



# THE VALUE OF VOLUNTEERING

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## VOLUNTEERING IS GOOD FOR YOU.

Previous research demonstrates that volunteering has consistently been associated with better physical, mental, and cognitive health in older adults (Huo et al., 2021; Carr et al., 2015). One study indicated that older adults who volunteered for more than 100 hours in a year reported better psychosocial outcomes such as greater life satisfaction and purpose in life, as well as lower levels of depression, hopelessness, and loneliness (Huo et al., 2021).



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## TWO TYPES OF VOLUNTEERING

Volunteerism is commonly categorized by formal and informal volunteering. **Formal volunteering** is defined as any unpaid work that is performed for an organization or agency such as a for-profit or non-for-profit organization like places of worship, schools, or community groups. Older adults commonly engage in formal volunteering through activities such as tutoring school-aged children, participating in local food drives, ringing up items at a hospital gift shop, fundraising for nonprofit organizations, and providing professional and/or managerial assistance. **Informal volunteering** is defined as any direct help or assistance that is given to a person outside your household such as helping a neighbor with some gardening or driving them to the grocery store. Older adults commonly engage in informal volunteering through activities such as caring for grandchildren, driving a friend to a medical appointment, and grocery shopping for a neighbor (ibid.).

While researchers universally agree that older adults are significantly more likely to exhibit life satisfaction through volunteerism, some may assume that people who volunteer benefit because they inherently exhibit **empathy**. For

instance, those who volunteer may be better at understanding the feelings of others and ultimately receive gratification and greater life satisfaction by addressing the feelings of others through volunteerism. However, people differ in their levels of empathy and their rates of volunteering, suggesting that individuals may benefit from volunteerism regardless of whether they are empathetic.

In the fall of 2021, Mather Institute developed a study to understand the extent to which volunteerism impacts life satisfaction, independent from empathy. Specifically, it explores how both formal and informal volunteerism, as well as different commonly practiced volunteering activities, impact life satisfaction, regardless of whether those who volunteer exhibit empathy. Just under 400 older adults completed an online survey to address this topic. (Details on our study sample and methodology can be found in the Appendix.)

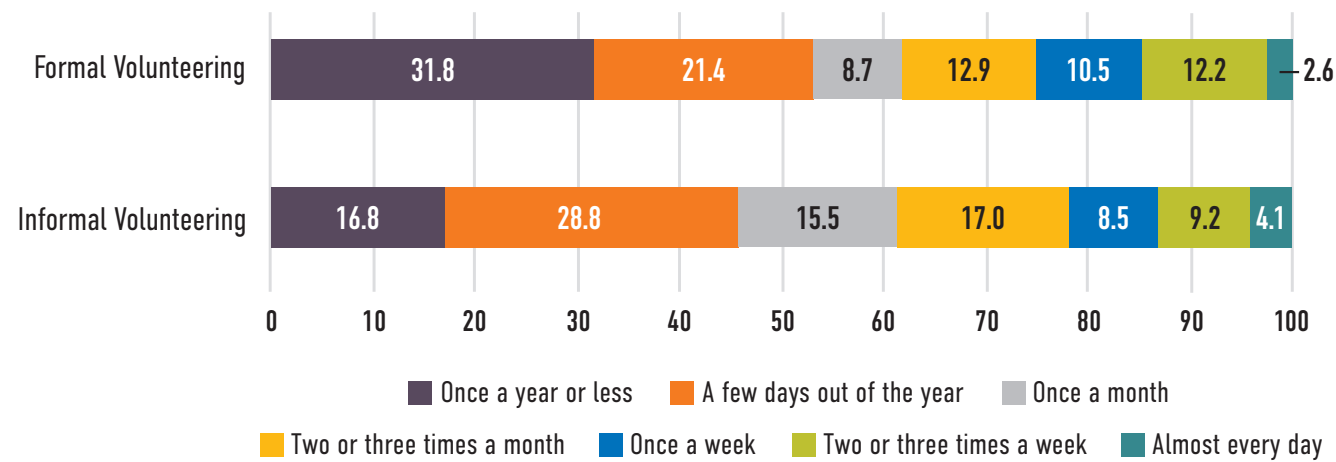
The results provide an interesting glimpse into the relationship between volunteerism and empathy as they relate to life satisfaction.

## HOW FREQUENTLY DO OLDER ADULTS VOLUNTEER?

Consistent with past studies, it seems the answer is “not much” (Explore volunteerism—ages 65+ in the United States: 2021 senior report, n.d.).

