

Published by  
Giving USA Foundation™  
and written and researched at  
the Center on Philanthropy  
at Indiana University



# GIVING USA spotlight

ISSUE 3, 2008

## Giving during recessions and economic slowdowns

### Introduction

Recessions occur every five to ten years, on average, in the American economy. Economic “slowdowns” also occur from time to time. The official definition of a recession is two successive quarters with a decline in gross domestic product (GDP). Thus, as of September 2008, the country is not in a recession. Yet, the economy is growing more slowly than it did in 2007, and there are serious concerns about how households will meet the costs of food, medical care, and fuel. There are also grave worries about wealth, with recent declines in home values, the continuing credit crisis, and the impact on the stock markets.

This issue of *Giving USA Spotlight* looks at recessions and economic slowdowns and their impact on charitable giving in order to help nonprofit organizations anticipate what MIGHT occur in 2008–2009 and plan accordingly. There are two different types of analysis:

- Description of recessions/slowdowns and giving by donor type, and
- Description of recessions/slowdowns and giving by type of recipient.

*Giving USA* publishes information about giving in amounts not adjusted for inflation (current dollars) and amounts that are adjusted for inflation (which economists call real dollars). Except in the box below, this issue uses inflation-adjusted values throughout, as they provide the most appropriate long-term comparisons when using 40 years of data. Where data are available, analysis is from 1967 to 2007.

Total giving has increased in current dollars in every year but one since recording began. The exception is 1987, when a tax law change in 1986 prompted some

people to “give early” in order to maximize the value of tax deductions they could claim.

Economic changes, such as slowed growth or a decline in gross domestic product, occur without economic recession. When the economy shows stress, whether it is a recession or not, giving may grow more slowly. It is important to note that giving still grows.

In current dollars, before adjusting for inflation, giving has increased an average of 8.4 percent in years without a recession. In years with a recession, giving has increased 6.2 percent (also in current dollars).

The average rate of change in giving during a recession is a drop of 1 percent. This decline compares with the total 40-year average of growth in giving of 2.8 percent for 1967 through 2007. During years without a recession, giving has increased an average of 4.3 percent.

Using one definition of a slowdown,<sup>1</sup> giving grows an average of 0.8 percent in years with a slowdown.

### What organizations need to do

The most important step a charitable organization can take to raise funds during a recession or downturn is to ask people for contributions in a clear and focused manner. Members of the Giving Institute offer advice in this newsletter based on their decades of experience as fundraising professionals and as advisors to nonprofit organizations. Important steps to successful fundraising include

- Work closely with the board of trustees to make sure that each board member is a current donor and an advocate for the organization’s vision and purpose.
- Develop and follow a fundraising, communications, and stewardship plan. With a plan, it is easier to stay focused and maintain momentum. It is also

easier to say no to good ideas that could divert resources unproductively.

- Focus efforts on renewing gifts from current donors. Take no donor for granted. Thank donors, recognize their contributions and let them know of the accomplishments they have made possible. This is true for individual, foundation, corporate, and all other types of donors.
- Maximize the use of all fundraising tactics available. This can include: thank you calls made by volunteers; online giving options; information about planned giving sent to loyal, long-term donors; and effective use of public relations and media relations to communicate your organization's message broadly.

The news reports often focus on negative stories, yet data show repeatedly that donors continue to give

during a recession or downturn and that nonprofit organizations continue to raise funds successfully.

Using *Giving USA* data, this newsletter contains facts and figures of actual changes in giving, during recessions and downturns. It is these figures—not potentially exaggerated news reports—that should guide your organization's planning for 2008 and 2009.

### Recessions vary in length

This newsletter looks at changes in giving by individuals, foundations, and corporations. Bequests are not considered because while there is some discretion among trustees about when to transfer assets to a charitable beneficiary, those decisions might or might not be tied to the overall economic climate.

The National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) determines when recessions start and end. Table 1 shows the recessions summarized by NBER.<sup>2</sup>

Table 1  
Start and end months and duration of recessions, 1967 to 2007

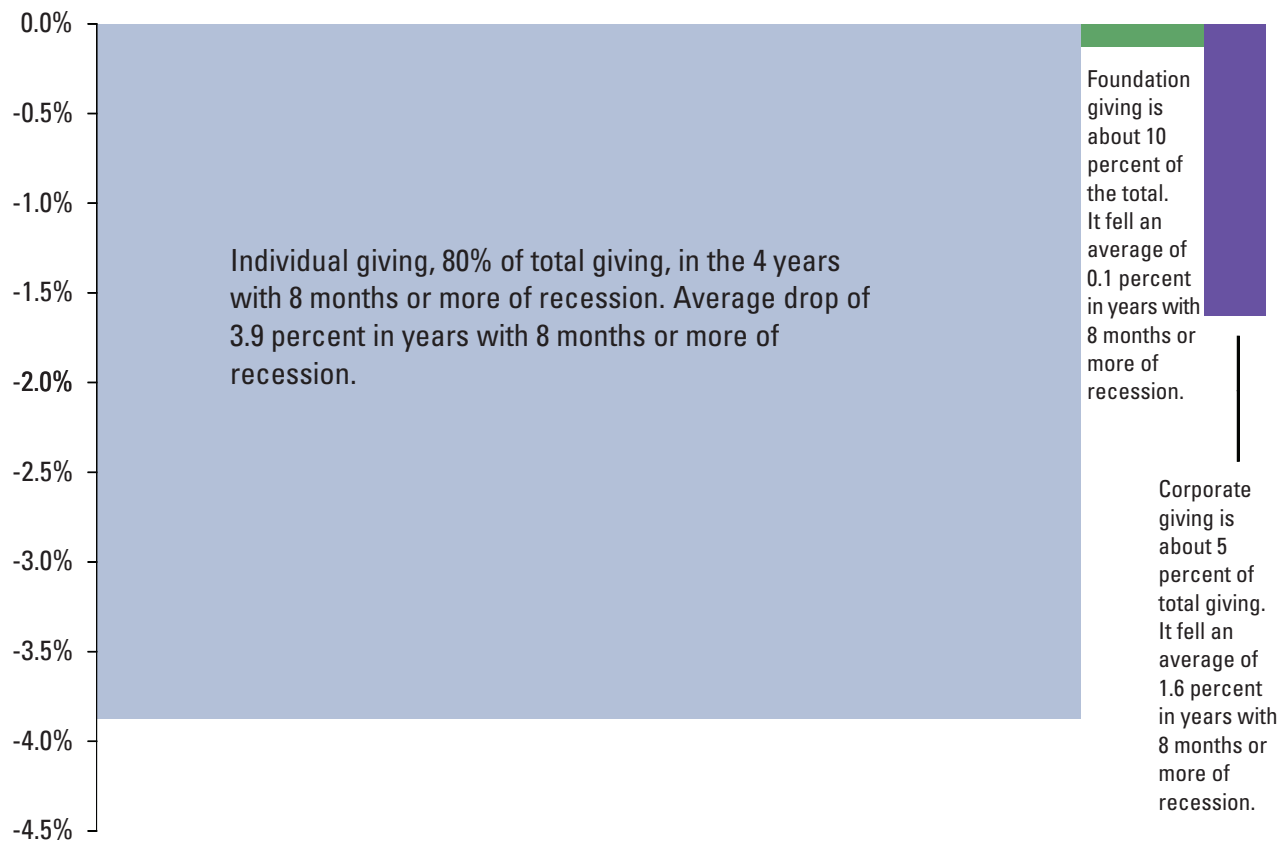
| Start of recession | End of recession | Months duration |
|--------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| December 1969      | November 1970    | 11              |
| November 1973      | March 1975       | 16              |
| January 1980       | July 1980        | 6               |
| July 1981          | November 1982    | 16              |
| July 1990          | March 1991       | 8               |
| March 2001         | November 2001    | 8               |

Source: National Bureau of Economic Research

Two recessions since *Giving USA* began lasted more than 12 months. The first was from November 1973 to March 1975 and the second was from July 1981 to November 1982. *Giving USA* typically shows as a

“recession year” any year that has even one month of recession in it. Even though the recession of 1969–1970 started in December 1969, *Giving USA* treats all of 1969 as a “recession year.”

