



Volunteer Transitions among Older Americans

Barbara A. Butrica, Richard W. Johnson, and Sheila R. Zedlewski

October 2007

The Retirement Project

Discussion Paper 07-06

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A crosscutting team of Urban Institute experts in Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, tax and budget policy, and micro-simulation modeling ponder the aging of American society.

The aging of America raises many questions about what's in store for future and current retirees and whether society can sustain current systems that support the retired population. Who will prosper? Who won't? Many good things are happening too, like longer life and better health. Although much of the baby boom generation will be better off than those retiring today, many face uncertain prospects. Especially vulnerable are divorced women, single mothers, never-married men, high school dropouts, and Hispanics. Even Social Security—which tends to equalize the distribution of retirement income by paying low-income people more than they put in and wealthier contributors less—may not make them financially secure.

Uncertainty about whether workers today are saving enough for retirement further complicates the outlook. New trends in employment, employer-sponsored pensions, and health insurance influence retirement decisions and financial security at older ages. And, the sheer number of reform proposals, such as personal retirement accounts to augment traditional Social Security or changes in the Medicare eligibility age, makes solid analyses imperative.

Urban Institute researchers assess how current retirement policies, demographic trends, and private-sector practices influence older Americans' security and decision-making. Numerous studies and reports provide objective, nonpartisan guidance for policymakers.

This study was supported through a grant from Atlantic Philanthropies as part of their Ageing Programme, which seeks “to bring about lasting improvement in the lives of older adults and to transform how ageing is viewed and older persons are treated by society.”

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The authors are indebted to Simone Schaner for constructing the data used in this analysis.

Publisher: The Urban Institute, 2100 M Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20037

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Abstract

As the nation ages, older adults' volunteer activities are becoming increasingly important. This study uses longitudinal data from a nationally representative survey to examine entries into and exits from formal volunteer activities by adults age 55 to 65 in 1996. The findings reveal considerable persistence in volunteer activities. Nearly 7 of 8 older adults who volunteered in 1996 volunteered again by 2004, and nearly 4 in 10 volunteered consistently over the eight-year period. The results point to the need to engage older adults in volunteer activities early on, ideally before they retire, to maximize volunteer engagement during later years.

Introduction

As America ages, older adults' role in society and the contributions they make are gaining importance. Although employment rates decline at older ages, many seniors can and do remain productively engaged by volunteering for charitable and community organizations. These activities help nonprofits meet the growing demand for volunteers (Urban Institute 2004) and also appear to enhance the health and well-being of those who contribute their time and energy (Corporation for National and Community Service [CNCS] 2007a). The time that adults age 55 and older devoted to formal volunteer activities in 2002 has been valued at \$44 billion (Johnson and Schaner 2005), and this estimate is likely to increase as the large baby boom generation grows older. But nonprofits will likely have to intensify efforts to recruit new volunteers and retain existing ones if they are to maximize the potential of older volunteers. The 2005 White House Conference on Aging, in fact, called for new and more meaningful volunteer opportunities for older Americans (Morrow-Howell 2006).

While we know a lot about the characteristics of older volunteers, we know relatively little about the dynamics of volunteerism. For example, how many years do volunteers typically spend volunteering? What factors determine whether older individuals move into and out of volunteer activities? How do changes in family status, health, and employment affect decisions to start or stop volunteering? Understanding more about the process of volunteering would help nonprofit organizations understand how personal characteristics and events affect the availability of volunteers and help policymakers understand the long-term importance of volunteering in older individuals' lives. A fuller understanding of potential barriers and facilitators to

volunteerism may also help policymakers design the right kinds of opportunities to expand older Americans' productivity and engagement.

This study uses longitudinal data from a nationally representative survey to examine entries into and exits from formal volunteer activities between 1996 and 2004 by adults age 55 to 65 at study baseline. The report begins with a review of the literature on volunteering by older adults, including the benefits of volunteering. It then describes the data, methods, and sample criteria. Results show the duration of volunteer activities, the probability that older adults start and stop volunteering, and the factors that significantly predict volunteer transitions.

The findings reveal considerable stability among both volunteers and nonvolunteers. Among adults age 55 to 65 in 1996, nearly seven-eighths of those who volunteered in 1996 volunteered again by 2004, and only about a third of those who did not volunteer in 1996 did any volunteering by 2004. Older adults are more likely to stop volunteering than to start volunteering. Duration and intensity of volunteering, as well as marriage to a volunteer, are strong predictors of continued volunteer activities. And, the time spent away from volunteer activities, as well as marriage to a nonvolunteer, decreases the odds of volunteer starts. Additionally, changes in physical and mental health and caregiving responsibilities affect the probabilities of stopping and starting volunteer activities. The results point to the need to engage older adults in volunteer activities early on, ideally before they retire, to maximize volunteer engagement during later years.

Background

Many older adults engage in volunteer activities. Zedlewski and Schaner (2005) report that about 33 percent of adults age 55 and older in the Health and Retirement Study (HRS) formally volunteered for an organization in 2002. The 2006 Current Population Survey (CPS) indicates that about 26 percent of adults age 55 and older volunteered for an organization in 2006, down slightly from earlier years (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2007).

Research on volunteers is already fairly extensive. One branch of the literature measures the impact of volunteering on personal well-being, including physical health, mental health, and mortality. The CNCS (2007a) presents an extensive review of this literature. Most of these studies find that older adults who volunteer have better physical and mental health than their counterparts who do not volunteer (Lum and Lightfoot 2005; Luoh and Herzog 2002; Morrow-Howell et al. 2003). Others find that volunteering is related to lower mortality (Luoh and Herzog 2002; Musick, Herzog, and House 1999). Glass and colleagues (1999) show that productive activities such as volunteering and work can lower the risk of mortality as much as fitness activities can. These benefits appear to arise from the personal sense of accomplishment and purpose that volunteering often imparts (Greenfield and Marks 2004; Herzog et al. 1998).

