

Civic and Community Action II

(from Civitas, pp. 74-78)

II. What are the scope and patterns of voluntary action today? What do citizens gain and contribute through such efforts, and how are civic involvement important to a successful and fulfilling life?

The extent of Americans' community and civic activities are extraordinary...research indicates that patterns of voluntary association and activity in the United States and Canada are notably higher than those of other industrialized nations with the exception of Scandinavia...The level of voluntary efforts has recently grown. According to the Gallup-Independent Sector survey completed in 1989, an estimated 98.4 million Americans (54.4 percent of adults 18 or older) volunteer an average of four hours a week for a total of 20.5 billion hours a year, an increase of 23 percent in numbers over three years. Over the past two decades, several innovative forms of community and civic involvement have emerged. Adapting the model of Alcoholics Anonymous, more than 200 groups dedicated to various forms of self-help now exist, ranging from Mothers Against Drunk Driving, with 600,000 members, to peer support groups of students concerned with drug use, battered women's support networks, and groups of those with emotional problems.

Related to such self-help activity is a movement concerned with community stability and revitalization. By the late 1970s, a *Christian Science Monitor* poll found a dramatic growth of neighborhood activity. Twenty million citizens belonged to some sort of neighborhood organization. Several million had taken direct action in support of their communities. Neighborhood and community groups take a variety of forms, from community organizations aimed at gaining a voice in public decision making to community-based health clinics and day-care centers, urban garden clubs, and crime watch projects. According to the National Congress for Community Economic Development, the number of community development groups involved in low-income housing and commercial improvements increased throughout the 1980s. * p. 77

Americans give a number of reasons for their community, civic, and voluntary involvement. More commonly, 53 percent express the conviction that people should help those less fortunate. Citizens also describe the strong personal satisfactions they gain from voluntary effort, see voluntary involvement as a central way to express their religious beliefs and values, appreciate the opportunity afforded by civic effort to give back to society some of the benefits they have received, and see voluntary efforts as a way to serve as examples and role models.



Civic and community activities serve many purposes. Volunteers' main goals include interest in increasing opportunities for others; protecting the environment; and improving the cultural life of communities. Large numbers of citizens also express concerns that reflect older civic, republican, and democratic traditions. Thus, 47 percent voice the desire to help improve the moral foundations of the society; 45 percent of respondents say that teaching people to become more self-sufficient is a major concern; and 41 percent say they have a strong interest in helping organizations "that work at the grass roots level."