Participants in the current study indicated that they engaged in volunteerism a few days out of the year or less. They also less frequently engaged in formal volunteering than informal volunteering. The average rates for which respondents engaged in formal and informal volunteering are depicted in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1. FREQUENCY OF VOLUNTEERISM



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## WHO VOLUNTEERS?

There were significant differences in the extent to which different groups engaged in formal and informal volunteering.

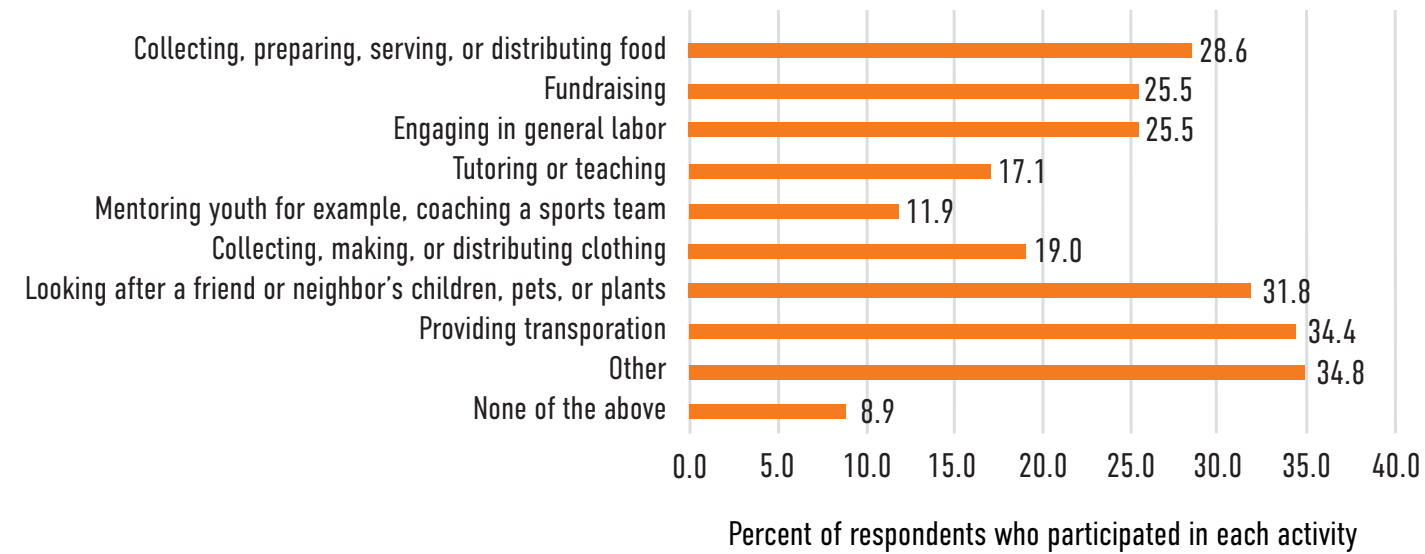
**Engagement in formal volunteerism is associated with age, ethnicity, employment status, education, and income.** Individuals age 65 or better, Hispanic/Latinos, and those employed full-time are less likely to engage in formal volunteering than individuals age 64 or younger, non-Hispanic/Latinos, and those not employed full-time. However, the likelihood of engaging in formal volunteering increases with income. Relative to those with a bachelor’s degree, the likelihood of engaging in informal volunteering is greater among those with more than a bachelor’s degree, but less among those with less than a bachelor’s degree. Frequency of formal volunteering is not associated with gender, race, or marital status.

**Engagement in informal volunteerism is associated with education and marital status.** Relative to those with a bachelor’s degree, the likelihood of engaging in informal volunteering is greater among those with more than a bachelor’s degree, but less among those with less than a bachelor’s degree. Respondents who are separated/divorced are also more likely to engage in informal volunteering than those who are married. Frequency of engagement in informal volunteering is not associated with age, gender, race, ethnicity, full-time employment, or income.

## COMMON TYPES OF VOLUNTEERISM

We also examined how frequently respondents engaged in common types of volunteering. (See Figure 2 for details).

