



Older Adults Engaged as Volunteers

Sheila R. Zedlewski and
Simone G. Schaner

The growing number of boomers reaching retirement age over the next 20 years offers an unprecedented chance to tap into a large base of potential volunteers. It makes good sense to consider ways to encourage boomers' volunteerism. Benefits would accrue to society directly through the contributions of unpaid work, to older adults as volunteering improves health and well being, and potentially to government, as healthier older adults require fewer health care dollars.

In fact, numerous studies document that active and engaged older people remain in better health. For example, a recent small-scale experiment shows that low-income minority seniors volunteering in public elementary schools outscored their non-participating counterparts in both physical strength and cognitive ability (Fried et al. 2004). Other studies

find older adults who volunteer live longer and with better physical and mental health than counterparts who do not volunteer (Lum and Lightfoot 2005; Murrow-Howell et al. 2003). Glass and his colleagues (1999) show that productive activities like volunteering and work can lower the risk of mortality as much as fitness activities can.

A better understanding of who is volunteering today should precede efforts to direct resources toward supporting volunteerism among aging boomers. Previous studies, for example, caution that the retirement of the baby boom population will not necessarily lead to a new, willing army of volunteers. Some studies show that older adults do not volunteer more in retirement than while working. Rather, those who volunteer during their working years tend to volunteer during retirement (Harvard School of Public Health 2004). Other literature documents that personal characteristics such as religion and education are associated with higher rates of volunteerism (Kutner and Love 2003).

This *Perspective* uses data from the 2002 Health and Retirement Study to examine volunteerism among adults age 55 and older.¹ Formal volunteering is defined as volunteering for an organization; and informal volunteering, as time spent helping others not in the household. The relationships between demographic and economic characteristics are also explored for these two types of volunteerism.

The results provide new insights into volunteering among older adults. Contrary to some prior studies, we find that non-working adults engage in formal volunteer activities somewhat more often than full-time workers, account-

ing for other characteristics that affect volunteering. Men volunteer informally more often than women, once differences in work status, education, and health between the sexes are taken into account. Results also confirm other studies showing that adults who assign high importance to religion, those with higher incomes and more education, and those in good health volunteer

Boomers' volunteerism could benefit society, boomers themselves, and potentially, government. But a better understanding of who is volunteering today should precede efforts to support volunteerism among aging boomers.



more often than their counterparts. Further, Hispanics volunteer less often than either whites or African Americans. As discussed, these insights could help shape initiatives to increase volunteerism among older adults.

Volunteering and Retirement

More than 6 out of 10 adults age 55 and older engage in some volunteer activity (figure 1). About 2 in 10 engage in both formal and informal volunteer activities, 3 in 10 engage in informal volunteer activities only, and 1 in 10 only volunteer formally.

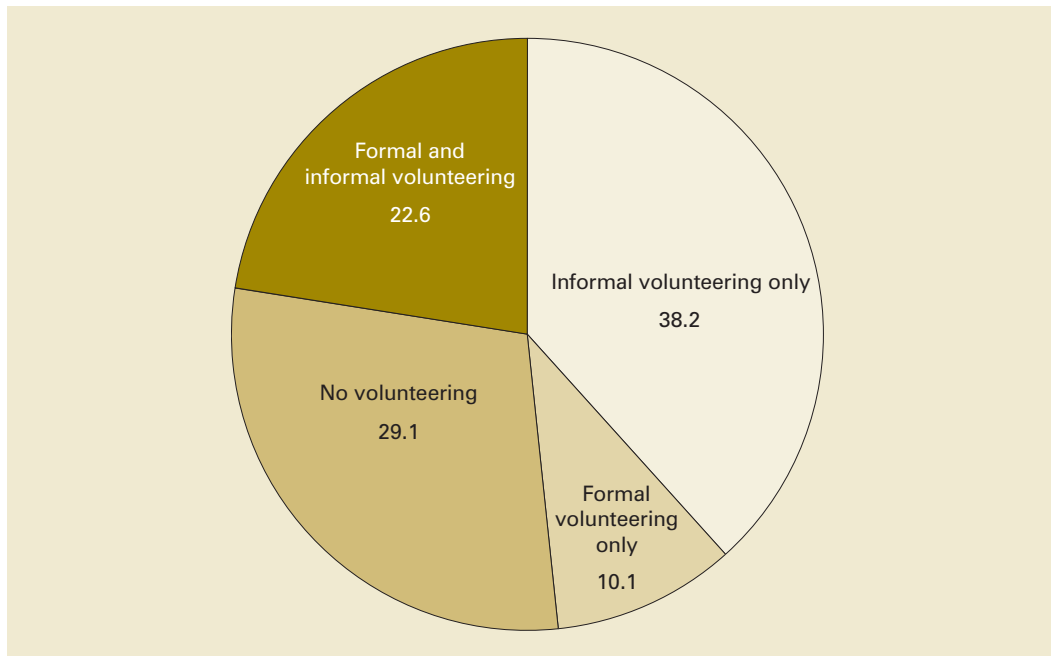
Not surprisingly, rates of volunteering vary by age and work status (table 1). Simple descriptive statistics show that older adults who are still working volunteer more often than their nonworking counterparts at all ages. This difference is particularly large among those age 75 and older. While 44.7 percent of nonworkers in this

