

Volunteering

Does it Help Us As We Age?

MIDUS

Midlife in the United States

A National Study of Health & Well-Being

Volunteering

MIDLIFE IN THE UNITED STATES: A NATIONAL STUDY OF HEALTH AND WELL-BEING



Volunteers can play an important role in improving the lives of others in their community, especially in these hard economic times. The MIDUS national study included questions about time spent volunteering (such as for nursing homes or youth groups) and amount of money donated (such as to religious or political organizations).

Researchers have used this data to examine how helping others by volunteering time or money might influence the well-being of the volunteers themselves.



WHO VOLUNTEERS? Volunteering Varies:

BY RESOURCES

People more likely to volunteer their time or donate money:

- had more education or a higher income
- were more religious or felt more obligated to help others
- had more social contacts.

[Einolf, 2011]



BY GENDER

- Women tended to volunteer more often.
- Men tended to donate more money.
- Women who spent a lot of time caring for children were *not* prevented from volunteering. Having children aged 7-13 was associated with *more* volunteering for both sexes, perhaps because children are involved in activities that encourage parents' involvement.

[Einolf, 2011; Rossi, 2001]



BY AGE

- Older adults were more likely to volunteer or donate money than middle aged or younger adults.
- Older adults contributed more money to religious organizations.

[Almeida et al., 2001]



FUNDED BY THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE ON AGING

Does Volunteering Help Us Age?

Not only do many older adults have the time & life skills to help others, volunteering seems to improve their own lives in many ways:

1

Increases Psychological Well-Being

Volunteering Time:

- Older adults volunteering 10 or less hours a month had improved psychological well-being (feeling more satisfied with life, liking yourself, having good relations with others). This may be because volunteering provides opportunities to make friends and gain self-esteem from seeing how volunteer work benefits others.
- Those who volunteered more than 10 hours a month had no positive effect on well-being, perhaps because larger time commitments and greater responsibilities can create stress.

Donating Money:

- Making charitable donations of any size was linked to greater well-being. Donations of over \$100 a month showed a more positive effect.
- For older adults limited by health problems, giving money may provide a way to stay involved and connected.

[Choi & Kim, 2011]



Makes Us Happier

- Older people who volunteered reported feeling more cheerful, more peaceful, more satisfied, and more full of life.

[Greenfield & Marks, 2004]

2

Promotes Better Mental Functioning

- Those who had more social contact, such as through volunteering, had better mental functioning (thinking clearly, remembering details) as they aged.

[Lachman, 2008]



3

*Those who bring sunshine to the lives of others
cannot keep it from themselves.*

☞ James Matthew Barrie



Fulfills Our Need to Contribute to Future Generations

4

- In mid to late life, some feel an urge towards generativity (wanting to help future generations, such as by passing on skills or knowledge).
- Generativity can be expressed in many ways, including good parenting, or through volunteer work that aides children or helps important institutions survive into the next generation.
- Greater generativity is associated with more time spent volunteering and with increased psychological well-being.
- Volunteering can be an especially important way to express generativity for adults who report poor relations with their children.

[An & Cooney, 2006; Son & Wilson, 2011; Rossi, 2001]



5

Maintains a Sense of Purpose

- Volunteering helps older adults without major social roles (they aren't an employee, a partner, or a parent) maintain a sense of purpose in life (having goals, aims, and direction).
- Volunteering may provide meaningful activities or new roles that sustain self-identity and purpose.

[Greenfield & Marks, 2004]



*We make a living by what we get,
but we make a life by
what we give.*

☞ Winston Churchill



...What Encourages Older Adults to Volunteer?



► Staying socially engaged:

Older adults who maintained social connections (by being involved in groups) were more likely to volunteer.



► Starting at a younger age:

Those who began volunteering or donating when they were younger were more likely to continue as they aged. Those who had never volunteered or donated before were also likely to continue *not* doing so.



No matter how big & powerful government gets, and the many services it provides, it can never take the place of volunteers.

✍ Ronald Reagan



► Keeping volunteers happy:

Since repeat volunteers were more dedicated (they volunteered longer & donated more), further research is needed to identify what creates positive volunteer experiences that encourage continued giving.

[Choi & Jing-Ann Chou, 2010]

...Will Baby Boomers Volunteer When They Retire?

Retirement is increasingly seen as a time of purposeful activity, rather than a time of extended leisure. Volunteering can be one means of continuing productivity into older age. As more baby boomers reach 65, researchers and policy makers are interested in how many will volunteer, and how it will affect society.



Analysis of factors that predict who is likely to volunteer show that the *percentage* of future volunteers is likely to remain steady among baby boomers (born 1946-55). However, the *total number* of volunteers should still rise, since the number of people over 65 is expected to increase greatly during the next decade as baby boomers retire.

If charitable organizations can expand their capacity to utilize more volunteers, not only may volunteering help boomers maintain their quality of life, their community service may provide substantial benefits to the rest of society.

[Einolf, 2009]

MIDUS—Midlife in the United States

Institute on Aging, University of Wisconsin-Madison
2245 MSC, 1300 University Ave., Madison, WI 53706
Phone: (608) 262-2056 • Email: aging@ssc.wisc.edu



<http://MIDUS.wisc.edu>

Publications on volunteering, including those summarized here (as indicated in brackets), can be found on the MIDUS website.

We give our thanks
to all those who
volunteer their time
to make MIDUS
research possible.

