This report provides an overview of volunteerism among older adults by summarizing current research conducted in the United States (U.S.) and China. The report reviews rates of volunteering in later life, what volunteering in later life typically involves, why volunteering among older adults is important, how organizations can promote older adults’ volunteerism, and how older adults can find volunteer opportunities.

* Assistant Professor of Social Work at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. Contact: egreenf@ssw.rutgers.edu. The author thanks Mallory G. Russo for assistance with the literature review, as well as Dr. Chien-Chung Huang and Jackie Boyden at the Huamin Center.
Introduction

Population aging is one of the major demographic shifts that the world will experience in the coming decades. In 1950, 8% of the world’s population was ages 60 and over. In 2011, about 11% of the world’s population belonged to that age group. In 2050, this age group is expected to reach 22%. This means that in several decades, about one in five people in the world will be ages 60 and older. Demographers predict that by 2030, China will be among the most rapidly aging nations in the world.

Historically, population aging has been viewed as a social problem. People are asking:

- Who will provide care for older adults with health problems?
- How can we finance national social insurance programs, such as Social Security, for the growing masses of older adults?
- How will an aging population affect major economic systems?
- How can we prevent and cure the burdensome diseases associated with aging?

Since the late 1990s, there has been a growing movement to move beyond this strict “deficits” approach to aging by focusing on the opportunities that our aging population presents for individuals, families, and society as a whole. Researchers, policymakers, advocates, and citizens alike are beginning to ask:

- How can a growing number of older adults be utilized to address the world’s most pressing social issues?

This question has led to a greater emphasis on promoting civic engagement in later life. Civic engagement can be defined broadly as activity that involves older adults’ contributing to their communities.

One of the most common forms of civic engagement is volunteering. Volunteering is giving one’s time and energies to benefit the well-being of others as a result of one’s own free will and not for some other reason, such as financial remuneration or mandated service.

Some people use the term “volunteering” to refer to people helping others informally through their own private network of relationships. Most, however, use this term to refer to helping others through formal service organizations, such as hospitals and schools.

Until recently, efforts to understand and promote volunteerism had focused on youth. It was not until the late 1990s when the idea of promoting volunteerism among older adults was discussed widely. It was at this time when Marc Freedman—the Founder and CEO of Encore.org (a nonprofit organization in San Francisco, CA, that focuses on promoting meaningful work in later life)—published a germinal book titled “Prime Time: How Baby Boomers Will Revolutionize and Transform America.” This book calls for mobilizing the skills, talents, and experiences of older adults to help address pressing social problems. Also at this time, the Atlantic Philanthropies—a private foundation in the U.S.—made strategic grants to leading organizations in the field of aging around civic engagement, including the Gerontological Society of America (a premiere professional organization for research on aging) and the National Council on Aging (a leading organization in the U.S. focused on aging and social policy). The grants aimed to draw the attention of researchers, policymakers, service professionals, and citizens to older adults’ civic engagement, such as volunteering.

The purpose of this report is to summarize the main ideas that have emerged within the past 15 years regarding older adults’ volunteerism. Specifically, this report presents the “who, what, why, and how” of volunteering in later life with a special focus on the U.S. and China.

WHO Volunteers Later in Life?

Many people maintain out-dated and ageist stereotypes of what adults are capable of or expected to do in later life. In the U.S., there are stereotypes that conjure up images of sickly elders sitting quietly to themselves—dependent on others for their care and passively watching life passing them by. Although cultural traditions in China more readily emphasize older adults’ contributions to families and communities, widespread norms tend to emphasize older adults’ contribu-
tions to their families and paid work over their broader communities.4

Research on volunteering in the U.S. suggests that many older adults do, in fact, volunteer. Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that in 2011, 24% of adults ages 65 and older volunteered.5

Although rates of any volunteering peak in midlife, older adults in the not all older adults are equally likely to become a volunteer. Leaders in the field have suggested two categories of factors that influence older adults’ volunteering:8
- Individual factors (such as health and personal motivation)
- Institutional factors (such as organizational facilitation, social policies, and incentives)

Although rates of any volunteering peak in midlife, older adults in the U.S. are likely to contribute more hours of volunteering than any other age group.

In contrast, a study conducted in Hong Kong in 2001-2002 found that the participation in volunteer activities was lowest among older adults in comparison to other age groups, with only 3.6% of the population reporting any volunteer work during the past 12 months.4

While many older adults do, in fact, volunteer, research also indicates that

### WHAT Does Volunteering Later in Life Involve?

<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>
</tr>
<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>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data from http://www.bls.gov/news.release/volun.nr0.htm.

