



Older Adults' Engagement Should Be Recognized and Encouraged

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Older adults enhance society in many ways. While many engage in paid work, many others move from career jobs into unpaid activities that contribute to the public good. Many volunteer through formal or informal channels, providing help to neighbors and friends. Many older adults care for their frail parents, disabled spouses and children, and young grandchildren. Some older adults combine paid work with other activities.

This brief, the first in a series, summarizes the types and intensity of engagement among adults age 55 and older in 2002. We define engagement as time spent in paid work, formal volunteering, informal volunteering, and caregiving activities. This brief also shows how engagement varies by age and individual characteristics. Future briefs will focus on particular types of engagement, the relationship between engagement and retirement satisfaction, and the economic value of these activities.

As the population ages, the contributions of older adults deserve more recognition. Older Americans represent a tremendous resource to society today and offer even greater potential for the future. Older adults, freed of parenting chores, can devote more time to other family members, community organizations, and neighborhoods. The potential contributions of older adults will

grow rapidly as baby boomers age. Three in ten Americans will be 55 or older—prime engagement years—by 2030, up from two in ten today (U.S. Census Bureau 2004). By enhancing our understanding now, we can prepare to tap the baby boomers' full engagement potential.

The report presents results from the 2002 Health and Retirement Study (HRS), a nationally representative survey of adults age 55 and older.¹ The HRS measures four types of engagement: hours working for pay, hours engaged in formal volunteer activities (defined as volunteering for an organization), hours engaged in informal volunteering (helping others who do not live in the same household), and hours caring for family members (including spouses, grandchildren, and parents). Caregiving for children and parents generally is only counted as engagement if the number of hours exceeds 100 in the previous two years.²

Types of Engagement

Older Americans stay busy (figure 1). Nine out of ten adults age 55 to 64 engage in at least one of the four types of productive activities: paid work, formal or informal volunteering, or family caregiving. Engagement declines with age but remains high. Eight out of ten adults age 65 to 74 and almost six in ten age 75 and older engage in at least one of these activities.

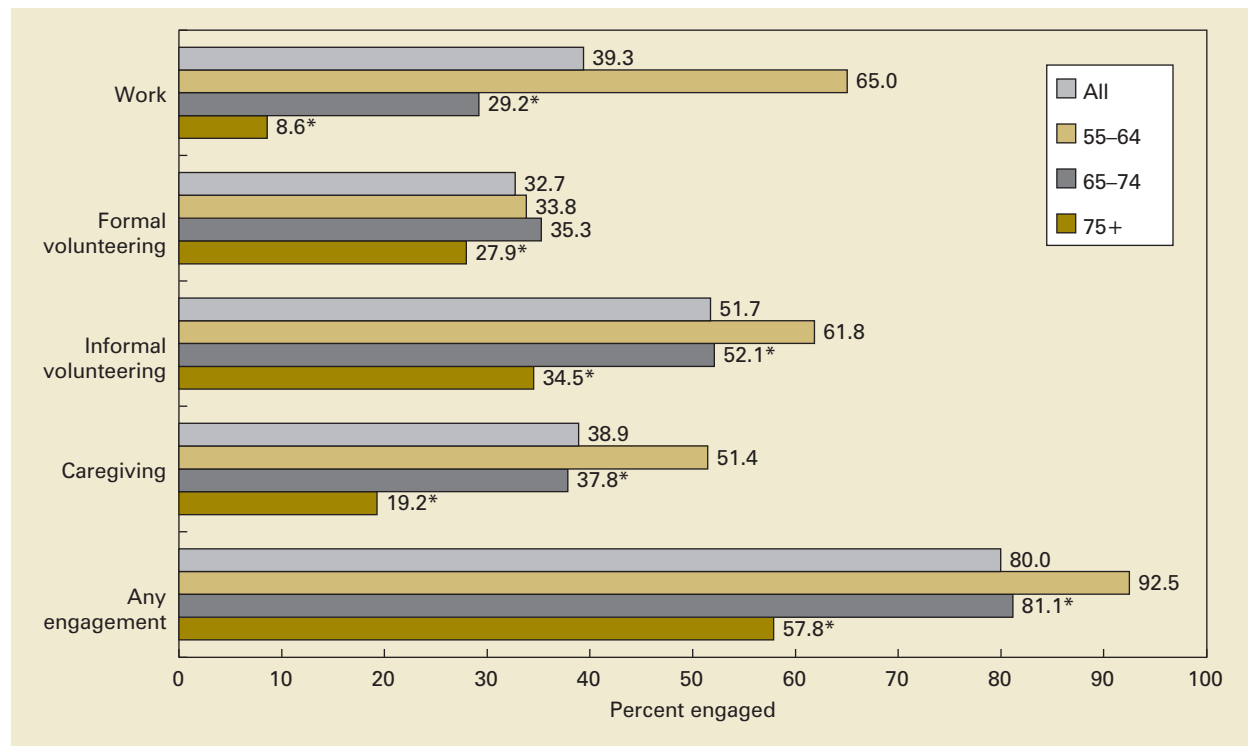
What older Americans do with their time varies with age. Those at the younger end of the spectrum, for example, are much more likely to still be employed. Over 60 percent of those age 55 to 64 work, compared with about 30 percent of adults age 65 to 74. Less than 10 percent of adults 75 and older remain on the job. Older Americans do, however, volunteer at similar rates throughout the age distribution. Over 30 percent of older adults devote some time to formal volunteer activities. Even among adults age 75 and older, 27.9 percent volunteer formally.