**FIGURE 2. COMMON TYPES OF VOLUNTEERING ACTIVITIES**

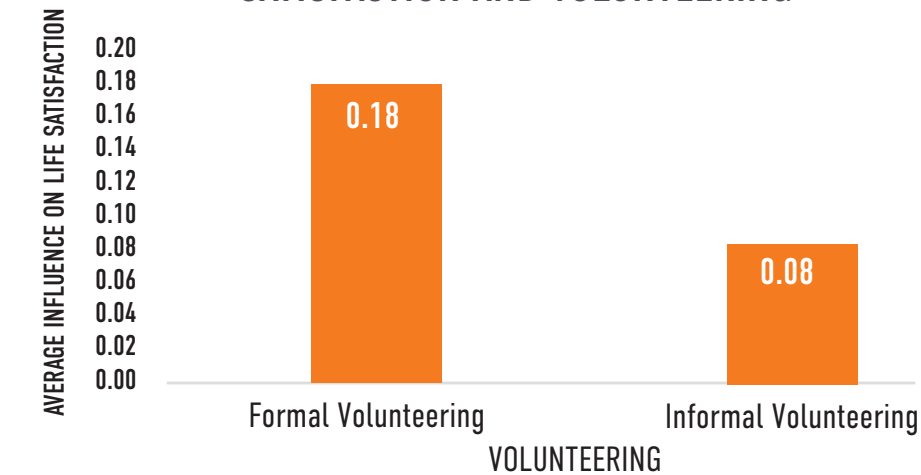


While most respondents indicated that they most frequently engaged in volunteerism activities that weren't listed, of those listed, respondents most frequently volunteered by providing transportation to others (for example, driving a friend to the grocery store). Respondents were then likely to volunteer by looking after a friend's or neighbor's children, pets, or plants while they were away. Respondents were least likely to volunteer by mentoring youth (for example, coaching a sports team).

## LIFE SATISFACTION AND VOLUNTEERING

In addition to examining the prevalence of formal and informal volunteering, as well as different volunteering types, the study revealed how formal and informal volunteering are associated with life satisfaction. This analysis controlled for the effects of empathy. (See Figure 3 for details).

**FIGURE 3. ASSOCIATION BETWEEN LIFE SATISFACTION AND VOLUNTEERING**



While frequent engagement in both formal and informal volunteering was associated with greater life satisfaction, respondents exhibited greater life satisfaction if they frequently engaged in formal volunteering than if they frequently engaged in informal volunteering.