U.S. are likely to contribute more hours of volunteering than any other age group.

Regarding individual factors, a large body of research demonstrates that education is among the most powerful predictors of volunteering at any stage of adulthood. For example, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated that in 2011, 42.4% of the adult population with a college degree or higher volunteered, in comparison to 18.2% of adults with high school education only.5 Studies in Hong Kong and Shanghai similarly have found that volunteering is more prevalent among older adults with higher levels of education.7,8

Older adults who have limited mobility have more difficulty finding volunteer activities that are accessible to them. Women are slightly more likely to volunteer than men, as are people who are more religious and have more social contacts. People who volunteer at earlier stages in life are more likely to continue doing so in later life than people without earlier histories of volunteering.

Given social inequalities in access to volunteer opportunities, researchers have been trying to better understand how organizations can create environments that facilitate volunteerism among diverse subgroups of older adults. This scholarship also considers how public policies and programs can support organizations in facilitating older adults’ volunteerism. Research in the U.S. suggests that older adults are likely to benefit more from volunteering when they receive adequate training for their volunteer responsibilities, ongoing support, stipends to offset the costs of volunteering, and choice of volunteer activities.9 Moreover, research conducted in Hong Kong has found that volunteering yields more health benefits when social workers and peers are more encouraging and supportive of older adults’ volunteer service.10

It is anticipated that the number of volunteers in later life will increase with the aging of the Baby Boom cohort—a large group of adults who were born between 1946 and 1964. This cohort’s high levels of health and education are likely to facilitate their interest and ability in volunteering. Survey research conducted in the U.S. in 2004 suggests that about half of Baby Boomers expect to continue to contribute to their communities through work and/or service in later life.11 Census data in Hong Kong in 2000 indicated that 38% of adults ages 45 to 59 anticipated volunteering after they retire or are 60 years old.7
Volunteering is a general term that 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 and not because of financial remuneration, a mandate, or coercion. Some people do not consider any work that is compensated with a stipend or reimbursement as volunteer work. There is growing recognition, however, that volunteer stipends and reimbursement (such as for the cost of travel to volunteer) are sound volunteer management strategies, particularly for encouraging lower income elders to volunteer.

Recognizing the wide range of activities that could be considered volunteer work, it is useful to identify different dimensions of volunteer activity. For example, volunteer activities vary in terms of the following characteristics.

- **Type of action**: Does the activity involve helping (e.g., tutoring a student) or giving (e.g., donating money)?

- **Motivation of the actor**: 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 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?

Most research studies on volunteering in later life have used relatively simple measures of volunteer behavior that do not distinguish among these different characteristics of volunteering. Researchers generally know whether or not individuals volunteered, for how many hours, and through what type of organization. Studies in the U.S. suggest that adults of any age are most likely to do so through religious organizations, such as churches and temples. Furthermore, it has been estimated that volunteers age 65 and older in the U.S. donate an average of nearly four full-time weeks of work per volunteer to religious causes and nearly five full-time weeks per volunteer to non-religious organizations. Older adults are more likely to volunteer by providing managerial assistance, such as serving on a board or committee, than younger volunteers, who are more likely to tutor, teach, or supervise sports teams.

Leaders in the field are orienting attention to new settings for volunteering among older adults. For example, in the U.S., there are a growing number of organizations within the travel industry that promote “voluntourism.” Voluntourism involves traveling throughout the world to improve the lives of others by interacting directly with them. Another emerging type of volunteerism in later life is eco-volunteerism, which involves older adults volunteering to conserve natural resources and foster environmental sustainability for future generations. Eco-volunteerism among older adults might be especially likely to yield health benefits because it oftentimes involves rigorous physical activity, which can improve older adults’ health.

**WHY Does Volunteering Later in Life Matter?**

Both in the U.S. and in China, enthusiasm for older adults’ volunteerism is based on two ideas.