Large shares of older Americans also volunteer informally and care for family members.

Almost 80 percent of Americans age 55 and older engage in at least one type of productive activity, averaging nearly 1,300 hours of productive activity each year.



FIGURE 1. Rates of Engagement among Adults Age 55 and Older, 2002



Source: 2002 Health and Retirement Study.

Notes: Estimates based on a sample of 16,811 adults age 55 and over. Work indicates any paid work in the past 12 months. Caregiving indicates any child or parental care in the past two years, any spousal care in the past month (or the last three months of life of a recently deceased spouse), or care for another child in the household. Formal volunteering includes any volunteer work with an organization in the past two years. Informal volunteering includes any help to others without pay in the past two years. Any engagement indicates any work, formal or informal volunteerism, or caregiving over their respective timeframes. For grandchild and parental care, unmarried adults must have performed at least 100 hours of care, and couples must have performed at least 100 hours of combined care, in order to be counted as caregiving.

* Rate is significantly different than the rate for 55- to 64-year-olds at the 10 percent level or better.

Over six in ten adults age 55 to 64 help nonfamily members and about half help with family care. Engagement in these activities does fall off with age. Adults age 75 and older are least likely to be providing care. While this may reflect advanced age and diminished stamina, adults in this age group also are less likely to have family members needing care.

Engagement Intensity

As shown in table 1, the majority of older Americans diversify their activities. Many combine work with volunteering (14.7 percent), and others combine work with caregiving and volunteering (14.1 percent). Relatively few older adults report paid work as their only form of engagement (6.3 percent).

While paid work still dominates the schedule for those below retirement age, many who work also find some time for other activities. For example, about one-quarter of adults age 55 to 64 engage in paid work, caregiving, and volunteering. Participation in multiple activities, however, declines dramatically with age—70.6 percent of adults age 55 to 64 engage in multiple activities, compared with 49.5 percent of adults age 65 to 74 and 25.8 percent of adults 75 and older. On the other hand, some aging adults do not engage in any of these activities, including almost one in five adults age 65 to 74 and two in five adults age 75 and older.

The mean and median hours of engagement also highlight dramatic differences across age groups. Older adults, on average, contribute nearly 1,300 hours to paid work, caregiving, and

TABLE 1. Patterns of Engagement by Age Group, 2002

Engagement	All	Percent by Age Group		
		55–64	65–74	75+
Single Activity	27.5	21.9	31.7	32.1
Work	6.3	9.2	5.7*	2.3*
Formal volunteering	4.5	1.4	5.2*	8.7*
Informal volunteering	9.1	5.3	11.5*	12.7*
Caregiving	7.6	6.0	9.3*	8.4*
Multiple Activities	52.4	70.6	49.5	25.8
Work and caregiving	4.3	7.7	2.5*	0.6*
Work and volunteering	14.7	22.6	12.4*	4.3*
Work, caregiving, and volunteering	14.1	25.6	8.6*	1.5*
Caregiving and volunteering	12.9	12.1	17.4*	8.8*
Formal and informal volunteering	6.5	2.6	8.6*	10.6*
No Activity	20.1	7.5	18.9*	42.2*
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Mean Hours of Engaged Persons	1,266	1,758	888*	561*
Median Hours of Engaged Persons	832	2,000	400	150

Source: 2002 Health and Retirement Study.

