The Volunteering Cliff: Is it the economy?

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# Introduction

Scholars and the popular press have raised alarms about declines in philanthropic behavior, specifically financial giving and formal volunteering to nonprofit organizations in the United States. The percent of American households donating to a charitable organization has declined from 66% of in 2000 to only 49.6% in 2018. Similarly, data from the U.S. Census Bureau indicated that a lower percentage of Americans are volunteering and that the decline is particularly steep in rural communities (Grimm & Dietz, 2018; Paarlberg et al., 2022). Similar declines in volunteering behavior have been noted in England and Wales (Lim & Laurence, 2015).

While there have been many speculations about changes in individuals and social make-up of communities that may be behind these declines in civic participation, one possible explanation is the economy. Popular media coverage and multi-disciplinary studies have increasingly paid attention to the ways the global economy and local economic conditions shape the civic health of communities. While many societies have become wealthier over time, particularly after the Great Recession of 2008, this growth in wealth has not been equally distributed across places (Alonso-Ferres et al., 2020). Persistent poverty, economic stagnation, and rising inequality have created “left behind” places (McCann, 2020; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), which may have social and political consequences. A growing sentiment that “some places don’t matter anymore” may have created “geographies of discontent” that fueled the “rise of populism” in the United States and Europe (McCann, 2020, 2020; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Wuthnow, 2019) and dampened civic engagement. While declines in giving and volunteering may predate the Great Recession of 2008 (Lim & Laurence, 2015; Paarlberg et al., 2022), the Great Recession seems to have exacerbated these trends and neither giving nor volunteering rates have rebounded more than a decade later, leading to important questions about the effects of economic shocks on volunteering.

Empirical evidence on the effects of economic context on volunteering are mixed. There is some evidence that residents in economically disadvantaged communities may be more likely to respond in a pro-social manner (Rotolo et al., 2015) as individuals are more likely to come together in “hard times.” However, other studies suggest that residents living in such communities are more likely to disengage from formal helping behavior (Lim & Laurence, 2015). Also, the effects of economic disadvantage (lack of income) may be different than the effects of income inequality or economic declines. And the effect of a temporary widespread economic shock (such as a Global recession or the economic shutdown during the Pandemic), may be different from these long-term conditions, leaving scholars to conclude that the effects of local economic context on civic engagement is complex (Besser, 2009; Paarlberg et al., 2022).

In addition, volunteering declines appear particularly steep in rural places, long viewed as quintessential centers of civic engagement (Besser, 2009; Putnam, 2000; Wuthnow, 2019). Might economic conditions, compounded by the lingering effects of the recession, be behind these ongoing declines?

In this paper, we examine the complex interactions between economic conditions (local and global) and individual volunteering across rural and urban contexts. Specifically, we examine three questions: 1). How are local economic conditions related to the likelihood of individual volunteering? 2). How do the effects of the 2008 recession on volunteering moderate local economic conditions? 3). How do these relationships between economic conditions and volunteering differ across rural and urban places? We draw upon a diverse body of social science literature, including sociology, political science, economics, social psychology, and rural sociology to offer hypotheses. We tested our model using United States Census Bureau data which includes more than 990,000 respondents between 2002 and 2015.

This paper contributes to the scholarly and practitioner conversations on declining rates of volunteerism. While many studies have traditionally examined the individual economic factors associated with volunteerism, such as income and employment, we contribute to the growing body of scholarship that examines how the economics of places shapes individual volunteering. As far as we know, one of the few studies to parse out the complex relationships between economic context and individual volunteering across rural and urban settings. As public policy increasingly relies upon private volunteer efforts, particularly in times of economic distress, it is critical to understand how economic context might shape local response (Jones et al., 2016; Mohan & Bennett, 2019) and the capacity of communities facing economic hardship to respond to their own needs.

# Economic Context as a driver of the Volunteering cliff

Volunteerism, like most forms of collective behavior, is inherently rooted in place, which structures social relationships, provides signals about need, and supports access to financial and social resources that enable and constrain action on behalf of others (Paarlberg et al., 2022; Rotolo, 2000; Rotolo & Wilson, 2012, 2014). Social scientists have long been interested in the relationship between national economic trends and individual behavior, including political and nonpolitical civic engagement; however, the Great Recession of 2008 and the economic shutdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic have spurred additional research. While much research has focused on how the economic position of individuals affect their behavior, a “sociotropic” perspective suggests that individuals act based an assessment of the economic health of their community and country rather than on their perceptions of their individual economic circumstances (Kinder & Kiewiet, 1981; Lim & Sander, 2013, p. 16). “Sociotropic” concepts are often used to explain the effect of economic conditions on individual political behavior (Kinder & Kiewiet, 1981).

