

**GPI** *Atlantic*

Genuine Progress Index for Atlantic Canada / Indice de progrès véritable - Atlantique

**MEASURING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

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**APPLICATION OF THE GENUINE PROGRESS INDEX TO NOVA SCOTIA**

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THE ECONOMIC VALUE OF  
CIVIC & VOLUNTARY WORK  
IN ATLANTIC CANADA

2003 UPDATE

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# THE ECONOMIC VALUE OF CIVIC & VOLUNTARY WORK IN ATLANTIC CANADA

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## 1. Voluntary Work and Health

Social networks may play as important a role in protecting health, buffering against disease, and aiding recovery from illness as behavioural and lifestyle choices such as quitting smoking, losing weight, and exercising.<sup>1</sup> Newfoundlanders have lower incomes and higher rates of unemployment than the rest of Canada, as well as high levels of behavioural risk factors, all of which are conventionally associated with health problems. Yet they consistently record the highest rates of self-reported excellent and very good health, the highest rates of psychological wellbeing, the lowest stress and depression rates, and the lowest rates of several chronic ailments in the country. It has been suggested that strong communities and social networks may help explain this anomaly.<sup>2</sup>

According to Health Canada, social support networks extend from close family and friends to the broader community, and are “reflected in the institutions, organizations and informal giving practices that people create to share resources and build attachments with others.”<sup>3</sup> Health Canada uses volunteerism as a key indicator of a “supportive social environment” that can enhance health.<sup>4</sup>

“Formal” voluntary activity describes work for charitable, non-profit, and community organizations. “Informal” voluntary work is assistance given directly to individuals, not through any organization, such as shopping, cleaning and doing yard work for a disabled, sick, or elderly neighbour. Given Atlantic Canada’s disproportionately large rural population (more than double the Canadian rate), informal voluntary work is particularly important in this region, since many charities and formal service organizations do not have a presence in rural communities.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: Mustard, J.F., & Frank, J. (1991). *The Determinants of Health*, (CIAR Publication No. 5) Canadian Institute for Advanced Research, Toronto.

<sup>2</sup> Colman, Ronald (2000), *Women’s Health in Atlantic Canada*, Atlantic Centre of Excellence for Women’s Health and GPI Atlantic, Halifax, February, 2000, pages 10-11, and 40.

<sup>3</sup> Health Canada (1999), *Toward a Healthy Future: Second Report on the Health of Canadians*, Ottawa, page 60.

<sup>4</sup> Health Canada (1999), *op. cit.*, pages 60-62.

The 2000 statistical profile on women's health in Atlantic Canada noted that residents of all four Atlantic provinces have the highest volunteer participation rates in the country when both formal and informal voluntary work are counted. They also put in considerably more hours of voluntary work per week than other Canadians, 43% higher than the national average in Nova Scotia, and 33% higher in Newfoundland. Using 1997 and 1998 data, the 2000 report also noted a nationwide decline in both formal and informal voluntary work, with Canadians giving 8.7% fewer hours per capita in 1998 than in 1992. Nova Scotians and Prince Edward Islanders were the only ones to buck that national trend. Although both provinces saw a decline in formal voluntary work, like the rest of the country, they saw a sharp increase in informal voluntary work, leading to a net gain in volunteer hours per capita.<sup>5</sup>

Those data have now been updated.

## **2. Trends in Voluntary Work 1997 – 2000**

In 2000, Statistics Canada conducted a National Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating that assessed trends in formal voluntary work to “determine whether the care that Canadians demonstrate for one another, their communities and their environment is growing, remaining stable, or on the wane.”<sup>6</sup> Those results, released in August, 2001, allow us to update the formal voluntary work numbers from the 2000 women's health report, which are based on similar earlier surveys in 1987 and 1997. Statistics Canada's next assessment of trends in combined formal and informal voluntary work will be the 2004 General Social Survey, for which results should become available at the end of 2005.

The 2000 survey results indicate that more women than men volunteer, both in Canada as a whole and in the Atlantic provinces in particular. The four Atlantic provinces have higher than average rates of formal voluntary work (Figure 1).

