



Will Retiring Boomers Form a New Army of Volunteers?

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As the first of the baby boom generation starts qualifying for Social Security benefits in 2008, some analysts predict they will form an army of willing and able volunteers. Volunteering could substitute for paid work, keeping retired boomers engaged and nonprofit service organizations fully staffed. But the jury is still out on boomer retirees'

propensity to volunteer. Some research shows that boomers have been less civically engaged than preceding generations (Putnam 2002), leading others to forecast that boomer retirees will demand relatively few volunteer opportunities (Harvard School of

Public Health 2004). Other, more recent studies show that boomers in their 50s volunteer at higher rates than earlier cohorts did and suggest a potential surge in demand for volunteer opportunities (Corporation for National and Community Service 2007).

What share of older adults substitutes volunteer for paid-work activities? Do most retired adults begin volunteering while working or after retiring? What characterizes individ-

uals who volunteer postretirement? And does the commitment to volunteer intensify after retirement?

Only a few earlier studies shed light on transitions from working to volunteering. Using data from the Americans' Changing Lives survey, Mutchler, Burr, and Caro (2003) examine the work and volunteer participation activities of individuals age 55 to 74 in 1986 and in 1989.

Among individuals not volunteering for formal organizations at the time of the first interview, the researchers find those who worked part-time, those who had not worked in either period, and those who stopped work between the two interviews participated more often in formal volunteer activities at the second interview than full-time workers did. The researchers also emphasize the strong continuity of volunteer activity. Three-quarters of those who volun-

teered in 1986 were still volunteering three years later. Only 16 percent of the sample that reported no volunteer activities in the first interview was volunteering three years later.

The study by the Corporation for National and Community Service

(2007) of volunteer retention rates among boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) and preboomers finds little evidence that retirement inspires volunteerism. They find that older workers who cut back their work hours do not continue volunteering longer than those who stick with the same work schedule. The study also reports that volunteer retention rates drop for boomers who leave the workforce and for preboomers who lose their jobs. Still, the study con-

The jury is still out on boomer retirees' propensity to volunteer. We find that most who volunteer while working continue after retirement. We also show that a significant share who do not volunteer while working begin after they retire.



firms, for both boomers and preboomers, volunteer retention rates increase with the number of hours volunteered.

With these earlier studies as a backdrop, we use data from the 1996 through 2004 waves of the nationally representative Health and Retirement Study (HRS) to examine formal volunteer activities as individuals move from work to retirement. We focus on individuals age 55 to 64 in the 1996, 1998, and 2000 waves of the HRS, who can be observed for two consecutive waves after retiring. Thus, our estimates record formal volunteer activities over a four-year postretirement period. We define retirement as shifting from working 20 hours a week or more to either working less than 20 hours per week or stopping work. We show the share of individuals who volunteer in the pre- and postretirement periods and highlight the personal factors that predict whether individuals begin volunteering after retirement. We also show the intensity of volunteer activity after retirement.

We find that, consistent with other studies, *the vast majority of adults who volunteer while working continue to volunteer after retirement.* We also show that *a significant share of older adults not involved in formal volunteer activities while working begin volunteering after they retire.* Not surprisingly, these “new” postretirement volunteers resemble volunteers in general. Individuals in good health, those with spouses who volunteer, those who consider religion important, and those who were managers before retiring begin volunteer activities after retirement much more often than others. Self-reported tallies of the number of hours of formal volunteering indicate a greater commitment among those who begin volunteering before retirement compared with those who start after retiring. More generally, retirees engage in considerable volunteer activity, making it likely that a potentially large group of boomers will be looking for volunteer opportunities when they retire.

How Many Volunteer after Retirement?

Individuals who combine formal volunteer activities with work tend to keep volunteering after retirement. Similarly, most who do not volunteer while working never do (figure 1). Among the third of adults age 55 to 64 who work and volunteer before retirement, 55 percent volunteer continuously, 26 percent volunteer sporadically, and 19 percent stop volunteering in the four years that we observe them after retirement.¹ In contrast, among adults age 55 to 64 who do not volunteer while working, nearly three-quarters do not start volunteering in that four-year postretirement period. However, 9 percent of workers who did not volunteer while working volunteer continuously after retirement, and another 18 percent volunteer sporadically.

