

**KEEPING  
BABY BOOMERS  
VOLUNTEERING**

**A Research Brief on Volunteer Retention and Turnover**





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## INTRODUCTION

Baby Boomers—the generation of 77 million Americans born between 1946 and 1964—represent a potential boon to the volunteer world. Based on U.S. Census data, the numbers of volunteers age 65 and older will increase 50 percent over the next 13 years, from just under 9 million in 2007 to more than 13 million in 2020. What’s more, that number will continue to rise for many years to come, as the youngest Baby Boomers will not reach age 65 until 2029.

The volunteer potential of Baby Boomers is vital to the nonprofit world, not just because of the generation’s size but also because of Boomers’ relatively high education levels, health, and wealth. Boomers today are entering their later years with a broad range of skills, talents, and experience—as well as with a set of attitudes, expectations, and needs that is decidedly different from previous generations. Harnessing those skills, and accommodating those expectations, will be critical to solving a wide range of social problems in the years ahead.

To attract Baby Boomers to volunteering, experts on aging agree that nonprofit groups and others must boldly rethink the types of opportunities they offer—to “re-imagine” roles for older American volunteers that cater to Boomers’ skills and desire to make their mark in their own way. This is vitally important to ensuring that the potential of this vast resource is tapped to its fullest.

While much attention has focused on how to recruit Baby Boomers into the ranks of volunteers, relatively little attention has been paid to ensuring that those who choose to volunteer one year continue to do so the next. The importance of volunteer retention should not be underestimated. Despite their reputation for self-centeredness, Baby Boomers today have the highest volunteer rate of any age group. They also, as this report notes, volunteer at higher rates than past generations did when they were the same age. Because three out of every ten Boomer volunteers choose not to volunteer in the following year, a key aspect of keeping Boomer volunteer rates high is to learn how to retain existing Boomer volunteers.

To better understand this dynamic, the Corporation for National and Community Service looked at data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics from 2002-2006. The data trace the volunteer habits of the same sample of Baby Boomers over two consecutive years, as well as a similar sample of pre-Boomers.

This is the first time that these data sets have been analyzed. Though much work remains to be done, the hope is that the findings contained herein will help nonprofits and others gain greater insight into the volunteer preferences of Baby Boomers so that turnover can be kept to a minimum and the greatest number of Boomers will remain engaged in their communities in their later years.

## KEY FINDINGS

■ **Baby Boomers in their late 40s to mid-50s have higher volunteer rates than past generations had at the same ages.**

Surprisingly, given many of the concerns raised about their lack of civic engagement, Baby Boomers age 46 to 57 are volunteering at higher rates than members of either the Silent or Greatest Generations. The differences in volunteering seem to be the result of several factors, but two are noteworthy. First, Baby Boomers have higher education levels compared to older generations. Second, Baby Boomers in their 40s and 50s are more likely to have school-aged children at home than older generations were at the same age. Research shows that the propensity to volunteer rises with increases in education. There is also evidence that adults with children under 18 years of age residing with them are more likely to volunteer than adults without school-aged children at home.

■ **Holding age constant, Baby Boomers appear to have different volunteer interests than past generations.**

Between 1989 and 2003-2005, there has been a change in the types of organizations that 41 to 59-year-old adults volunteered with. In both 1989 and 2003-2005, 41 to 59-year-old volunteers were most likely to volunteer with religious organizations. However, in 1989, the second most popular type of volunteer organization for the Silent and Greatest Generations



was civic, political, business, and international. By 2003-2005, the second most-popular type of volunteer opportunity for Baby Boomers appears to have been educational or youth service organizations.

■ **Each year, approximately 3 out of every 10 Baby Boomer volunteers dropped out of volunteering.**

On average, 69 percent of Baby Boomers who volunteered in the first year also volunteered in the second year. This means that 31 percent of Baby Boomers who volunteered in the first year did not volunteer in the second year. Unfortunately, volunteer recruitment efforts tended to fall short of fully replacing those volunteers who chose not to continue volunteering. On average, only 83.2 percent of the volunteers who chose not to continue were replaced with new volunteers.

■ **Volunteers with the highest attachment to volunteering also have the highest retention rates.**

The likelihood of volunteering year after year increases as volunteer hours and volunteer weeks rise: for volunteers who serve 12 or more weeks per year, the volunteer retention rate is 79 percent, versus 53

percent for volunteers that serve two weeks or less per year. The greater the time commitment a Baby Boomer makes to volunteering during one year, the more likely he or she is to volunteer in the following year.

■ **Volunteer retention is related to the type and nature of volunteer activity.**

For those volunteers who perform only one activity for their main volunteer organization, volunteer retention rates are highest for Baby Boomers whose volunteer activities are professional and managerial, engaging in music or some other type of performance, and tutoring, mentoring, and coaching (74.8%, 70.9%, and 70.3% respectively). Volunteer retention is lowest for volunteers who engage in general labor or supply transportation (55.6%).

■ **Volunteer retention rates are related to the ways Baby Boomers become volunteers.**

Among volunteers who are asked to volunteer, those who are asked by the volunteer organization have the highest retention rates, while those asked by their employer to volunteer have the lowest retention rates (70.5% vs. 53.9%).

## IMPLICATIONS

It is important to remember that in general, anything that keeps people volunteering year after year (volunteer retention) will increase overall volunteer rates. Volunteer turnover should be seen as just as undesirable as turnover among paid employees. For most businesses and nonprofits, a 30 percent employee turnover rate would be an indication of a workplace problem. The same should be true for volunteers. Two models of volunteer retention that might be considered are the donor model and the employee model.

Most charitable organizations attempt to maintain repeat donors, especially large donors. To get repeat gifts from large donors, charitable organizations must spend time cultivating the donor and making him or her feel connected to the organization and its mission. Some of the same tools and approaches used to encourage a large donor to make a repeat gift might be helpful if applied to volunteers. In a sense, through their time commitments, volunteers are making a huge in-kind donation to the resources and mission of the organization. Moreover, research suggests there is a strong connection between volunteering and giving. Thus, it makes sense to find ways of encouraging substantial volunteering because it will produce substantial in-kind gifts and could simultaneously produce considerable monetary gifts.