Figure 1  
Comparison of average decline in giving by type of donor for years with 8 months or more of recession



Note for graph: The width of the box indicates the share of all giving from that donor type. The height is the percentage change, on average, in giving during four years with 8 months or more of recession. Not shown is bequest giving, which is not clearly tied to the overall economic climate.

### The worst recession impact on giving occurs during the longer recessions

Because some “recession years” have only a month or two in the official recession, this analysis looks at years where 8 months or more were in recession. Those years are 1970, 1974, 1982, and 2001.

In those four years, total giving fell an average of 2.7 percent. Figure 1 shows the average rate of drop by type of donor and uses the width of the blocks to show the comparative share of all donations from that donor type. Thus, the largest block shows individual giving as 80 percent of all giving (8 units wide) and declining an average of 3.9 percent in recession years (the depth of the block).

In the worst recession year for giving, 1974, contributions fell a total of 5.4 percent and fell from all donor types. This is an unusually severe result, compared with the other years with 8 months or more of recession.

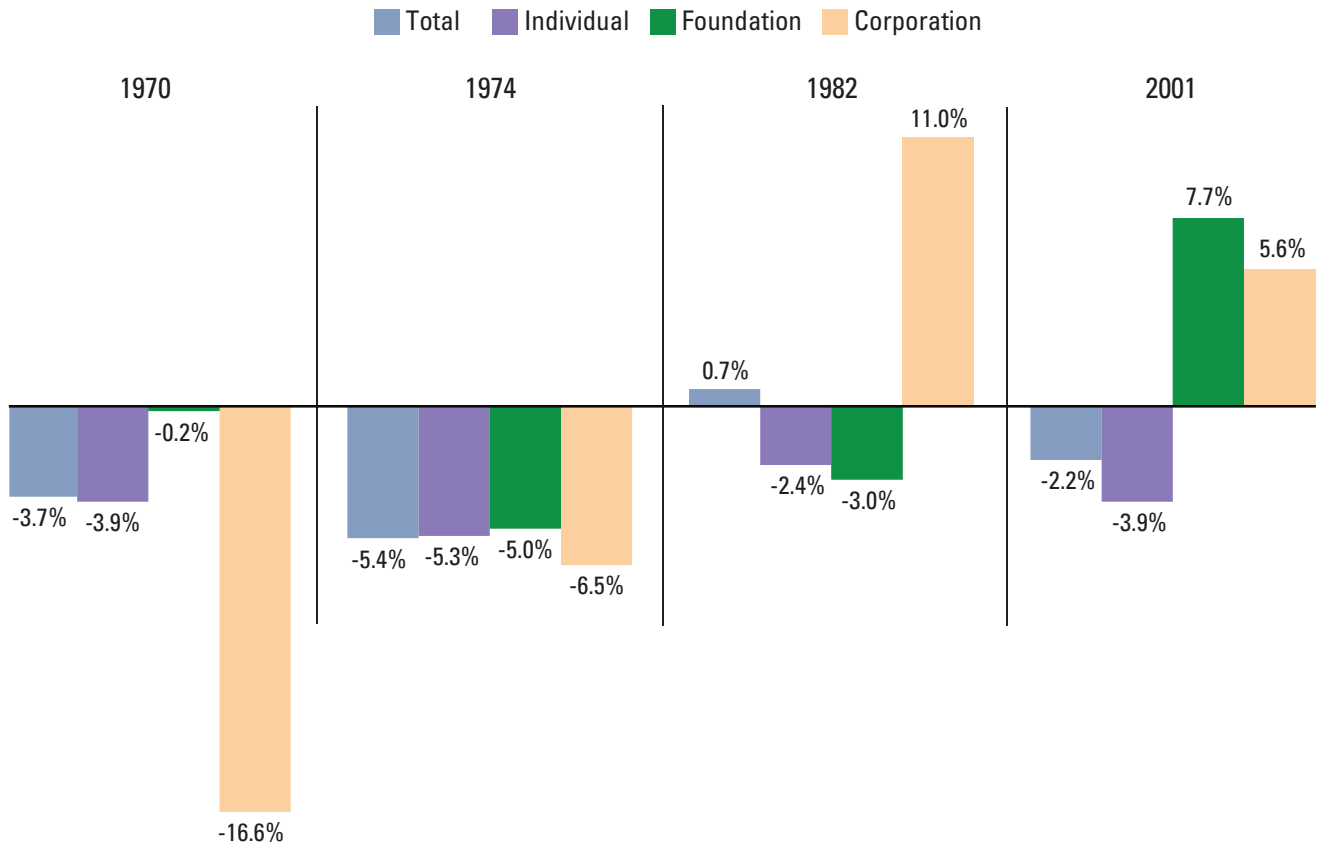
Figure 2 shows the percentage of change for total giving and for individual, foundation, and corporate giving, during the four years that had recession in at least 8 months. Giving fell from all four donor types in 1970 and 1974. It fell in two donor types in 1982 and 2001. Because individual donations are the single largest source of contributions, declines in individual giving have the strongest impact on the total.

Because they are a comparatively small portion of the total, foundation and corporation gifts cannot make up for a slowdown in individual contributions.

In tougher economic times, organizations need to continue to talk to people about programs and goals, have a clear and compelling case for support, and think and act for the long-term.

Donors continue to give during recessions and are most likely to make gifts to organizations that provide excellent stewardship.

Figure 2  
Percentage change in giving during years with 8 months or more of recession



**Slowdowns also affect giving but not as severely as recessions**

For this edition of the *Spotlight*, we have also identified years of economic slowdown, based on lower-than-average rates of change in personal income, which

affect individual giving, or slower-than-average growth in Gross Domestic Product, which affects all giving. Table 2 shows the thresholds used for defining a slowdown and the rate of change in giving in the years identified as times of economic slowdown.

Table 2  
Years with slower rate of growth in economic indicator(s) and rates of change in giving

