

HIGHLIGHTS • HIGHLIGHTS • HIGHLIGHTS

What Will It Take?

Making Headway on Our Most Wrenching Problems

A Study Conducted for:
Pew Partnership for Civic Change

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Highlights

Americans are largely optimistic about the futures of their communities and stand ready to help make them better places in which to live. Sixty percent of all those eighteen years old or older say that their community's best years are yet to come, and more than three-quarters say they feel connected to the place where they live. More than half of the adult population says that they have volunteered their time to try and solve problems in their communities over the past year, and millions more say they would be ready to do so in the future.

Despite this optimism, there are still challenges that must be overcome if communities are to be successful in the long term.

- The United States Department of Agriculture estimates that nearly 34 million Americans—one out of every nine—went to bed hungry or were at risk of doing so at some point during 2001, the most recent year for which data is available. Forty percent of these Americans have a job.
- According to estimates by the Urban Institute, as many as 3.5 million people, including 1.4 million children, experienced homelessness at some point during 2000. In 2002, the Center for Joint Housing Studies at Harvard University found that in dozens of metropolitan areas throughout the country, a minimum wage worker cannot afford to pay fair market rent on a two bedroom apartment.
- Based on the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey conducted for the Department of Education by the Educational Testing Service, it is estimated that between 40 and 44 million adults either cannot read or read so poorly that they cannot properly fill out a bank deposit slip or identify specific information in a newspaper article.
- While crime rates are dropping in larger cities, they are increasing in cities with populations between 50,000 and 150,000. According to the FBI, Tuscaloosa, Alabama had more violent crimes and burglaries per capita than any other city in 2000.
- According to *Education Week's* "Quality Counts 2003," nearly one-quarter of all secondary school students take at least one class from a teacher who did not major or minor in the subject. In high poverty high schools, the percentage jumps to 32 percent.

This project, which includes interviews with 1,002 randomly selected adults and 201 nonprofit executives, explored the extent to which hunger, affordable housing, neighborhood safety, illiteracy, and public education are viewed as problems within communities throughout the country. The surveys also sought to provide guidance on ways to combine financial resources, service delivery systems, and the good will of volunteers to make headway on these critical community issues.

In the process we discovered a clear discrepancy between the public's assessment of the severity of the problems and the assessments of those same problems by the nonprofit practitioners who work on these issues every day. More promising was what the survey revealed about the willingness of citizens to help out in a variety of ways: ways that don't always match the

expectations of the practitioners working on the front lines. We identified an enormous amount of latent good will on the part of the public, as well as opportunities for the two groups to work together.

Problem Definition: A Fundamental Disconnection

When asked to describe the severity of the affordable housing, hunger, literacy, crime and public education problems, 90 percent of the 201 nonprofit executives interviewed labeled the problem they concentrate on as either a “fairly serious” or “very serious” problem in their community. Of the twenty-one people who rated their chosen issue as either “not much of a problem” or “not a problem at all,” fifteen were working to insure the quality of public education in their community.

However, there is a fundamental disconnect as to the severity of these five problems between the nonprofit executives and activists who work on them daily and the American public that is being asked to volunteer its time and money to solve them.

- A total of forty nonprofit executives who deal with the issue of hunger in communities across the country were interviewed, and all forty said the problem is very serious or fairly serious in the communities they serve. Only 24 percent of America’s adult population expresses the same sentiment.
- Thirty-eight of forty-one activists who focus on crime and neighborhood safety indicated that the issue poses a very serious or a fairly serious problem in their communities. Nationwide, 28 percent of the general population holds that same view.
- Similarly, thirty-eight of forty nonprofit executives who work to solve illiteracy define the problem as very serious or fairly serious in their own communities. Among the general population, 24 percent hold similar opinions with just 9 percent opting for the most pessimistic view.
- While thirty-nine of the forty affordable housing activists believe that they are working on a very serious or fairly serious problem within their own communities, just 42 percent of the American population agrees.
- Among the forty activists interviewed who are working to insure the quality of public education in their communities, twenty-five, or 63 percent, think the issue poses a very serious or fairly serious problem for their community’s schools. Overall, 26 percent of the American public believes the problem is that serious where they live.

Citizens Ready to Help

Despite these fairly fundamental disagreements on the severity of the problems, there are huge numbers of people who are willing to lend a hand if they can be convinced that hunger, illiteracy, inadequate housing, poor public education, and neighborhood safety pose significant concerns for the communities in which they live.

- Eighty-seven percent of those surveyed indicate that they already donate clothing, food, or money to a local charity or would be willing to do so.

- Seventy percent say they would be willing to donate supplies to a local school or are already doing so.
- Sixty-five percent indicate either a willingness to help an adult or child learn to read, or say they are already doing just that.
- Sixty-four percent of those surveyed say they either currently serve food at a local shelter or would be willing to do so.
- Sixty-four percent say they would either be willing to spend one hour each week mentoring a child or claim to be doing so already.
- Fifty-nine percent of the public are either willing to deliver food to people who cannot get out of their homes, or say they are willing to help in this way.
- Roughly four out of ten adults would either be willing to assist with the construction and repair of affordable housing or say they already help in this manner.

