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UNDER EMBARGO UNTIL JULY 27, 2021, 12:01 AM ET

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New study: Lower-wealth volunteers experience greater health gains from volunteering than wealthier volunteers

Volunteering's health effect among older adults in the lowest wealth quintile—whose average wealth is negative—is stronger than for the highest wealth quintile of older adults, report investigators in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine

Ann Arbor, July 27, 2021 – Formal volunteering in later life is beneficial for both physical and psychological well-being. However, research has shown that older adults with key advantages, such as wealth, are more likely to volunteer and reap its benefits. In a [new study](#) appearing in the [American Journal of Preventive Medicine](#), published by Elsevier, investigators found that lower-wealth volunteers may experience even greater health gains than higher-wealth volunteers.

In the United States, around 29 million older adults volunteer through organizations each year, contributing three billion hours of service to the community at large. Volunteering is regarded as beneficial for volunteer health, and some studies have even suggested the possibility that volunteering could become a low-cost, sustainable public health intervention.

“Earlier studies with two to 20 years of follow-up have reported that regardless of how volunteering was measured (for example, status, intensity, duration, or consistency), the activity was associated with higher self-rated health and fewer depressive symptoms,” explained co-investigator Seoyoun Kim, PhD, Department of Sociology, Texas State University, San Marcos, TX, USA. “However, research points to potential selection bias, because older adults with key advantages, such as wealth, are more likely to volunteer and reap its benefits.”

“In this new study, we wanted to challenge the ‘single regression coefficient’ for the benefits of volunteering on health in the entire population,” noted co-investigator Cal Halvorsen, PhD, MSW, Department of Social Work, Boston College, Boston, MA, USA. “We were interested in whether the effects of formal volunteering on health were different between the wealthiest and the least wealthy

individuals (highest 20 percent versus lowest 20 percent). We were also interested in understanding the practical implications, particularly for low-wealth individuals.”

The investigators analyzed data from nearly 90,000 observations from the Health and Retirement Study, a longitudinal and nationally representative US study funded by the National Institute on Aging and the Social Security Administration that surveys approximately 20,000 older adults every two years. They included observations from 2004 to 2016 using data from a previous wave to predict outcomes in the next wave to alleviate concerns about reverse causality. They also created a quasi-experimental study using statistical analyses to adjust for the fact that wealthier older adults were more likely to volunteer, among other factors, thereby reducing bias in their results.

Findings showed that in the full sample, volunteering enhanced self-reported health and reduced depressive symptoms for older adults in general. Significantly, those in the lowest wealth quintile experienced more gains in self-reported health from volunteering compared to their wealthy counterparts. Volunteering was associated with fewer depressive symptoms regardless of wealth status.

“This study enhances our understanding of how formal volunteering influences health and well-being in two key ways,” commented Dr. Kim. “First, we echo previous research that finds that volunteering is beneficial for older adults’ physical and mental health. And second, through our advanced statistical procedures, we show that lower-wealth volunteers may experience even greater gains in self-reported health than higher-wealth volunteers.”

“It is noteworthy that formal volunteering may operate as a health equalizer,” added Dr. Halvorsen. “Policymakers and charitable organizations tend to focus on the middle class to wealthy volunteers, but it’s important to eliminate barriers to volunteering among the least wealthy, such as lack of transportation, discrimination, or lack of organizational support.”

“We already know that volunteering, in general, is good for you. Yet what is notable about this study is that it shows how volunteering’s health effect among older adults in the lowest wealth quintile—whose average wealth is negative—is stronger than for the highest wealth quintile of older adults. This is important, as the lowest wealth quintile of older adults began with lower self-rated health,” stated the investigators.

Volunteering can provide many benefits to individuals, and it is possible that being involved in the work of nonprofit and community organizations increases one’s social networks and access to important health promotion programs which, in turn, influence the health of the lowest wealth volunteers the most.

Notes for editors

The article is “Volunteering as an Equalizer: A Quasi-Experimental Study Using Propensity Score Analysis,” by Seoyoun Kim, PhD, and Cal Halvorsen, PhD, MSW (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2021.05.004>). It appears online and is openly available in advance of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, volume 61, issue 5 (November 2021) published by [Elsevier](#).

Full text of this article is available to credentialed journalists upon request; contact Jillian B. Morgan at +1 734 936 1590 or ajpmedia@elsevier.com. Journalists wishing to interview the authors should contact

Seoyoun Kim at skim182@txstate.edu, or Jayme Blaschke, Office of Media Relations, Texas State University, at +1 512 245 2180; Jb71@txstate.edu.

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