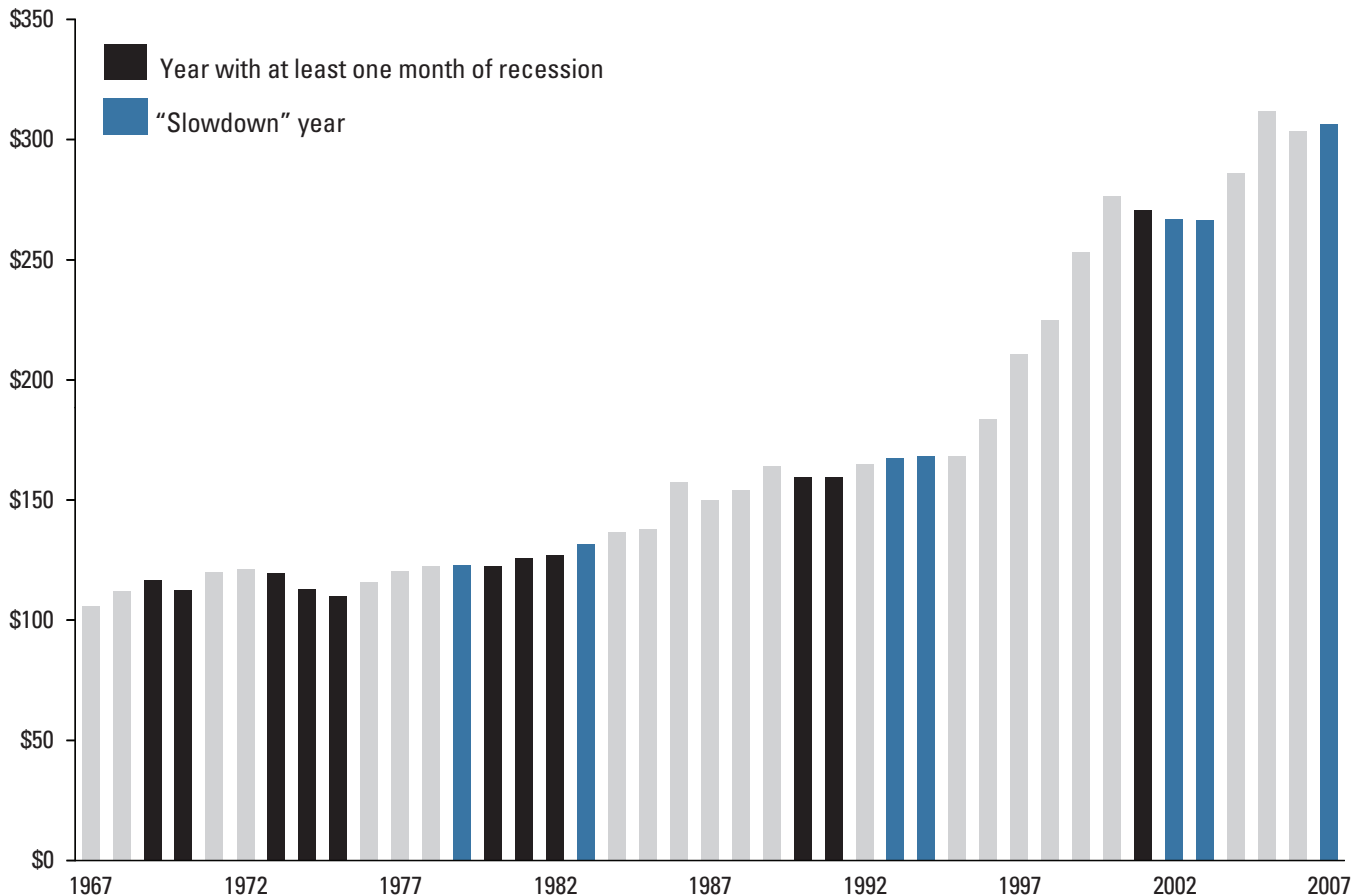
| Rate of change in personal income is 2.9% or less (90% or less of 40-year average of 3.3%) | Rate of change in Gross Domestic Product is 2.0% or less (80% or less of 40-year average of 2.5%) | Percentage change {adjusted for inflation} in giving in "slowdown" year |
|--|---|---|
|  | 1979  | 0.4   |
|  | 1983  | 3.6   |
| <b>1993</b>  | <b>1993</b>   | 1.5   |
|  | 1994  | 0.4   |
|  | 1995  | 0.0   |
| <b>2002</b>  | <b>2002</b>   | -1.4  |
|  | 2003  | -0.2  |
|  | 2007  | 1.0   |

## Recessions and slowdowns show slower giving growth, as do some other years

Figure 3 shows the inflation-adjusted total giving amounts based on *Giving USA* records for 1967 to 2007. The black bars indicate years with a month or

more of recession. Giving does not go down during all recession years. It rose or stayed stable (adjusted for inflation) in 9 of the 15 years on record with at least one month of recession.

Figure 3  
Inflation-adjusted total giving, 1967–2007  
Showing recession years and years with decreases  
(\$ in billions)



Giving grew more slowly in years identified as a “slowdown” year, indicated by blue bars. There were also years of slow giving growth even with fairly strong economic growth, such as in the late 1970s, from 1984 to 1985, and in the early 1990s.

Giving rose at an unusually high rate—then fell the following year—in three years: 1987, 2001, and 2005. The 2001 and 2005 amounts reflect contributions for recovery after disasters. In 1987, giving fell from 1986, when many donors “pre-paid” gifts in order to maximize

deductions before new tax rates took effect.

While year-to-year changes can be helpful, it is also useful to look at averages over time. Table 3 shows the percentage change in giving (adjusted for inflation) for

- All years;
- Any year with even one month of recession (recession year); and
- “Slowdown” years, identified based on a slower rate of growth, as noted earlier.

**Table 3**  
Average rates of change in giving for all years, for years with recession, for year with 8 months or more in recession, and for “slowdown” years

| Type of donor                    | Average, all years 1967–2007 | Average for years of recession since 1967 | Average for years with 8 months or more of recession | Average for “slowdown” years since 1967* |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------|---|--|--|
| Total giving, including bequests | 2.8                          | -1.0                                      | -2.7   | 0.8                                      |
| Individual                       | 2.7                          | -1.5                                      | -2.4   | 1.2                                      |
| Foundation                       | 4.3                          | -1.0                                      | -0.2   | 1.6                                      |
| Corporation                      | 3.2                          | -1.8                                      | -1.7   | 3.5                                      |

All percentages are adjusted for inflation using the Consumer Price Index where 2007 = 100. Data from *Giving USA 2008* for 1967–2007.

\* Slowdown years are 1979, 1983, 1993, 1994, 1995, 2002, 2003, and 2007. In those years, GDP grew at 80% or less of its 40-year average OR personal income grew at 90% or less of its 40-year average. In 1993 and 2002, both occurred, but in the other years, only one occurred.

The rate of change in individual giving is comparatively close to the rate of change in total giving in Table 3.

- Total giving averaged an annual change of 2.8 percent in all years;
- Individual giving shows an average annual change of 2.7 percent.
- In recession years, total giving fell on average 1.0 percent;
- During those same recession years, individual giving fell on average 1.5 percent.

Because individual giving makes up about three-quarters of total giving, it makes sense that the rates of change tend to move together.

During “slowdown” years:

- Individual giving grew at around half of the 40-year average for individual giving;
- Foundation giving grew just under 2 percent (compared with 4.3 percent for a 40-year average); and
- Corporate giving changed at about the same rate as the 40-year average.