age group volunteer formally or informally, 66.8 percent of working adults age 75 and older volunteer.

In contrast, volunteers without paid jobs spend more time volunteering, at least at younger ages. For example, nonworking formal volunteers age 55 to 64 spend 217 hours a year on average formally volunteering, compared with 137 hours for their working counterparts. Nonworking informal volunteers age 55 to 64 averaged 132 hours a year, compared with 107 hours for working informal volunteers.

Although these findings are consistent with earlier studies, simple relationships between retirement and volunteering do not take into account other differences between the two groups. For example, workers have better health on average than nonworkers, and adults that work at older ages tend to have more education (Haider and Loughran 2001).

FIGURE 1. Volunteer Activity among Older Americans, 2002 (%)



Source: 2002 Health and Retirement Study.

Notes: Includes noninstitutionalized Americans age 55 and older. Data are weighted to reflect the true underlying population.

TABLE 1. Rate of Volunteering and Average Annual Volunteer Hours by Age and Work Status, 2002

Age and retirement status	Percent volunteering			Mean hours of volunteering (among volunteers)		
	All	Formal	Informal	All	Formal	Informal
Not working for pay						
55–64	61.3**	28.1**	53.7**	215**	217**	132**
65–74	60.2**	33.1**	48.8**	198**	184**	119*
75+	44.7**	26.5**	32.9**	182	189	95
Working for pay						
55–64	74.1	36.8	66.2	164	137	107
65–74	71.9	40.6	60.0	166	144	102
75+	66.8	43.3	51.9	192	158	117
All	61.8	32.7	51.7	183	169	111
N (weighted, millions)^a	59.9	59.9	59.9	37	20	31

Sources: 2002 Health and Retirement Study.

Notes: Population totals are reweighted to reflect 2002 Census estimates. Retired is defined as not working for pay.

^aRepresents total population age 55 and over.

*Statistically significant from the value for those working for pay in the same age group, at the 90 percent level.

**Statistically significant from the value for those working for pay in the same age group, at the 95 percent level.

Characteristics of Volunteers

Indeed, many factors spur individuals to volunteer (figure 2). Using regression methods to isolate the independent effect of individual characteristics on volunteering shows, for example, that the relationship between work and volunteering is more complex than simpler statistics indicate. Nonworkers tend to volunteer in formal activities somewhat more often than full-time workers, other things being equal. Yet, part-time workers (employed fewer than 35 hours per week) are more likely to volunteer, formally and informally, than full-time workers. The likelihood of volunteering tends not to vary much across the different work status categories; other characteristics tend to matter more in individuals' decisions to volunteer.