Another branch of the literature attempts to understand the factors associated with volunteerism. Some studies document that volunteer rates tend to peak for adults in their mid-30s to mid-50s and then decline for adults age 60 and older (Hendricks and Cutler 2004). More recently, however, the CNCS (2007b) reports that baby boomers age 46 to 57 in 2006 volunteered at higher rates than earlier generations at these same ages, suggesting that the large baby boom generation may also volunteer at higher rates than its predecessors as its members

move into their 60s. Rozario (2007) points out that although volunteer rates are slightly lower for people age 65 and older than for adults in their 40s and 50s, the median number of volunteer hours among the older age group is nearly double the median hours for the younger groups (96 hours compared with 50 to 56 hours). Studies also find that among older adults, part-time workers, those with at least some college education, those in good to excellent health, those with high incomes, and those who assign high importance to religion volunteer more often than their counterparts (Kutner and Love 2003; Zedlewski and Schaner 2006). Having children under age 18 in the household increases rates of volunteerism among adults of all ages, probably because parents often participate in their children's school activities (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2007). On the other hand, Caro and Bass (1995) find that employment, family obligations, and health problems can deter volunteering.

The CNCS (2007b) also examines retention rates among volunteers. Using CPS data from 2002 to 2006, it finds that two-year volunteer retention rates among boomers (age 46 to 57) decline when they leave the labor force and when their children move out of the household. It also reports that job losses depress two-year volunteer retention rates among the pre-baby boom cohort (age 58 and older). Of course, these job changes may have been accompanied by other events (such as a move or a change in health status) that could not be assessed in the study. Thus, one cannot conclude that changes in job status themselves lead to changes in volunteer status. This same study also documents higher volunteer retention rates among those donating the most volunteer hours and those providing professional services, indicating that strength of commitment and type of volunteer activity may be important predictors of volunteer transitions.

Finally, a few studies have tried to assess interest in volunteering among nonvolunteers. One recent survey reports that more than half of nonvolunteers age 55 and older have some

interest in volunteering (VolunteerMatch 2007). The study further reports that professionals and women age 55 to 64 express the most interest in volunteering. When asked why they are not volunteering, many say they have not found the right opportunity. This survey also finds that older nonvolunteers would prefer volunteer activities that offer opportunities to learn new skills or explore new interests. Current interest in volunteerism among older adults appears to be much higher than in previous years. For example, a 1991 Commonwealth Fund survey found that only one-quarter of nonvolunteers age 55 and older said that they would consider volunteer work (Caro and Bass 1995).

This study improves understanding of how individuals move in and out of formal volunteer activities. It uses longitudinal data that follow older individuals over eight years to examine these transitions over a longer period than possible with the CPS, the basis of many previous studies. It also provides more complete information about how changing characteristics and circumstances of individuals affect volunteering spells. It highlights, for example, how changes in mental and physical health status and other demands on older adults' time affect volunteer transitions. The data support the most complete analysis to date of volunteer dynamics.

Data and Methods

This study uses data from multiple waves of the HRS, a large, nationally representative survey of older Americans conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan for the National Institute on Aging. The survey began in 1992 with a sample of adults age 51 to 61 and their spouses, and it reinterviewed them every two years.¹ The most recent data available when we completed the study were collected in 2004. The HRS oversamples African Americans,

Hispanics, and Florida residents, but it includes sample weights used to adjust the estimates so they represent the underlying national population.

We use information collected by the HRS to create measures of volunteerism and other productive activities. Because the survey asks different questions about each activity, some of our measures use different reference periods. We define formal volunteering as any volunteer work for religious, educational, health-related, or other charitable organizations in the past 12 months. Parent care consists of any assistance to parents or parents-in-law of at least 100 hours over the past two years. Spouse care refers to any assistance in the past month (or the last three months of life for a recently deceased spouse). Child care consists of any care of a child living in the household, or grandchild care of at least 100 hours over the past two years. Work refers to any paid work in the past 12 months. Additionally, the HRS asks volunteers how many hours they devoted to volunteer activities over the past 12 months. Other respondent characteristics available in the HRS that likely influence volunteerism include financial resources, health status, residential relocations, religiosity, and basic demographics.

Methods

The analysis uses a discrete-time multivariate hazard model to examine the factors related to older adults' transitions to and from volunteering. For each person, we observe a spell of volunteering or nonvolunteering that begins in 1996. For those who volunteer in 1996, the spell ends when they stop volunteering or we can no longer observe them because they stop responding to the survey. For nonvolunteers, the spell ends when they begin volunteering or we can no longer observe them. We use the logistic function to model the discrete-time hazard rate.

¹ Other cohorts were added to the survey design after 1992.

The dependent variable equals one when the respondent begins or ends volunteer activities; otherwise it equals zero. We estimate models for the full samples of volunteers and nonvolunteers, and then separately for men and women.