The employment model assumes that volunteers should not be seen as just free labor. Instead, they should be approached as a key resource and an integral part of the organization's success. Most employers recognize that employee turnover imposes both direct and indirect costs. The same is true of volunteers.

The loss of a volunteer imposes search costs to find a replacement. When replacements are found, the new volunteers must be trained and supervised. They must get to know the work and mission of the organization. They have to form productive work relationships with the paid and unpaid members of a charitable organization's staff. The human resources field has developed a host of insights and tools for reducing employee turnover and our recent reports on volunteer management capacity in nonprofit organizations illustrate that many of those tools (such as offering training and professional development opportunities) would be helpful in reducing volunteer turnover.

## METHODOLOGY

The data for this report is drawn from the Current Population Survey's (CPS) volunteer supplements for 1974, 1989, and 2002 to 2006. The CPS is a monthly national household survey administered by the U.S. Census Bureau (Census) for the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). The CPS is the primary source of employment information on our nation's labor force. In addition to the main CPS, supplements are also periodically administered on a variety of topics, such as voting and food security. The volunteer supplement is an annual set of questions administered to the CPS survey households specifically aimed at gaining information on Americans' volunteering behavior—i.e., volunteering through or with an organization. Since 2002, the volunteer supplement has been administered on an annual basis. Prior to 2002, the last volunteer supplements had been administered in 1989.

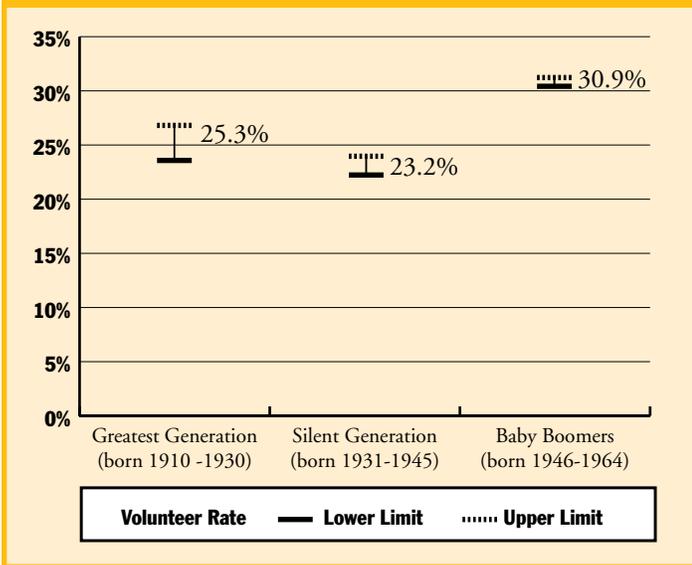
The monthly CPS is administered to between 50,000 and 60,000 households. At any one time, about half the respondents have been in the survey for two consecutive Septembers. This means it is possible to follow respondents over a two-year period. Since 2002, there have been four waves of respondents that have been in the survey for two years in a row. Each of these waves forms a separate two-year panel of respondents. This report will use the survey responses from these four two-year panels to analyze volunteer retention and turnover among Baby Boomers and volunteers born before 1946.

### ARE BOOMERS DIFFERENT FROM PAST GENERATIONS?

In order to determine what to expect in the way of volunteering behavior from Baby Boomers as they age, we should start by comparing Baby Boomers to older generations<sup>1</sup> (the Silent Generation and the Greatest Generation). Research has found that volunteering is affected by age.<sup>2</sup> Volunteering rates tend to peak for adults in their mid 30s to mid 50s and decline for adults 60 and older. In order to fairly compare across generations, it is important to consider these lifecycle effects by controlling for age. A comparison of the volunteer rates for all three generational groups at the same point in the lifecycle provides an indication about whether Baby Boomers are volunteering more or less compared to other generations at the same point in life.

Figure 1 shows the volunteer rates for Baby Boomers compared to generations born before 1946 (the Silent and Greatest Generations), holding age constant so that all survey data were collected while the respondents were ages 46 through 57. The chart illustrates that Baby Boomers today are in fact volunteering at higher rates than members of either the Silent Generation or the Greatest Generation at the same age.

**Figure 1. Volunteer Rates: All Generations Measured at Ages 46-57**

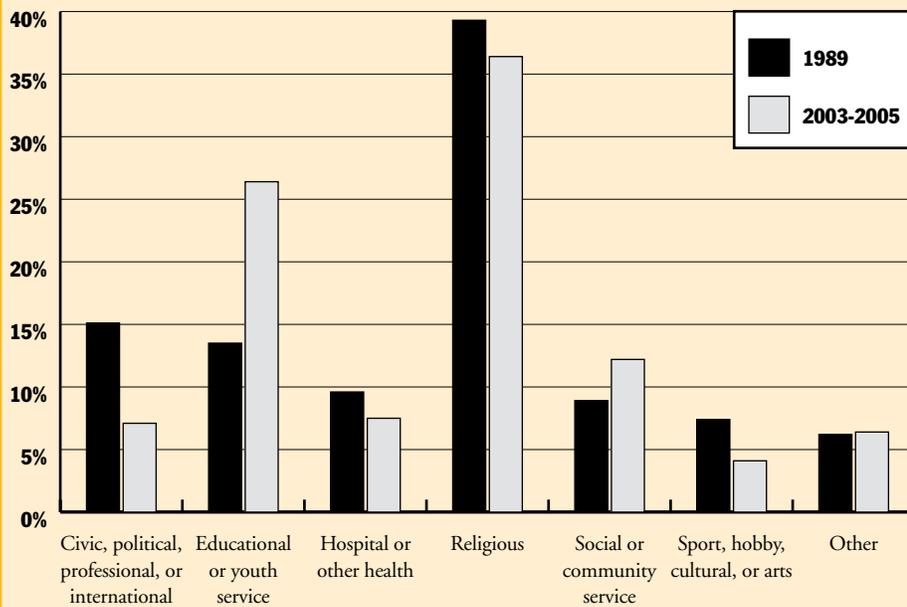


Note: Figure 1 shows the estimated volunteer rates along with their 99 percent confidence interval. That is, we are 99 percent confident that the real volunteering rate lies between the upper limit (represented by the dashed line) and the lower limit (represented by the solid line) – the narrower the distance between the upper and lower limit, the more precise the estimate. When the confidence intervals for two different estimates overlap, there is no statistical difference between the two. When there is no overlap, there is a statistically significant difference between the two estimates.