### Fewer than half of charities see gift receipts drop, even in years of decline

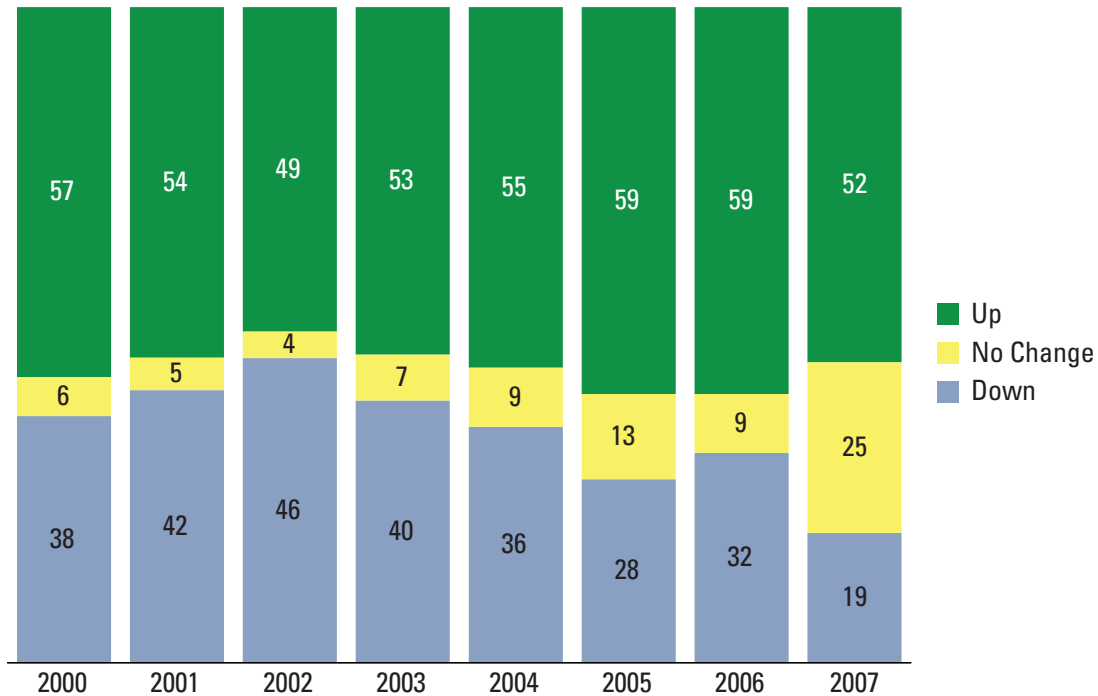
Not all charities, or even all types of charities, experience the “national average rate of change” in any year, let alone in recession years. In fact, *Giving USA* surveys from 2001 through 2007 found that in all years, 49 to 59 percent of charities saw growth in giving. Even in the worst year surveyed (giving in 2002), less than half saw a drop in total gift dollars received.

Figure 4 shows the survey results for giving in 2000 through 2007. Data are from *Giving USA* surveys of randomly selected organizations, except 2007. For that year, the results are from organizations participating in an online poll fielded by GuideStar.org.

While there has been only one recession in the period since 2000 (in 2001), there are three years in that interval when giving declined: 2002, 2003, and 2006. Even with overall declines, half or more of the charities responding to the *Giving USA* survey reported an increase at their particular organization.<sup>3</sup>

Charities weather downturns when they have solid fundraising programs and compelling cases for support. Successful charities continue to request gifts for purposes that are meaningful to donors. They provide excellent stewardship and accountability so that donors know their funds have been put to good use.

Figure 4  
 Percentage of surveyed charities reporting that gift receipts were up, down, or not changed compared with the prior year



Data: *Giving USA* surveys, 2000–2006; Guidestar.org for 2007.

### Description of recessions and type of recipient

Different types of recipient organizations have different levels of “sensitivity” to changes in the wider economy that affect the contributions made to that type of organization. The following section contains, by recipient type:

- A graph showing giving over time, during recessions, and slowdowns;
- A table showing average rates of change; and
- A few bullet points summarizing the key findings for the type of recipient.

The recipient types (subsectors) are in the order they appear in *Giving USA 2008*: Religion, education, foundations, human services, health, public-society benefit, arts, international affairs, and environment.

Briefly stated, the results are summarized here:

- Human services and public-society benefit both show growth in giving in recessions and even higher rates of growth in longer recessions.
- Religion shows little effect in giving during recessions and little effect from slowdowns.
- International affairs and environment both show

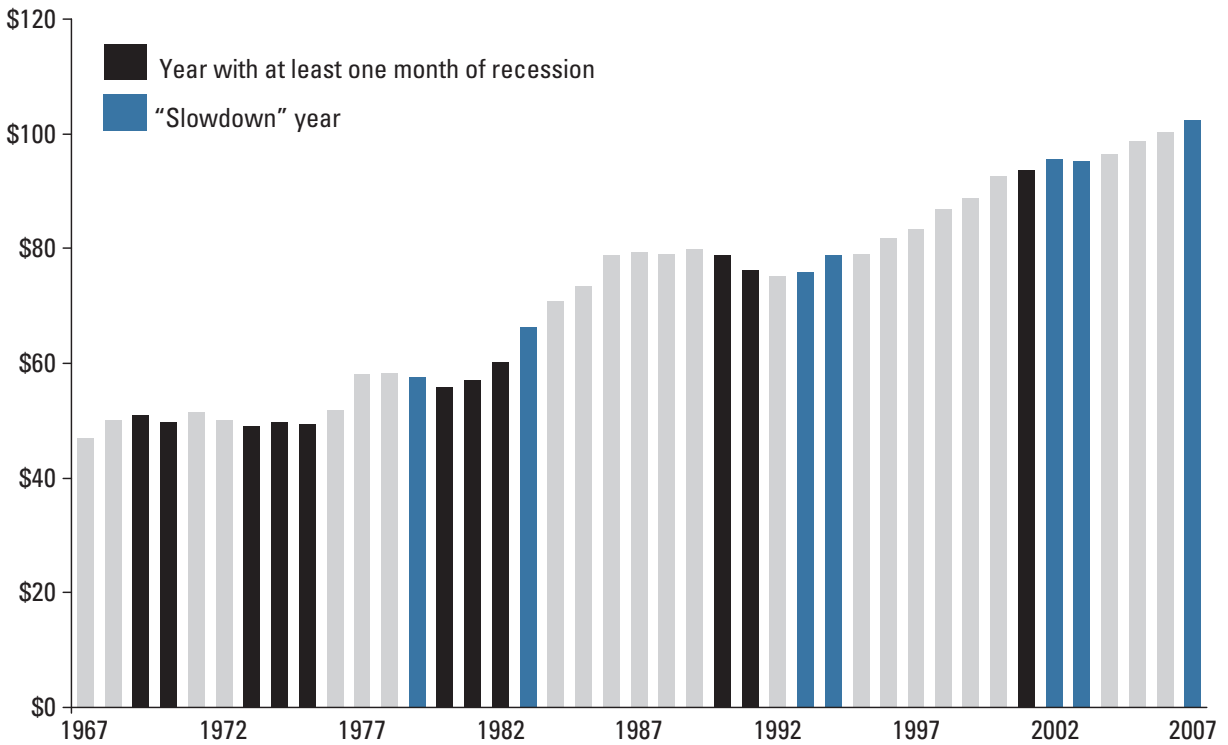
slower rates of growth during recessions than during non-recession years, but there is no sign of drops during recessions or during slowdowns.

- Health shows a much slower rate of growth in recessions and in slowdowns.
- Education shows a strong effect, with giving dropping during recessions, dropping further during longer recessions, and an average drop in slowdowns.
- Foundations show a mixed effect with a slower rate of growth in giving during recessions and a drop during slowdowns
- The arts subsector also shows a mixed effect.

In summary, *Giving USA* data show that the amount given to education has fallen, on average, by 1.9 percent in recessions since 1967. Other types of charitable organizations saw a slowed rate of growth in recession years, but, on average, not a decline. Religion showed a decline, on average, but it is very small (a drop of 0.1 percent).

Historically, giving to foundations and to arts has dropped during slowdowns and other subsectors have seen a slowed rate of growth, but not a decline.

Giving to religion, 1967–2007  
Adjusted for inflation  
(\$ in billions)



Giving fell in 6 of 11 recession years—and it did not fall in any year that was not a recession year, including slowdown years, except 2003. The decline in 2003

might be a result of continued relief donations in 2002 after the September 11 attacks.