The logistic regressions control for factors that likely affect volunteer dynamics, including health status, religiosity, household income and wealth, age, gender, race, education, marital status, participation in other productive activities, spousal volunteerism, number of hours devoted to volunteer activities at the previous interview (for those in the volunteer sample), whether the respondent has relocated since the previous interview, and whether the respondent lives in an urban, suburban, or rural area. The health status measures include indicators for excellent or very good overall health (as rated by the respondent), depression, and any difficulty with activities of daily living (ADLs), such as bathing and dressing, or instrumental activities of daily living (IADLs), such as shopping and preparing meals. Religiosity is measured by two variables indicating whether religion is very important or somewhat important to the respondent. We measure household wealth as the value of housing, other real assets, and financial assets. Financial amounts are measured in constant 2005 dollars (adjusted by the change in the consumer price index). Most independent variables are measured at the same interview as volunteering. However, some variables, including parent care, spouse care, child care, paid work, marital status, spouse volunteerism, and the health variables, measure changes between the current and previous interview. For each measure, the model includes indicators of whether the characteristic or circumstance existed in both survey years, started between the survey years, or stopped between the survey years; the reference groups consist of those who did not experience it in either survey year.

Sample Criteria

The sample for our hazard models consists of 6,916 respondents age 55 to 65 in 1996 who participated in both the 1996 and 1998 interviews and gave complete information on volunteerism and other key variables.² The sample of volunteers, who were followed until 2004 or until they stopped volunteering or dropped out of the survey, includes 2,644 adults and 6,448 person-year observations. The sample of nonvolunteers includes 4,272 adults and 12,810 person-year observations. We do not use data from the 1992 and 1994 surveys because in those years the HRS identified only volunteers who devoted at least 100 hours to volunteer activities during the past 12 months.

Before estimating the models, however, we use a subset of the sample to compute the frequency of volunteer transitions and the number of periods in which older adults volunteer. To ensure that we consider only complete volunteer histories when computing the duration of volunteer activities, we eliminate from the sample respondents who dropped out of the survey before 2004, leaving 5,872 individuals who completed all five HRS interviews from 1996 to 2004.

The Dynamics of Volunteer Behavior

Our results begin with an examination of the duration of volunteer activities by adults age 55 to 65 over the five periods, covering the 1996 through 2004 survey years. The tabulations show the number of periods that men and women volunteered. Then we analyze the dynamics of volunteer

² In 1996 8,107 HRS respondents age 55 to 65 provided data on volunteer status, but 700 dropped out of the survey by 1998 and another 491 failed to report other key information.

behavior. We show the baseline characteristics of the sample and summarize the probabilities that individuals either stop or start volunteering between 1998 and 2004. We then show the factors that significantly predict volunteer stops and starts, focusing particularly on how changes in individual circumstances relate to changes in volunteer behavior.

Length of Time Volunteering

Among adults age 55 to 65, 40.3 percent did not volunteer in any of the survey periods, 15.2 percent volunteered in only one period; between 9 and 10 percent volunteered in two, three, or four survey periods; and 15.7 percent volunteered in all five periods (table 1). While men volunteered somewhat less often than women, the duration distributions do not differ much by sex.

We find considerable stability in volunteer behavior. Nearly 4 in 10 adults age 55 to 65 who volunteered in 1996 volunteered in all four subsequent periods, and another 2 in 10 volunteered in three of the four subsequent periods. (These duration statistics include all years of

Table 1. Percentage Distribution of the Duration of Volunteer Activities among Adults Age 55 to 65 in 1996

	N	Number of Periods Volunteering						
		None	1	2	3	4	5	All
All	5,872	40.3	15.2	10.3	9.2	9.5	15.7	100.0
Men	2,616	42.1	15.5	10.0	8.8	8.4	15.2	100.0
Women	3,256	38.7	14.9	10.5	9.5	10.4	16.0	100.0
Volunteer in 1996								
All	2,363	0.0	14.5	12.2	14.9	19.2	39.2	100.0
Men	1,041	0.0	16.9	13.1	14.7	17.1	38.2	100.0
Women	1,322	0.0	12.5	11.4	15.1	21.0	40.1	100.0
Nonvolunteer in 1996								
All	3,509	67.0	15.6	9.0	5.3	3.1	0.0	100.0
Men	1,575	70.0	14.5	7.9	4.8	2.7	0.0	100.0
Women	1,934	64.4	16.5	9.8	5.8	3.4	0.0	100.0

Source: Authors' estimates from the Health and Retirement Study.

Notes: The sample consists of adults age 55 to 65 in 1996 who responded to the 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, and 2004 HRS interviews. Volunteers are those who report volunteering for religious, educational, health-related, or other charitable organizations in the past year.

volunteering, whether consecutive or not.) In contrast, most individuals who did not volunteer in 1996 did not volunteer in any survey period. Among those who began volunteering after 1996, nearly half (15.6 percent out of the 33.0 percent who begin) volunteered in only one wave. More women than men began volunteering (35.6 percent of women compared with 30.0 percent of men), but the durations of their volunteer activities are distributed fairly similarly.

Characteristics of Volunteers and Nonvolunteers

Individuals age 55 to 65 who volunteer differ from nonvolunteers along many dimensions (table 2). Not surprisingly, the average age of volunteers and nonvolunteers does not differ significantly since the sample covers a narrow age range. Also, the male-female ratios in the volunteer and nonvolunteer groups do not differ significantly. However, volunteers are slightly more likely than nonvolunteers to be white (85 percent versus 81 percent), and half as likely to be Hispanic (4 percent versus 8 percent). Marriage also is more common among volunteers than nonvolunteers (78 percent compared with 69 percent). Married couples tend to volunteer together or sit out together. About half of volunteers are married to spouses who volunteer, and half of nonvolunteers are married to other nonvolunteers.

