

# Formal Volunteering: A Solution to Bolster Health And Retirement Security in Later Life

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## **BACKGROUND**

A growing body of research has documented the health outcomes of volunteering in later life, which includes improved physical health,<sup>1</sup> mental health,<sup>2</sup> life satisfaction,<sup>3</sup> self-rated health,<sup>4</sup> and even reduced mortality.<sup>5</sup> In addition, formal volunteer work by older adults has been valued at over \$44 billion in 2002,<sup>6</sup> which translates into significant savings for our nation. Yet, scant research has examined the economic outcomes of volunteering for older adults' themselves.

In this brief, we ask: *is formal volunteering a pathway to work after retirement?* The additional years in the paid labor force can result in contributions to the national economy; bolster economic security and health among older adults themselves; and help shift social policies to leverage extended engagement longer into the life-span.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Data were drawn from the Health and Retirement Study of fully retired older adults aged 62+ in 1998 (n=8,334) and followed to 2008. Controls included socio-demographic (age, gender, race) economic (total household net worth, total household income, pension, health insurance, education, health, life-time occupational status) and social factors (marital status, employed spouse, parenting). Survival analysis and Fully Conditional Specification imputation methods were utilized.

If a study participant reported partly-retired, working part or full-time, and working any hours or weeks in subsequent waves (2000-2008), then the respondent was coded as 'returned-to-work'.

Formal volunteering was examined two ways: the presence or absence of the role and the intensity of volunteering. The volunteer role was measured with the question, "Have you spent any time in the past 12 months doing volunteer work for religious, educational, health-related or other charitable organizations?" Respondents that replied "yes" were coded as 1.

“Altogether, how many hours did you spend in the past 12 months doing volunteer work for such organizations?” was trichotomized: none (zero hours), moderate intensity (greater than 0 hours, less than 100 hours) and high intensity (100+ hours). “None” was used as the reference group.

## **RESULTS**

The average age at baseline was 74 (range 62-102, SD=7.37). Just over half (53.75%) were female. Most (88.52%) of the sample were white, followed by black (8.69%) and other (2.76%). Approximately 6% (501) of retirees returned to work over the course of the study.<sup>7</sup>

One out of three (29%) retirees volunteered formally at baseline and this declined slightly to 26% by the end of the observation period. Approximately 17% engaged less than 100 hours and 13% engaged more than 100 hours at baseline. These trends were fairly stable over the ten years.

Respondents who formally volunteered were 58% more likely to return-to-work in subsequent waves when compared to people who did not volunteer, while controlling for covariates (HR:1.58,  $p < .0001$ , CL:1.28-1.94).

Retirees who engaged in moderate or high intensity levels of formal volunteering were 50% and 66% more likely to return-to-work in subsequent waves when compared to people who did not volunteer (HR:1.50,  $p < .0011$ , CL:1.17-1.92; HR:1.66,  $p < .0001$ , CL:1.29-2.14, respectively).

## **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Previous research has documented the health benefits of volunteering and findings from this research brief suggest it increases the odds of retirees’ returning-to-work, which may bolster their economic security.

Unfortunately, older adults are often overlooked by agencies in need of volunteers, and many older adults are unaware of volunteer opportunities. Moreover, significant portions of racial and ethnic minorities, low-income older adults, non-college educated, people with disabilities, and immigrants are underrepresented in the nation’s volunteer labor force.<sup>8 9</sup>

National and federal programs can help ensure older adults have access to volunteer opportunities:

- Senior Corps which includes the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), the Foster Grandparent Program, and Senior Companion<sup>10</sup>
- Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP)<sup>11</sup>
- AARP’s Experience Corp<sup>12</sup>
- ReServe<sup>13</sup>

AARP’s Experience Corp has proven to be successful at recruiting and retaining racial minorities;<sup>14</sup> And SCSEP is vital to low-income older adults as it is the only federally funded program to help them into civic roles and obtain employment.

Identifying best practices for recruiting and retaining older volunteers and disseminating this information widely is warranted. Policy and programmatic features, such as stipend provision, tax credits, scholarships, and time-banking are promising avenues for increasing volunteerism by older adults.<sup>15</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Formal volunteering is a possible solution to bolster health and retirement security in later life. Findings from this brief clearly suggest that volunteering increases the odds of older adults coming out of retirement and working longer. High-intensity formal volunteering maximizes the odds of returning-to-work.