Although originally described in the context of political behavior, a variety of theories have been used to explain the relationships between macroeconomic context and individual civic behavior (Borbáth et al., 2021; Lim & Sander, 2013). However, these studies often posit opposing relationships and return contradictory evidence. For example, studies that draw upon a need-based perspective suggest that economic hardship provides cues that signal need and promote grievances that mobilize individual engagement (Grasso & Giugni, 2016). Thus, there is some evidence that during economic downturns or when places experience distress individuals mobilize to act (Custers et al., 2019; Grasso & Giugni, 2016; Rotolo et al., 2015). However, there is conflicting evidence that individuals in economically challenged contexts retreat from civic life, regardless of their personal economic fortunes (Lim & Laurence, 2015; Lim & Sander, 2013). Studies that focus on civic withdrawal under economic distress often focus on supply side mechanisms, emphasizing lack of financial and social resources and breakdown of group solidarity that occur during economic declines (Grasso & Giugni, 2016).

To untangle the diverse body of research on economic conditions and civic engagement, we organize our review around three enduring dimensions of local economic context that dominate research on economic context and civic engagement: economic disadvantage, income inequality, and long-term economic decline. We then review the literature on the effects of recession and other economic shocks on individual civic behavior. Given the growing attention paid to the economic decline in rural places and its potential mobilization of political behavior, we briefly summarize the unique context of economic hardship in rural America. While our review of past research focuses on general forms of civic engagement, including both political (such as protest behavior) and nonpolitical community engagement (such as volunteering), given that our research question is focused specifically on volunteering, we highlight the differences between these forms of engagement as they emerge in our review.

## Local Economic Conditions

Individual behavior is not only shaped by economic jolts but also by local economic conditions, which are often long-term conditions and may have a particularly strong impact on individual civic behavior (Lim & Sander, 2013). This perspective is consistent with the urban studies theory of “neighborhood effects” (Custers, 2021) that posits that one’s environmental context influences people’s life chances over and above the effect of their individual characteristics (Sampson, 2012). Three economic conditions have figured prominently in the growing body of research on civic engagement: economic disadvantage, income inequality, and long-term economic decline.

### Economic Disadvantage

Social science theory generally posits that civic participation is driven by both needs and resources. From a needs perspective, economic disadvantage may spur engagement as participation becomes more urgent and the demand for volunteers increases (Custers et al., 2019). In the face of “need”, people may perceive that “we are in this together.” Custers et al. (2019) posited that community needs, appearing as litter, crime, and physical deterioration in lower SES neighborhoods, are more obvious and spur action.

Grievance theories from political science posit that economic disadvantage may actually spur engagement in protest or adversarial types of organizations (Grasso et al., 2019). In support of this, Grasso and colleagues’ (2019) cross-national study of various forms of participation in the midst of the Great Recession found that protesting and striking are higher in places with higher levels of unemployment and that unemployment levels did not dampen more conventional forms of engagement, such as volunteering for a political party. Alternatively, there is some suggestion that individuals living in high income communities “…may either use their relative prosperity as a substitute for personal involvement, i.e., they have the collective resources to hire staff for community projects and do not need as many volunteers, or possibly have residents who are more involved in the labor market than residents of other towns and have less time for civic engagement” (Besser, 2009, p. 191).

However, most studies, consistent with supply-side perspectives and theories of social disorganization, generally find that civic participation and helping behavior are highest in economically advantaged communities and lowest in economically disadvantaged places (Bécares et al., 2011; Custers, 2021; Letki, 2008; McCulloch et al., 2012; Mohan & Bennett, 2019). In a study of British neighborhoods, Letki (2008) found that neighborhood economic disadvantage dampened the organizational involvement of residents and is the single strongest predictor of social capital (even when compared to individual-level characteristics). Similarly, in a study of the determinants of the likelihood of volunteering in England, Mohn and Bennett (2019) found that this dampening effect of deprivation holds across volunteering for a variety of types of organizations.