<sup>1</sup> The Silent Generation was born between 1931 and 1945, and the Greatest Generation was born between 1910 and 1930.

<sup>2</sup> See Hendricks and Cutler, 2004.

Figure 2. Volunteer Rates by Organization for 41 to 59-year-olds in 1989 and 2003-2005



Another indication of generational differences in volunteering between Baby Boomers and older volunteers is the type of organizations each cohort volunteered with. Figure 2 compares the types of organizations that 41 and 59-year-olds volunteered with in 1989 and in 2003-2005.<sup>3</sup> Between 1989 and 2003-2005, there was considerable change in where 41 to 59-year-olds chose to volunteer. The most popular volunteer venue in 1989 and in 2003-2005 was religious organizations. However, in 1989 the second most-popular volunteer setting was civic, political, professional, or international organizations, while in 2003-2005 it was educational or youth service organizations. This suggests that the older generation was more oriented toward civic groups and political forms of engagement, while the Baby Boomers at the same age were more interested in youth and children's issues.

These generational differences in volunteering, while interesting, are challenging to explain. Does it mean that one generation is more civically engaged or more service-oriented than another? While it is difficult to directly answer this question, it is possible to identify factors and characteristics that can be used to predict differences in volunteering rates. Two major predictors of volunteering are educational achievement and the presence of children under 18. Generational differences in these characteristics might help to explain volunteering variations between generations.

First, as education levels rise, so does the propensity to volunteer.<sup>4</sup> On average, Baby Boomers are more educated than either the Silent or Greatest Generations. The differences in generational volunteering rates reflect to a large extent differences in educational achievement. Second, individuals who reside with their own children under 18 tend to have higher volunteer rates than individuals who do not reside with their own children.<sup>5</sup>

School-aged children appear to be a primary factor for adult volunteering. Baby Boomers are getting married and having children later than older generations. The result is that many of them have school-

aged children well into their 40s and 50s. This propensity for Baby Boomers to have young children later in life compared to older generations contributes to the difference in volunteer rates.

The higher volunteer rates for Baby Boomers after controlling for age should dispel some people's concerns about whether Baby Boomers could ever be as civically engaged as their parents and grandparents. Moreover, it may also mean that volunteering rates may be higher for Baby Boomers as they age than lifecycle effects would have predicted. To put it another way, Boomers may hit their peak volunteer years later in life compared to past generations and could maintain high volunteer rates at a much older age.

<sup>3</sup> Unlike the 1989 and 2003-2005 volunteer supplements, the 1974 volunteer supplement did not have information on volunteer organizations, thus it was not possible to directly compare the Silent and Greatest Generations to the Baby Boomers when all three groups were 46-57. However, it was possible to use the 1989 and 2003-2005 volunteer supplements to analyze volunteering by organizational type. Therefore the comparisons are between volunteers who were 41-59 in 1989 to those who were the same age in 2003-2005. While there is some overlap in generations, in 1989 most 41-59-year-olds were part of the Silent Generation, while in 2003-2005 most were Baby Boomers.

<sup>4</sup> See Wilson, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> See Wilson and Musick, 1997.

## VOLUNTEER RETENTION, TURNOVER, AND RECRUITMENT RATES

We could substantially miss the full volunteer potential of Baby Boomers if we do not focus on how to keep them volunteering. It is possible to be very successful in recruiting new volunteers but have the Baby Boomer volunteer rate remain stable or even decline. This is because current volunteers may choose not to continue volunteering after their initial experiences. As a result, high volunteer turnover can substantially dampen the overall volunteer rate.

As such, a better understanding of the dynamics associated with volunteer retention and turnover for Baby Boomers could provide important insights into how to increase Baby Boomers' involvement with volunteering. The remainder of this report will examine volunteer retention and turnover, including comparing volunteer retention and turnover for Baby Boomers to volunteers born before 1946 (the Silent and Greatest Generations).

To start our discussion of what keeps people volunteering, let's examine the overall volunteer retention, turnover, and recruitment rates for Baby Boomers compared to older generations. Because the CPS data keeps a large subset of its respondents in the survey for two years, it is possible to follow the volunteer behavior of an individual respondent for two years. This allows us to analyze what percentage of individuals volunteer for two years in a row as opposed to those who only volunteer in one year but fail to volunteer in the next. The data essentially provides the ability to calculate:

- **Volunteer Retention Rates:** the percentage of volunteers in a given year that choose to volunteer in the next year.
- **Volunteer Turnover (attrition) Rates:** the percentage of volunteers in year one that choose not to volunteer in the next year.
- **Volunteer Recruitment/Replacement Rates:** the percentage of volunteers in year two who were non-volunteers in year one. In essence these are the volunteers in year two who replaced those volunteers that volunteered in year one but not in year two.



Table 1. Volunteer Retention, Turnover, and Recruitment Rates for Baby Boomers and Pre-Baby Boomers					
	Population Wave				
	2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-2005	2005-2006	Average
<b>Baby Boomers</b>					
Volunteer Retention	69%	68%	71.5%	67.5%	69%
Volunteer Replacement	28.9%	28%	26.3%	25.4%	27.2%
Volunteer Turnover	31%	32%	28.5%	32.5%	31%
Year One Volunteer Rate	35.2%	36.3%	36.7%	35.2%	36%
Year Two Volunteer Rate	34.1%	34.3%	35.6%	31.9%	34%
Change in Volunteer Rate	-1.1%	-2%	-1.1%	-3.3%	-1.9%
<b>Pre-Baby Boomer</b>					
Volunteer Retention	71.8%	71.6%	71.5%	68.9%	71%
Volunteer Replacement	27.7%	28.6%	27.9%	25.4%	27.5%
Volunteer Turnover	28.2%	28.4%	28.5%	31.1%	29%
Year One Volunteer Rate	27.5%	28.6%	28.9%	28.5%	28.3%
Year Two Volunteer Rate	27.2%	28.6%	28.7%	26.3%	27.7%
Change in Volunteer Rate	-0.2%	0.1%	-0.3%	-2.2%	-0.6%

Table 1 presents all three rates along with the volunteer rate for each two-year wave of respondents beginning in 2002. For example, in the 2002-2003 wave, Baby Boomer volunteers had a 69 percent retention rate between 2002 and 2003, a 31 percent turnover rate, and 28.9 percent of volunteers in 2003 were non-volunteers in 2002. As a result, the volunteer rate for this wave was 35.2 percent in 2002, but it declined slightly to 34.1 percent in 2003 primarily because of the turnover or attrition rate.