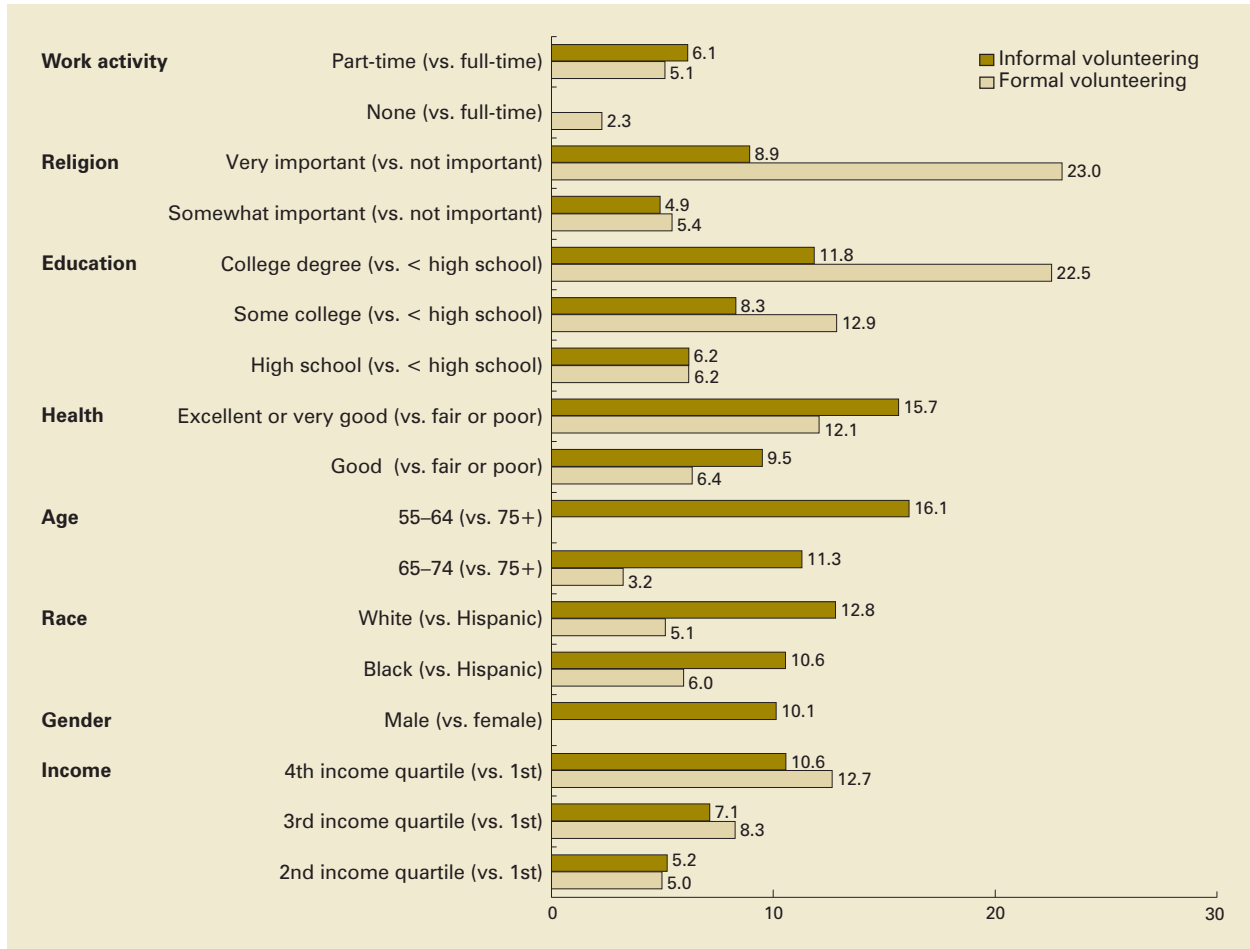
Being religious has the strongest correlation with formal volunteering. The probability of volunteering formally is 23 percentage points higher for individuals who describe religion as “very important,” compared with individuals for

whom religion is “not important.” In contrast, strong religious commitment adds only 9 percentage points to the probability of volunteering informally. Strongly religious people may be especially committed to good work, or they may have more opportunities to volunteer through places of worship. While those for whom religion is somewhat important volunteer more often than those who assign little importance to religion, the effect is relatively small (5 percentage points).

Education also has a strong, positive effect on choosing to volunteer. A college degree adds 23 points to the probability of volunteering formally and 12 to the probability of volunteering informally, compared to those without a high school degree. Persons with some college also volunteer significantly more often than those without a high school education, but the effect of education on the probability of volunteering diminishes as the level of education declines.

Those with higher incomes also volunteer more often than those with low incomes. For

FIGURE 2. Contribution of Personal Factors to Likelihood of Formal and Informal Volunteering



Source: 2002 Health and Retirement Study.

Notes: Estimates show the marginal, percentage point impact on the probability of volunteering. Only select coefficients statistically significant at the 90 percent level or higher are presented. Other controls include caregiving, other race, depression, marital status, and whether a minor child is in the household.

example, being in the top fourth of incomes adds about 13 points to the probability of volunteering formally and 11 points to the probability of volunteering informally, relative to the group in the bottom fourth. And the probabilities of volunteering diminish as income declines.

As one would expect, healthy older adults volunteer more often than those with health problems. Excellent or very good health adds 12 points to the probability of volunteering formally and 16 points to the probability of volunteering informally. Good health relative to fair or

poor health also increases the probability of volunteering and has a stronger effect on the likelihood of engaging in informal, as opposed to formal, volunteer activities.

Interestingly, age primarily affects the likelihood of participating in informal volunteering activities. Adults age 55 to 64 are no more likely to volunteer for organizations than their counterparts age 75 and older, and those age 65 to 74 are only slightly more likely than those age 75 and older to volunteer formally. Race also affects the likelihood of volunteering. Both whites and

blacks volunteer formally and informally more often than Hispanics.