The results also show a continuing sharp decline in formal voluntary work throughout Canada. Nationwide, 12.8% fewer Canadians volunteered in 2000 than in 1997, and the volunteer participation rate dropped from 31% to 27% of Canadians. There were parallel declines among both men and women. Despite a 2.5% growth in population, there were 960,000 fewer Canadian volunteers in 2000 than there were in 1997. However, the remaining volunteers picked up some of the slack and increased their own volunteer hours by 8.7%. Thus the total number of hours volunteered in Canada declined by 5% in just three years (Figure 2).<sup>7</sup>

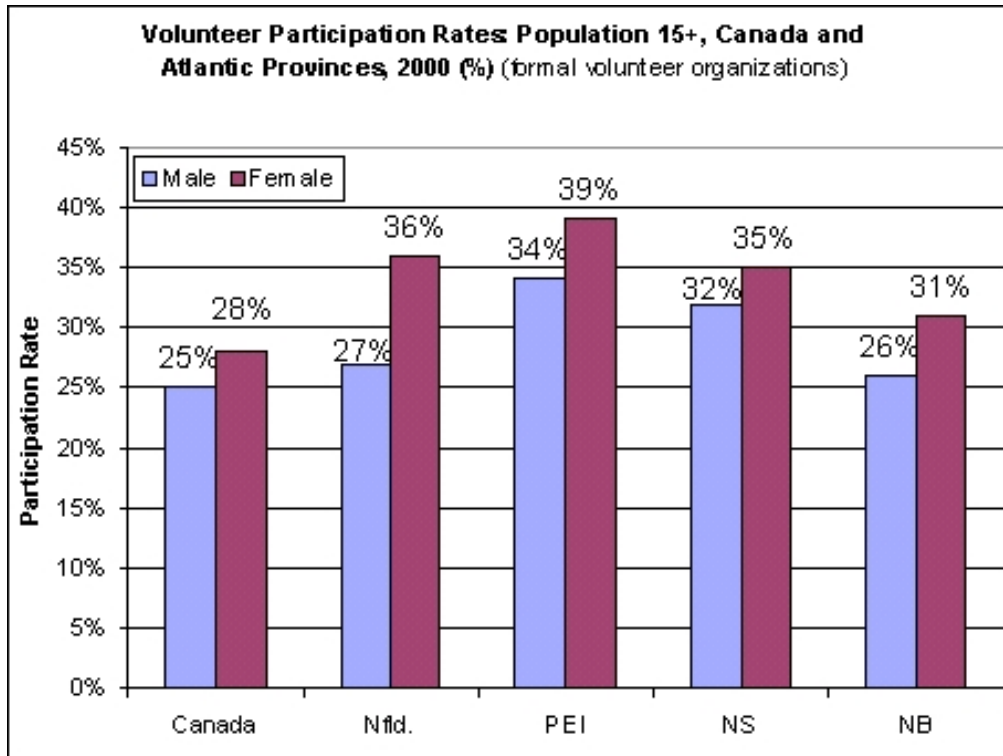
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<sup>5</sup> Colman, Ronald (1998, with updates in 1999 and 2000), *The Economic Value of Civic and Voluntary Work in Nova Scotia*, GPI Atlantic, Halifax; and see Colman (2000), *Women's Health in Atlantic Canada*, pages 42-46.

<sup>6</sup> Hall, Michael, Larry McKeown, and Karen Roberts, *Caring Canadians, Involved Canadians: Highlights from the 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating*, Statistics Canada, catalogue, no. 71-542-XPE, Ottawa, August, 2001, page 5.

