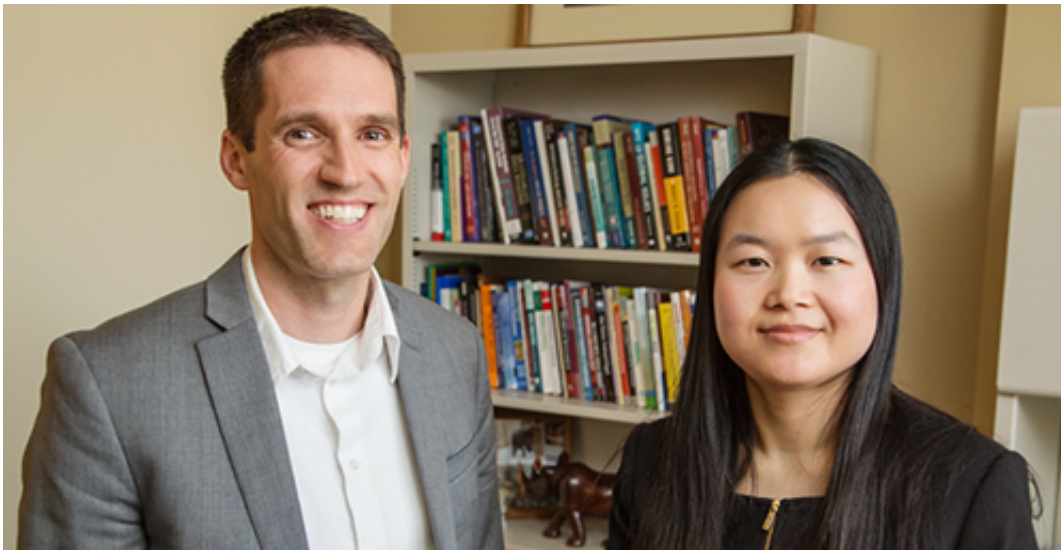


More older adults from US volunteering in other countries

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Increasing numbers of older Americans are traveling abroad to perform volunteer work -- and host communities and organizations are clamoring to recruit them, according to studies by social work professor Benjamin Lough and doctoral student Xiaoling Xiang. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Nearly 290,000 older adults from the U.S. volunteered abroad during 2012 - an increase of more than 60 percent in less than a decade, a recent study found.

A growing number of adults age 55 and older are interested in performing volunteer work in other countries, and host communities are clamoring to recruit them, especially if they have professional and

specialized skills that may not be readily available in local labor markets, according to researchers Benjamin J. Lough and Xiaoling Xiang of the University of Illinois.

Lough and Xiang analyzed data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' Current Population Survey, an annual survey of more than 60,000 households that includes questions about unpaid work performed in other countries, the types of activities that volunteers engage in and the organizations coordinating the programs.

Of the 1 million Americans who volunteer overseas annually, the greatest percentage are teens and young adults ages 15-24. However, participation by [older adults](#) has risen steadily in recent years, driven in part by the growth in America's over-55 population as the last of the [baby boomers](#) reach middle age.

Accordingly, service organizations such as the U.S. Peace Corps that traditionally catered to younger people have ramped up efforts to recruit greater numbers of late-life volunteers.

In 2006, the U.S. Peace Corps began a targeted marketing campaign to recruit adults over age 50. By 2012, about 8 percent of the organization's applications for overseas service were from older adults, according to the study, which has been accepted for publication in the journal *Administration and Society*.

The average age of the older volunteers in the study was more than 64.

"Growing numbers of adults age 65-plus are going abroad to volunteer, partly because baby boomers have more free time with retirement and are interested in active engagement," said Lough, a professor of social work at Illinois. "They spent their lives working and raising children, and now that they're retired, they want leisure, but they also want to give

back while satisfying their thirst for adventure."

Host countries consistently express a preference for [older workers](#) who have greater experience and skills to offer, Lough said.

Nearly half of the older adults in the study who volunteered abroad had master's, doctoral or professional degrees.

"As volunteers age, they have more professional skills to contribute, and that's what hosting organizations want," Lough said. "Host organizations and communities are less interested in hosting young people who have fewer skills - they want competent people who can contribute something really useful, who have lifelong experience doing things. There is a consistent demand for volunteers who have meaningful skills and can stay for longer periods of time."

The average duration of older volunteers' stay abroad was about 13 weeks - the same amount of time as the youngest volunteers, who were ages 15-24.

International service organizations could better meet communities' needs for skilled workers by addressing some of the barriers that prevent [older people](#) from volunteering abroad, such as concerns about access to health care services and financial constraints, the researchers said.

Older adults with higher incomes were more likely to serve abroad, the researchers found. Nearly a quarter of older international volunteers in the study reported annual household incomes of \$150,000 or more.

Offering stipends or help with travel expenses could boost participation of older adults with lower incomes, the researchers suggested.

More than half (52 percent) of the older adults in the study volunteered

through religious organizations, compared with about 34 percent of younger workers.

"The single most important predictor of whether a person volunteers or not is if they are asked, so being asked is really important, as is having access to institutions that will ask for volunteers," Lough said. "If we really think that productive aging is something that people want to do and should do, a key question of recruitment is, do we ask them? How do we increase the access for older adults to be productive, give back to society, and tap into the potential that they have developed over a lifetime of experience? That experience sometimes goes unused because they don't hear about opportunities, aren't asked, or they end up going abroad as tourists and not having the same impact on society or on themselves."

In a related study, Lough, Xiang and co-author Sung-wan Kang interviewed 56 adults age 55 or older about their motivations for volunteering abroad. About 20 percent of older adults said they were inspired by some form of family connection, such as intergenerational volunteering with younger family members or with siblings.

Many older adults expressed desires or obligations to "give back to others" from positions of privilege and opportunity, and others said they wanted to share their "skills and years of experience" while traveling in the developing world.

About one third of older [volunteers](#) said they were interested in learning about other cultures, but from in-depth, relational perspectives that usually are not experienced through tourism, according to the study.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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