Individuals living in economically advantaged places have resources that support their own participation and that of their neighbors; these resources are often lacking in disadvantaged places. Generalized trust and various forms of civic participation are lower in poor communities (Letki, 2008). Deprivation reduces social cohesion (Bécares et al., 2011) and fosters competition for resources (Letki, 2008). As economic disadvantage in a place increases, individuals living in the place may experience a collective sense of powerlessness, competition, alienation (Laurence, 2011; Sampson, 2012), reduced sociability (Letki, 2008), and decreased trust in others (Lim & Laurence, 2015). Wilson’s (2012) theory of “neighborhood social isolation” posits that poor neighborhoods are socially detached from middle- and higher-income communities, which decreases individuals’ motivations, opportunities, and invitations to participate in voluntary activities. Adolescents raised in poor neighborhoods are less likely to be socialized to participate, because they are less likely to be exposed to people, events, and discussions that invite participation (Gimpel et al., 2003). In contrast, people in high income places who are surrounded by others who participate in civic life may feel more social pressures to participate (Oliver, 1999) (Custers et al., 2019). Living in a high-income community imparts invitations, norms, and obligations to participate. From an investment perspective, individuals living in distressed community are more preoccupied with meeting immediate material needs and may be less willing to invest in cooperative behavior that provides no immediate benefit (Grueter et al., 2020; Lettinga et al., 2020; Parboteeah et al., 2004).From a practical perspective, individuals living in more affluent contexts have greater resources at their disposal to care for others (Paskov & Dewilde, 2012). Individuals living in economically advantaged places can also invest their financial and social capital in local organizations, which in turn stimulates the participation of others (Custers, 2021).

**H1:** As community economic disadvantage in a place increases, residents are less likely to volunteer.

### Economic Inequality

As income inequality increases around the world, a growing number of studies have examined the relationship between income inequality and social outcomes, including various forms of pro-social behavior. Many studies have documented a negative relationship between income inequality and various forms of political participation (Andersen, 2012; Lim & Sander, 2013; Scervini & Segatti, 2012), giving (Duquette & Hargaden, 2018) and volunteering (Lancee & Van de Werfhorst, 2012; Lim & Sander, 2013; Rotolo & Wilson, 2014; Veal & Nichols, 2017). Using CPS data, Rotolo and Wilson (Rotolo & Wilson, 2014) found that income inequality is negatively related to both secular and religious volunteering rates in U.S. cities. In a cross-national study, Lancee and Van de Werfhorst (2012) also found that higher levels of inequality are associated with lower participation in civic associations.

There are numerous explanations for how inequality dampens volunteering (Schröder, & Neumayr, 2019). The psychosocial perspective (Werfhorst & Salverda, 2012) suggests that income inequality is like other forms of diversity and leads to status differentials between people, increasing social distance, and social disorganization (Collins & Guidry, 2018). In the face of extreme social differences, people will be less likely to trust each other (Fateh Ahmad & Majid, 2021), share common values and priorities, feel less “solidarity” to the larger community (Paskov & Dewilde, 2012), and be less willing to cooperate to supply “public goods” (Rotolo & Wilson, 2014). Inequality may also be associated with less tolerance for “out groups” (Andersen & Fetner, 2008) and less willingness to associate with others that are “different” (McPherson, 1983). Concepts of “social affinity” (Duquette & Hargaden, 2018) and “contact hypothesis” (Lancee & Van de Werfhorst, 2012) posit that income inequality creates social distance between community members. In unequal communities, people will feel less affinity with and empathy for those who are unlike them and are therefore less likely to provide support to others as incomes and lifestyles diverge. In unequal communities, individuals are also more likely to distrust institutions, which are a source of inequality, and thus less likely to participate in such institutions.

From a resource perspective (Lancee & Van de Werfhorst, 2012), places with high levels of inequality also have large gaps in the social, cultural, and economic resources that individuals need to participate. Not only do more people at the bottom of the income ladder lack the resources to participate in unequal contexts, but inequality is associated with public underinvestment in human, physical and social systems (Lancee & Van de Werfhorst, 2012; Duncan, 2010).

Both perspectives lead us to hypothesize that inequality dampens volunteering behavior.

**H2:** As inequality in a place increases, residents are less likely to volunteer.

### Economic Decline

For the past three decades, globalization, deindustrialization, economic concentration, and agricultural corporatization have led to uneven rates of economic growth and decline across place that have led to long-term changes (and disparities) in the economic fortunes of local communities. Rodríguez-Pose and colleagues (2020) suggested that long-term economic decline in a place creates perceptions of “interterritorial inequality”. They posit that long term decline creates a sense of segregation from the broader society that fuels anger and resentment that their community has been left behind and “doesn’t matter” to the larger society (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Communities in decline may feel a reduced sense of shared community identity. They may be less likely to have access to broader non-local social networks and role models that provide the information and connections that support local engagement. Individuals in “left behind” communities may also feel hopeless, powerless and lack a sense of efficacy that their efforts will make a difference, as a result there is little reason to participate (Bartle et al., 2017; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Prolonged economic decline might dampen residents’ sense of “collective efficacy,” a shared expectation that others will act on the behalf of the community(Sampson, 2012). Long term decline also has a sociopsychological effect as communities experience outmigration -watching friends and families leave—creates a loss of identity and sadness.