Average rates of change in giving to religion under various economic conditions  
1967–2007

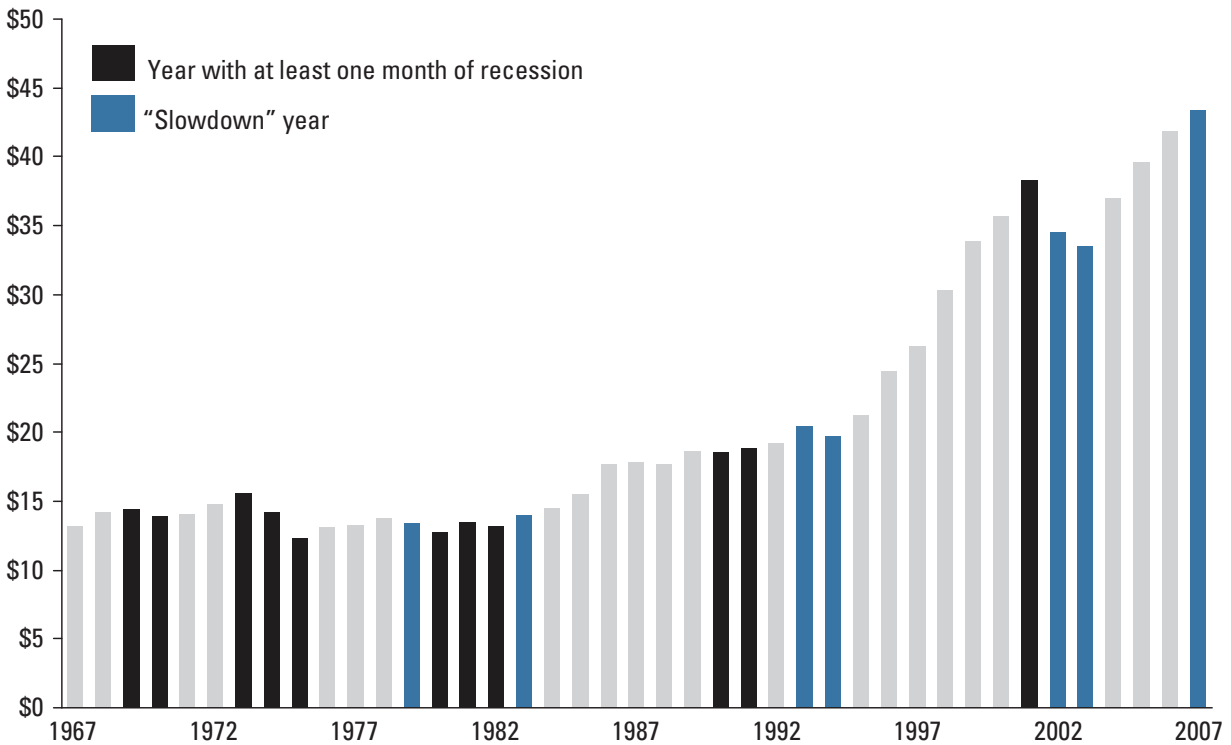
|          | Total | Recession | Non-recession | Recession in 8 months or more of year | Slowdown |
|----------|-------|-----------|---------------|---------------------------------------|----------|
| Religion | 2.0%  | -0.1%     | 2.8%          | 1.4%                                  | 2.6%     |

Religion giving was relatively insulated from economic downturns, but it can be affected by recession.

During slowdowns, giving was barely different than it is in non-recession years.



**Giving to education, 1967–2007**  
Adjusted for inflation  
(\$ in billions)



Education giving dropped in 5 of 11 recession years, with the largest declines in the latter years of the 1973–1975 recession. This led to an average annual

change in recessions of a drop of 1.1 percent, and a sharper drop, -1.9 percent, in years with 8 months or more of recession.

**Average rates of change in giving to education under various economic conditions  
1967–2007**

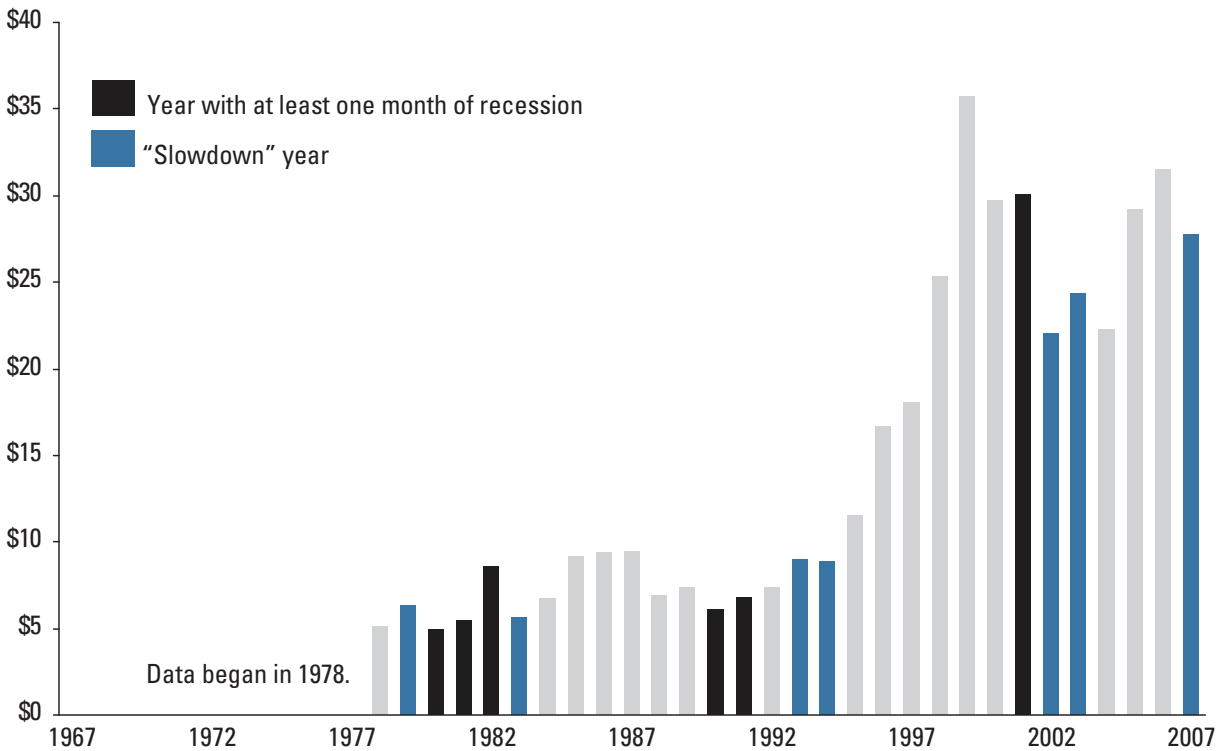
|           | Total | Recession | Non-recession | Recession in 8 months or more of year | Slowdown |
|-----------|-------|-----------|---------------|---------------------------------------|----------|
| Education | 3.1%  | -1.1%     | 4.6%          | -1.9%                                 | -0.5%    |

Giving to education slowed its rate of growth during economic slowdowns, with increases averaging 0.5 percent, compared with overall average annual growth of 3.1 percent from 1967 to 2007.