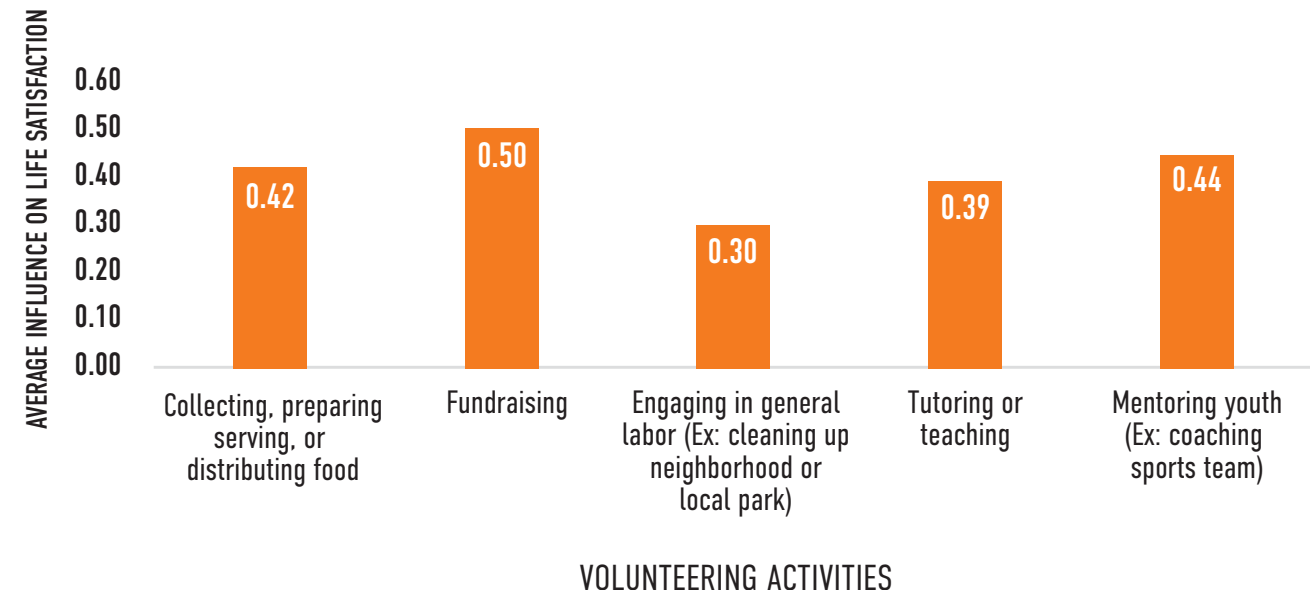


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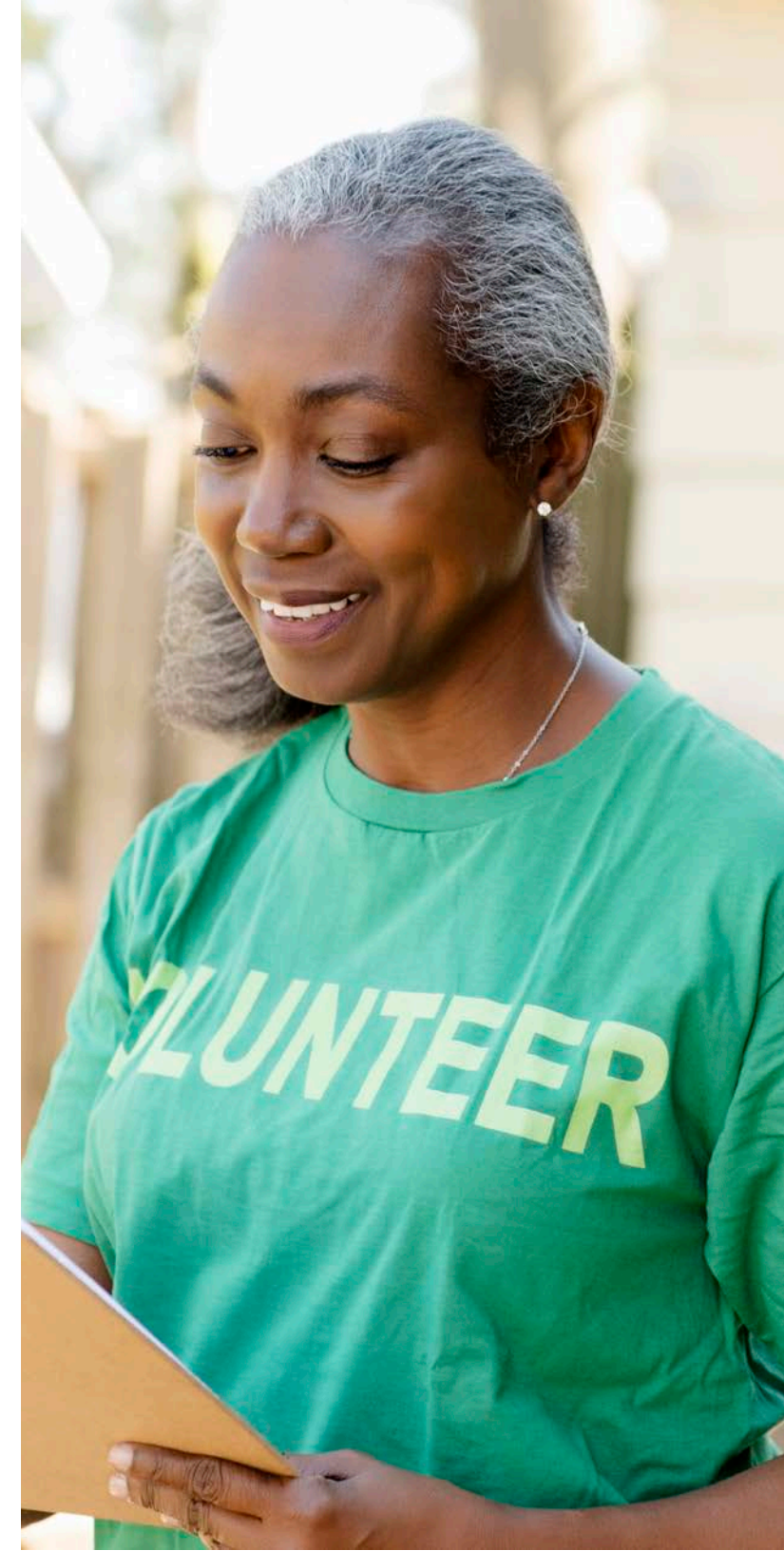
## LIFE SATISFACTION AND VOLUNTEERING TYPES

We then examined whether the association between life satisfaction and volunteerism differed by which type of volunteering activity was performed. (See Figure 4 for details).

**FIGURE 4. ASSOCIATION BETWEEN LIFE SATISFACTION AND VOLUNTEERING ACTIVITIES**



Respondents were significantly more likely to exhibit life satisfaction if they engaged in any of five different volunteering activities: 1) Collecting, preparing, serving, or distributing food; 2) Fundraising; 3) Engaging in general labor (Ex: cleaning up neighborhood or local park); 4) Tutoring or teaching; and 5) Mentoring youth (Ex: coaching sports team). They exhibited the greatest life satisfaction when they engaged in fundraising and the least life satisfaction if they engaged in general labor.