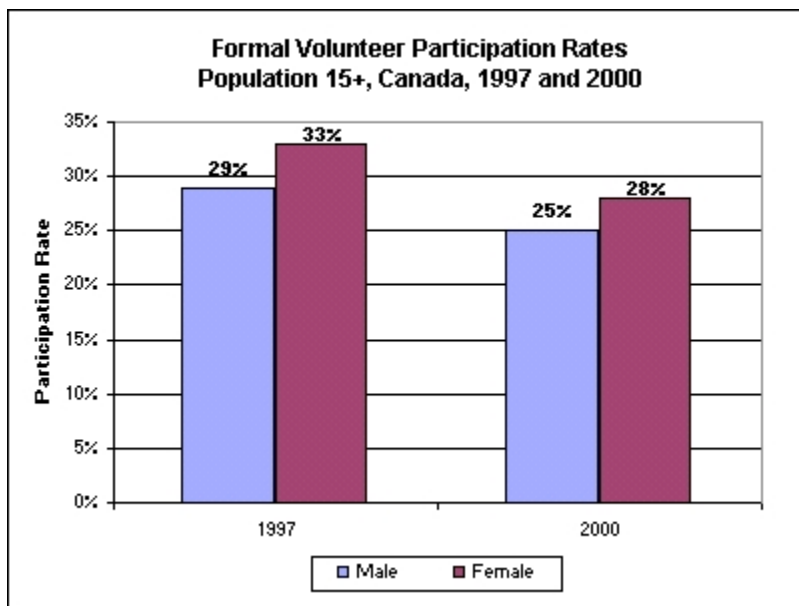
<sup>7</sup> Hall et al. (2001), op. cit, pp. 11 ff.

**Figure 1. Volunteer Participation Rates (%): Population 15+, Canada and Atlantic Provinces, 2000**



Source: Statistics Canada, Caring Canadians, Involved Canadians 2001

**Figure 2. Formal Volunteer Participation Rates: Population 15+, Canada, 1997 & 2000**



Source: Statistics Canada, Caring Canadians, Involved Canadians 2001

However these total volunteer numbers underestimate the impact of this decline in volunteerism on those Canadians who benefit most from voluntary activity, such as the elderly, disabled, sick, homeless, youth in need, abused women and children, and other vulnerable groups. From the perspective of the beneficiaries of voluntary work, the most accurate measure of progress is volunteer service hours offered per capita, taking into account changes in population rather than just the absolute number and hours of volunteers. From that perspective, volunteer hours per capita declined by 6.3% between 1997 and 2000. In other words, on a per capita basis, Canadians received 6.3% fewer volunteer services in 2000 than they did in 1997 (Table 1).<sup>8</sup>

On the whole, Atlantic Canadians bucked that national trend in 2000, and they did so dramatically. Only four provinces in Canada *increased* their per capita formal volunteer service hours between 1997 and 2000 – Newfoundland (by 45%), Prince Edward Island (by 50%), Nova Scotia (by 18%), and Saskatchewan (by 3%). But this is not particularly cause for celebration. In all these provinces, except for PEI, the increase was entirely achieved by fewer volunteers putting in longer hours. Only PEI saw a modest increase in the number of volunteers, with 2,000 more Islanders volunteering in 2000 than in 1997. Newfoundland and Labrador had 12,000 fewer volunteers in 2000 than in 1997; Nova Scotia had 30,000 fewer; and New Brunswick had 34,000 fewer, the second largest percentage drop in the country after Ontario in number of volunteers. In total, Atlantic Canada had 74,000 fewer volunteers in 2000 than it did in 1997.

To compensate for this decline, volunteers in all four Atlantic provinces increased their contribution more dramatically, as measured by hours per volunteer, than volunteers in any other province. The remaining Atlantic volunteers worked 51% more hours in Newfoundland, 46% more in PEI, 32% more in Nova Scotia, and 16% more in New Brunswick.

Atlantic Canadian volunteers now work longer hours than volunteers in any other province. Newfoundland volunteers put in the longest hours of any volunteers in Canada, 28% higher than the national average, with New Brunswick volunteers ranking second (17% higher), Nova Scotian volunteers third (15% higher), and Prince Edward Islanders fourth (14% higher). Unfortunately, the longer hours of New Brunswick volunteers were not able to compensate for the 16.3% decline in the *number* of volunteers in that province, leading to a net 2.6% loss in volunteer hours per capita, when population change is taken into account. Nevertheless, New Brunswick still ranks fifth in the country in total volunteer service hours contributed per capita, after PEI, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and Saskatchewan (Figure 3).

The latest trends indicate a dangerous situation. While Atlantic Canadians can be justly proud of the remarkable strength of the voluntary sector in this region, and of the tremendous contribution that volunteers make to our wellbeing, standard of living, and quality of life, we must recognize that a growing responsibility and burden rests on ever fewer shoulders. A smaller number of dedicated volunteers is being spread increasingly thin, and the danger of volunteer burnout is real.