The slowdown average is influenced strongly by the

steep declines in 2002 and 2003. The Council for Aid to Education attributed lower giving to higher education in 2002 to a weak economy and comparatively low values for stocks.<sup>4</sup> The slower rate of giving in 2003 was attributed to declining gifts from alumni.<sup>5</sup>

**Giving to foundations, 1978–2007**  
Adjusted for inflation  
(\$ in billions)



Giving to foundations showed a strong effect from economic downturns, especially since the high reached in 1999. However, the historical record presents shows an unexpected component, in that giving during the longest recessions rose, on average, 29.3 percent. This

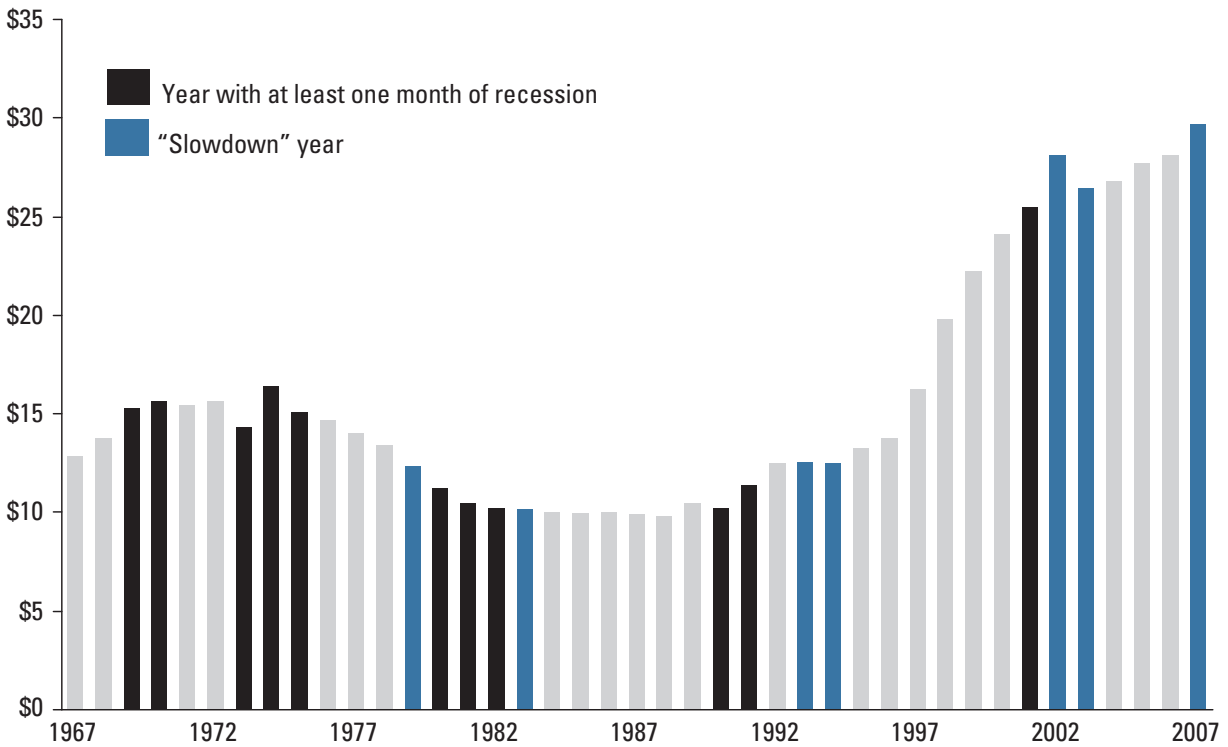
was due to an unusually high amount donated to foundations in 1982, which spurred growth of more than 57 percent that single year. With that exceptional result removed, the average rate of change during recessions was an increase of 0.5 percent.

**Average rates of change in giving to foundations under various economic conditions  
1978–2007**

|             | Total | Recession | Non-recession | Recession in 8 months or more of year* | Slowdown |
|-------------|-------|-----------|---------------|--|----------|
| Foundations | 8.5%  | 5.9%      | 11.5%         | 29.3%                                  | -2.7%    |

\* Includes two years, 1982 and 2001. In 1982, giving to foundations rose 57.6 percent. The value for 2001 is 1.0 percent.

**Giving to human services, 1967–2007**  
Adjusted for inflation  
(\$ in billions)



This subsector changed for a variety of reasons, including declines in some recession years (but not all) and declines in non-recession years, as well.

Interestingly, giving to this subsector rose, on average, during recession years, and increased more quickly

during longer recessions than it did during recessions generally. This may indicate an appropriate response to the level of need in the response to social service organizations in difficult times.

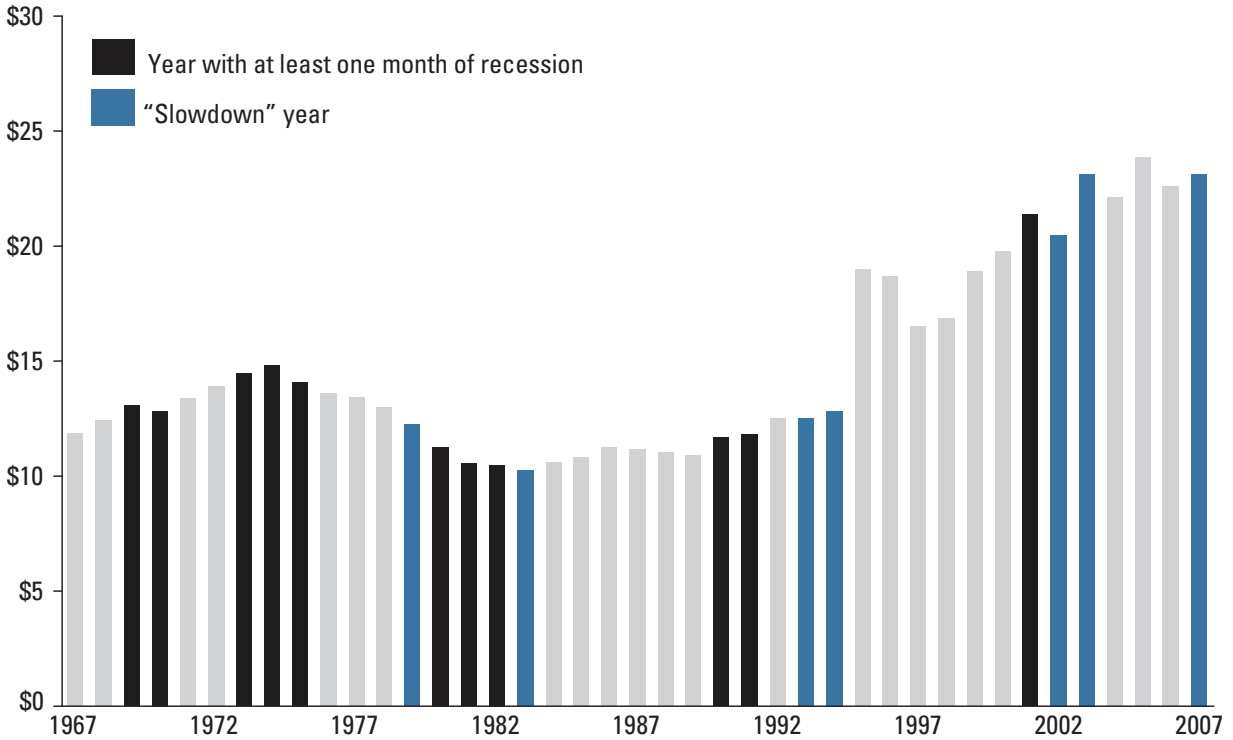
**Average rates of change in giving to human services under various economic conditions  
1967–2007**

|                | Total | Recession | Non-recession | Recession in 8 months or more of year | Slowdown |
|----------------|-------|-----------|---------------|---------------------------------------|----------|
| Human services | 2.3%  | 0.7%      | 2.9%          | 5.0%                                  | 0.3%     |

Recent growth in giving to this subsector, while very encouraging, reportedly does not do enough to help social service agencies keep up with growing needs for

shelter, food support, and other types of assistance sought by people during economic crises.