From a resource perspective, long term decline reduces the capacity of local organizations to support volunteering and declining areas may be more likely to experience larger cuts in government service spending, as they have less long-term ability to generate tax revenue (Gray & Barford, 2018). A robust economy provides the skills and social networks that are essential for volunteerism (Tolbert et al., 2002; Verba & Nie, 1987) and are lost in communities facing long-term declines. Long-term decline may be particularly detrimental for youth, who instead of being “socialized” to engage, may face limited opportunities to engage in the workplace and civic organizations (Emmenegger et al., 2017).

**H3**: As local economic conditions decline; residents are less likely to volunteer.

## The Moderating Effect of National (Global) Economic Jolts

In the aftermath of the Great Recession of 2008, a growing body of research has examined how temporary economic jolts impact civic engagement. From a needs-based perspective, a rapid increase in needs triggered by a national recession might motivate people to get involved (Lim & Sander, 2013). As Lim and Laurence (2015) described, there seems to be a sense of nostalgia, often emanating from the popular media, that during hard economic times, people pull together and help each other. Like volunteering for a natural disaster, a recession may trigger two motivations: norms of responsibility and relational motivations, such as reciprocity, and shared identity (Hung et al., 2020). Hard times may produce a sense of community, neighborliness, increased empathy and a realization that needs cannot be met through traditional market and government solutions (Alonso-Ferres et al., 2020; Custers et al., 2019; Rotolo et al., 2015). One way that individuals cope during hard times is to build cooperative networks (Alonso-Ferres et al., 2020). Custers and colleagues (2019) found that during the 2008 recession, perceived problems in Dutch neighborhoods were associated with increased civic participation. Rotolo and colleagues (2015) found that U.S. metropolitan regions experiencing the highest rate of foreclosures experienced increases in volunteering. Finding that homeowners accounted for almost all the increased volunteer response, they posited that homeowners empathized with victims of the foreclosure crisis and were more likely to feel they had a “stake” in their community. In addition, during a recession, nonprofit organizations may respond to increased need by more actively recruiting volunteers (Lim & Sander, 2013).

However, other empirical studies of volunteer response during economic recessions provide mixed results and sometimes contradict this rosy picture. Lim and Laurence’s (2013) study of trends in civic engagement between 1973 and 1994 found no evidence that national recessions affected either political or nonpolitical community engagement. Focusing on the Great Recession of 2008, Lim and Laurence (2015) found that both formal and informal volunteering in England and Wales declined during the recession, regardless of whether or not individuals experienced financial hardships. Similarly, Putnam (2000) found that membership in civic associations declined during the Great Recession. A study of civic engagement in Western Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic found that individuals’ perceptions of increased economic threats were associated with lower levels of political and civic participation (Borbáth et al., 2021).

There are many potential supply-side explanations for these declines. The opportunity cost of volunteering might increase during economic hard times as individuals feel less secure financially (Lim & Laurence, 2015) and face greater uncertainty (Borbáth et al., 2021). “In severe recessions, people may also be anxious about their economic wellbeing and security and work harder at their workplaces, impinging on time and energy they could devote to community” (Lim and Sander, 2013, p. 16). Recessions also affect the subjective well-being of individuals and during economic downturns; individuals are more likely to experience poorer mental health and greater stress, lower self-efficacy, higher in-group biases, and decreased trust in others (Alonso-Ferres et al., 2020) and in all types of institutions (Lim & Sander, 2013). And during economic downturns, organizations that recruit and use volunteers face constrained resources and may be less able to promote participation (Custers et al., 2019). Based on this, our first hypothesis is as follows:

**H4**: Individuals are less likely to volunteer during and after a recession.

There is growing evidence that national/global shocks to the economy (recessions) moderate the effect of local economic conditions. Research has increasingly suggested that the effects of national and global economic shocks impact communities differently. However, the few empirical studies testing these differences are mixed. Testing the differential effect of the recession across neighborhoods in Rotterdam (2008-2013), Custers and colleagues found that the volunteering gap between high SES neighborhoods and low SES neighborhoods narrowed. Although low SES neighborhoods had lower rates of civic engagement than more affluent neighborhoods prior to the recession, they found small increases in volunteering rates in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods and a decline in affluent neighborhoods during the recession (Custers et al., 2019). Their analysis supported a “needs” perspective that volunteering in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods was spurred by the perception that needs were “urgent” and that people were struggling during the Recession.