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<sup>8</sup> Statistics Canada does not provide this calculation, even though it is probably the most accurate measure of the actual impact of the voluntary sector on Canadians, and the key variable in assessing the potential health impacts of volunteerism. Thus GPI Atlantic simply derives volunteer service hours per capita by dividing the total annual volunteer hours (from Hall et al. above) by the total population of Canada and of each province. This takes into account population changes over time.

**Table 1. Fewer volunteers putting in longer hours leads to net loss of volunteer services in Canada, increase in Atlantic Canada (formal volunteer organizations 1987-2000)**

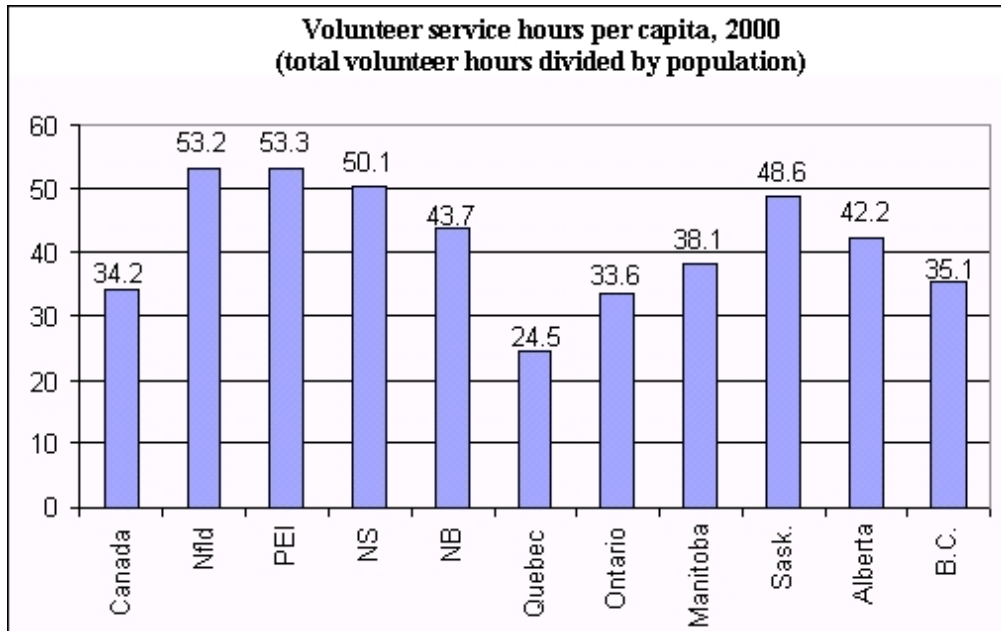
	Numbers of volunteers (thousands)				Total annual volunteer hours (thousands)		
	1987	1997	2000	% change 1997-2000	1987	1997	2000
<b>Canada</b>	5,337	7,472	6,513	-12.3%	1,017,548	1,108,924	1,053,200
<b>Nfld</b>	110	150	138	-8.0%	22,600	20,494	28,600
<b>PEI</b>	32	38	40	+5.2%	4,669	4,869	7,400
<b>N.S.</b>	218	283	253	-10.7%	40,901	40,029	47,200
<b>N.B.</b>	162	208	174	-16.3%	34,097	34,121	33,000
Quebec	1,005	1,313	1,135	-13.6%	206,911	196,974	180,500
Ontario	1,870	2,890	2,378	-17.7%	352,923	421,596	393,500
Manitoba	303	344	312	-9.3%	48,748	44,763	43,700
Sask.	276	361	323	-10.5%	50,497	48,311	49,700
Alberta	701	878	913	+4.0%	121,035	128,323	127,000
B.C.	661	1,005	845	-15.9%	135,166	169,443	142,600
	Average annual hours per volunteer				Volunteer service hours per capita (total population)		
	1987	1997	2000	% change 1997-2000	1987	1997	2000
<b>Canada</b>	191	149	162.0	+8.7%	38.3	36.5	34.2
<b>Nfld</b>	206	137	207.2	+51.2%	39.2	36.7	53.2
<b>PEI</b>	148	127	185.0	+45.7%	36.2	35.5	53.3
<b>N.S.</b>	188	141	186.6	+32.3%	45.6	42.3	50.1
<b>N.B.</b>	211	164	189.7	+15.7%	46.6	44.8	43.7
Quebec	206	150	159.0	+6.0%	30.4	26.5	24.5
Ontario	189	146	165.5	+13.4%	36.4	36.8	33.6
Manitoba	161	130	140.1	+7.8%	44.2	39.2	38.1
Sask.	183	134	153.9	+14.9%	49.2	47.3	48.6
Alberta	172	146	139.1	-4.7%	49.5	44.9	42.2
B.C.	205	169	168.8	-0.1%	44.1	43.0	35.1