**Giving to health, 1967–2007**  
 Adjusted for inflation  
 (\$ in billions)



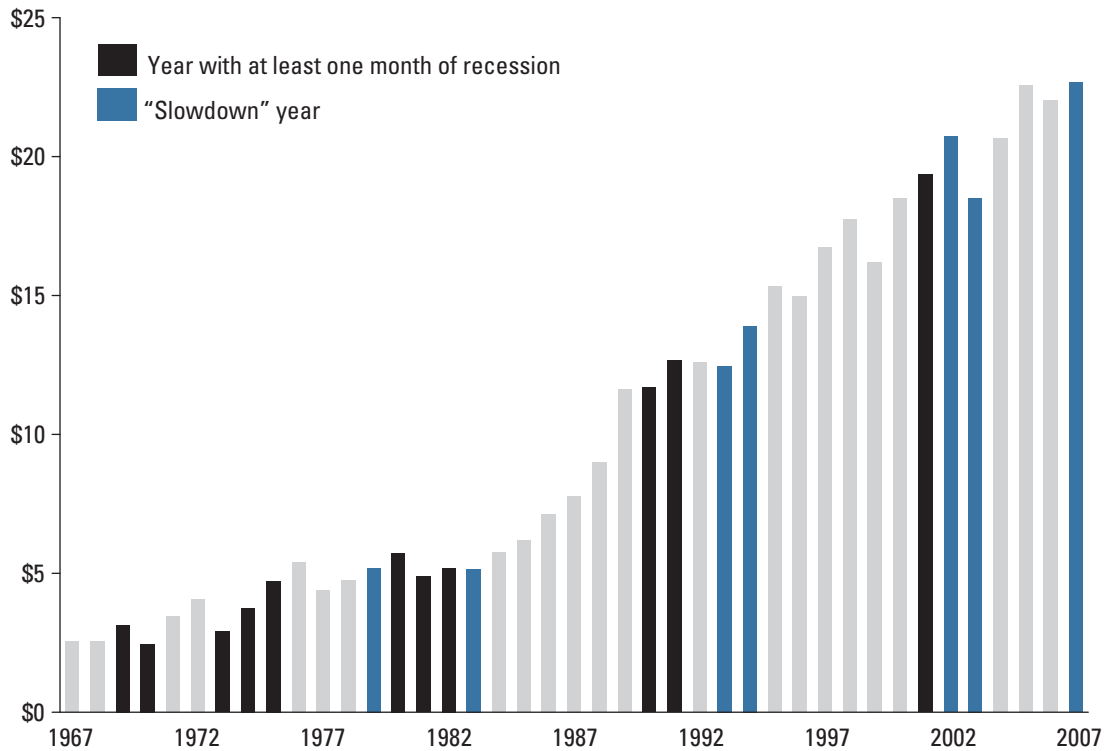
Giving for health fell in 3 of 11 recession years, and declined in other years, as well. Overall growth in giving to this subsector was a 2.3 percent average annual

rate of growth, with more rapid rates of change in the most recent decades.

**Average rates of change in giving to health under various economic conditions  
 1967–2007**

|        | Total | Recession | Non-recession | Recession in 8 months or more of year | Slowdown |
|--------|-------|-----------|---------------|---------------------------------------|----------|
| Health | 2.3%  | 0.5%      | 2.9%          | 1.9%                                  | 0.9%     |

**Giving to public-society benefit, 1967–2007**  
Adjusted for inflation  
(\$ in billions)



This subsector changed for a variety of reasons, including declines in some recession years (but not all) and declines in non-recession years, as well.

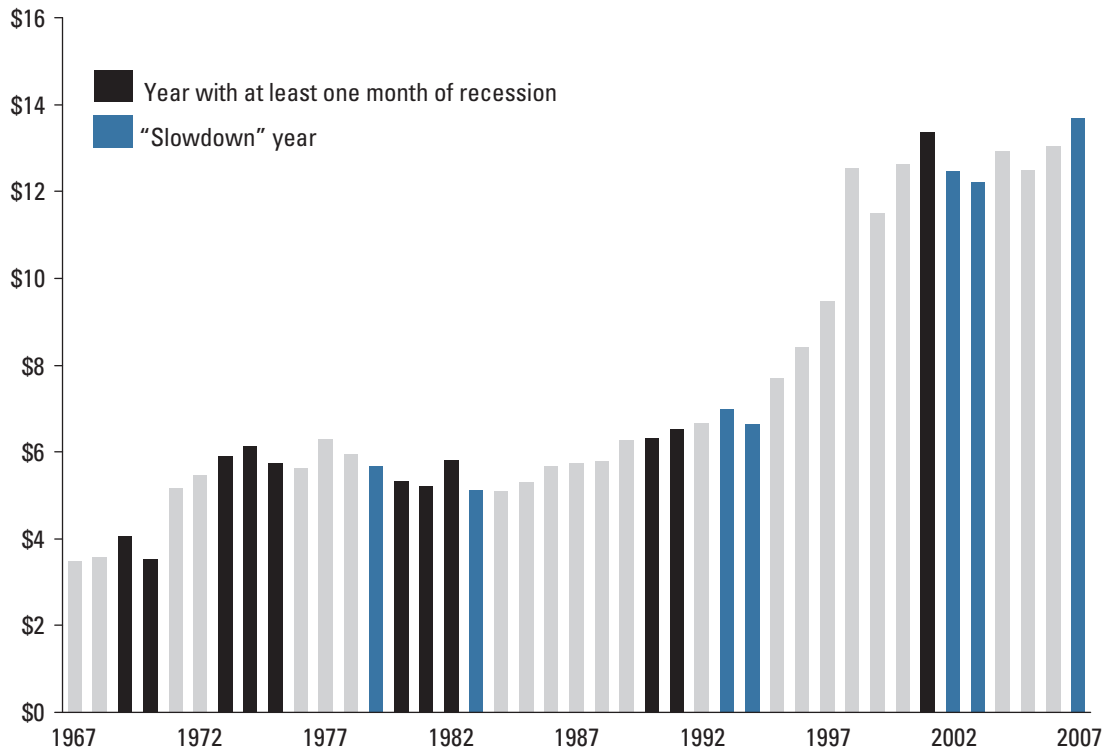
**Average rates of change in giving to public-society benefit under various economic conditions  
1967–2007**

|                        | Total | Recession | Non-recession | Recession in 8 months or more of year | Slowdown |
|------------------------|-------|-----------|---------------|---------------------------------------|----------|
| Public-society benefit | 6.4%  | 3.9%      | 7.3%          | 4.8%                                  | 2.6%     |

Like human services, this sector shows comparatively strong growth during recessions, and an even higher rate of growth during longer recessions. For this subsector, the rates of growth during recessions are lower

than during non-recession years, but they are among the strongest reported for recession years among the subsectors.

**Giving to arts, culture, and humanities, 1967–2007**  
Adjusted for inflation  
(\$ in billions)



Gifts to arts, culture, and humanities varied with a number of factors. Changes since 2000 have reflected, among other shifts, large gifts from several estates, the donation of highly valuable art collections to museums, and recent high-profile campaigns for major institutions.

Giving to this subsector appears not to follow the economic cycle very closely, as it has increased in 6 of the 11 recession years. In fact, on average, the rate of growth is slowed during recessions from the 40-year average.