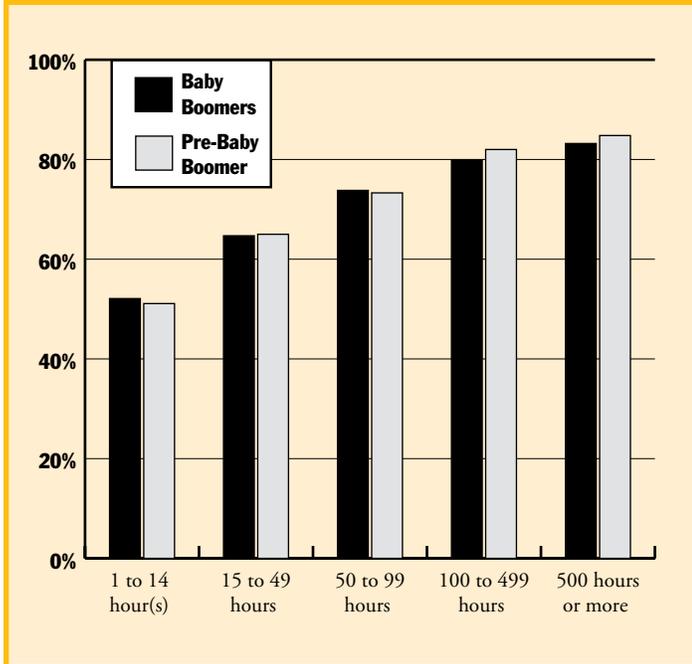
Table 1 shows that, while Baby Boomers and older generations have roughly the same volunteer recruitment rates, Baby Boomers have higher volunteer turnover or attrition rates than older generations. This may indicate that as Baby Boomers age their volunteer retention rates will increase. However, as suggested above, there are definite generational differences in volunteering between Baby Boomers and older generations. It is possible that these generational differences may be more important than lifecycle effects in predicting volunteer retention as Baby Boomers age.

Table 1 also highlights the importance of volunteer turnover on the overall volunteer rates. For Baby Boomers, the average volunteer attrition rate from 2002 to 2006 was 31 percent compared to 29 percent for older volunteers. At the same time, Baby Boomers' volunteer replacement rate was almost four percentage points lower than their volunteer turnover rate. This explains why two-year volunteering rates dropped more for Baby Boomers than for older volunteers. In short, this highlights how important the volunteer turnover or attrition rate is to the overall volunteer rate.

### EXPLAINING DIFFERENCES IN VOLUNTEER RETENTION AND TURNOVER RATES

The key to designing effective interventions to reduce volunteer turnover and increase retention is to increase our understanding of the factors related to both turnover and retention. This section will examine several possible explanations for variations in volunteer retention: high attachment to volunteering, finding the right fit, changing family and work status, and differences in the pathways to volunteering.

**Figure 3. Volunteer Retention Rates by Volunteer Hours for Baby Boomers and Older Volunteers**



### ■ High Attachment to Volunteering

One explanation for why some people continue to volunteer and others drop out of volunteering, centers on the notion that some individuals develop a high attachment to volunteering.<sup>6</sup> How much an individual volunteers, is jointly determined by a volunteer's individual preferences and the available volunteer opportunities. A volunteer who has developed a high attachment to volunteering will be invited into greater service opportunities with an organization and most likely also search out additional opportunities to volunteer.

This attachment can be seen in three indicators: 1) how many hours are volunteered annually; 2) how many weeks are volunteered annually; and 3) how many organizations individuals volunteer for. If this is the case, we might expect to see volunteers with high values on the hours and weeks volunteered and the number of volunteer organizations to have a higher propensity to volunteer two years in a row than those with lower values.

Consistent with the notion that volunteer retention is related to higher attachment to volunteering, retention rates are higher as volunteer hours increase (see figure 3). That is, the more hours a volunteer devotes to volunteering in the first year, the more likely he or she is to volunteer the next year. The same effect is seen for volunteer weeks and for the number of volunteer organizations one volunteers with (see table A-1, Appendix.).

The findings indicate that busy volunteers—those who appear to be most highly attached to their volunteer work—were more likely to be retained as volunteers than episodic or occasional volunteers. Therefore, the volunteers who put in the fewest hours and weeks, and work with the smallest number of organizations also have the highest volunteer attrition rates. These patterns hold for Baby Boomers and older volunteers as well. (See figure 3, and tables A-1 and A-2, Appendix.)