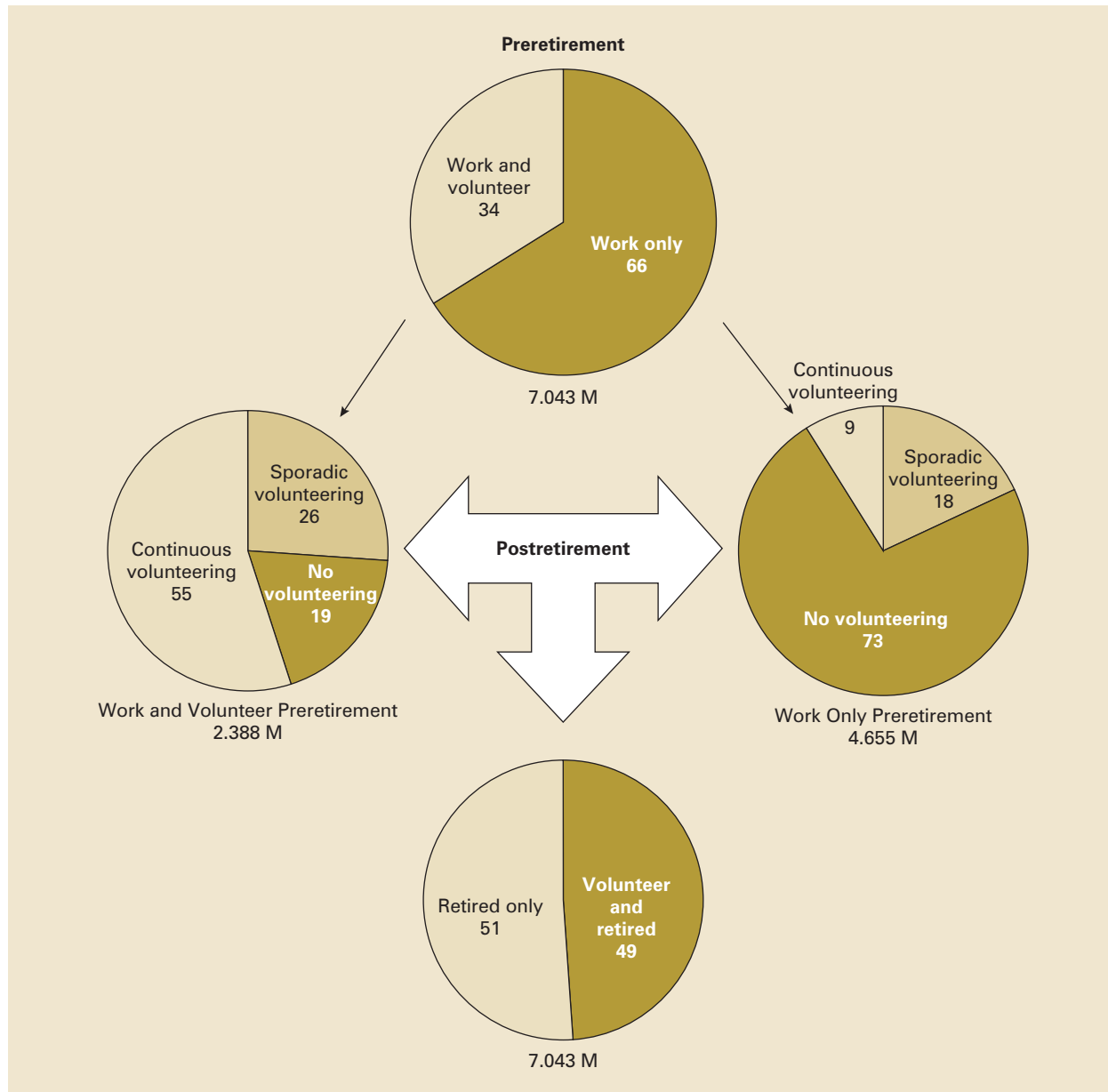
While the share of workers who begin volunteering after retirement may seem small, the numbers are not. This nationally representative sample of individuals who retired between 1996 and 2000 represents over 7 million older adults. The postretirement new volunteer group includes 1.3 million new volunteers and 1.9 million experienced volunteers. In other words, new volunteers represent 39 percent of all postretirement volunteers in this cohort.²

The research also documents a definite increase in formal volunteer activities after retirement. Among adults who retire, 45 percent engage in formal volunteer activities even though only 34 percent of adults volunteered while working. The volunteer rate for this group of young retirees far exceeds the often-quoted 26 percent volunteer rate for all adults age 55 and older.³

Who Starts Volunteering after Retirement?