Volunteers have more education and financial resources than nonvolunteers and place more value on religion. Fifty-three percent of volunteers have at least some college education, compared with only 31 percent of nonvolunteers. Volunteers also have significantly more income and assets than nonvolunteers. In 1996, volunteers averaged \$72,100 in household income and \$407,800 in assets, compared with \$51,600 and \$242,700, respectively, for nonvolunteers. As other studies have found, the importance of religion also differentiates volunteers and nonvolunteers. For example, 73 percent of volunteers say that religion is very

Table 2. Characteristics of Adults Age 55 to 65 in 1996, by 1996 Volunteer Status

	Volunteer		Nonvolunteer		Difference
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	
Age	59.57	3.09	59.53	3.06	NS
Male	0.47	0.50	0.47	0.50	NS
Race					
Non-hispanic white	0.85	0.36	0.81	0.39	***
Non-hispanic black	0.09	0.29	0.09	0.28	NS
Hispanic	0.04	0.19	0.08	0.28	***
Other race	0.02	0.13	0.02	0.14	NS
Educational attainment					
High school dropout	0.14	0.35	0.31	0.46	***
High school graduate	0.33	0.47	0.38	0.49	***
Some college	0.22	0.42	0.17	0.38	***
College graduate	0.31	0.46	0.14	0.34	***
Not married	0.22	0.41	0.31	0.46	***
Married: spouse vol.	0.48	0.50	0.19	0.39	***
Married: spouse not vol.	0.30	0.46	0.50	0.50	***
Religion importance					
Very important	0.73	0.44	0.52	0.50	***
Somewhat important	0.19	0.40	0.33	0.47	***
Not important	0.07	0.26	0.15	0.35	***
Household resources (\$)					
Income (ten thousands)	7.21	11.13	5.16	6.88	***
Assets (ten thousands)	40.78	85.54	24.27	51.45	***
Urban/rural					
Urban	0.41	0.49	0.43	0.50	NS
Suburban	0.28	0.45	0.28	0.45	NS
Rural	0.31	0.46	0.29	0.45	**
Other engagement					
Parent care	0.24	0.43	0.18	0.39	***
Spouse care	0.04	0.20	0.05	0.22	**
Child care	0.34	0.47	0.31	0.46	**
Work for pay	0.62	0.49	0.55	0.50	***
Health status					
Health excellent/very good	0.63	0.48	0.46	0.50	***
Depressed	0.06	0.25	0.14	0.35	***
Difficulty with ADLs or IADLs	0.09	0.28	0.16	0.37	***
Number of persons	2,644		4,272		

Source: Authors' estimates from the Health and Retirement Study.

Notes: The sample consists of HRS respondents age 55 to 65 in 1996. Volunteers are those who report volunteering for religious, educational, health-related, or other charitable organizations in the past year. Financial amounts are expressed in 2005 dollars. ADL denotes an activity of daily living (such as bathing and dressing) and IADL denotes an instrumental activity of daily living (such as shopping and preparing meals).

* .05 < p < .10; ** .01 < p < .05; *** p < .01 ; NS = not significant

important to them, compared with only 52 percent of nonvolunteers. Older adults who volunteer also engage in other activities more often than nonvolunteers. Among volunteers, 24 percent provide parent care, 34 percent provide child care, and 62 percent work. Among nonvolunteers, only 18 percent provide parent care, 31 percent provide child care, and 55 percent work.

Not surprising, volunteers tend to be physically and mentally healthier than nonvolunteers. For example, 63 percent of volunteers report being in excellent or very good health, compared with only 46 percent of nonvolunteers. In contrast, nonvolunteers are about twice as likely as volunteers to feel depressed (14 percent versus 6 percent), and more likely to have difficulties with ADLs or IADLs (16 percent versus 9 percent).

Describing Volunteer Transitions

Similar to a life table, table 3 describes the probability (hazard rate) that individuals stop or start volunteer activities in each year after 1996, given that they did not do so in the previous period. The number of volunteers and nonvolunteers declines over time as they stop or start volunteering or drop out of the sample. The risk of quitting starts out relatively high and declines precipitously over time. In 1998, the probability an older adult stops volunteering is 35 percent, but it drops to 22 percent in 2000 and to 12 percent by 2004 for those who continued to volunteer. One reason for the decline over time in the simple hazard rate is that the sample changes as the least committed volunteers drop out. By the end of the period, only the most committed volunteers with the lowest quit rates remain.

Table 3. Probability of Stopping and Starting Volunteering among Adults Age 55 to 65 in 1996

	Volunteers stop volunteering			Nonvolunteers start volunteering		
	Number ^a	Probability ^b	Cumulative survival rate ^c	Number ^a	Probability ^b	Cumulative survival rate ^c
Survey year						
1998	2,644	0.35	0.65	4,272	0.12	0.88
2000	1,619	0.22	0.51	3,402	0.09	0.80
2002	1,209	0.16	0.43	2,775	0.08	0.73
2004	976	0.12	0.37	2,361	0.07	0.68
Mean duration (years)		4.94			6.02	

Source: Authors' estimates from the Health and Retirement Study.

Notes: The sample consists of HRS respondents age 55 to 65 in 1996. Volunteers are those who report volunteering for religious, educational, health-related, or other charitable organizations in the past year.

^aThe number of observations declines over time as sample members either stop or start a volunteer activity or drop out of the sample.

^bThe probability (hazard rate) of stopping or starting a volunteer activity indicates the chance of that event occurring in a particular survey year given that it did not occur in any of the previous survey years.

^cThe cumulative survival rate indicates the cumulative percentage of older adults in each year who continue to volunteer or not volunteer.