However, there is also evidence that recessions might have a stronger negative effect on individuals living in economically ailing communities as residents of these communities already lack the material resources, collective efficacy, and cultural norms of engagement that support engagement (Lim & Laurence, 2015; Lim & Sander, 2013). In response to “hard times,” residents of already economically vulnerable communities may further withdraw from civic life and focus on weathering hard times individually. Economically vulnerable communities may lack the financial capacity, social resilience, and norms of community engagement that are needed to respond to respond to cyclical economic downturns (Lim & Laurence, 2015, p. 323).

Custers and colleagues (2019) posited that one of the possible explanations for these conflicting findings is that in the Netherlands, economically disadvantaged neighborhoods received greater governmental support for service delivery, creating a supportive institutional environment. Given the U.S. context that, like the U.K., has experienced three decades of limited government, we expect that the recession will have a stronger negative impact in economically vulnerable communities (those that are economically disadvantaged, high rates of income inequity, and that have faced long-term economic decline).

This leads us to extend our original three hypotheses:

**H5a:** The relationship between community economic disadvantage and individual volunteering is moderated by economic recession, such that the negative effect of living in an economically disadvantaged place is stronger post-recession.

**H5b:** The relationship between community inequality and individual volunteering is moderated by economic recession, such that the negative effect of economic inequality is stronger post-recession.

**H5c:** The relationship between economic decline and individual volunteering is moderated by economic recession, such that the negative effect of economic declines is stronger post-recession.

## The Special Case of Rural America’s Decline

While rural places have historically had higher rates of volunteerism than urban places, there is also reason to expect that the dampening effect of economic vulnerability on civic engagement may exert an even stronger effect in rural places. Scholars and public commentators increasingly describe how economic re-structuring has fueled “rage” and feeling of “being left behind” in rural places (Cramer, 2016; Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2020; Wuthnow, 2019). Particularly in the United States, there has been a perception in rural places (often derogatorily referred to as “fly over states”) that they were not getting their share of respect, resources, or voice in national discussions (Wuthnow, 2019). Rodríguez-Pose and colleagues (2020) posited that these perceptions of “being left behind” have fueled anger and resentment in those communities that have a strong sense of community identity and attachment. While such anger may have fueled populist voting and political participation in both urban and rural communities, we posit that there are certain aspects of contemporary rural life which may cause rural residents to withdraw.

First, the face of economic disadvantage may be different in rural places. In rural places, due to low wages and the boom/bust of resource extraction, employment offers less of a buffer against poverty (Bounds, 2019) and, as a result, poverty among working families has remained high (Thiede et al., 2018). The Recession has not ended in rural America. Although poverty rates are at near highs in rural places and rural employment rates continue to decline (Allard 2019), poverty is less concentrated and often hidden in rural places (Thiede et al., 2018). The social attitudes about poverty may also be different as rural poor are less likely to define their quality of life based upon income levels (Milbourne & Webb, 2017). Second, rural places are less likely to be connected to institutional resources that help sustain places during “hard times.” Although rural places may have a higher density of informal associations and churches (Wuthnow 2019), urban places generally have a higher concentration of organizational and institutional financial resources—such as housing, human services, Medicaid providers, day care and early childhood education centers—than rural places (Allard, 2019) . Third, rural places may have different social structures and norms that shape civic engagement (Bernard et al., 2019). Rural residents are often more likely to describe a strong sense of community, see themselves as a part of the community, and feel an obligation to help others (Milbourne & Webb, 2017; Wuthnow, 2019). Individuals living in poverty in rural places are more reliant upon these social networks for support. Changes in local support structures through outmigration and aging populations, limits the self-help capacity of rural places (). Furthermore, many rural places have strong institutionalized values that serve as mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, such as patrimony and a strong norm of self-reliance (Bernard et al., 2019; Milbourne & Webb, 2017; Wuthnow, 2019). Similarly, reliance on religious congregations and other informal associations may play a very important role in meeting needs (Lee & Bartkowski, 2004)(Lee and Bartkowski 2005), but religious congregations and other informal associations are often exclusionary. And while rural communities may be more reliant on neighbors and families for support, long-term decline has accelerated the exodus of educated young people, reducing the capacity for collective care, and creating a sense of loss for those left behind.

We thus posit three-way interactions between economic conditions, recession, and rurality, such that:

**H6a:** Community economic disadvantage, recession and rurality have a three-way interaction effect on individual volunteering, such that the negative relationship between economic disadvantage and individual volunteering will be strongest post-recession and in rural counties. **H6b:** Economic inequality, recession and rurality have a three-way interaction effect on individual volunteering, such that the negative relationship between inequality and individual volunteering will be strongest post-recession and in rural counties.