**Notes:** (1) Figures for absolute volunteer numbers and annual volunteer hours do not account for population increases. (2) Hall *et al* provide rounded numbers only for total volunteer hours.

**Sources:** Statistics Canada, *Caring Canadians, Involved Canadians*, catalogue no. 71-542-XPE, 1998; Doreen Duchesne, Statistics Canada, *Giving Freely: Volunteers in Canada*, catalogue no. 71-535, no. 4, 1989; Hall, Michael, Larry McKeown, and Karen Roberts, *Caring Canadians, Involved Canadians: Highlights from the 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating*, Statistics Canada, catalogue, no. 71-542-XPE; Ross, David, *Economic Dimensions of Volunteer Work in Canada*, Department of the Secretary of State of Canada, January, 1990, page 11; Colman, Ronald, *The Economic Value of Civic and Voluntary Work in Nova Scotia*, GPI Atlantic, Halifax, July, 1998; Statistics Canada, *Quarterly Demographic Statistics, July – September, 1997*, catalogue no. 91-002-XPB; Statistics Canada, *Provincial Economic Accounts, Annual Estimates, 1996*, catalogue no. 13-213-PPB, population, page 167; Statistics Canada, *CANSIM II* database, table 051-0001.



**Figure 3. Volunteer service hours per capita, 2000 (total volunteer hours divided by population)**



Source: Statistics Canada, Caring Canadians, Involved Canadians 2001

As Statistics Canada notes:

*“Such reliance on a small minority of the population to provide the bulk of volunteer time and charitable donations may be a source of vulnerability for charitable and non-profit organizations and the people they serve. Any decline in number among this small core group of contributors could have dramatic repercussions.”<sup>9</sup>*

### 3. Economic Value of Voluntary Work Losses: 1987 – 2000

The 1997-2000 trend continues the decline in formal voluntary service hours received by Canadians that was first observed between 1987 and 1997. Thus, the accelerating 6.3% decline between 1997 and 2000 builds on an earlier 4.7% decline between 1987 and 1997. Cumulatively since 1987, and taking Canada’s population increase into account, volunteer service hours per capita have dropped by 10.7% nationwide. Every province in the country, with the exception of Newfoundland, PEI, and Nova Scotia, shared in that decline. Since 1987, Newfoundland increased its volunteer hours per capita by 36%, PEI by 47%, and Nova Scotia by 10%. New Brunswickers, on the other hand, received 6.2% fewer volunteer service hours per capita in 2000 than they did in 1987, in line with the national trend.

<sup>9</sup> Hall et al. (2001), op. cit., page 9.

If volunteer work had continued to be offered through community based organizations at the same rate as in 1987, Canadians would have received the benefits of 126 million more hours of voluntary services than they actually did. What this means in practical and human terms is that the sick, elderly, and disabled are no longer receiving the same level of volunteer health support as before. The poor are receiving fewer volunteer social services; and victims of crime and abuse are receiving less support and counselling than they used to. It is harder to find volunteers to staff help lines, to organize church events, to coach sports, and direct theatre, arts and other cultural events in children's after-school and weekend programs. And it is getting harder to fundraise for charitable foundations and for hospital telethons, and to find volunteers to serve on the boards of community organizations.

Across Canada, volunteers are trying to compensate for these losses by putting in longer hours, but only in Newfoundland, PEI, Nova Scotia, and Saskatchewan have these extra hours succeeded in maintaining, and even increasing, the level of voluntary services. In the rest of Canada, there are simply fewer volunteer services than there used to be, with corresponding impacts on the health and quality of life of Canadians, and on the strength of Canada's civil society and communities.