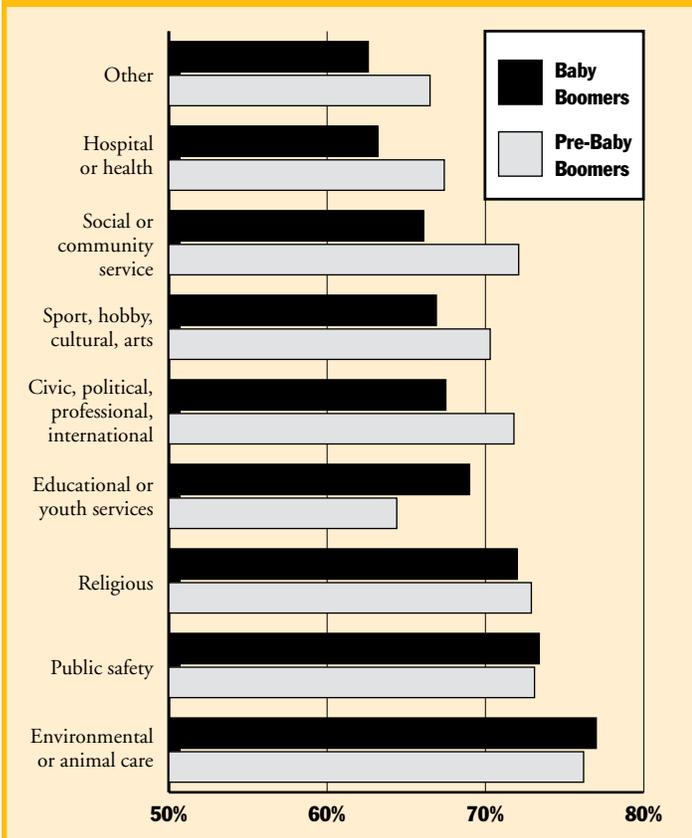
The data seems to confirm that, as volunteers increase their commitment to volunteering they increase their interest in volunteering. Indeed, one could argue that there is something of a virtuous circle that encourages those who commit the most to volunteering to commit more. Given the results for older generations, we have every reason to believe that these patterns are likely to hold as Baby Boomers age. These findings suggest that volunteer organizations should work with volunteers in the same way they work with donors to cultivate a strong sense of commitment to the organization and its goals.

### ■ Finding the Right Fit

As with paid employment, volunteers do not have perfect knowledge about the benefits and costs of potential volunteer opportunities. Individuals may accept volunteer opportunities that do not suit them, either because the duties assigned to them are not a good fit, or because they find that they are not compatible with the volunteer organizations.

<sup>6</sup> See Wilson and Musick, 1997.

**Figure 4. Volunteer Retention Rates by Type of Volunteer Organization for Baby Boomers and Older Generational Cohorts**



Figures 4 and 5 show the volunteer retention rates for Baby Boomers and older generations by the type of volunteer organization and volunteer activity in the first year of volunteering. Baby Boomers and older generations who volunteer in environmental or animal care, public safety, and religious organizations have the highest volunteer retention rates (see figure 4). This is an interesting finding in that there is something about these three fields that cuts across generations and ages. Volunteering with religious organizations is consistently high among almost all types of volunteers—including Baby Boomers and older volunteers. So it is not surprising that volunteer retention would be high among individuals who volunteer through religious organizations.

However, interpreting these findings should be undertaken with some caution. The actual percentage of volunteers retained in environmental and public safety organizations is among the lowest of all types

of organizations (2% and 1.3%, respectively). Even though volunteers in these fields are highly committed, few individuals choose to volunteer primarily with these types of organizations. Unfortunately, it is difficult to ascertain whether these types of organizations are highly adept at retaining their volunteers or whether individuals who decide to volunteer in these sectors are already highly committed to the goals of the organizations.

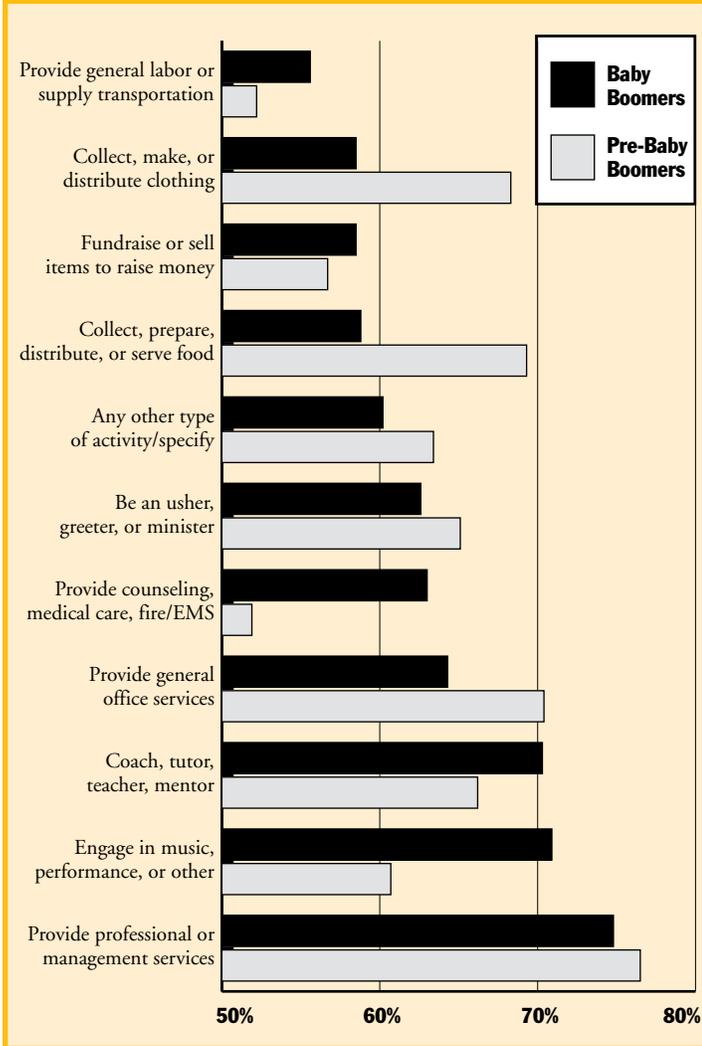
On the other hand, Baby Boomers volunteering at hospitals and health facilities had the lowest volunteer retention rates, while volunteer retention rates for earlier generations (born before 1946) were lowest for those who volunteered in educational and youth services organizations (see figure 4). These findings seem consistent with the different pathways that lead these two generations into volunteering. Because Baby Boomers are younger and also are more likely to have school-aged children still at home, they are likely to be more attached to volunteering in school and educational settings. Unlike Baby Boomers, older volunteers are more likely to have friends or relations experiencing health problems. This reality might make it more likely they would enter or pursue volunteer opportunities in the healthcare field.