The cumulative percentage of older adults who continue to volunteer each year (the cumulative survival rate) is another indicator of volunteer durations.³ In 1998, 65 percent of volunteers continued (survived), compared with just 37 percent by 2004. We also find that individuals who volunteered in 1996 continued volunteering for another 4.94 years on average, assuming that individuals who report volunteering in consecutive biannual interviews also volunteered in the intervening year when they were not observed.

Compared with the probability of a volunteer break, the probability of initiating volunteer activities starts out extremely low and declines even further over time. In 1998, the probability that an older adult starts volunteering is only 12 percent. For those who still do not volunteer, the probability drops to 9 percent in 2000 and to only 7 percent in 2004. Individuals remain as nonvolunteers for long periods, with the cumulative survival rate at 88 percent in 1998 and

³ The hazard rate is computed from the cumulative hazard, which is based on the Nelson-Aalen estimator. The cumulative survival rate is based on Kaplan-Meier estimator. Both the Nelson-Aalen and Kaplan-Meier estimators are superior to other estimators in small samples.

remaining as high as 68 percent in 2004. On average, nonvolunteers continue in that state for 6.02 years over the eight-year period that we observe them.

Multivariate Regressions of Volunteer Transitions

The multivariate analyses control for differences in demographic and economic characteristics across individuals and show the impact of life-changing events on volunteer transitions.

Transitions from Volunteering

Table 4 reports hazard model results for volunteer breaks. Education and religion have the expected effect on transitions from volunteering—higher levels of education and greater religiosity significantly reduce the probability of volunteer breaks. For example, volunteers who feel that religion is very important are 14.8 percentage points less likely to stop volunteering than those who believe that religion is unimportant.

Consistent with the findings of the CNCS (2007b), those with a high attachment to volunteering, measured by the number of volunteer hours, are significantly less likely to stop volunteering. For example, the probability of a volunteer break decreases by 8.2 percentage points for those who contributed between 50 and 99 hours in the previous year, but by 17.1 percentage points for those who volunteered 200 or more hours in the previous year.

Many social, demographic, and health status changes increase the chances of interruptions in volunteer activities. For example, residential moves increase the likelihood that volunteers quit by 4.9 percentage points. Volunteers who marry a spouse who does not volunteer are 29.4 percentage points more likely to quit than those who are not married in either survey

Table 4. Sample Means and Marginal Effects from Hazard Model of Volunteer Breaks among Volunteers Age 55 to 65 in 1996

	All		Men		Women	
	Mean	Marginal effect	Mean	Marginal effect	Mean	Marginal effect
Age	63.70	-0.002	63.60	0.001	63.78	-0.003
Gender						
Male	0.45	0.006	1.00	—	0.00	—
Female (reference)	0.55	—	0.00	—	1.00	—
Race						
Non-hispanic white (reference)	0.86	—	0.88	—	0.85	—
Non-hispanic black	0.09	0.013	0.07	0.023	0.10	0.002
Hispanic	0.03	0.043	0.03	0.034	0.03	0.053
Other race	0.02	0.019	0.02	-0.007	0.02	0.032
Educational attainment						
High school dropout	0.12	0.063 ***	0.12	0.072 **	0.11	0.057 **
High school graduate (ref.)	0.32	—	0.26	—	0.37	—
Some college	0.22	-0.007	0.20	-0.002	0.23	-0.008
College graduate	0.35	-0.047 ***	0.41	-0.040 *	0.29	-0.046 **
Religion importance						
Very important	0.79	-0.148 ***	0.72	-0.170 ***	0.84	-0.092 **
Somewhat important	0.15	-0.036	0.20	-0.070 ***	0.12	0.025
Not important (reference)	0.06	—	0.08	—	0.04	—
Household resources (\$)						
Income (ten thousand)	6.63	-0.002 *	7.73	0.000	5.71	-0.004 **
Assets (ten thousand)	54.34	0.000	61.15	0.000	48.68	0.000
Past volunteer hours						
< 50 hours (reference)	0.38	—	0.41	—	0.36	—
50-99 hours	0.16	-0.082 ***	0.15	-0.109 ***	0.16	-0.062 ***
100-199 hours	0.21	-0.129 ***	0.20	-0.143 ***	0.22	-0.114 ***
200+ hours	0.25	-0.171 ***	0.24	-0.189 ***	0.25	-0.152 ***
Urban/rural						
Urban	0.41	0.006	0.41	-0.006	0.42	0.011
Suburban	0.27	0.009	0.27	-0.009	0.26	0.018
Rural (reference)	0.32	—	0.32	—	0.32	—
Moved						
No (reference)	0.89	—	0.87	—	0.90	—
Yes	0.11	0.049 **	0.13	0.017	0.10	0.075 ***
Married						
Never (reference)	0.21	—	0.12	—	0.29	—
Continued: spouse vol.	0.45	-0.095 ***	0.53	-0.136 ***	0.39	-0.071 ***
Continued: spouse not vol.	0.31	0.056 ***	0.34	0.021	0.29	0.080 ***
Start: spouse vol.	0.00	-0.111 *	0.01	-0.092	0.00	—
Start: spouse not vol.	0.00	0.294 **	0.01	0.435 ***	0.00	0.069
Stop	0.02	0.108 **	0.01	0.095	0.02	0.122 **
Parent care						
Never (reference)	0.72	—	0.70	—	0.73	—
Continued	0.14	0.039 **	0.13	0.023	0.14	0.053 **
Start	0.06	-0.011	0.07	-0.058 **	0.05	0.030
Stop	0.08	0.012	0.09	-0.012	0.08	0.036
Spouse care						
Never (reference)	0.93	—	0.93	—	0.92	—
Continued	0.02	0.008	0.03	0.005	0.02	0.003
Start	0.03	-0.003	0.02	-0.050	0.03	0.019
Stop	0.02	-0.088 ***	0.02	-0.094 **	0.02	-0.087 ***