The nationwide loss of voluntary services has economic as well as human implications. A decline in voluntary work of this magnitude can either produce an absolute loss in services, with a corresponding decline in standard of living and quality of life, *or* the lost voluntary services can be replaced for pay. "Replacement cost" valuations assess the value of the lost volunteer hours by imputing a market value to the work that volunteers do. At Statistics Canada's estimated replacement cost rate for volunteer work of \$16 an hour, the decline in formal volunteer services cost Canada more than \$2 billion in lost services in 2000.<sup>10</sup> Because voluntary work is not valued or measured in the conventional economic accounts, this \$2 billion loss does not show up in the GDP or in any other market statistics, and is presented here for the first time.

When formal and informal voluntary work are both considered, volunteers contribute the equivalent of \$53 billion worth of services to the Canadian economy; including \$2 billion in Nova Scotia, \$1.5 billion in New Brunswick, \$1.3 billion in Newfoundland; and \$300 million in PEI. This massive contribution is not counted in our economic growth statistics, and therefore remains invisible in our conventional measures of progress.

Indeed this invisibility is undoubtedly the primary reason why most policy makers are unaware of the decline in voluntary work, and why the unfolding crisis in the voluntary sector has never been debated in any legislature in the country. A 10.7% decline in the gross domestic product would be called a depression and would constitute a national emergency. Yet a decline of this magnitude in unpaid voluntary work does not register on the policy radar screen. This anomaly

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<sup>10</sup> Monetary values are derived using Statistics Canada's replacement cost (specialist) imputation for volunteer work, in Statistics Canada, *Households' Unpaid Work: Measurement and Valuation*, catalogue no. 13-603E, no. 3, Table A4, page 71, adjusted to 2000 dollars. For monetary valuation methodology, see Colman, Ronald (1998), *The Economic Value of Civic and Voluntary Work in Nova Scotia*, GPI Atlantic, Halifax, July, 1998, sections 5.2, pages 17-20; 7.2, pages 34-36; and 7.3, page 37. Since university graduates have a disproportionately high rate of contribution to volunteer organizations, the opportunity cost method of valuation is likely to yield a considerably higher value than the replacement cost method used here. The \$2 billion figure given here can therefore be regarded as a conservative estimate.

demonstrates how powerful indicators are in determining the policy agenda of governments, and is the primary reason why the Genuine Progress Index does include the value of voluntary work as one of its core measures of progress. If voluntary work is indeed a mark of community strength and quality of life, and a vital determinant of population health, as Health Canada has stated, then urgent action is clearly needed to support and strengthen the voluntary sector and to reverse the troubling trends of the last 15 years.

#### 4. Predicting the Decline

Are the trends of the last few years unexpected? If we continue to exclude voluntary work from Canada's core measures of wellbeing and progress, then declines in volunteer services will not be predicted, and will only manifest later in a gradual, subtle, and unexplained deterioration in the health and quality of life of Canadians. If, on the other hand, voluntary work is carefully monitored in a core set of measures of progress, as the Genuine Progress Index does, then the trends of recent years are not at all surprising, and were, indeed, entirely predictable.

For example, a July 1998 GPI Atlantic report noted that university graduates have the highest rate of participation in formal volunteer work of any educational group. In Canada as a whole, 46% of university graduates volunteered for some non-profit organization, compared to 35% of those with a postsecondary certificate or diploma, 24% of those with only a high school education, and only 13% of those with less than a high school education. Statistics Canada analyses of results from the 1987 National Survey on Volunteer Activity state conclusively that "the tendency to volunteering rises with the level of education."<sup>11</sup> GPI Atlantic's own analysis of the data found that "level of education had a much greater effect on the rate of participation in formal volunteer work through organizations than it did on informal voluntary work."<sup>12</sup>

The same 1998 GPI report noted the propensity of highly educated Canadians to work increasingly long hours in their paid jobs. This occurred partly as a result of corporate and government "downsizing" in the 1990s, which led employers to retain their most highly skilled and educated employees, and to expect those remaining employees to maintain or increase levels of output. The GPI report cited a 1997 Statistics Canada study, which found that "the propensity to work overtime rises with an employee's educational attainment."<sup>13</sup> That study found 27% of university graduates working overtime, compared to 17% of those with some postsecondary