Postretirement volunteers are not all alike but do have certain traits in common (figure 2). Using regression methods, we isolate the independent effect of individual characteristics

FIGURE 1. Formal Volunteering Pre- and Postretirement, Adults Age 55–64 Who Retired between 1996 and 2000 (percent)

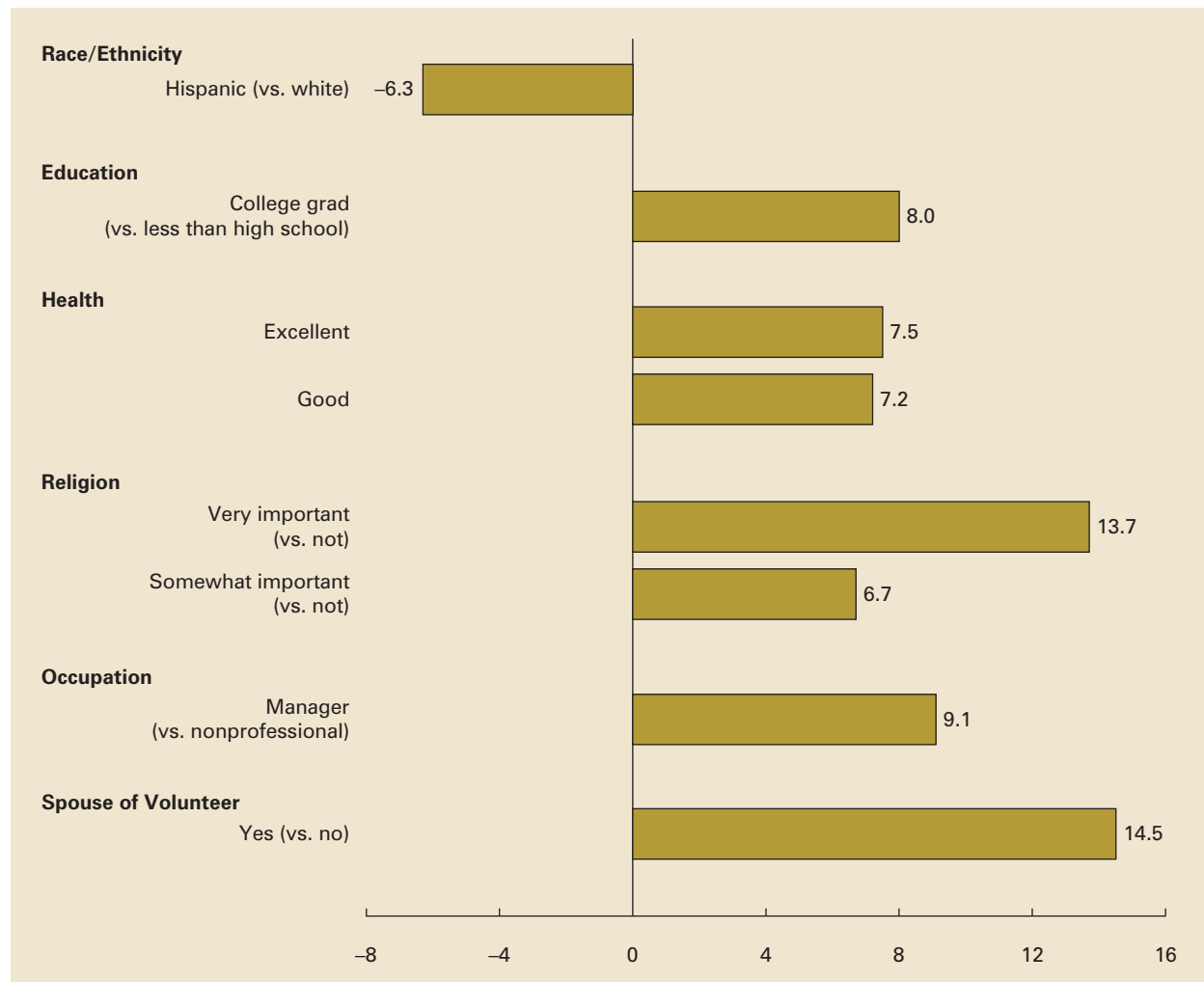


Source: Health and Retirement Study (1996–2004).