The number and type of volunteer activities also seem to be related to volunteer retention. For Baby Boomers and volunteers born before 1946, the volunteer retention rate rises with the number of volunteer activities, which may indicate higher attachment to volunteering and support the contention that volunteers who are given a variety of tasks are more likely to choose to continue volunteering (see tables A-1 and A-2, Appendix.).

What may be most interesting, though, is that volunteer retention is also related to the type of volunteer activity a person performs. Figure 5 looks at Baby Boomers and older volunteers who only perform one volunteer activity<sup>7</sup> for their main volunteer organization. Certain activities are clearly related to higher volunteer retention. Professional or management activities have the highest volunteer

<sup>7</sup> 48 percent of Baby Boomers and over 50 percent of volunteers born before 1946 only perform one volunteer activity.

**Figure 5. Volunteer Retention Rates by Volunteer Activities for Baby Boomers and Older Generational Cohorts Who Only Perform One Volunteer Activity, (2002-2006)**



retention rates for both Baby Boomers and older volunteers, while general labor and supplying transportation have the lowest retention rates (see figure 5). However, after accounting for these similarities there is considerable variation between what activities seem to be related to Baby Boomer volunteer retention and what activities are related to older generations' volunteer retention. For instance, retention rates are higher for Baby Boomers who engage in volunteer activities related to music and performance, and tutoring, mentoring, and coaching than they are for older volunteers. On the other hand,

retention rates are higher for older volunteers who collect, make or distribute clothing, and collect, make, distribute, prepare, and serve food than for Baby Boomers doing the same tasks. (See figure 5.)

These results suggest it may be more promising to recruit Baby Boomers into certain types of volunteer activities. Moreover, the popularity of activities appears to be related to age differences and possibly differences in generational perspectives. For community programs that primarily provide volunteer opportunities that appear to be less attractive to Baby Boomers (and maybe to older volunteers as well), it may be imperative to consider strategies for making these activities more attractive to Boomers or to reconsider how they will utilize volunteers.

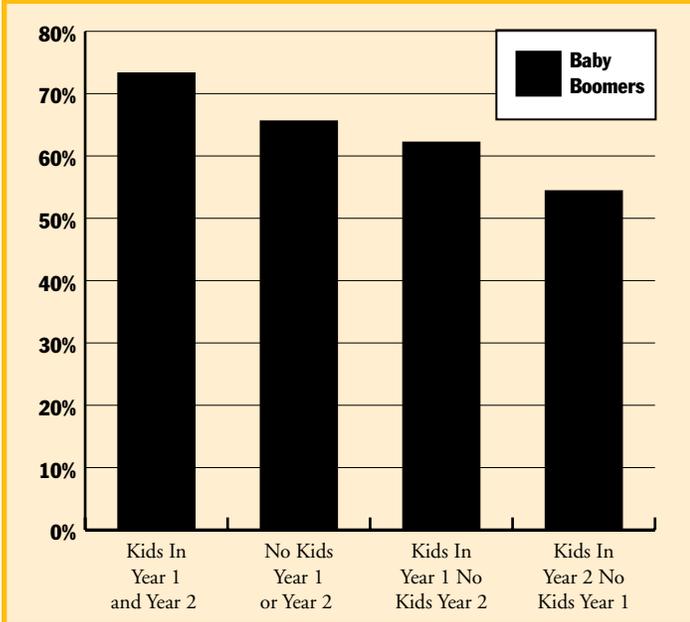
#### ■ Changing Family Status and Work Commitment

Changes in family status and employment, while sometimes welcomed, are almost always disruptive to some extent. Given this, it seems reasonable to expect that such changes may affect volunteering behavior. To investigate the relationship between volunteer retention and changes in family status we look at the change in the presence of one's own children under 18-years-old residing in the household over two years. Four conditions were examined: 1) individuals with no children of their own in the first year but with children of their own in the second; 2) individuals with children under 18 years of age in the first year but not in the second year; 3) individuals with children under 18 years of age in both the first and the second year; and 4) no children under 18 years of age residing in the household in either the first or the second year.

For volunteers born before 1946, there was no significant difference in volunteer retention rates between respondents falling into each of the four categories. For Baby Boomers volunteer retention rates were affected by changes in the presence of children under 18 in the household.<sup>8</sup> When no children resided in a household, the arrival of a new child to the household by far had the greatest impact on depressing

<sup>8</sup> For volunteers born before 1946 there was no significant difference in volunteer rates between these four groups, mainly because only two percent of these older adults ever had their own children under 18 living with them.

**Figure 6. Volunteer Retention Rates by Changes in the Presence of Children Under 18 Years in the Household for Baby Boomers (2002-2006)**



the volunteer retention rate. The second condition that was most likely to depress volunteer retention was a household that previously had children under 18 no longer having such children. (See figure 6.)

Both these findings seem reasonable. The arrival of a new child produces considerable disruptions and the requirement to reallocate time to the new arrival. On the other hand, the presence of children is a predictor of volunteering. When one's children either leave home or are no longer school-aged, some of the motivation for volunteering is reduced. One finding that is particularly interesting is that, among Baby Boomers, volunteers who do not have children have the second highest volunteer retention rate. This suggests that Baby Boomers face few barriers to volunteering, and might be induced to increase their volunteering commitments with the right incentives.

Changes in employment status also appear to predict volunteer retention for Baby Boomers and volunteers born before 1946. It appears that moving out of the workforce is most likely to reduce volunteer retention among Baby Boomers, while losing one's job is most likely to reduce volunteer retention for volunteers born before 1946. (See figure 7.)

Interestingly, some studies have suggested that Baby Boomers may be more likely to volunteer as they reduce their work hours.<sup>9</sup> In particular, some speculation exists that Baby Boomers moving from full-time to part-time work will increase their volunteering.<sup>10</sup> The speculation is that this increase in leisure time will create an opportunity to recruit more Baby Boomers into volunteering or lead them to increase the time they already devote. It seems reasonable that volunteer retention might also be positively affected by a reduction in work hours and an increase in leisure time.