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<sup>11</sup> Duchesne, Doreen, *Giving Freely: Volunteers in Canada*, Statistics Canada, Labour Analytic Report no. 4, catalogue no. 71-535, #4, Ottawa, August, 1989; also Webber, Maryanne, Statistics Canada, Labour and Household Surveys Division, *Volunteers in Sports and Recreation*, presentation to the 16<sup>th</sup> annual conference and general meeting of the Recreation Association of Nova Scotia, November 16-19, 1989; Catano, Janis Wood, *Volunteers in Nova Scotia: A Profile of Volunteers based on the 1987 National Survey on Volunteer Activity*, Profile no. 28, Voluntary Action Directorate, Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada, Department of the Secretary of State, Ottawa, 1989.

<sup>12</sup> Colman, Ronald (1998), *The Economic Value of Civic and Voluntary Work in Nova Scotia*, GPI Atlantic, Halifax, July, 1998, pages 23-24.

<sup>13</sup> Statistics Canada, *Perspectives on Labour and Income*, Winter, 1997, catalogue no. 75-001-XPE; see especially pages 5, 6, 13, 14, and 27.

education, 18% of those with a high school education, and just 9% of those with less than a high school education.

In short, the same highly educated group that contributed a disproportionately large share of voluntary work was found, in the late 1990s, to be working ever longer hours in the market economy. Three years before results from the 2000 national volunteer survey were released, the 1998 GPI report therefore warned:

*“Since hours are finite, there is a strong possibility that voluntary hours have decreased in proportion to the increase in work hours for the highly educated. It must be emphasized that there is currently no firm evidence of this... But the circumstantial evidence for a link between longer work hours and a potential time squeeze that may threaten the economic and social contribution of volunteer organizations is strong...”*

*“From the perspective of the GPI, this example illustrates the critical importance of tracking trends in unpaid work. An increase in overtime hours in the market economy will show up as economic growth and as an increase in the GDP. At the same time, a potential cost or consequent loss of economic and social value in the volunteer sector remains invisible in the accounts...”*

*“The GPI view is that it is more prudent to track such potential problems in a more comprehensive system of accounting that includes the value of civic and voluntary work. This, in turn, can function as an early warning system to enable policy makers to arrest such a potential decline in volunteer work in its early stages, and before it manifests in social problems that may produce additional costs.”<sup>14</sup>*

Results from the 2000 national volunteer survey confirm these earlier GPI predictions, and are also in line with the “greying” of the Canadian population. According to Statistics Canada:

*“Although volunteer rates have declined since 1997 for each education group, the greatest decline was among those with a university education (from 48% to 39%).”*

Nor surprisingly, the 35-44 age group experienced the sharpest drop in volunteer rates. Among the volunteers who remain, also not surprisingly, Statistics Canada reported:

*“Compared with 1997, the greatest increases in average number of hours volunteered occurred among those with less than high school education.”<sup>15</sup>*

By age group, older volunteers experienced the sharpest increase in average hours volunteered, with a 21-hour increase in average hours among 55-64 year olds, and a 67-hour increase among those 65 and older.

This changing composition of the volunteer work force, which partly parallels the aging of the Canadian population, in turn has implications for the skill sets available to community and non-profit organizations, and for the kind of voluntary services they can deliver effectively.

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<sup>14</sup> Colman (1998), op. cit., pages 22 and 25.

<sup>15</sup> Hall et al. (2001), op. cit., page 33.

Volunteers on the whole are older and less educated. Prime-aged, highly educated volunteers are becoming scarcer.

According to the 1998 GPI report, the “strength of the data on the connecting variables” between volunteer work and market work by educational level constituted “warning signals that the economic and social contributions of voluntary work cannot be taken for granted.”<sup>16</sup> The 1998 GPI report pointed to similar dangers to the voluntary sector arising from increasing rates of time stress among women, who constitute the majority of volunteers. And this present analysis points to future dangers to the voluntary sector arising from volunteer burnout and from the increased workload that now rests on fewer volunteer shoulders.