A High Demand For Volunteers

Only 16 percent of the nonprofit executives we spoke with said they had “more than enough” help from volunteers to accomplish their organizational goals in 2002. Twenty-seven percent said they had barely enough volunteer help, and a majority (55 percent) readily admitted to having not nearly or not quite enough volunteers. Even among those who said they had plenty of volunteers there seemed to be a demand for more.

- Ninety-three percent of the literacy advocates say they could use more volunteers to teach people to read.
- Ninety percent of the executives running programs that promote neighborhood safety indicate a desire for more volunteers to work on neighborhood cleanup details, and 88 percent say they could use more neighborhood watch organizers.
- Three-fourths of the public education advocates say they could use more volunteers to work in classrooms as tutors, and six out of ten voice the need for more people to assist with the collection of donated books and other school supplies.
- Two-thirds of the executives who tackle the hunger problem in their communities say they need more volunteers to collect donated food to be distributed or served, and more than half voice the need for more volunteers to serve or distribute the food.
- Sixty-eight percent of the respondents who work to provide affordable housing express the desire for more volunteers to build or repair housing, and more than a third say they could use additional help with the task of locating existing affordable housing.

However, the nonprofit executives said it was not just volunteer power that they need. Forty-eight percent identified their biggest problem as a lack of funding, which is four times as many as those who felt their biggest problem was a lack of volunteers. Even so, there seemed to be general agreement that the combination of more funds and a larger volunteer corps locally could make a real difference in combating the five problems.

Matching Volunteers With Organizations That Need Help

The challenge is to match those willing to work with those organizations that feel they can benefit the most from additional help. That may be easier said than done. Among those who volunteered their time during 2002, most learned about it from a small network of groups associated with their daily lives. Twenty percent learned about their chosen volunteer activity through their children's school, and another 19 percent learned about it through their place of worship. Family and friends accounted for 15 percent of the contacts that resulted in volunteer activity, while another 14 percent cited word of mouth as their source. Few mentioned direct contact with charitable organizations, the media, or other sources. In fact, almost 40 percent of people who did not volunteer last year said that their lack of knowledge about which organizations needed their help contributed in part to their inaction. More than a third said they simply did not know whom to call. Less than 10 percent of those who volunteered learned about local needs from the local newspaper, and only 1 percent heard the call from local television news.

Forty-six percent of the 201 organizations represented in the study send out periodic newsletters and 27 percent communicate with the public through newspaper articles or advertisements. However, just 7 percent of all volunteers learned about their chosen organization's need for help through either of these sources. While 19 percent of volunteers learned about their chosen organization's need for help through their church, only 5 percent of nonprofit executives say they use that vehicle to communicate with the community. Fourteen percent of the nonprofit executives say their organizations communicate their needs via the Internet or mass e-mails, but just 2 percent of the volunteering public said they learned about their current volunteer opportunity that way.

Possible Solutions: A Second Disconnection

When asked to choose which of five potential actions would do the most to improve life in the communities where they live—increased voter turnout, increased donations of food and clothing, increased monetary donations to charities, increased volunteerism, or people working together more closely to solve problems—40 percent of the public said their community would benefit most through increased cooperation on problem solving; 27 percent cited increased volunteerism; 14 percent said increased voter participation, 11 percent selected increased donations of food and clothing; and just 8 percent of the public chose increased monetary donations to charities.

When the nonprofit executives were asked which of six actions by the public would do the most to help solve the problems they battle, 39 percent cited increased monetary donations to charities such as theirs—more than twice the number who thought an increase in volunteerism would help most. Thirteen percent felt that better cooperation between their organization and the local business community would prove most beneficial, and 11 percent cited greater cooperation

between their organizations and local government officials. Having greater visibility in the community and increased donations of supplies garnered the attention of 11 percent and 9 percent of the nonprofit executives, respectively.

Even those who mentioned greater cooperation between nonprofits and government or business leaders had monetary considerations at the forefront of their thoughts. When asked what would be the most important thing that business leaders could do to help them, 40 percent called for greater financial support—more than twice the number who called for any other single action. Similarly, 30 percent indicated that increased funding would be the single most important thing local government officials could do to help, which was nearly three times the number who mentioned any other course of action.

Despite this emphasis on hard cash, which may be a sign of the economic times, 62 percent of nonprofits surveyed said that more people volunteering would do *a great deal* to help organizations like theirs solve the problem at hand, and another 29 percent said more volunteers would be of some assistance in doing so.

While the nonprofit sector believes that more money will aid their causes the most, and the public places more emphasis on greater volunteerism and cooperation, neither approach will be terribly effective unless the public comes to believe that these problems pose serious threats *within their own communities*. Among other things, this will require the nonprofit sector to do a better job of communicating its needs. The nonprofit sector will need to develop better vehicles for recruitment, but it must also make more efficient use of the time and talents that volunteers have to offer.