**H6c:** Economic decline, recession and rurality have a three-way interaction effect on individual volunteering, such that the negative relationship between economic declines and individual volunteering will be strongest post-recession and in rural counties.

# Methods

**Data**

To test our hypotheses, we utilized the Current Population Survey’s (CPS) September volunteering supplement from 2002 through 2015. The CPS is a survey conducted monthly by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which gathers information on labor force participation, as well as individual and household demographic data. The volunteering supplement includes questions about the respondents’ volunteer work. The CPS is a two-stage stratified probability sample of households in the United States, designed to provide a representative sample of the nation and each state. The survey interviews approximately 56,000 households each month, collecting data on all household members aged 15 and older. Our study used a pooled dataset of 1,072,000 respondents who answered the volunteering questions, or about 90,000 individuals per year.

Each respondent in the dataset has an assigned county FIPS (Federal Information Processing Standards) code, but almost 59.44% of the publicly available data did not include county codes due to confidentiality concerns. The majority of these respondents were from rural areas. To obtain the geographic identifiers of the rural respondents, we accessed the full dataset that provides each respondent’s county FIPS code through a secure Census Bureau Research Data Center. This allows us to examine the effects of rurality, specifically in terms of how the effects of community economic contexts on volunteering may differ between rural and urban areas in the United States (testing the third set of hypotheses). Due to missing contextual and individual level data, our final sample includes 997,000 respondents. Individuals were the unit of analysis in our study.

**Variables**

Summary statistics for all the variables are in Table 1 below.

**Dependent variable**

The primary variable used in this research is whether an individual participated in volunteer work through or for an organization within the past year. This variable was constructed from two survey questions. The first question asked whether the respondent had participated in any volunteer activities through or for an organization since September 1st of the previous year. The second question asked whether the respondent had participated in any volunteer activities that they might not have thought of as volunteering, such as activities for children's schools or youth organizations, during the same period. Respondents who answered yes to either question were classified as having volunteered, and were coded as 1 on the volunteering variable. Those who responded no to both questions were coded as 0.

**Independent variables**

The main explanatory variables are county economic contexts. To measure economic disadvantage, we use the percentage of families living under poverty in the county. Second, we include county’s GINI income inequality coefficient, as a proxy for community inequality. Third, we calculated percent change in median household income in the county, using the difference between median household income in county in 2000 (adjusted to 2015 dollars) and in 1990 (adjusted to 2015 dollars), divided by median household income in county in 1990 (adjusted to 2015 dollars). This measure serves as a proxy for county economic decline. Finally, to see the effects of economic recession on volunteering, we include a binary variable of post-recession (1=2009 or later; 0=2008 or earlier).

Another main variable of interest is rurality. To define rural counties in this study, the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) rural/urban continuum code (in 2003 and 2013) was used. Counties classified as 1, 2, or 3 on this continuum were considered urban, which includes those in large and small metropolitan areas and those adjacent to metropolitan areas. All other non-metropolitan counties (4-11) were classified as rural. The USDA defines metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas based on population size and geographical connection to a larger metropolitan labor market. Metropolitan statistical areas (MSA) include a core urban center and adjacent communities with a high degree of economic and social integration with the urban center. Non-metropolitan counties include open countryside, rural towns, and urban areas with a population of less than 50,000 and not part of a larger MSA. 19% of respondents in the sample live in rural counties.

**Controls**

We include both individual and county level controls. The individual-level controls included in this study were age, age squared, gender (1 for female, 0 for male,), race (1 for white, 0 otherwise), ethnicity (1 for Latinx, 0 for non-Latinx), education (1 for bachelor's degree or higher), household income (adjusted to 2015 dollars and logged), homeowner (0 if not, 1 if so), citizens, 0 for no bachelor's degree) citizenship (1 if a US citizen, 0 if not), marital status (1 if married, 0 otherwise), Kids (1 if having kids, 0 otherwise), employment status (1 if employed, 0 if not employed), and business/farm ownership (1 if the person owns a business/farm, 0 otherwise). These variables are commonly used socio-demographic predictors of individual volunteering behavior (Musick & Wilson, 2007, 2007; Rotolo & Wilson, 2012; J. Wilson, 2012).