Table 4 (Continued). Sample Means and Marginal Effects from Hazard Model of Volunteer Breaks among Volunteers Age 55 to 65 in 1996

	All		Men		Women	
	Mean	Marginal effect	Mean	Marginal effect	Mean	Marginal effect
Child care						
Never (reference)	0.54	—	0.58	—	0.50	—
Continued	0.26	-0.019	0.22	-0.013	0.29	-0.018
Start	0.10	-0.001	0.10	-0.002	0.10	0.001
Stop	0.10	0.003	0.09	-0.003	0.11	0.012
Work for pay						
Never (reference)	0.40	—	0.29	—	0.49	—
Continued	0.45	0.000	0.55	-0.023	0.36	0.020
Start	0.04	-0.037	0.04	-0.023	0.04	-0.048
Stop	0.11	0.008	0.11	-0.002	0.10	0.015
Health excellent/very good						
Never (reference)	0.30	—	0.30	—	0.30	—
Continued	0.47	-0.042 ***	0.45	-0.016	0.49	-0.058 ***
Start	0.09	-0.022	0.09	0.037	0.08	-0.059 ***
Stop	0.14	0.013	0.15	0.033	0.13	0.002
Depressed						
Never (reference)	0.89	—	0.91	—	0.86	—
Continued	0.02	0.104 **	0.01	0.007	0.03	0.140 ***
Start	0.05	0.068 ***	0.04	0.123 **	0.06	0.046
Stop	0.04	0.017	0.03	0.045	0.05	0.007
ADLs or IADLs						
Never (reference)	0.87	—	0.87	—	0.87	—
Continued	0.04	0.036	0.04	0.099 **	0.05	0.004
Start	0.05	0.050 *	0.05	0.011	0.05	0.078 **
Stop	0.04	-0.023	0.04	-0.047	0.04	-0.014
Depressed missing	0.04	0.182 ***	0.07	0.175 ***	0.01	0.260 ***
Duration						
2 years (reference)	0.40	—	0.42	—	0.39	—
4 years	0.25	-0.073 ***	0.25	-0.104 ***	0.25	-0.051 ***
6 years	0.19	-0.101 ***	0.18	-0.125 ***	0.19	-0.083 ***
8 years	0.15	-0.130 ***	0.15	-0.149 ***	0.16	-0.113 ***
Number of person-years	6,448		2,821		3,622	
Predicted probability	0.207		0.212		0.200	
Chi²	888.880		476.510		469.730	
Pseudo R²	0.153		0.180		0.144	

Source: Authors' estimates from the Health and Retirement Study.

Notes: The sample consists of HRS respondents age 55 to 65 in 1996 who report volunteering for religious, educational, health-related, or other charitable organizations in the past year. Financial amounts are expressed in 2005 dollars. ADL denotes an activity of daily living (such as bathing and dressing) and IADL denotes an instrumental activity of daily living (such as shopping and preparing meals).

* .05 < *p* < .10; ** .01 < *p* < .05; *** *p* < .01

year, and those who remain married to a nonvolunteer are 5.6 percentage points more likely to quit. Volunteers who divorce or become widowed between surveys are 10.8 percentage points more likely to quit than those who are not married in either survey year. Other events that increase the odds that volunteers quit include caring for a parent in both survey years (3.9 percentage points), continued depression (10.4 percentage points), depression onset (6.8 percentage points), and the onset of difficulties with ADLs or IADLs (5.0 percentage points).

Other events reduce the likelihood of volunteer breaks. Marriage to a spouse who volunteers reduces the probability that an individual stops volunteering. For example, volunteers who become married to another volunteer are 11.1 percentage points less likely to quit than volunteers who are not married, and those who remain married to a spouse who volunteers are 9.5 percentage points less likely to quit. Volunteers who stop caring for a spouse are 8.8 percentage points less likely to stop volunteering than those who did not care for a spouse in the current or previous survey. And, volunteers with excellent or very good health in both the current and previous survey years are 4.2 percentage points less likely to stop volunteering than those who were less healthy in either year. Finally, the likelihood that older volunteers quit declines as they volunteer longer. For example, the probability that volunteers quit is 13.0 percentage points lower in the eighth year of the volunteer spell than in the second year.⁴

Several factors have different effects on the probability of ending volunteer activities for men and women. For example, recent moves and health status have much larger impacts for women than men. Women who moved between survey years are 7.5 percentage points more

⁴ The estimated impact on volunteer breaks of having missing depression data is large and significant, but this result appears to be capturing the effect of proxy interviews. There are 394 cases in 1996 (volunteers and nonvolunteers combined) with missing depression information and 393 proxy interviews. It is perhaps not surprising that respondents who are unwilling or unable to complete the HRS survey themselves are more likely to quit

likely to quit volunteering than those who did not move. This effect is insignificant for men. Also, women who are in excellent or very good health in both the current and previous survey years are 5.8 percentage points less likely to quit volunteering than those who reported good, fair, or poor health in both survey years. For men, health status does not significantly influence the probability that they stop volunteering. Marrying a nonvolunteer increases the likelihood that men stop volunteering by 43.5 percentage points, but has no impact on women. In contrast, becoming divorced or widowed increases the likelihood that women stop volunteering by 12.2 percentage points, but has no impact on men.

