

The Aging of Rural Canada's Volunteer Base

What are the age characteristics of rural volunteers? What are the potential implications of an older and aging volunteer base? What challenges will rural communities face in renewing its base of volunteers?

Voluntary sector organizations play a key role in rural Canada. Many provide social and recreational opportunities for community members. Others provide valuable services and programs where government and the private sector are unable to do so. Volunteer groups are the backbone of many rural communities, and are highly dependent on the goodwill of citizens to volunteer their time and effort.

The NRE Household Survey (2001) shows that 59% of all rural Canadians volunteer for at least one voluntary organization in their community. However, a much higher percentage of older citizens are volunteers compared to those in younger adult age groups. There is a significant difference in the numbers of volunteers according to age.

Two-thirds of seniors (age 65 and over) are volunteers, compared with 45% of young adults (18 to 34 years of age). Seniors have more available free time to volunteer within the

community, compared to younger adults who are working and who are raising young families.

When we examine volunteer participation rates in various different types of volunteer sector



groups, we find some important differences based on age. The type of organization with the most volunteers are social and public benefit organizations (firefighters, community facilities, politics, etc.), and there are relatively fewer young adults (18%)



volunteering with these groups compared to those in older age categories. A higher percentage of seniors volunteer with religious

groups (38%) and social or casual organizations (such as Lions, Legion, etc.) compared with younger adults.

A higher percentage of seniors than the national average for all age groups volunteer in all but four of the thirteen major categories of voluntary organization types (the exceptions being sport, education, youth, and employment related organizations). With children of their own no longer involved in the activities of programs of many of these organizations, many seniors turn to other groups to offer their voluntary services.

Canada's aging population, and the out-migration of youth from rural areas, have been well documented in the popular media and in critical academic research.

With many seniors providing much of the volunteer effort in rural Canada, there is a concern over the potential lack of "replacements" for older volunteers who are no longer able to volunteer or who retire from their activities.

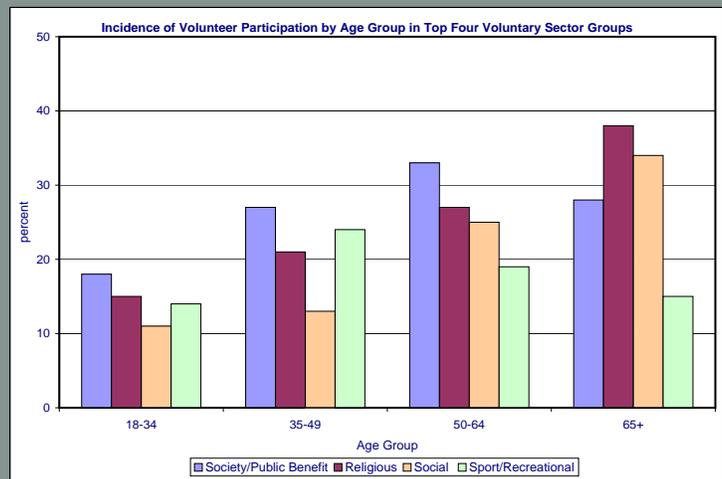
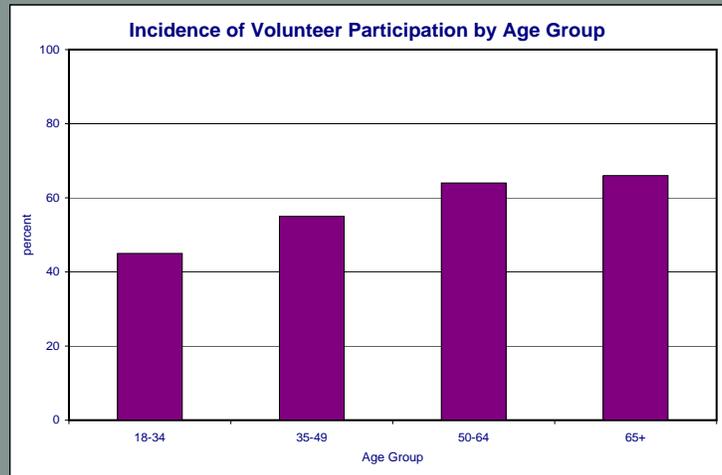
Rural communities need to plan now to develop strategies for volunteer recruitment and retention among younger age groups in order to ensure a reasonable critical mass of volunteers in their organizations.

Continued overleaf...

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