- **Volunteering promotes the well-being of the people and organizations that volunteers serve**

- **Volunteering promotes the well-being of individual volunteers themselves.**

Much of the research on the benefits of volunteering has focused on its effects on older individuals themselves. Theorizing on volunteering in later life has focused on volunteering as a positive social role that can promote health through a variety of processes, such as by protecting against losses and negative events in other social roles, contributing to an individual’s identity and positive sense of self, connecting individuals with others, enhancing feelings of control, increasing one’s sense of mattering to others, promoting physical activity, and enhancing an individuals’ 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. Volunteering also has been discussed as a primary vehicle for adults’ achieving generativity—a term coined by Erik Erikson, a famous lifespan development psychologist, which emphasizes the importance of opportunities to develop and display concern for the welfare of others, particularly for younger generations.
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, such as fewer depressive symptoms, greater life satisfaction, and happiness. Research also has focused on whether some subgroups of adults benefit more from volunteering than others. These studies, overall, have found greater benefits among older volunteers who:

- Have fewer personal and economic resources (e.g., are in poorer health, have lower levels of education, lack other major social roles)
- Receive volunteer training, ongoing support for their volunteer activities, and have greater choice of volunteer activity
- Dedicate more time to the volunteer role (although some studies have found that extraordinarily high levels of volunteering might be stressful and undermine people’s well-being)

There has been less research to examine the outcomes of volunteers’ service for the individuals and organizations that they serve. A report by the Center on Aging and Work at Boston College estimated that volunteering among adults ages 50 and older is worth approximately $59 billion. Furthermore, based on a study of 40 nonprofit organizations in the U.S., the National Council on Aging estimated that organizations achieved a nearly 800% return when investing in recruiting and managing adults ages 55 and over as volunteers.

**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 report any organizational practices to engage older adults. They cited lack of staff, training, screening, and placement systems as key barriers.

Principles for sound volunteer management among older adults are likely similar to those for other age groups, such as matching volunteers’ interests and skills with tasks, providing training and ongoing support, and formally recognizing volunteers’ contributions. There is some research, however, suggesting that older adults might have unique volunteer needs and preferences, such as having flexible hours that allow them to fulfill other work and family obligations. For older adults with limited mobility, transportation to volunteer activities is especially important, as are volunteer opportunities that can be done remotely within the volunteers’ homes.

The national government in the U.S. has devoted some resources to facilitate volunteerism among older adults specifically through the U.S. Corporation for National and Community Service’s 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, within the past decade, 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. Another national volunteer program is “Loving Care to Help the Growth of the Young,” which involves older adults supporting children in need throughout the country.

Most people in the U.S. find volunteer opportunities through their own pri-
vate 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, such as Catholic Charities or United Way. Other volunteers create their own opportunities, such as by identifying local organizations that already are working on a particular issue and building teams of volunteers through their own private networks and beyond.24

Recognizing that finding volunteer opportunities can be challenging, a growing number of organizations host online databases that people can search to find suitable volunteer opportunities. For example, AARP—a membership organization in the U.S. that advocates on behalf of adults ages 50 and over—has created an online database for volunteer opportunities.25 People can visit the site to seek volunteer opportunities by location, date, and keyword. The database also designates volunteer opportunities that can be conducted online within one’s own home.

Matching volunteers with the right opportunity requires efforts by organizations, as well as by prospective volunteers themselves. The Center for Philanthropy and Community Service at the University of Texas suggests that volunteers consider the following questions while seeking volunteer opportunities:26

- 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 (e.g., children, poverty, education, vulnerable older adults)? 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 (e.g., helping with a special event at an organization) or a more regular volunteer activity (e.g., weekly visits with people receiving volunteer services)? 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 with 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.

Summary and Conclusion

This report has summarized major ideas that have emerged over the past 15 years regarding older adults’ volunteerism. Key ideas include:

- Older adults’ volunteerism is influenced by their individual capacity (e.g., health) and organizational capacity (e.g., nonprofit organizations actively asking older adults to serve). Leaders in the field predict that Baby Boomers will be especially likely to volunteer in later life.

- Volunteering is a broad term that covers a wide range of activities. Older adults in the U.S. are likely to volunteer through religious organizations and to engage in professional or managerial roles, such as by serving on nonprofit boards.

(Continued on p. 7)
Summary and Conclusion Continued

- Enthusiasm for older adults’ volunteerism is based on the idea that it benefits society, service organizations, and 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. Online databases in the U.S. publicize these opportunities.

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 contribute to others’ well-being. Volunteerism among older adults is one primary way in which this shift in thought can lead to change in action for the benefit of aging individuals, communities, and society as a whole.
References


華民研究中心
Huanmin Research Center

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
School of Social Work
390 George Street, Room 503
New Brunswick, NJ 08901
848-932-5383, ext. 25383
socialwork.rutgers.edu/huamin