Finally, figure 2 shows no difference in the probability of formal volunteering between men and women. Also, men are more likely to volunteer informally than women. This result defies the conventional wisdom that women spend more time volunteering than men and underscores the importance of taking multiple demographic and personal characteristics into account when considering what triggers volunteerism.

Volunteer Opportunities

These results on who is likely to volunteer, and who isn't, could guide initiatives to increase volunteer opportunities. Clearly, initiatives targeting nonreligious adults, Hispanics, and the more disadvantaged (those with low education levels and low incomes) might yield big payoffs because these individuals report the lowest levels of volunteer activity.

The federal government currently supports a variety of volunteer opportunities for older adults, and some already target low-income adults (table 2). For example, Senior Corps, a network of national service programs, includes opportunities for low-income adults to participate in the Foster Grandparents and Senior Companions programs. The Senior Companions program matches low-income seniors with adults with disabilities and pays volunteers a stipend. The Senior Community Service Employment Program offers older low-income adults—including immigrant seniors—volunteer opportunities through community service.

Other national programs sponsored primarily by the federal government target older adults more broadly or match particular skills to volunteer opportunities. The Retired and Senior Volunteer Program, part of the Senior Corps, serves the largest number of older adults, providing over a half million with general volunteer opportunities in 2002. Senior Medicare Patrol, funded by the Administration on Aging, trains retired professionals to help Medicare and Medicaid beneficiaries become better health care

consumers. The Small Business Administration sponsors a Service Corps of Retired Executives to provide free counseling and training to small business owners. Other nongovernmental organizations also provide volunteer opportunities targeting older adults. For example “Lifelong Access Libraries,” the Ignatian Lay Volunteer Corps, and the Volunteers in Medicine Institute engage older adults in a variety of volunteer activities (Civic Ventures 2005).

Policymakers should carefully consider the value of these programs and gauge the potential growing demand for even more opportunities. While most of these programs have not undergone formal evaluations, their missions match the growing needs of an aging population. Engagement, whether through volunteer opportunities or work, enhances the health and well-being of older adults and creates societal value.² Yet, at current funding levels, most programs can only serve a small minority of older adults. And recent funding for these programs generally has declined in real terms as they compete with other government priorities.³ Instead of cutting funding, Congress should consider the value of expanding these and other volunteer opportunities as boomers approach their retirement years.

Notes

1. The HRS is a longitudinal survey of older Americans conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan for the National Institute on Aging. For more information, see <http://hrsonline.isr.umich.edu>.
2. See Johnson and Schaner (2005) for estimates of the value of unpaid engagement activities.
3. For example, the President's 2007 budget proposes federal funding for the Senior Service Corps programs at \$218 million, the same as 2006 levels (Corporation for National and Community Service 2006).

References

Administration on Aging. 2003a. “Performance Data for the Senior Medicare Patrol Projects.” Statement by Edwin L. Walker, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Administration on Aging. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

TABLE 2. Selected Federally Funded Volunteer Opportunities for Older Americans

Initiative	Administrator	Approximate funding	Participants	Target groups	Stipend	Overview
Senior Corps^a						
Foster Grandparents	CNCS	\$110 m	32,361	Low-income adults 60+	Yes	Matches low-income seniors (60+) with disadvantaged children
Retired and Senior Volunteer Program	CNCS	\$ 60 m	535,784	Adults 55+	No	Provides general volunteering opportunities for those 55+
Senior Companions	CNCS	\$ 47 m	16,726	Low-income adults 60+	Yes	Matches low-income seniors (60+) with disabled adults
Senior Medicare Patrol	Local groups	\$ 7 m ^b	> 45,000 ^c	Retired professionals	No	Trains volunteers to help Medicare and Medicaid beneficiaries become better health care consumers
Service Corps of Retired Executives	Local groups	\$ 5 m ^c	> 10,500	Retired executives	No	Links volunteers with small business owners to provide free counseling and training
Senior Community Service Employment Program	NCOA, AARP, Experience Works, other grantee orgs	\$400 m ^d	@ 93,000	Low-income adults 55+	No	Provides job training, employment, and service opportunities
Family Friends	NCOA	\$ 1 m ^e	> 1,000	Adults 55+	No	Pairs older adults with disabled or ill children
Experience Corps	Civic Ventures	\$ 0.8 m ^e	@ 1,800	Adults 55+	Yes	Places volunteers in schools and youth-focused organizations in their communities.

Note: Approximate funding includes only federal grant money.