While some evidence exists of the link between reduced work hours and increased volunteering,<sup>11</sup> the evidence compiled for this report does not seem to support this conclusion for volunteer retention. Holding employment status constant, decreasing work hours does not lead to higher volunteer retention. Indeed, increasing work hours seems to slightly increase Baby Boomers' and older volunteers' propensity to be retained as a volunteer (see tables A-1 and A-2, Appendix.). While the differences are relatively modest in practical terms, they are statistically significant for Baby Boomers.

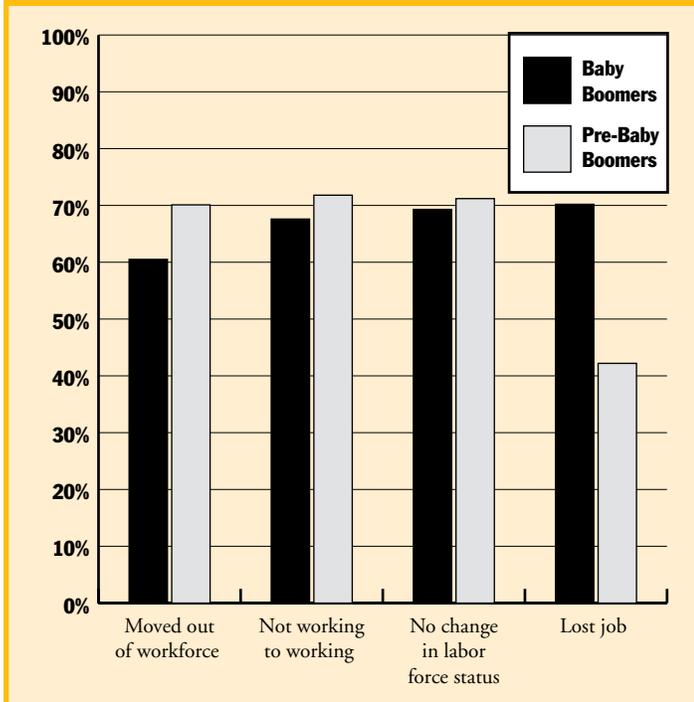
Given these findings, it might suggest the need for some caution in speculating about the impact that retirement or reduced working hours might have on volunteering for Baby Boomers. The underlying assumption in the assertion that reduced work commitments will result in more volunteering is that volunteering is a substitute for working. While this seems perfectly reasonable, the volunteer retention findings in this report suggest that working and volunteering may not be substitutes for each other. Instead, it may be that work provides the social and institutional networks that present opportunities for volunteering. As work is reduced, those networks and connections that lead to volunteer opportunities are either eliminated or diminished, leading to less

<sup>9</sup> See Mutchler, Burr, and Caro, 2003. See Wilson and Musick, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> See Harvard, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> See Mutchler, Burr, and Caro, 2003; Freeman, 1997; and Wilson and Musick, 1999 for discussions of changes in work hours and volunteering.

**Figure 7. Volunteer Retention Rates by Changes in Workforce Status, Baby Boomers and Pre-Baby Boomers (2002-2006)**



volunteer retention—and maybe even less overall volunteering. On the other hand, if many Baby Boomers decide to retire later and work full-time longer than past generations, as some speculate, that could translate into higher volunteer retention and volunteering rates for older Americans.

### ■ Pathways to Consistent Volunteering

The pathways into volunteering also appear to be an important predictor of volunteer retention. Baby Boomers who became volunteers by approaching an organization on their own had slightly higher volunteer retention rates than volunteers who were asked by someone to volunteer (see table A-1 and A-2, Appendix.).<sup>12</sup> While the actual differences in retention rates are small, they are still statistically significant. Moreover, a one-percentage point difference in retention rates could represent as many as 200,000 more volunteers. Since it is not entirely clear what motivates some volunteers to seek out their own volunteer opportunities while others wait to be asked, this creates something of a dilemma for organizations seeking long-term volunteers but this reality may illustrate the value of marketing your volunteer opportunities.

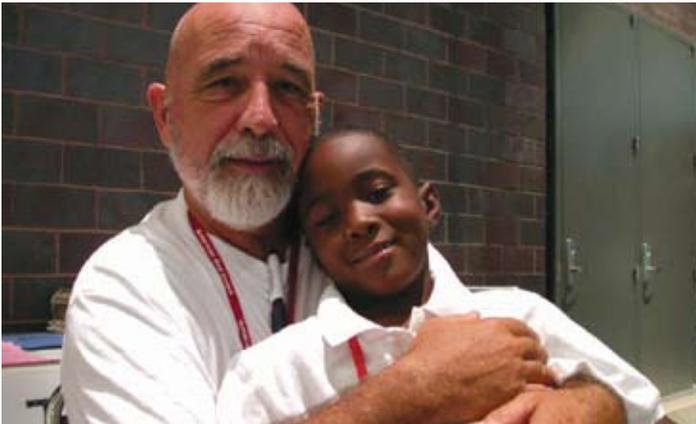
It may be more possible to influence the volunteer retention rates of Baby Boomers who volunteer because someone asks them to volunteer. It turns out that who asks you to become a volunteer is related to volunteer retention. For example, Baby Boomer volunteers who were asked by someone in the volunteer organization had the highest volunteer retention rates. On the other hand, volunteers who originally became volunteers because their boss or employer asked them to volunteer had the lowest volunteer retention rates (see table A-1, Appendix.).

This finding is particularly interesting in light of the growing popularity of employment-based volunteer recruitment programs. It would appear that volunteers might feel less commitment to their volunteer activity if they feel pressured into doing it by their employer. This stands in stark contrast to being approached and asked to volunteer by someone in the organization where the volunteer activity will take place. Being asked by the organization seems to produce a much higher level of commitment to volunteering. This suggests that it may be important to find ways of differentiating between using the workplace as a venue for volunteer recruitment and being or at least feeling pressured to volunteer by one's boss.



<sup>12</sup> See Freeman 1997 for discussion of relationship of being asked to actual volunteering.

Holding age constant, Baby Boomers appear to be more likely to volunteer than their parents as they reach early and late middle age. The combination of a higher propensity to volunteer and the large size of the Baby Boomer generation indicates a huge potential source of new volunteers for community service activities in the future. As Baby Boomers age, there is a strong possibility that they will volunteer in extremely large numbers over the next 10 to 15 years—exhibiting volunteer rates and numbers that exceed earlier generations of older Americans. In fact, the Corporation used Census data to demonstrate that the number of older American volunteers (age 65+) is expected to increase by 50 percent by 2020 (from almost 9 million in 2007 to over 13 million in 2020).



