

- Sport**
- Argument**
- Education**
- Money**
- Jobs**
- Travel**
- Enjoyment**
- News**
- UK**
- Crime
- Environment
- Health
- Legal
- Media
- Politics
- This Britain
- Transport
- Ulster
- Europe**
- World**
- Environment
- Politics
- Science/Medical
- Africa
- Americas
- Asia
- Australasia
- Middle East
- Robert Fisk
- Business**
- News
- News Analysis
- Comment
- Market Report
- Investment Column
- Citywire
- Digital**
- Features
- News
- Reviews
- People**
- Obituaries
- Profiles

Home > News > UK > **This Britain**

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Time-poor Britons shy away from charity work

By Philip Thornton, Economics Correspondent

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Britain's cash-rich, time-poor society is either becoming more selfish or people are too busy to extend a helping hand to others. Official figures show the amount of time people spent on voluntary work fell from 2.3 billion hours in 1995 to 1.6 billion hours in 2000, a decline of more than 30 per cent.

More significantly for agencies across the country struggling to provide services to vulnerable groups in society, the value of this contribution fell to £13.2bn from £17.7bn. One possible reason given for the fall was the massive increase in employment, now at a record 28.2 million people, the Office for National Statistics said.

The voluntary work sector believes there are other reasons for the decline including the increase in family break-ups, rising house prices and burgeoning debt, all of which force people to work harder to make ends meet. "As more and more people became employed could it be that people have less time to volunteer or that less people are using voluntary activities to help them get back into the labour market?" a spokeswoman asked.

Mark Lever, chief executive of the Women's Royal Voluntary Services (WRVS), agreed, saying the voluntary sector had been taken by surprise by huge, sudden changes in society. Volunteer numbers for the WRVS dropped 20 per cent over the same period although it has now managed to reverse the trend. He said the traditional volunteer was a woman in her fifties whose husband worked and whose children had grown up and left home. "That is changing," he said. "More and more homes have got both people working long hours.

"There must be a link between levels of employment and volunteering, especially as we used to attract people looking for experience before they went back into the labour market." Mr Lever said voluntary organisations had also come under pressure from what he called an "increasing emphasis on contracting out services".

He said: "In 1995, I don't think we had a single arrangement under contract. Now commercialism has come in, we have had to push for higher service levels and high levels of professionalism." He said the change of culture had put off many traditional volunteers. "There was a lot of resentment from the grass roots," he said. "People would look at me with my background in accountancy and think the suits had arrived."

The WRVS, which had a net increase of more than 1,000 volunteers last year, had broadened its appeal across all ages and ethnic backgrounds, he added. "It has been significant communications challenge but we have now started to go over the hump."

Justin Davis-Smith, director of the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR), said traditional charities had undergone major changes to recruit and retain the modern volunteer. "The more traditional organisations have found it hardest to recruit," he said. "They are the ones to have lost out to organisations such as Greenpeace and the other more social-issue organisations."

The institute said its own survey showed that although the number of volunteers had fallen by 5 per cent since 1991, the number of hours they put in had jumped by an astonishing 50 per cent. Mr Davis-Smith said the IVR survey used much broader definitions than the ONS, which included protest activity and other forms of volunteering that would be anathema to traditionalists from the 1950s. "I don't think they've picked up the full extent of volunteering in the community," he said. "The nature of volunteering has changed, especially for young people who have more demands on their time.

"They are not prepared to sign up to large chunks of time so charities need to be able to offer more flexible, bite-sized chunks of time, and I think this has been taken on board."

Jason Tanner, a spokesman for CSV, the UK's largest volunteer charity, said the picture was confused further by companies putting voluntary work into their employment schemes. He said blue-chip companies such as Nike and Barclays had set up "employee volunteering" to help develop their workers' skills outside the office on company time. "Rather than sending them on a paintballing day so they can run around a wood covering each other with paint, they realised someone might come back to work better refreshed if they spent an hour a week going into a school and improving a child's reading age," he said.

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Barclays allows staff two days of Barclays' time a year for community activities. Groups can get up to £1,000 to fund a particular project. Mr Davis-Smith added: "Charities now have far fewer people stuffing envelopes and more people improving children's reading or preparing prisoners for leaving prison."

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