Transitions to Volunteering

In general, the results show that variables have smaller and opposite effects on the probability of volunteer starts than on the probability of volunteer breaks (table 5). If religion is very important to an older person, for example, the likelihood that he or she starts volunteering increases by 5.2 percentage points, while the likelihood he or she stops volunteering decreases by 14.8 percentage points. Interestingly, living in an urban or suburban area reduces the probability that older adults will start volunteering, but it has no impact on their probability of quitting.

Being married to a spouse who volunteers in the current period substantially increases the likelihood that nonvolunteers start volunteering. The impact is largest for nonvolunteers who marry a volunteering spouse (15.9 percentage points) followed by those who continue in marriage to a volunteer (7.9 percentage points).

volunteering than others. Few regression results change when the analysis drops proxy interviews. In particular, the coefficients on the variable depressed remain highly significant.

Table 5. Sample Means and Marginal Effects from Hazard Model of Volunteer Starts among Nonvolunteers Age 55 to 65 in 1996

	All		Men		Women	
	Mean	Marginal effect	Mean	Marginal effect	Mean	Marginal effect
Age	63.81	0.002 **	63.79	0.002 *	63.83	0.001
Gender						
Male	0.47	-0.010 **	1.00	—	0.00	—
Female (reference)	0.53	—	0.00	—	1.00	—
Race						
Non-hispanic white (reference)	0.81	—	0.82	—	0.80	—
Non-hispanic black	0.09	0.011	0.08	-0.001	0.09	0.021 *
Hispanic	0.08	-0.007	0.08	0.002	0.09	-0.014
Other race	0.02	-0.011	0.02	-0.015	0.02	-0.010
Educational attainment						
High school dropout	0.32	-0.018 ***	0.31	-0.013 *	0.32	-0.022 ***
High school graduate (ref.)	0.39	—	0.35	—	0.42	—
Some college	0.17	0.023 ***	0.18	0.027 **	0.17	0.021 **
College graduate	0.12	0.079 ***	0.16	0.066 ***	0.09	0.096 ***
Religion importance						
Very important	0.54	0.052 ***	0.42	0.045 ***	0.65	0.062 ***
Somewhat important	0.31	0.005	0.36	-0.001	0.27	0.019
Not important (reference)	0.15	—	0.22	—	0.09	—
Household resources (\$)						
Income (ten thousand)	4.51	0.001 *	5.16	0.001	3.93	0.001
Assets (ten thousand)	28.70	0.000	30.34	0.000	27.22	0.000
Urban/rural						
Urban	0.43	-0.025 ***	0.42	-0.022 ***	0.44	-0.027 ***
Suburban	0.28	-0.017 ***	0.28	-0.016 **	0.28	-0.018 **
Rural (reference)	0.29	—	0.31	—	0.28	—
Moved						
No (reference)	0.87	—	0.87	—	0.87	—
Yes	0.13	0.011	0.13	0.015	0.13	0.009
Married						
Never (reference)	0.32	—	0.23	—	0.39	—
Continued: spouse vol.	0.14	0.079 ***	0.18	0.083 ***	0.11	0.084 ***
Continued: spouse not vol.	0.51	-0.017 ***	0.57	-0.008	0.46	-0.019 **
Start: spouse vol.	0.00	0.159 **	0.00	0.047	0.00	0.278 **
Start: spouse not vol.	0.01	0.000	0.01	-0.016	0.00	0.026
Stop	0.02	0.012	0.02	-0.022	0.03	0.036
Parent care						
Never (reference)	0.79	—	0.78	—	0.80	—
Continued	0.09	0.001	0.09	-0.011	0.09	0.012
Start	0.05	0.000	0.06	0.013	0.05	-0.016
Stop	0.07	0.016 *	0.08	0.010	0.07	0.023 *
Spouse care						
Never (reference)	0.90	—	0.91	—	0.89	—
Continued	0.03	-0.004	0.03	0.010	0.03	-0.016
Start	0.04	0.026 *	0.03	0.034	0.04	0.019
Stop	0.03	0.044 ***	0.03	0.054 **	0.04	0.037 *
Child care						
Never (reference)	0.60	—	0.64	—	0.56	—
Continued	0.20	0.002	0.17	-0.010	0.23	0.011
Start	0.10	0.018 **	0.09	0.013	0.10	0.023 *
Stop	0.10	0.006	0.10	-0.011	0.11	0.022 *

Table 5 (Continued). Sample Means and Marginal Effects from Hazard Model of Volunteer Starts among Nonvolunteers Age 55 to 65 in 1996

	All		Men		Women	
	Mean	Marginal effect	Mean	Marginal effect	Mean	Marginal effect
Work for pay						
Never (reference)	0.50	—	0.42	—	0.57	—
Continued	0.36	-0.012 **	0.42	-0.015 **	0.30	-0.011
Start	0.04	0.026 *	0.04	0.025	0.04	0.024
Stop	0.11	0.014 *	0.13	0.010	0.09	0.018
Health excellent/very good						
Never (reference)	0.51	—	0.51	—	0.50	—
Continued	0.28	0.021 ***	0.27	0.018 **	0.28	0.026 ***
Start	0.09	0.021 **	0.09	0.018	0.09	0.023 *
Stop	0.13	0.014 *	0.13	0.006	0.12	0.022 *
Depressed						
Never (reference)	0.76	—	0.83	—	0.71	—
Continued	0.08	-0.014	0.05	-0.016	0.11	-0.013
Start	0.08	-0.016 **	0.06	-0.020 *	0.10	-0.014
Stop	0.07	-0.007	0.06	0.000	0.09	-0.011
ADLs or IADLs						
Never (reference)	0.75	—	0.76	—	0.74	—
Continued	0.11	-0.030 ***	0.10	-0.028 ***	0.13	-0.033 ***
Start	0.07	-0.007	0.07	0.003	0.07	-0.015
Stop	0.06	0.001	0.06	-0.007	0.06	0.007
Depressed missing	0.11	-0.031 ***	0.18	-0.033 ***	0.04	-0.017
Duration						
2 years (reference)	0.33	—	0.33	—	0.33	—
4 years	0.27	-0.027 ***	0.26	-0.033 ***	0.27	-0.020 ***
6 years	0.22	-0.032 ***	0.22	-0.033 ***	0.22	-0.030 ***
8 years	0.19	-0.041 ***	0.19	-0.044 ***	0.18	-0.038 ***
Number of person-years	12,810		5,930		6,880	
Predicted probability	0.077		0.066		0.085	
Chi²	679.170		335.840		360.660	
Pseudo R²	0.089		0.106		0.082	