Interestingly, the trends in voluntary work since 1987 show how the growing time crunch on Canadians, confirmed by Statistics Canada’s time stress surveys,<sup>17</sup> manifests differently in distinct phases. More Canadians volunteered in 1997 than in 1987, both in absolute numbers and on a per capita basis. But Canadians were also busier and more time stressed, and so they contributed 22% fewer hours on a per volunteer basis than 10 years earlier. That trade-off, as we saw, led to a net 4.7% decline in volunteer service hours per capita, when population increases were taken into account.

The 1997-2000 trend marks a second phase in the time crunch, in which those who are most time-stressed, such as highly educated, working age people putting in longer overtime hours, simply drop out. During this second phase, the composition of the volunteer work force also changes, with fewer remaining volunteers – older, less educated, and less time-stressed – putting in longer volunteer hours. If the numbers alone are examined, without reference to these social and demographic changes, it might be argued that there is no problem, since average annual hours per volunteer in 2000 are still 15% less than they were in 1987, despite the sharp increase in hours since 1997. But in the context of growing time stress rates, an aging population, a markedly changed volunteer work force, and declining volunteer numbers, a return to 1987 conditions is not an option. The key challenges for the next phase are to prevent burn-out among the volunteers themselves, and to reduce workplace pressures and overwork, in order to coax educated and middle-aged Canadians back into the voluntary sector.

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<sup>16</sup> Colman (1998), op. cit., page 27.

<sup>17</sup> Statistics Canada’s 1992 and 1998 General Social Surveys asked an identical 10-question time-stress survey. Respondents classified as “extremely time stressed” by Statistics Canada are those who gave affirmative answers to seven out of the ten questions, such as “Do you consider yourself a workaholic?”, “Do you worry that you don’t spend enough time with your family and friends?”, and “Do you feel that you’re constantly under stress trying to accomplish more than you can handle?” Results revealed significantly larger percentages of Canadians being extremely time stressed in 1998 than in 1992. 1992 results are from Judith Frederick, Statistics Canada, *As time Goes By... Time Use of Canadians*, General Social Survey, catalogue no. 89-544E, pages 15-16. 1998 results are from Statistics Canada, *The Daily*, November 9, 1999, catalogue no. 11-001E, pages 2-4; and Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, Cycle 12, 1998, Housing, Family and Social Statistics Division, special tabulation.

## 5. Overcoming Fragility and Strengthening the Voluntary Sector

The purpose of these remarks is to underline the policy relevance of the GPI, and its utility in pointing to preventive measures that can avoid later costs. An accurate and comprehensive set of indicators has the capacity to predict social trends more successfully than current measures of progress based on a narrow range of market statistics. While Atlantic Canadians can justly celebrate the comparative strength of the voluntary sector in this region, and the dedication and generosity of the volunteers in their midst, they also cannot take this contribution for granted.

In total, Atlantic Canada now has 74,000 fewer volunteers than it did in 1997. The remaining volunteers in all four Atlantic provinces are now working longer hours than ever, between 16% and 51% more than they did in 1997. These volunteers are putting in 28% more hours than the national average in Newfoundland and 15% more hours in the Maritimes. Voluntary work is being spread more thinly in the population among an ever smaller number of volunteers who, almost miraculously, have managed to buck the national trend and to *increase* the level of voluntary services provided to Atlantic Canadians by 17%, as measured by volunteer service hours per capita. During this same period, voluntary services nationwide declined by 6.3%. By this measure, Atlantic Canada has the highest rate of volunteer service of any region in the country. But this remarkable contribution rests on a narrower and more fragile base than ever.

Recognizing the treasure that exists in this region, both in human and economic terms, the four Atlantic region governments are well placed to take the lead in strengthening and supporting a voluntary sector that makes such a vital contribution to community and population health. They can consider and analyze these trends carefully, take the dangers and warning signals as seriously as they would a comparable decline in economic activity, and address and tackle the root causes as assiduously and creatively as they would work to remedy and reverse an economic downturn. To prevent potential adverse impacts on community and population health, and to avoid serious long-term costs, the four governments can work with volunteer and community-based organizations to ensure they have sufficient resources, staff, and support to do their work effectively. In the long run, such policies will be highly cost-effective.