

Trends in volunteerism among older adults

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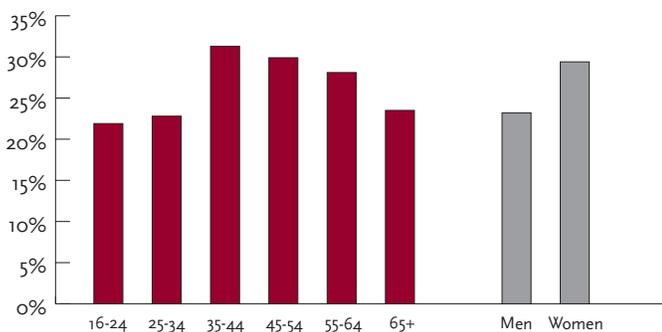
TRENDS IN VOLUNTEERISM AMONG OLDER ADULTS

Estimates of the extent to which older adults participate in volunteer activities vary; one survey reports that about 30% adults aged 45-54 volunteered at least once in the preceding year, while another survey reports volunteer work by over 50% of adults over age 50. Volunteers contribute their time to a wide range of secular and religious organizations, in such activities as mentoring, coaching, tutoring, office services, and management assistance. Over 40% of older adults expect to increase the amount of time spent in volunteer work in the next five years. Older adults are more likely to continue to volunteer with organizations that offer opportunities to contribute managerial or professional skills, as well as flexible work schedules.

How prevalent is volunteer work among older adults compared to younger adults?

“About 61.8 million people, or 26.4% of the population, volunteered through or for an organization at least once between September 2007 and September 2008,” according to a 2009 Bureau of Labor Statistics report. Persons aged 35—44 remained the most likely to volunteer (31.3%), with those in their early twenties being the least likely (18.6%).” Among older adults, the rates declined from 29.9% for ages 45-54 to 28.1% for ages 55-64, and 23.5% for ages 65 and over (see Figure 1).¹

Figure 1. Percentage of volunteers in 2008, by age and gender



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics (2008)

According to a 2009 survey by The Hartford, “respondents aged 50 or older are more likely to participate in volunteer work, with 52.9% of respondents reporting such activities, compared to 45.2% of those under age 50.” Those aged 50+ or older are also more likely to “provide monetary donations to causes they support, with 76.5% reporting such donations, compared to 60.8% of those under age 50.”²

The same 2009 survey by The Hartford reports that “frequency of volunteer work does not vary widely by age. Among respondents under age 50, 45.4% do not participate in volunteer work, compared to 47.9% of those over age 50. Those under age 50 are somewhat more likely to volunteer less than 1 day per month (20.8%) compared to those over age 50 (12.4%). Less than 10% of respondents in both age groups volunteer one day per month or more.”²

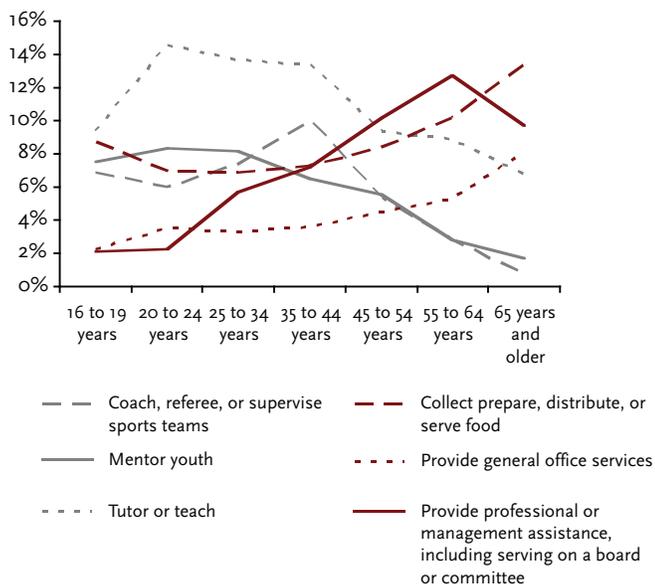
According to a 2007 analysis of data from the Health and Retirement study, more than 10 million healthy older adults without caregiving responsibilities do not engage in paid work or formal volunteering. More than half of these able adults are under age 75, and more than 9 out of 10 have some paid work experience.³

What types of volunteer activities are attractive to older adults?

“Volunteer tasks vary by age groups,” shows a 2007 analysis of BLS data by the Sloan Center for Aging & Work. “Some tasks, such as mentoring youth or tutoring, peak in the twenties or early thirties, then decline among other age groups. Other tasks, such as coaching sports, peak in middle age. Volunteering time to managerial or professional tasks tends to peak in the early retiree years (55 to 64), while tasks such as collecting food or providing general office assistance continue to increase with age.”⁴ (See Figure 2.)

In the same 2007 Sloan Center on Aging & Work report, an analysis of Current Population Survey data shows that, “volunteers age 50 through 64 contributed an average of 126 annual hours (3.6 full time weeks) per volunteer to religion and 113 annual hours (3.2 full time weeks) to secular organizations. Volunteers age 65 and older donated an average of 134 annual hours (3.8 full time weeks) per volunteer to religion and 167 annual hours (4.8 full time weeks) per volunteer to secular groups.”⁴

Figure 2. Main volunteering task by age group, selected tasks - percent of volunteers



Is there potential for increased volunteer activities among older adults in the future?

According to a 2008 AARP survey, “four in ten Americans aged 44-79 (41%) indicate they are very or somewhat likely to increase the amount of time they spend volunteering in the next five years.”⁵

“Women are somewhat more likely than men to say they expect to do volunteer work when they are older (83% of women vs. 77% of men),” according to a 2009 Pew survey.⁶

“Boomers are most likely to continue volunteering if the activity that they perform is professional or managerial (74.8% retention). They are least likely to continue serving if their activity is primarily to engage in general labor or supply transportation (55.6% retention),” according to a 2008 report based on Census data.⁷

According to a 2008 AARP survey, “seventy-one percent of respondents said they prefer volunteering without a specific schedule, while 21 percent said they prefer regular and ongoing opportunities.”⁵

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics (2006)

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