CNCS=Corporation for National and Community Service

NCOA=National Council on Aging

^aSource: Corporation for National and Community Service (2006).

^bSource: Administration on Aging (2003a).

^cSource: Small Business Administration (2006).

^dSource: U.S. Department of Labor (2006).

^eSource: Administration on Aging (2003b).

^f Approximately this number of volunteers have been trained in the organization's history.

- . 2003b. *Compendium of Active Grants, Fiscal Year 2003, Under Title IV of the Older Americans Act*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- Civic Ventures. 2005. *Experience in Action*. Gerontological Society of America and Civic Ventures Wall Calendar. Washington, DC: Civic Ventures.
- Corporation for National and Community Service. 2006. "Corporation Appropriation History." http://www.cns.gov/pdf/2007_budget_apphistory.pdf. (Accessed February 28, 2006.)
- Fried, Linda P., Michelle C. Carlson, Marc Freedman, Kevin D. Frick, Thomas A. Glass, Joel Hill, Sylvia McGill, George W. Rebok, Teresa Seeman, James Tielsch, Barbara A. Wasik, and Scott Zeger. 2004. "A Social Model for Health Promotion for an Aging Population: Initial Evidence on the Experience Corps Model." *Journal of Urban Health* 81(1): 64–78.
- Glass, Thomas, Carlos Mendes de Leon, Richard A. Marottoli, and Lisa F. Berkman. 1999. "Population-Based Study of Social and Productive Activities as Predictors of Survival among Elderly Americans." *BMJ* 319: 478–83.
- Haider, Steven J., and David Loughran. 2001. "Elderly Labor Supply: Work or Play?" Labor and Population Program Working Paper No. 01-09. Santa Monica, CA: RAND.
- Harvard School of Public Health. 2004. "Reinventing Aging: Baby Boomers and Civic Engagement." Harvard School of Public Health–MetLife Foundation Initiative on Retirement and Civic Engagement Report. Boston, MA: Harvard School of Public Health.
- Johnson, Richard W., and Simone G. Schaner. 2005. "Value of Unpaid Activities by Older Americans Tops \$160 Billion Per Year." Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. *Perspectives on Productive Aging* Brief No. 4.
- Kutner, Gail, and Jeffrey Love. 2003. "Time and Money: An In-Depth Look at 45+ Volunteers and Donors." *Multicultural Study 2003*. Washington, DC: AARP.
- Lum, Terry Y., and Elizabeth Lightfoot. 2005. "The Effects of Volunteering on the Physical and Mental Health of Older People." *Research on Aging* 27 (1): 31–55.
- Murrow-Howell, Nancy, Jim Hinterlong, Philip A. Rozario, and Fengyan Tang. 2003. "Effects of Volunteering on the Well-Being of Older Adults." *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences* 53B(3): S137–S145.
- Small Business Administration. 2006. "Budget Request and Performance Plan." Washington, DC: Small Business Administration. http://www.sba.gov/cfo/2006_Budget_Request_and_Performance_Plan.pdf. (Accessed March 22, 2006.)
- U.S. Department of Labor. 2006. "About SCSEP." Washington, DC: Employment and Training Administration. http://www.doleta.gov/seniors/html_docs/AboutSCSEP.cfm. (Accessed March 22, 2006.)

About the Authors

Sheila R. Zedlewski is the director and **Simone G. Schaner** is a research assistant for the Urban Institute's Income and Benefits Policy Center.



THE URBAN INSTITUTE

2100 M Street, NW
Washington, DC 20037

Nonprofit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit No. 8098
Ridgely, MD

Address Service Requested

For more information,
call Public Affairs:
202-261-5709
or visit our web site,
<http://www.urban.org>.
To order additional copies
of this publication, call
202-261-5687
or visit our online bookstore,
<http://www.uiipress.org>.

Perspectives on Productive Aging is a series of data and policy briefs focused on engagement activities among adults age 55 and older. The series is supported through a grant from Atlantic Philanthropies as part of their Ageing Programme, which seeks "to bring about lasting improvement in the lives of older adults and to transform how ageing is viewed and older persons are treated by society."

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.

Perspectives on Productive Aging is part of the Urban Institute's Retirement Project. Further information can be obtained at <http://www.urban.org/toolkit/issues/retirementproject/>.

THE URBAN INSTITUTE

2100 M Street, NW
Washington, DC 20037

Copyright © May 2006

Phone: 202-833-7200

Fax: 202-293-1918

Copyright © May 2006. Permission is granted to reproduce this document with attribution to the Urban Institute. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Urban Institute, its board, its sponsors, or other authors in the series.