Notes: Estimates based on a sample of 16,811 adults age 55 and over. Work indicates any paid work in the past 12 months. Volunteering indicates any formal or informal volunteer work in the past two years. Caregiving indicates any grandchild or parental care in the past two years or any spousal care in the past month (or the last three months of life of a recently deceased spouse), or care of another child in the household. For grandchild and parental care, unmarried adults must have performed at least 100 hours of care, and couples must have performed at least 100 hours of combined care, to be counted as caregiving.

* Rate is significantly different from the comparable rate for 55- to 64-year-olds at the 10 percent level or better.

volunteering each year. Adults age 55 to 64 spend almost 1,800 hours a year in these activities, compared with about 600 hours for those age 75 and older, reflecting higher employment rates among the younger group. Median hours of engagement indicate an even greater decline in hours across age groups.

Engagement Varies by Individual Characteristics

Participation also varies across a wide spectrum of demographic characteristics (table 2). In general, older Americans who enjoy a higher socioeconomic status are more likely to be engaged than those with fewer advantages.

For example, single people are less likely to be engaged than married people in all age groups. Only about half of singles age 75 and older engage in work, volunteering, or caregiving, compared with almost seven out of ten

of their married counterparts. Of course, this may simply reflect less need for spousal caregiving among singles. It also may reflect a higher average age among singles (as more widows and widowers join this marital status group).

African Americans and Hispanics are less likely to be engaged than their white counterparts. Those of Hispanic origin age 65 and older are least likely to be engaged in work, volunteering, or caregiving. About 60 percent of Hispanics age 65 to 74 and 35 percent of Hispanics age 75 and older are engaged, rates substantially below their white counterparts (83 and 60 percent, respectively).

Engagement rates also drop among persons with poorer health, particularly among the oldest cohort. While 71.7 percent of adults 75 and older in very good or excellent health participate in work, caregiving, or volunteer activities, only 42.4 percent of those in fair or poor health participate. While it makes sense that health influences rates of engagement, some research also indicates that engage-

TABLE 2. Engagement Rates by Age and Demographic Characteristics, 2002

Characteristics	All	Percent Engaged by Age Group		
		55–64	65–74	75+
Marital Status				
Married	86.3	94.1	84.9*	67.6*
Not married	68.9 ^	88.3 ^	73.3* ^	49.8* ^
Race				
White	81.0	93.3	83.2*	59.8*
Black	78.2 ^	89.4 ^	78.4* ^	51.0* ^
Hispanic	70.6 ^	89.0 ^	58.8* ^	34.7* ^
Other	76.6 ^	91.9	73.6* ^	48.3* ^
Gender				
Male	83.4	93.7	82.7*	63.4*
Female	77.2 ^	91.4 ^	79.8* ^	54.4* ^
Health Status				
Excellent/very good	89.8	97.0	89.2*	71.7*
Good	81.2 ^	93.7 ^	83.0* ^	61.4* ^
Poor/fair	63.0 ^	81.1 ^	65.2* ^	42.4* ^
Mental Health				
Not depressed	83.0	94.2	83.8*	62.7*
Depressed	71.1 ^	84.6 ^	70.9* ^	50.0* ^
Income Quartile^a				
1	60.6	78.7	65.8*	44.3*
2	77.3 ^	89.6 ^	79.7* ^	63.0* ^
3	87.3 ^	95.8 ^	88.1* ^	66.7* ^
4	94.6 ^	97.6 ^	92.3* ^	79.5* ^
All	79.9	92.5	81.1*	57.8*

Source: 2002 Health and Retirement Study.

Notes: Estimates based on a sample of 16,811 adults age 55 and over. Engagement is defined as having worked for pay in the past 12 months, volunteered formally or informally, provided grandchild or parental care in the past two years, provided spousal care in the past month (or the last three months of life of a recently deceased spouse), or cared for another child in the household. For grandchild and parental care, unmarried adults must have performed at least 100 hours of care, and couples must have performed at least 100 hours of combined care, to be counted as engaged. Engagement hours do not include hours of child care for non-grandchildren.