The extra years in the paid labor force can result in contributions to the national economy; bolster economic security and health among older adults themselves; and help shift social policies to leverage extended engagement into the life-span. This is the time to expand national volunteer programs as baby boomers age into their sixth and seventh decades of life.

Identifying and disseminating best practices to increase the volunteer opportunities available to underrepresented older adults should become a priority, as they may benefit most from participation in formal volunteer programs.<sup>16</sup>

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## END NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Lum, T.Y. & Lightfoot, E. (2005). The effects of volunteering on the physical and mental health of older people. *Research on Aging*, 27(1), 31-55. *See also* Moen, P., Dempster- McClain, D., & Williams, R.M. (1992). Successful aging: A life- course perspective on women's multiple roles and health. *American Journal of Sociology*, 97 (6), 1612. doi: 10.1086/229941
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- <sup>3</sup> Van Willigen, M. (2000). Differential benefits of volunteering across the life course. *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 55(5), S308–S318. doi:10.1093/geronb/55.5.s308
- <sup>4</sup> Luoh, M.-C., & Herzog, A. R. (2002). Individual consequences of volunteer and paid work in old age: Health and mortality. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 43(4), 490. doi:10.2307/3090239. *See also* Morrow-Howell, N., Hinterlong, J., Rozario, P.A., & Tang, F. (2003). Effects of volunteering on the well- being of older adults. *The Journals of Gerontology. Series B, Social Sciences*, 58 (3), S137- S145.
- <sup>5</sup> Musick, M. A., Herzog, A. R., & House, J. S. (1999). Volunteering and mortality among older adults: Findings from a national sample. *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 54B(3), S173–S180. doi:10.1093/geronb/54b.3.s173
- <sup>6</sup> Johnson, R. W., & Schaner, S. G., (2005). Value of unpaid activities by older Americans tops \$160 billion per year. Urban Institute. <http://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/alfresco/publication-pdfs/311227-Value-of-Unpaid-Activities-by-Older-Americans-Tops-Billion-Per-Year.PDF>
- <sup>7</sup> This percentage is lower than what is found in the literature and is likely due to two reasons. Many studies use self-reported labor force status which is an inaccurate measure of labor force status. We verified if the respondent had worked any hours or weeks in subsequent waves, which is a more rigorous method to discern actual labor force status. Furthermore, studies that examine unretirement perform analyses on individuals 50 years of age or older. We restricted our analyses to those who were 62 years of age and older. These two reasons may account for the lower percentage of retirees that returned-to-work.
- <sup>8</sup> McBride, A. (2007). Civic engagement, older adults, and inclusion. *Generations*, XXX, 66–71.
- <sup>9</sup> Gonzales, E., Matz-Costa, C. & Morrow-Howell, N. (2015). White House Conference on Aging 2015. Increasing opportunities for the productive engagement of older adults: A response to population aging. *The Gerontologist*, Special Issue for the Policy Forum. doi:10.1093/geront/gnu176
- <sup>10</sup> Corporation for National & Community Service: <http://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/senior-corps>

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- <sup>11</sup> Senior Community Service Employment Program: <http://www.doleta.gov/seniors/>
- <sup>12</sup> AARP's Experience Corps: <http://www.aarp.org/experience-corps/>
- <sup>13</sup> ReServe: <http://www.reserveinc.org/>
- <sup>14</sup> Morrow-Howell, N., McCrary, S., Gonzales, E., McBride, A. M., Hong, S.I., & Blinee, W. (2008). Experience Corps: Stipends. (CSD Research Brief 08-24). St. Louis, MO: Washington University, Center for Social Development <http://csd.wustl.edu/Publications/Documents/RB08-23.pdf>
- <sup>15</sup> McBride, A. M., Gonzales, E., Morrow-Howell, N., & McCrary, S. (2011). Stipends in volunteer civic service: Inclusion, retention, and volunteer benefits. *Public Administration Review*, 71(6), 850–858. doi:10.1111/j.1540-6210.2011.02419.x. ***See also*** Gonzales, Matz-Costa & Morrow-Howell (2015).
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid*

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