For county-level controls, first, we include the proportion of the county's population with a bachelor's degree and the median household income for the county. These measures were obtained from the US Census Bureau's website. Second, the study also considered two measures of cultural capital: the religious adherent rate and the number of religious congregations and nonprofit organizations per 10,000 people in the county. The religious adherent rate represents the number of religious adherents in the county for every 10,000 people and was obtained from the Association of Religious Data Archives. The number of religious congregations and nonprofit organizations per 10,000 people in the county was obtained from the National Center for Charitable Statistics Business Master File. Third, the study accounted for the region of the USA in which the county is located. The southern region of the USA was coded as 1, while all other regions were coded as 0, as the southern region has been found to have historical traditions that limit association activity. Finally, we include a racial diversity index, which draws upon the Herfindahl-Hirschman index (Hirschmann, 1964). We constructed this measure by subtracting the sum of the squares of the percentages of four different races (Whites, Blacks, Native Americans, and Asians) from 1.

**Modeling Approach**

We ran three sets of logistic regression models, each of which estimates the relationship between three types of county economic contexts (economic disadvantage, community inequality, and economic decline) and individuals’ volunteering. In each set of models, we ran three models: (1) base model without interaction terms (testing the first set of hypotheses), (2) model with two-way interaction terms between recession and each economic variable (testing the second set of hypotheses), and (3) model with three-way interaction terms on recession, rurality, and each economic variable (testing the third set of hypotheses). All of our models include year-fixed effects and clustered standard errors by counties, accounting for unobserved heterogeneity across counties and throughout the years.

# results

Table 2 presents the results for the first set of models, examining the effect of economic disadvantage (measured by the percent of families living under poverty) on volunteering. In all three models, family poverty rate is significantly and negatively associated with volunteering (p <0.001), providing strong support for H1. Recession is also negatively and significantly related to volunteering (p<0.001). All things being equal, people’s volunteering decreased after economic recession, as hypothesized. In Model 2, the two-way interaction term between recession and the family poverty rate is insignificant. This does not support H5a, and we thus cannot conclude that the effect of economic disadvantage differs pre/post-recession. Model 3 includes the three-way interaction term on recession, rurality, and the percentage of families living under poverty, and it is not significant, which does provide support for H6a.



The models presented in Table 3 examine the effects of community inequality (measured by GINI coefficient) on individuals’ volunteering. The results show similar patterns as the first set of results on economic disadvantage. In Model 1, GINI is significant (p <0.001), suggesting that community inequality negatively affects volunteering. This provides support for H2. Recession is also negatively and significantly associated with volunteering, suggesting that volunteering behaviors are negatively impacted by economic recession, other things being equal. However, the two-way and three-way interaction terms in Models 2 and 3 are not significant. This suggest that the negative effect of community inequality on volunteering may not differ pre/post- recession and in rural/urban areas. These results do not provide support to H5b and H6b.



The last set of models in Table 4 test the relationship between community economic decline (measured by percent change in median household income in the county) and volunteering. It is worth noting that more positive and larger numbers in percent income change means an increase in the county’s median household income (i.e., the county’s economy has gotten better). In all three models, the percent income change is significant and positive (p <0.001), indicating that the improvement of county economy increases individuals’ volunteering propensity, other things being equal. This offers support to H3. Recession again is negatively significant, showing the negative impact of economic recession on individuals’ volunteering. In Model 2, the two-way interaction term between recession and percent income change is negatively significant (p<0.05). The three-way interaction term in Model 3 is also significant (p<0.05). These results suggest that the effect of economic decline on volunteering may differ before/after the economic recession, and between rural and non-rural counties.



To further explore these relationships, we generated predicted probabilities of volunteering across rural and urban areas and pre- and post-recession periods. These are presented in Table 5 below. The results show that, first, individuals’ volunteering decreased after recession, in both urban and rural areas, which applies to all levels of the percent income change. This provides support to H5c that the (negative) effect of economic decline on volunteering is stronger after the recession. Second, the decreases in volunteering after the recession is much more significant in rural areas in most cases (up to the point of 60% change in county median household income). Before the recession, the predicted probabilities of individuals’ volunteering were much higher in rural areas. After the recession, however, the differences on predicted probabilities of volunteering in urban and rural areas become minimal, largely due to the greater decreases in rural volunteering. Third, the decreases in volunteering post-recession were smaller in rural areas when the community’s economics get better. The differences in predicted probabilities of volunteering between pre and post-recession become smaller in rural counties, starting at counties with the 70% of change in the median household income. This suggests that volunteering in rural counties experiencing growth was dampened less post-recession than rural counties experiencing stagnation. Taken together, these results suggest that rates of county economic growth affect volunteering differently between urban and rural areas, providing support to H6c.