that predict who will be among the 27 percent who start volunteering after retirement. Not surprisingly, enjoying excellent or good health adds over 7 percentage points to the probability of beginning formal volunteer work after re-

tirement. Also, Hispanics are less likely to start volunteering after retirement than non-Hispanic white or black retirees. These characteristics are consistent with the general description of older individuals who engage in formal vol-

FIGURE 2. Contribution of Personal Factors to Likelihood of Starting Formal Volunteer Activity Postretirement (percent)



Source: Health and Retirement Study (1996–2004).

Notes: Estimates show the marginal, percentage-point impact on the probability of beginning to volunteer postretirement. Only select characteristics significant at the 90 percent level or higher are presented. Other controls include age, sex, marital status, income, mental health status, and spouse/parent/child caregiving. Sample includes adults age 55–64 who were working at least 20 hours a week but not volunteering, and were retired during the 1996–2000 period. Results show postretirement formal volunteering through 2004.

unteer activities (Zedlewski and Schaner 2006).

More education and managerial experience translate into greater likelihood that adults will begin volunteering after retirement. A college education adds 8 percentage points to that probability, and managerial experience adds 9 percentage points.⁴ The findings conform to the notions

that better-educated people often know more about opportunities for formal volunteering and that nonprofit organizations often seek out those with managerial experience. Also, some highly educated managers may be retiring from large corporations that retain connections to their retired managers through volunteer opportunities (Burnes and Gonyea 2005).

The two characteristics that make the largest difference in the probability of new volunteer activity after retirement are religiosity and marriage to a volunteer. Compared with retirees who don't consider religion important, assigning it a very high importance adds 13.7 percentage points to the probability of postretirement volunteering. Assigning some importance to religion adds 6.7 percentage points. Having a spouse who volunteers contributes 14.5 percentage points to the likelihood that an individual will begin volunteering after retirement. Presumably, both attendance at religious activities and having a spouse who volunteers may open doors to formal volunteer opportunities for retirees. For example, one in three religious congregations actively manages volunteers in social service outreach programs (Urban Institute 2004).

Volunteer Commitment

Corroborating other studies, we find that individuals who committed to formal volunteer activities over longer periods volunteer more intensively (table 1). In this postretirement group, 28 percent of continuing volunteers log at least 200 hours a year, compared with 17 percent of the new volunteers. Also, nearly half (46 percent) of the new volunteers participate for 50 hours a year or less, compared with about one-third (32 percent) of the preretirement volunteers.

The patterns of postretirement volunteering do not differ dramatically by gender. About a quarter of men and women volunteer over 200 hours a year. More men than women contribute fewer than 50 volunteer hours a year (43 percent compared with 33 percent). Differences between male and female patterns of formal volunteer work widen for those who begin volunteering when retired. Over half (54 percent) of the men in this group contribute 50 volunteer or fewer hours per year, compared with 39 percent of the women. Only about 17 to 18 percent of men and women in the new volunteer group participate 200 hours or more per year.

TABLE 1. Hours of Formal Volunteering in Postretirement Period by Gender and Volunteer Status

	Continual	New	Total
All (%)			
None	0.0	0.0	0.0
< 50	32.2	46.2*	37.8
50–99	19.3	19.7	19.5
100–199	20.2	16.4	18.7
200 or more	28.3	17.6*	24.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Weighted <i>N</i>	1,922,470	1,261,347	3,183,817
Unweighted <i>N</i>	626	407	1,033
Men (%)			
None	0.0	0.0	0.0
< 50	35.6	53.8*	43.1
50–99	16.2	12.9	14.9
100–199	17.7	16.0	17.0
200 or more	30.4	17.4*	25.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Weighted <i>N</i>	890,104	622,494	1,512,598
Unweighted <i>N</i>	276	188	464
Women (%)			
None	0.0	0.0	0.0
< 50	29.3	38.9*	33.0
50–99	21.9	26.4	23.6
100–199	22.3	16.9	20.2
200 or more	26.5	17.9*	23.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Weighted <i>N</i>	1,032,366	638,853	1,671,219
Unweighted <i>N</i>	350	219	569

Source: Health and Retirement Study (1996–2004).