## DISCUSSION

This study explores how both formal and informal volunteerism, as well as different commonly practiced volunteering activities, impact life satisfaction, regardless of whether those who volunteer exhibit empathy. Findings reveal that both formal and informal volunteering increase life satisfaction, regardless of whether individuals exhibit empathy. However, while older adults are less likely to engage in formal volunteering than informal volunteering, the benefits of formal volunteering are greater.

The findings also reveal that older adults are commonly engaging in volunteering activities that aren't likely to increase life satisfaction. For instance, while fundraising is most likely to increase life satisfaction, it is tied with engaging in labor as the fifth most popular volunteering activity. Additionally, while respondents are significantly likely to exhibit life satisfaction associated with mentoring youth or tutoring and teaching, they are least likely to engage in these activities. Life satisfaction is not significantly associated with most of the commonly practiced activities like looking after a friend or neighbor's children, pets, or plants; providing transportation; and collecting, preparing, serving, or distributing food.

## STRATEGIES FOR INDIVIDUALS AND AGING SERVICES PROVIDERS

Considering the relationships between volunteerism and life satisfaction, it is worthwhile to consider ways we might increase our volunteerism. The following are simple strategies individuals may utilize to this end:

- Not all volunteering opportunities offer the same psychological benefits. Reflect on your own volunteering activities and consider engaging in volunteering opportunities that have been shown to be the most rewarding, like collecting, preparing, serving, or distributing food, fundraising, general labor, tutoring or teaching, or mentoring youth. These common volunteering activities are specifically associated with greater life satisfaction.
- Get in touch with local not-for-profit organizations like places of worship, schools, or community groups. These organizations are likely to offer formal volunteer opportunities that will increase life satisfaction.
- Develop and cultivate social relationships with others within your community and be available to help those in need when necessary. For instance, it is mutually beneficial to collect and prepare food for a friend who is unable to do so.

Those in senior living communities and aging services can also support life satisfaction among older adults by promoting opportunities for volunteerism:

- Provide residents with information about volunteering opportunities through local for-profit or not-for-profit organizations like places of worship, schools, or community groups. Residents are more likely to engage in formal volunteering if they are aware of these opportunities.
- Promote opportunities within your community that allow residents to engage in informal volunteering activities among themselves. Even raising awareness about small and infrequent informal volunteering tasks, like watering each other's plants while away, can be psychologically beneficial.
- Develop and host your own formal volunteering opportunities, like programs for which residents can tutor and mentor children. Residents may be more likely to engage in formal volunteering activities that are easily accessible.

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## APPENDIX

### FORMAL AND INFORMAL VOLUNTEERING

Formal volunteering was defined as any unpaid work that is performed for an organization or agency such as a for-profit or not-for-profit organization (i.e., places of worship such as churches, local schools, or other neighborhood groups). Informal volunteering was defined as any direct help or assistance that is given to a person outside your household, such as helping a neighbor with some gardening, driving them to the grocery store or a medical appointment, or babysitting a friend's children. After providing definitions for formal and informal volunteering, respondents were asked how often they engaged in each type of volunteering activity within a typical year. Responses ranged from 1 (Once a year or less) to 7 (Almost every day).

### LIFE SATISFACTION

Life satisfaction was measured using the Satisfaction with Life Scale, a five-item scale examining the extent to which respondents agreed that they exhibited characteristics associated with life satisfaction (Diener et al. 1985). Responses ranged from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree).

### EMPATHY

Empathy was measured using a 16-item version of the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) (Spreng et al., 2009). On a scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always), respondents were asked to rate how frequently they felt or acted in a manner described.

TABLE 1. RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS

AGE (55-64)	81.1%
65 and older	18.9%
GENDER (WOMEN)	39.6%
Men	60.4%
RACE (WHITE/CAUCASIAN)	78.3%
Black/African American	9.6%
Asian/Pacific Islander	6.7%
Multiracial/Other race	5.4%
ETHNICITY (HISPANIC/LATINO)	10.2%
Not Hispanic/Latino	89.8%
EDUCATION (BACHELOR'S DEGREE)	34.6%
Less than a bachelor's degree	26.9%
More than a bachelor's degree	38.5%
EMPLOYMENT (FULL-TIME)	24.8%
Not employed full-time	75.2%
MARITAL STATUS (MARRIED)	57.3%
Separated/Divorced	15.9%
Widowed	10.4%
Never married	16.4%
INCOME (LESS THAN \$39,999)	24.9%
\$40,000 to \$79,999	32.2%
\$80,000 to \$119,999	21.4%
\$120,000 to \$159,999	8.4%
\$160,000 or more	13.1%