^a Quartiles are calculated among all Americans 55 and older in 2002.

* Rate is significantly different from the comparable rate for 55- to 64-year-olds at the 10 percent level or better.

^ Rate is significantly different from rate associated with first row of each demographic category at the 10 percent level or better.

ment may improve physical and mental health.³ Of course, the descriptive statistics reported here do not tell us whether poor health limits engagement or engagement improves health status.

Finally, lower-income older Americans engage in these activities less often than higher-income seniors. For example, only 60.6 percent of older adults in the lowest quarter of the income

distribution are engaged, compared with 94.6 percent of those in the highest quarter. These differences partially reflect employment status—older adults engaged in paid work tend to be in higher income categories.⁴ Nonetheless, these engagement differences persist even in the oldest age group, for whom paid work is less common. For example, among adults 75 and

older, nearly twice as many adults in the highest income group engage in work, caregiving, or volunteering as those in the lowest income group (79.5 percent compared with 44.3 percent).

Discussion

This profile illustrates high levels of engagement among older Americans in 2002. Eight out of ten seniors work, volunteer, or care for family members. Many of them participate in multiple activities. On average, older adults contribute almost 1,300 hours to these types of productive activities each year. While rates of engagement decline with age, about six in ten adults age 75 and older participate in these activities.

These findings contrast sharply with the image of older Americans as unengaged adults living out their older years solely in pursuit of leisure and rest. Nonetheless, the results also suggest room to expand engagement opportunities. Unengaged or less engaged older adults represent an untapped resource. Many recent studies document older adults' desire to remain actively engaged (see, for example, AARP 2004 and GAO 2005). Some policymakers are focusing on ways to increase employment opportunities for older adults. These initiatives are important, but so are initiatives that support opportunities to contribute through meaningful volunteer and caregiving activities. Ideally, older adults would have the choice to engage in multiple meaningful activities.

Also, the results showing large differences in engagement across socioeconomic groups raise questions about access to engagement opportunities. Minorities, especially Hispanics and lower-income adults, are less engaged than white and higher-income seniors. These results suggest the need for targeting opportunities to the most economically disadvantaged older adults. Programs such as the Senior Corps (run by the Corporation for National and Community Service with federal funds), which offers stipends for older low-income adults to serve as foster grandparents and senior companions, provide meaningful engagement opportunities. Policymakers should consider expanding these kinds of initiatives and assessing the net value to seniors and their communities.

Notes

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1. The data presented here are weighted to represent the U.S. noninstitutionalized population age 55 and older. Appropriate statistical methods have been used to control for the complex sample design of the HRS when performing significance tests. For more information on the HRS, see <http://hrsonline.isr.umich.edu>.
2. Total annual hours of engagement are estimated from reports of individual activities that often use different reference periods and, sometimes, hour thresholds. Engagement is defined as total hours worked for pay in the past 12 months, plus hours spent volunteering for an organization in the past 12 months, plus hours spent helping others who did not live with the respondent in the past 12 months, plus spousal care (annualized from reports for the past month), plus child care (annualized from reports for the past two years, if child care exceeds 100 hours), plus parental care (annualized from reports for the past two years, if the respondent's and spouse's hours exceed 100 hours). Note that those who engaged fewer hours than the HRS thresholds are not reported or included in our estimates.
3. See Lum and Lightfoot (2005), Luoh and Herzog (2002), and Thoits and Hewitt (2001) for examples.
4. Income quartiles were calculated over the entire population of persons age 55 and older.

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Perspectives on Productive Aging is a series of data and policy briefs focused on engagement activities among adults age 55 and older. The series is 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."

As America ages, older adults are getting more attention. Gone (or at least fading) is the stereotype of the retiree who is unable to work and who makes relatively few social contributions. Increasingly, older Americans are seen as a vibrant group with wisdom and energy to offer society and their families. *Perspectives on Productive Aging* will enhance the dialogue on the engagement of older Americans, documenting the current value of engagement among older adults and highlighting the best ways for society and policymakers to support and encourage the full engagement of older Americans.

Perspectives on Productive Aging is part of the Urban Institute's Retirement Project. Further information can be obtained at <http://www.urban.org/retirement>.

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