Source: Authors' estimates from the Health and Retirement Study.

Notes: The sample consists of HRS respondents age 55 to 65 in 1996 who do not report volunteering for religious, educational, health-related, or other charitable organizations in the past year. Financial amounts are expressed in 2005 dollars. ADL denotes an activity of daily living (such as bathing and dressing) and IADL denotes an instrumental activity of daily living (such as shopping and preparing meals).

* .05 < p < .10; ** .01 < p < .05; *** p < .01

Other events that boost volunteer starts are the cessation of parent care (1.6 percentage points), the onset of spousal care (2.6 percentage points), the cessation of spousal care (4.4 percentage points), the onset of child care (1.8 percentage points), the onset of work (2.6 percentage points), the cessation of work (1.4 percentage points), excellent or very good health in both the current and previous survey years (2.1 percentage points), the onset of excellent or very good health (2.1 percentage points), and the cessation of excellent or very good health (1.4 percentage points).

Circumstances that reduce the likelihood of volunteer starts are being married in the current and previous survey years to a nonvolunteer (1.7 percentage points), working in both survey years (1.2 percentage points), starting to feel depressed (1.6 percentage points), and having difficulty with ADLs or IADLs in both years (3.0 percentage points). Finally, the longer older adults do not volunteer, the less likely they are to start volunteering. For example, the probability that nonvolunteers start volunteering is 4.1 percentage points lower in the eighth year of the nonvolunteer spell than in the second year.

Summary and Implications

The impending retirement of boomers has spurred interest in tapping their productive energies to benefit society. Understanding potential barriers to volunteerism may help public policies or community interventions expand older Americans' productivity and engagement.

This study uses longitudinal data that follow older individuals from 1996 to 2004 to increase our understanding of volunteer dynamics. The results show that volunteers age 55 to 65 in 1996 continue to volunteer for an additional 4.94 years, on average. Key factors related to

breaks in volunteering are past volunteer experience and having a spouse who volunteers. For example, volunteers who donated 200 hours or more of their time in the previous year are 17.1 percentage points less likely to quit in the current year than those who contributed fewer than 50 hours of their time. Also, the probability that volunteers quit is 13.0 percentage points lower in the eighth year of the volunteer spell than in the second year. And, volunteers who marry another volunteer are 11.1 percentage points less likely to quit than volunteers who are not married, while those who remain married to a spouse who volunteers are 9.5 percentage points less likely to quit.

Other factors that reduce the probability that volunteers quit, in order of their relative significance, include placing a high importance on religion, ending spousal care, having a college degree, and having persistent excellent health. Factors related to increasing the likelihood of volunteer breaks include being depressed, lacking a high school diploma, developing an ADL or IADL difficulty, having recently moved, being Hispanic, and continuing parent care.

The results that describe transitions into volunteering further validate these findings. Many of the same variables that predict volunteer exits have an opposite impact on the probability that nonvolunteers start volunteering. Generally, however, the impact is much smaller on a volunteer start than a volunteer break, suggesting that it may be more difficult to persuade older adults to volunteer than to keep them from quitting. The average length of a nonvolunteer spell is 6.02 years, more than a year longer than the average volunteer spell. As with retaining volunteers, what matters most for recruiting volunteers is how long they have abstained from volunteer activities and whether their spouse volunteers. For example, the probability that nonvolunteers start volunteering is 4.1 percentage points lower in the eighth year of the nonvolunteer spell than in the second year. And, nonvolunteers who marry a volunteering spouse

are 15.9 percentage points more likely to start volunteering than those who are not married, while those who continue in a marriage to a volunteer are 7.9 percentage points more likely to start.

The results of our study can help inform policymakers, nonprofits, and community groups on ways to retain active volunteers and to recruit new ones. About four-fourths of America's public charities engage volunteers, and despite the historically high rates of volunteering, about two-thirds report difficulty recruiting the volunteers they need (Urban Institute 2004). Because older adults are much less likely to start volunteering than stop volunteering, initiatives should first focus on retaining current volunteers. Matching older adults with volunteer opportunities that match their personalities, experiences, and future goals might be one way to build stronger and longer lasting connections.

Initiatives aimed at recruiting new volunteers may have a greater payoff by targeting adults when they are younger and still working. Zedlewski (2007), for example, shows that over three-quarters of older adults who volunteer while working continue to volunteer after retirement, while only one-quarter of adults not volunteering while working begin to volunteer after retirement. Active employee volunteer programs that continue to engage retirees also provide a promising way to encourage volunteerism among older adults (Burns and Gonyea 2005). Also important is creating volunteer activities that families and couples can perform together. Opportunities for couples can both encourage people to start volunteering and help reduce volunteer turnover.

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