a billion person hours. Between 1997-2000 that declined five per cent, by the way. Typically per capita time volunteered is in the range of 45-50 hours in the span of a year and it was down by nine per cent from the previous survey in 1997.

Linda Graff: it dropped nine per cent in how many years?

Paul Reed: three years. The average time per volunteer rose however, about 11 per cent during that period. Per volunteer the amount of time that's put in over a year is about 160-180 hours. So there are some numbers that are rising. I think the important numbers are downward moving not upward. What we see is polarization. There are more and more Canadians who are volunteering for very small amounts of time, for very short periods and putting in small amounts. There is a small cohort, a small number of Canadians who are deeply committed volunteers who put in many hundreds of hours each year, who are giving even more. It's rising – and it's offsetting the decline by the low time volunteers.

Linda Graff: so we've got this growing number of volunteers who put in less time, and a small number of volunteers who put in huge amount of time and that latter group tends to compensate for the decreasing number from the majority.

Paul Reed: that's right, but that small group is shrinking – this civic core, as I've called it, that accounts for the lion's share of all volunteering shows signs of shrinkage. I might also point out, Linda, that the greatest declines in volunteering have occurred in large urban centres where the largest proportion of Canadians live. Volunteering is significantly higher in small and medium sized towns in rural areas.

Linda Graff: the civic core, the volunteers who are volunteering the lions share of volunteering, is there a relationship between them and age?

Paul Reed: yes, the lions share of volunteer time in the civic core comes from older folks, people who are 60-65 and older, people who have a combination – it's a “magic combination” as far as I'm concerned - of idealism and free time. These are people who are deeply committed to this country and to their communities. They are passing on. These are people who come from what we'll talk about later I think a long term civic generation and this civic generation is a very central element in the dynamics of the entire volunteering phenomenon.

Linda Graff: these volunteers who volunteer so much, they're people who lived through two wars, they've lived through a depression, they've got a sense of commitment to community, they feel that deeply and they practice it when they can.

Paul Reed: it's an absolutely distinguishing characteristic of this country, of Canadians, our civility, our community-mindedness, and the civic core has really been made up of people from the long civic generation. And they're passing now – there are signs of declining volunteering time being put in by older folks and I think that portends a softening in the very heart of the volunteering phenomena.

Linda Graff: is the character of volunteering changing?

Paul Reed: most definitely. Volunteering is made up of people who give small amounts of time, and people who give large amounts of time over an extended period in very committed volunteering and we're seeing a shift in the direction of short term, incidental, episodic volunteering and away from commitment volunteering. That naturally of course flows from people in the civic core, people in the long civic generation moving out of volunteering. There's another aspect that's quite important as well and that is a shift toward caring and direct helping as an individual rather than through an organization. There is a movement away from volunteering – caring and helping – through organizations and it's part of a very subtle movement among Canadians to distance themselves away from public institutions. There's declining confidence in public institutions of various kinds. Canadians do perceive voluntary and charitable community organizations as public organizations and institutions.

Linda Graff: so let me just stop you for a minute. So what I'm hearing is there's a greater number of people who are volunteering for shorter bouts of time, they probably don't stay with the same organization time after time either so an organization is not only losing its long term volunteers, but the short ones don't necessarily stay with them?

Paul Reed: I think that's a reasonable inference.

Linda Graff: and the fact that the general population has less confidence in public institutions is rubbing off on the nonprofit sector as well.

Paul Reed: for sure. Yes. We don't have really hard evidence yet, but there may be a shift from, in very substantial measure, of being focused in the area of responding to social needs to greater contribution of time to activities concerned with amenities. Keeping sports organizations going in the community, being concerned with recreation and hobbies. And organizations that are concerned with response to need like soup kitchens, helping the homeless, helping illiterate people and so on, those organizations are particularly having more and more difficulty procuring volunteers.

Linda Graff: so volunteers who are volunteering are looking to be engaged in things that almost serve them back as opposed to are other directed?

Paul Reed: yes, but let's say that have at least some kind of payoff for them. There is evidence that small communities are having particular difficulty as well in the way in which the mix of caring and helping is changing. And also the leadership positions in the voluntary sector are going begging.

There is a very, very serious Canada-wide problem in finding people who are prepared to serve as board members on voluntary organizations.

Linda Graff: I've seen that time after time after time. I do a lot of consulting with nonprofits and I'm out there doing training all the time and the thing that I hear over and over again is we can't find board members and more to the point we can't find the presidents, the vice presidents for the board. People just aren't interested in that kind of long-term maintenance kind of work any longer.