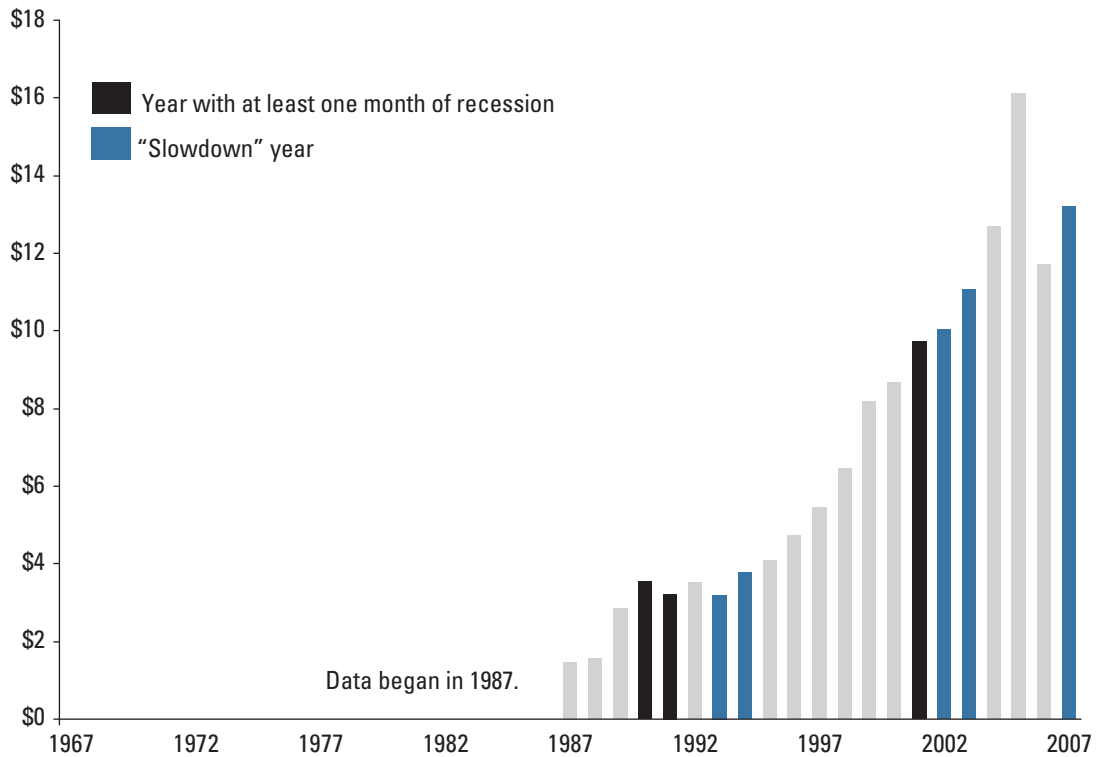
**Average rates of change in giving to arts, culture, and humanities under various economic conditions 1967–2007**

|                               | Total | Recession | Non-recession | Recession in 8 months or more of year | Slowdown |
|-------------------------------|-------|-----------|---------------|---------------------------------------|----------|
| Arts, culture, and humanities | 4.0%  | 1.9%      | 4.7%          | 2.3%                                  | -3.1%    |

The average decline during the slowdown years included a 7 percent decline in 2002 and a 12 percent drop in 1983. Arts, culture, and humanities giving

showed the largest decline of all subsectors during slowdowns.

**Giving to international affairs, 1987–2007**  
Adjusted for inflation  
(\$ in billions)



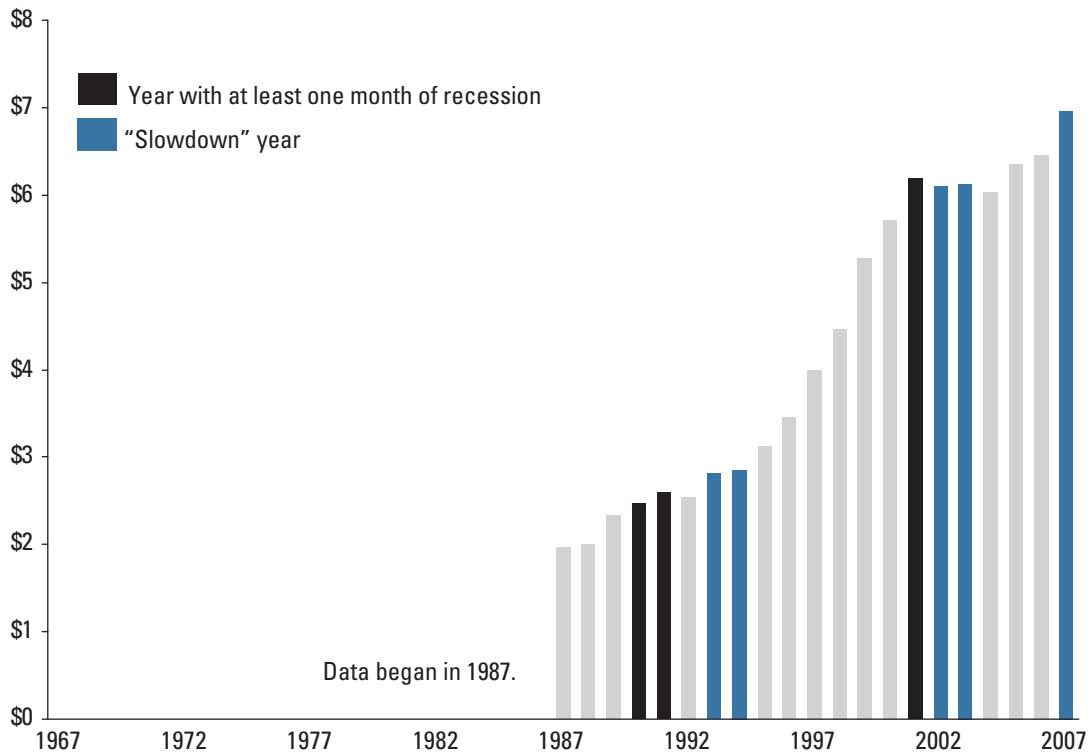
This subsector had the highest overall rate of growth. It declined in only 3 of the last 20 years—1991 (recession year), 1993 (slowdown year), and 2006, following the

very high contributions in 2005 for relief after the Asian tsunami.

**Average rates of change in giving to international affairs under various economic conditions  
1987–2007**

|                       | Total | Recession | Non-recession | Recession in 8 months or more of year | Slowdown |
|-----------------------|-------|-----------|---------------|---------------------------------------|----------|
| International affairs | 13.2% | 9.0%      | 26.3%         | 12.0%                                 | 7.2%     |

**Giving to environment/animals, 1987–2007**  
Adjusted for inflation  
(\$ in billions)



There were only three recession years since giving to environment/animals organizations began to be reported. There were five years of slowdown. Rates of change during recession years were not very

different from the overall average. The average rate of change in “slowdown” years, however, was just over half of the average rate for the past 20 years.

**Average rates of change in giving to environment/animals under various economic conditions  
1987–2007**

|                     | Total | Recession | Non-recession | Recession in 8 months or more of year | Slowdown |
|---------------------|-------|-----------|---------------|---------------------------------------|----------|
| Environment/animals | 6.7%  | 6.2%      | 12.8%         | 8.2%                                  | 3.7%     |



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**Endnotes:**

- <sup>1</sup> GDP growth below 2.0 percent (which is 80 percent or less of the 40-year average GDP change of 2.5 percent) OR personal income growth below 2.9 percent (which is 90 percent or less of the 40-year average of 3.3 percent).
- <sup>2</sup> National Bureau of Economic Research, Business cycle expansions and contractions, <http://www.nber.org/cycles/cyclesmain.html>. Downloaded July 1, 2008.
- <sup>3</sup> In every year for which size of organization was tracked, more small organizations saw growth than saw a drop in giving, although smaller organizations were more likely than larger charities to report a decline.
- <sup>4</sup> Council for Aid to Education, Gifts to higher education drop for the first time in 15 years: Decline in giving by alumni shows biggest drop, press release, March 13, 2003, [www.cae.org](http://www.cae.org).
- <sup>5</sup> CAE, press release, Spring 2004. [www.cae.org](http://www.cae.org).



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*GIVING USA Spotlight* is published by the  
Giving USA Foundation™  
4700 West Lake Avenue  
Glenview, IL 60025  
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ISSN 0889-3793

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