The Who, What, Why, and How of Volunteering in Later Life

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Introduction

- The world’s population is gradually aging; in several decades, about 1 in 5 people in the world will be ages 60 and older. By 2030, China will be among the most rapidly aging nations in the world.

![Graph showing population growth by age group from 1950 to 2050 for Japan, China, USA, Spain, Brazil, and India. Source: UN, World Population Prospects: The 2010 Revision.]

- While an aging population has previously been viewed as a social problem, there has been a movement towards focusing on the positive opportunities that an aging population presents for society.

- Civic engagement is broadly defined as activity that involves older adults’ contribution to their communities. The question of how a growing number of older adults be utilized to address society’s most pressing social issues has led to an emphasis on promoting civic engagement in later life.

- Volunteering is a common form of civic engagement. Volunteering is giving one’s time and energy to benefit the well-being of others as a result of one’s own free will and no for any other reason, such as financial remuneration or mandated service.
WHO Volunteers Later In Life?

Until recently, volunteering has been associated primarily with younger populations. Research in the U.S. suggests that many older adults do volunteer. In 2011, 24% of adults ages 65 and older volunteered.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>U.S. AGE GROUP</th>
<th>2011 PERCENT WHO DID ANY VOLUNTEER WORK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total, 16 years and over</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 to 24 years</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 to 34 years</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 to 44 years</td>
<td>31.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>45 to 54 years</td>
<td>30.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 to 64 years</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 years and over</td>
<td>24.0%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Research indicates that not all older adults are equally likely to volunteer. Two categories of factors that influence older adult’s volunteerism:

- **Individual factors:** education, health and personal motivation.
- **Institutional factors:** organizational facilitation and social policies.

- Education is among the most powerful predictors of volunteering at any stage of adulthood both in the US and China.

- Older adults who have limited mobility have more difficulty finding accessible volunteer activities.

- Individuals who volunteered earlier in life are more likely to continue volunteering later in life than those without histories of volunteering.

- Women are slightly more likely to volunteer than men.

- People who are more religious and have more social contacts are more likely to volunteer.
WHAT Does Volunteering Later in Life Involve?

Volunteering refers to a range of different types and settings for activity. It involves individuals giving their time to benefit others as a result of their own free choice. Although people typically consider volunteering as work that is not compensated, there is a growing recognition that volunteer stipends and travel reimbursement are sound volunteer management strategies, particularly for lower income elders. It is useful to identify different dimensions of volunteer activities. Volunteer activities vary in terms of the following characteristics:

- **Motivation:** To what extent is the activity motivated by altruism—a desire to promote the welfare of others—or by some other reason (e.g., a sense of obligation)?
- **Degree of direct human interaction:** How much direct interaction with other people does the activity involve?
- **Types of social institutions involved:** In what settings does the activity take place, such as government, health care, social services, family, neighborhoods, education, or religious?
- **Intensity of the activity:** How regularly and for how long does the actor engage in the activity? For example, is it a one-time volunteer engagement, or does it occur weekly?
- **Impact of the activity:** To what extent does the activity bring about beneficial outcomes? For example, does a volunteer at a hospital actually improve the morale of the patients there?

“Ecovolunterism” is another emerging type of volunteering in the U.S. and involves older adults volunteering to conserve natural resources and foster environmental sustainability. This activity often involves physical activity, which yields health benefits to older adults.
WHY Does Volunteering Later in Life Matter?

In both the U.S. and China, enthusiasm for older adult volunteering is based on two ideas:

1. Volunteering promotes the well-being of the people and organizations that volunteers serve.
2. Volunteering promotes the well-being of individual volunteers themselves.

Volunteering is a positive social role that can promote health through a variety of processes, such as:

- protecting against losses and negative events in other social roles
- contributing to an individual's identity and positive sense of self
- connecting the volunteer with others
- promoting physical activity,
- enhancing an individual's overall power, prestige, and resources.

