

JustServe: Life Benefits of Service

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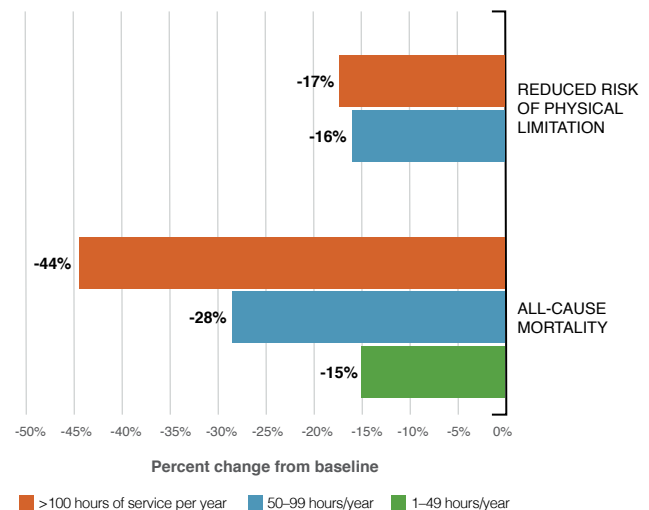
In 2017, 77 million adults in the United States collectively contributed 6.9 billion hours volunteering with organizations, generating \$167 billion in economic value to their communities as well as an unquantifiable amount of good.¹

Volunteering benefits the communities in numerous ways. However, it turns out that a nice side effect of volunteering is that it also benefits the volunteers themselves in numerous ways.

Our team of researchers from the University of British Columbia and Harvard University recently published a new study in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, looking more precisely at the benefits of volunteering for those who do it. We used data from a nationally representative data set of 13,000 people aged 50 and older and evaluated 34 physical health outcomes, health behaviors, and psychological and social well-being outcomes. This allowed us to directly measure the potential effect that volunteering might have on various outcomes, and it also helped us learn which outcomes volunteering does not appear to be influencing.

Here is what we observed. Over a four-year period, those who volunteered for at least 100 hours a year (about two hours per week) had a substantially reduced risk of mortality and developing physical limitations, higher levels of physical activity, and improved sense of well-being over time (for example, increased sense of purpose in life and reduced feelings of loneliness, depression, and hopelessness).²

Interestingly, although we saw that volunteers had a substantially reduced risk of dying over the four-year follow-up period, we did not observe reduced risk of chronic medical conditions, such as diabetes, hypertension, or cognitive impairment. Perhaps these findings could be explained by the fact that four years is too short of a follow-up time for people to develop these types of chronic conditions, which typically develop slowly over several decades.



Population aging is one of the most important social trends of the 21st century. For example, in both the United States and Canada, the number of adults aged 65 or higher is projected to increase 45%–55% in the next 15 years. The growing older-adult population possesses a vast array of skills and experiences that can be leveraged for the greater good of society via volunteering. Among people who are willing and able, how might both society and

the volunteers themselves benefit from acts of service? We hope our new study may shed some additional light on this exciting body of research.



A cautionary note is that these conclusions were drawn prior to the global COVID-19 pandemic, which makes social activity for older adults risky and unadvisable in the near future. However, there are so many ways we could all serve our communities. And now is a particular moment in history when society needs your service the most. If you are able to serve while abiding by health guidelines, not only can you help heal and repair the world, but you can help yourself as you serve and give to others.

When the COVID-19 crisis finally subsides, we have a chance to create policies and civic structures that enable more giving in society. Some cities were already pioneering this idea before the pandemic and quarantine, and I hope we have the willingness and resolve to do so in a post-COVID-19 society as well.

1. "Volunteering in America: Research," AmeriCorps, accessed June 10, 2019, nationalservice.gov/serve/via/research.

2. E. S. Kim and others, "Volunteering and Subsequent Health and Well-Being in Older Adults: An Outcome-Wide Longitudinal Approach," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, vol. 59, no. 2, 176–86.