Notes: Sample is HRS respondents who were full- or part-time workers (20 hours a week or more) age 55–64 in the 1996, 1998, or 2000 wave of the HRS; present in at least two consecutive waves after the wave of full- or part-time employment; and retired as of 2002. Continual volunteers are those who started volunteering before retirement and new volunteers are those who started volunteering after retirement.

*Indicates the difference between continual and new is statistically significant at the 90 percent level.

These results also highlight a high commitment to formal volunteer work among the newly retired. As noted, 45 percent of adults age 55 to

64 who retired between 1996 and 2000 did some formal volunteer work after retirement.⁵ Conservative estimates of the hours of formal volunteering suggest that those who started volunteering after retirement contributed over 80 million hours in an average year.⁶ Since the boomer cohorts following this group will be about 50 and 76 percent larger by 2010 and 2020, respectively,⁷ nonprofit organizations seem destined to benefit from a significant growth in the services of retirees.

Discussion

Most volunteers acquire the habit while still working. But a significant share of older adults does begin volunteering after retiring. Like longer-term volunteers, the new volunteers tend to have excellent health and managerial experience. Most also assign high importance to religion and tend to be married to volunteers. The ranks of volunteers likely will swell as members of the large cohort of boomers start retiring.

The patterns of postretirement volunteer activity revealed by our research reflect current knowledge and availability of volunteer opportunities. Should nonprofits and community groups step up recruitment, formal volunteer activity among retirees could increase. Retirees already volunteering could put in more hours, and more retirees would probably enlist in the army of volunteers. Surveys show that a large share of older people sitting on the sidelines would like to get involved (VolunteerMatch 2007). Older adults want to volunteer in activities that take advantage of their skills or that teach them new ones. Also, older adults may need help finding volunteer opportunities.

New options that use the internet, such as VolunteerMatch, a free online service that details volunteer opportunities, could vastly improve communication between older adults looking for volunteer opportunities and nonprofits seeking help. Many charities and congregations struggle

to find enough volunteers. Indeed, four in ten report that more information about potential volunteers would help their programs (Urban Institute 2004), so the retirement of the enormous baby boom cohort affords an exciting opportunity for nonprofit organizations. Some analysts even foresee an older adults' civic engagement movement that will prove to be a major transformative event of the 21st century—if society can harnesses this new productive force in a coordinated, multisector way (Gomperts 2007; Reilly 2006). Certainly, the weight of our research supports this optimism.

Notes

1. *Sporadic volunteering* indicates that individuals volunteered in one of the two periods in which we can observe them postretirement. *Continuous volunteering* indicates individuals who volunteered in both periods after retirement.
2. Of course, these estimates exclude volunteers drawn from the pool of older individuals age 55 to 64 who were not working at least 20 hours a week during the 1996 to 2000 period.
3. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2007), reported from the 2006 Current Population Survey.
4. Note that a college education and a managerial occupation hold up as significant predictors of formal volunteering even after controlling for income differences.
5. Note that this probably underestimates formal volunteer work, because the HRS only asks about volunteering in the past 12 months and we can only observe individuals every two years. People who volunteer only in the intervening years will not be counted among the postretirement volunteers.
6. This rough calculation multiplies the number of new volunteers by the number of hours of volunteering during their two-year postretirement period, taking the midpoint of the range and assuming 250 hours per year for those volunteering more than 200 hours per year, and annualizes the estimate. Unfortunately, the HRS does not record the exact number of hours of volunteer activity.
7. The growth in the U.S. resident population age 55 to 64 from 2000 to 2020 was calculated from U.S. Census projections as reported in the *Statistical Abstract* (2006), tables 11 and 12.

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As America ages, older adults are getting more attention. Gone (or at least fading) is the stereotype of the retiree who is unable to work and who makes relatively few social contributions. Increasingly, older Americans are seen as a vibrant group with wisdom and energy to offer society and their families. *Perspectives on Productive Aging* will enhance the dialogue on the engagement of older Americans, documenting the current value of engagement among older adults and highlighting the best ways for society and policymakers to support and encourage the full engagement of older Americans.

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