Because opportunities for positive, meaningful, and productive social roles typically become more limited in later life, volunteering has been discussed as an especially important activity among older adults.

Research studies using population data in the U.S. have found that volunteering in middle and later life is associated with a variety of better physical health outcomes, including reduced risk of mortality, better functional health, and better self-rated health, as well as improved psychological well-being.
HOW Can Older Adults Find Opportunities to Volunteer?

In general, organizations that utilize volunteers largely have overlooked older adults. In a survey conducted by the U.S. National Council on Aging in 2005, 91% of more than 800 officials representing 20 of the leading nonprofits in the U.S. could not even report any organizational practices to engage older adults. They cite lack of staff, training, screening, and placement systems.

The national government in the U.S. has devoted some resources to facilitate volunteerism among older adults specifically through the Senior Corps programs.

Senior Corps is targeted toward connecting adults ages 55+ with opportunities to address pressing social issues and engages about 500,000 adults a year.

Similarly, the China National Committee on Aging has launched the “Silver Hair Action Program,” which involves retirees with professional expertise visiting under-developed areas of China to support community development.

A growing number of organizations host online databases that people can search to find volunteer opportunities that interest them. For example, AARP—a nonprofit membership organization in the U.S. that advocates on behalf of adults ages 50 and over—has created an online database for volunteer opportunities. People can visit the site to seek volunteer opportunities by location, date, and keyword. The database also designates opportunities that can be done online at one’s own home.
HOW Can Older Adults Find Opportunities to Volunteer?

Most people in the U.S. find volunteer opportunities through their own private networks of local service organizations, such as by contacting their neighborhood school; hospital; senior center; church, temple, or synagogue; and a variety of nongovernmental charitable organizations.

Matching volunteers with the right opportunity requires effort by both the organization and prospective volunteer. Some questions to consider while seeking volunteer opportunities include:

◊ What causes or issues are especially meaningful to you? Is there a particular group of people or social issue that you seek to address through your volunteer work? Are you interested in issues in your immediate community or those that exist farther away?

◊ Do you want to volunteer in a way that uses the skills you already have, or do you want to do something completely different? What things are you looking to learn? What type of activities do you NOT want to do as a volunteer?

◊ Are you interested in a one-time volunteer activity or a more regular volunteer activity? Are you interested in volunteer work only on the evenings and weekends? How many hours can you commit?

◊ What kind of people do you want to work in terms of the people receiving services and your co-workers? Would you prefer to work alone or with a group, or with a friend or family members?

Although cultural norms might dictate that adults appear “selfless” in their pursuit to volunteer, it is important for volunteers to be realistic with themselves and volunteer organizations concerning their needs and interests so that they can be effective in their volunteer role.
Although many people worldwide overlook older adults as an active and engaged population, older adults can and do contribute to their communities, such as through volunteering.

Older adults’ volunteerism is influenced by their individual capacity (e.g., their health) and organizational capacity (e.g., nonprofit organizations actively asking older adults to serve). Leaders in the field predict that service to communities will be a centerpiece for later life among Baby Boomers in particular.

Volunteering is a broad term that covers a wide range of activities. Older adults in the U.S. are especially likely to volunteer through religious organizations.

Enthusiasm for older adults’ volunteerism is based on the idea that it has benefits for society, community service organizations, as well as for individual older adults themselves. There is some research to support these ideas.

There are several national programs in the U.S. and China focused on community service among older adults. Many older adults volunteer, however, through service organizations that attract volunteers of all ages. These opportunities in the U.S. are becoming increasingly publicized through online databases.

In conclusion, there is growing enthusiasm to move beyond a deficits approach to aging—whereby older adults are unilaterally viewed as vulnerable individuals in need of care—to a strengths perspective whereby older adults are viewed, in part, as a population who can and do contribute to others’ well-being. Volunteerism among older adults is one primary way in which this shift in thought can lead to shift in action for the benefit of aging individuals, communities, and society as a whole.
References


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