Paul Reed: I think there's the inclination to treat this perhaps a little too cavalierly. It's the leadership that serves as the spark plug for making these organizations work effectively, procure resources and so on.

Linda Graff: they also carry the values.

Paul Reed: that is at the very heart of it all.

Linda Graff: they carry the values for those organizations and if we can't sustain the leadership, one wonders where the organizational aspect of the sector is going.

Let's move on a bit here. Declining numbers. We see number of volunteers, we see declining hours, we see shifting in patterns in what people are willing to do, why in fact can't we see this in our communities? Why don't we actually see evidence of this on the ground?

Paul Reed: the numbers certainly are somewhat mixed and it becomes very much a matter of understanding which measurements carry greater value and significance. But also we've had a long civic generation that is particularly committed to community that has been doing the bulk of volunteering over the last perhaps 15 years and because they've been carrying the bulk of the load, one has the sense that everything is fine. There have been increasing resources made available by government to volunteering; that is turning around, that's changing. Things looked fine while there was more and more money flowing to the sector, flowing to volunteering activity. That's changing now, it's reversed direction.

Linda Graff: where are we going in the near future? We've got the civic core, that long generation who have really rallied to help us, moving out, aging out of volunteering. We've got baby boomers who are approaching this magic set point of 55 where theoretically they've got a whole bunch of free time opening up. Do we have any sense at all that they're going to replicate the kind of volunteering patterns we've seen from the group you call the long civic core?

Paul Reed: this is very much a matter of interpretation and different social commentators and social scientists have perhaps different interpretations. I'd like to suggest that while there are a couple of upward social dynamics, for example, the baby boom is approaching later middle age and early retirement and may well provide a pool of affluent idealists with considerable time available to contribute to their communities, and the rising level of university education in the population, which

is strongly connected with the probability of volunteering. I think that the probability is much more likely that volunteering will soften and decline for a number of reasons. There is a significant time deficit in many households in Canada now. Commuting, demand for personal time with children, etc. certainly constrains the amount of time one can contribute to one's community as a volunteer. A very large proportion of economically active households in Canada have both adults or all of the adults in paid employment. Once upon a time volunteering was fundamental the responsibility of mothers who stayed at home. That's a long time in the past. It's not there any longer. Of course the growing urban concentration of our population in just half a dozen metro areas is going to have a very significant impact.

Linda Graff: because urbanization is connected to not so much volunteering?

Paul Reed: that's right. Large metropolitan areas have the lowest rates of volunteering of any kind of residential place.

Linda Graff: and that's right across the country?

Paul Reed: right across the country.

Linda Graff: so increasing urbanization may portend even decreasing volunteer participation.

Paul Reed: quite so. Another factor is the declining incidence or influence of religious affiliation. A very, very powerful and again universal phenomenon right across the country. This is because people who are religiously active, who participate in their faith community with at least modest frequency, these are people who are most committed to their communities and declining religious involvement is virtually certain to be a contributing factor in declining volunteering.

Linda Graff: so while we might hold out some hope that baby boomers will respond as they hit retirement age and have some free time and enjoy longer health and mobility, that they will take the place of that long civic core who are aging out of volunteering, there are other social dynamics involved here that may in fact buffer that trend.

Paul Reed: yes. There's one important aspect over against, for example, the results of a survey that was done by a major polling company in Canada that showed that better than three-quarters of baby boomers have no interest in volunteering. We know from historical evidence that Canadians have this deep concern about community and when they feel that it is threatened in some fashion, they're inclined to respond. This is, I think, a very important source of potential civic energy that could easily take the form of volunteering.

Linda Graff: do we have to manufacture a crisis to make it happen?

Paul Reed: I don't think we like manufacturing crises, but I think if we were to communicate very clearly to Canadians, persuasively making the case for two things: what difference volunteering makes and why volunteering is imperative in our society, in our communities, I think that a lot of Canadians would hear that call.

Linda Graff: so it's not an insurmountable problem?

Paul Reed: absolutely not.

Linda Graff: what if we don't do something about it?

Paul Reed: Canadian society is going to change in pretty fundamental ways. We're going to see communities that perhaps have lots of physical infrastructure and some features that give the appearance of affluence, it would be material affluence. I think there would be increasing social poverty, if you wish, diminished quality of life because of diminished connectivity, diminished mutuality. These are things that are very hard to put numbers on and to put value on. But when they're not there, we know it and miss it.

** Thank you to Volunteer Edmonton for production of the transcripts from the Graff-Reed Conversations.
www.volunteeredmonton.com