**Table 5: Predicted probabilities of volunteering in rural and urban Areas, before and after the recession, at different levels of economic decline.**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| percdeltainc1 | Recession = 0 | | Recession == 1 | | Difference between pre- and post- recession | |
| \_at | Urban | Rural | Urban | Rural | Urban | Rural |
| 0 | 0.244 | 0.307 | 0.24 | 0.26 | 0.004 | 0.047 |
| 10 | 0.26 | 0.313 | 0.252 | 0.267 | 0.008 | 0.046 |
| 20 | 0.277 | 0.318 | 0.264 | 0.275 | 0.013 | 0.043 |
| 30 | 0.295 | 0.324 | 0.277 | 0.283 | 0.018 | 0.041 |
| 40 | 0.313 | 0.329 | 0.29 | 0.291 | 0.023 | 0.038 |
| 50 | 0.331 | 0.335 | 0.303 | 0.3 | 0.028 | 0.035 |
| 60 | 0.35 | 0.341 | 0.317 | 0.308 | 0.033 | 0.033 |
| 70 | 0.37 | 0.347 | 0.33 | 0.316 | 0.04 | 0.031 |
| 80 | 0.39 | 0.352 | 0.344 | 0.325 | 0.046 | 0.027 |
| 90 | 0.41 | 0.358 | 0.359 | 0.334 | 0.051 | 0.024 |

# Discussion

The study yields important findings on the effect of local economy on volunteering in rural and urban areas of the United States, which merit further discussion. We begin by summarizing our findings. We then discuss the limitations of our study and the implications for future research. We conclude with a discussion of the implications for policy.

Our findings confirm that local economic contexts matter for individuals’ volunteering. In the United States, economic disadvantage, economic inequality, and the decline in community economic condition significantly dampen the likelihood of individual volunteering. As expected, we also found that individuals’ volunteering decreased after the 2008 economic recession. This provides additional empirical support for the negative affect that economic jolts, such as global economic recession, on volunteering and civic participation, as noted in previous empirical research (Borbáth et al., 2021; Lim & Laurence, 2015). In addition, the recession exacerbated the negative impact of community economic decline on volunteering; however, the negative effect of income inequality and economic disadvantage was consistent pre- and post-recession. Individuals in economically declining communities may already lack necessary resources for civic participation such as collective efficacy and material and organizational resources (Lim & Laurence, 2015; Lim & Sander, 2013) and may thus further retreat from civic engagement activities after experiencing the economic uncertainty caused by the recession. It is particularly interesting that this negative effect exists more than five years after the “end” of the recession. Lastly, we also find some support on the importance of rurality in considering the effect of economic context on volunteering, before and after the economic recession. While individuals’ volunteering generally decreased after recession, in both urban and rural areas, it got much severely decreased in rural counties, particularly when the counties experienced economic decline (up to 60% of changes in median household income in the county). This finding aligns with the emerging concern that rural places experiencing economic declines are increasingly feeling left behind and isolated from the rest of the United States, leading to political anger and civic withdrawal (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2020; Wuthnow, 2019).

While our findings confirm that economic context matters for volunteering, there are several limitations to our findings. First, our findings may not be generalizable to other countries. As suggested earlier, the United States generally has less generous social welfare programs, which may have exacerbated the negative effects of the recession. Other countries might have done more to strengthen local institutions pre- and post-recession. Future studies should include controls for differences in levels of government spending, including cross-national studies. Second, we are unable to posit the mechanisms by which community economic hardships decrease volunteering. For example, the relationship between income inequality and volunteering is complex and may be moderated by individual income (Filetti & Janmaat, 2018). The volunteering gap between the rich and poor may increase in the face of higher inequality (Lancee & Van de Werfhorst, 2012; Schröder, & Neumayr, 2019). Consistent with theories of relative power (Filetti & Janmaat, 2018), higher income inequality may concentrate power in the hands of a small elite class. Individual who are less affluent may feel that they are powerless, not represented by institutions, and that the system is rigged against them (Uslaner & Brown, 2005). Feeling a sense of powerlessness, low efficacy, and pessimism for the future, the poor may futher disengage as economic prospects dim (Uslaner & Brown, 2005). Finally, our model only examines the likelihood of volunteering. Testing how economic conditions affect the “type of volunteering” across communities facing different economic conditions may help to unpack these mechanisms. For example, volunteering in high SES communities might be dominated by leisure activities (such as sports) and elite interests (the arts). Individuals may be more likely to drop these activities during economic downturns (Custers, 2021).

While our study raises many questions for additional research it is important to acknowledge the policy implications of our study. Neo-liberal agendas have focused on building the economy through voluntary efforts. However, our findings suggest that communities that support volunteering are economically robust. Efforts to raise rates of volunteerism in hopes of building stronger, economically robust communities, will not necessarily work without efforts to build economy (McCulloch et al., 2012).

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