However, the volunteer rate, like the employment rate, masks a lot of dynamism and volatility in the supply and demand for volunteers. An initial decision to volunteer does not mean that an individual will volunteer on a continuous basis. Indeed it appears that on average from 2002 to 2006, about 30 percent of all Baby Boomers who chose to volunteer in one year decided not to volunteer in the next. For example, an estimated 17.4 million Baby Boomers volunteered in 2005 and again in 2006. At the same time, an estimated 8.4 million Baby Boomers who volunteered in 2005 did not volunteer in 2006. While the good news is that most volunteers choose to volunteer at least two years in a row, a 30 percent attrition rate among employees in most industries in the private or government sectors would be considered very high given that the average employment turnover rates for 2006 were about 23 percent. ([www.nobscot.com/survey/index.cfm](http://www.nobscot.com/survey/index.cfm))

While many volunteers who leave volunteering are replaced by new recruits, the recruitment of new volunteers, unfortunately, does not make up for the loss of volunteers through attrition. On average, for Baby Boomers, over the four-year period from 2002-2006, the volunteer turnover rate was 30 percent while the volunteer replacement rates—the percentage of volunteers who were non-volunteers the year before—was only 26 percent (See table 1). A potential lesson is that the best way to keep volunteer rates high is to find ways of retaining existing volunteers.

What are some of the ways to increase volunteer retention? First, keep volunteers engaged. It appears that volunteers with a high attachment to their volunteer work also have high volunteer retention rates. Volunteer managers should focus on finding ways to cultivate greater interest and involvement among existing volunteers. This report indicates that the more time a volunteer spends volunteering with an organization and the more volunteer activities a volunteer is involved with, the more likely she or he is to keep volunteering.

Second, one place to develop committed volunteers is among volunteers who are already volunteering (perhaps episodically) with another organization. The volunteer rate tends to increase with the number of volunteer organizations, at least until the volunteer reaches five organizations. Sixty-three percent of all volunteers only volunteer with one organization. This suggests a real opportunity to increase volunteering among Baby Boomers by asking people who are already engaged to do more.

Third, the types of volunteer activities undertaken and where those activities take place have implications for volunteer retention among Baby Boomers. Certain organizations and activities are more likely to retain volunteers than other organizations and activities. For example, volunteers to religious organizations are above average in their volunteer retention, while volunteers to healthcare are below average—suggesting that healthcare organizations may need to find more effective approaches for retaining volunteers. Volunteers doing professional or management tasks also have above average retention rates, while volunteers that provide general labor or supply transportation have below average retention rates.

Given these findings, in order to retain Baby Boomers as volunteers, organizations should find ways of letting potential volunteers know about the more attractive volunteer opportunities available. But volunteer programs must also begin to consider how to make less attractive opportunities more inviting. Organizations with below average volunteer retention rates, such as healthcare, social and community organizations, and sports, hobby and art and cultural organizations, must find ways to increase the long-term commitment of Baby Boomers to volunteering with organizations. Same is true of volunteer activities, such as general labor and supplying transportation, which also have below average volunteer retention rates.

Fourth, volunteer retention is higher for volunteers recruited directly by a nonprofit or community-based organization. Volunteers asked by their employer or boss to volunteer have substantially lower volunteer retention rates compared to other forms of recruiting volunteers. This suggests that it is critical to differentiate between using the workplace as a venue for volunteer recruiting and making volunteering a work commitment. An individual that is pressured—or feels pressured—to volunteer by an employer may respond to the initial request but is far less likely to make a long-term commitment.

Finally, it is important to remember that in general, anything that pushes up volunteer retention rates among any groups will increase overall volunteer rates. Volunteer turnover should be seen as just as undesirable as turnover among paid employees. For most businesses and nonprofits, a 30 percent employee turnover rate would be an indication of a workplace problem. The same should be true for volunteers. Two models of volunteer retention that might be considered are the donor model and the employee model.

Most charitable organizations attempt to retain repeat donors, especially large donors. To get repeat gifts from large donors, charitable organizations must spend time cultivating the donor and making him or her feel connected to the organization and its mission. Some of the same tools and approaches used to encourage a large donor to make a repeat gift might be helpful if applied to volunteers. In a sense, through their time commitments, volunteers are making a huge in-kind donation to the resources and mission of the



organization. Moreover, research suggests there is a strong connection between volunteering and giving.<sup>13</sup> Thus, it makes sense to find ways of encouraging substantial volunteering because it will produce substantial in-kind gifts and could simultaneously produce considerable monetary gifts.

The employment model assumes that volunteers should not be seen as just free labor. Instead, they should be approached as a key resource and an integral part of the organization's success. Most employers recognize that employee turnover imposes both direct and indirect costs. The same is true of volunteers. The loss of a volunteer imposes search costs to find a replacement. When a replacement is found the new volunteers must be trained and supervised. They must get to know the work and mission of the organization. They have to form productive work relationships with the paid and unpaid members of a charitable organization's staff. The human resources field has developed a host of insights and tools for reducing employee turnover and our recent reports on volunteer management capacity in nonprofit organizations illustrate that many of those tools (such as offering training and professional development opportunities) would be helpful in reducing turnover among volunteers.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See Lee, Piliavin and Call, 1999; Brooks and Lewis, 2001; and Freeman 1997 for discussions of the relationship between charitable giving and volunteering.

<sup>14</sup> See *Volunteer Management Capacity* series, 2004.

<b>Table A-1 Volunteer Retention and Volunteer Turnover Rates for Baby Boomers, 2002-2006</b>			
<b>FACTORS</b>	<b>2-Year Retention Rate</b>	<b>1-Year Turnover Rate</b>	<b>Significant Relationship</b>
1 to 14 hour(s)	52.1%	47.9%	**
15 to 49 hours	64.7%	35.3%	**
50 to 99 hours	73.8%	26.2%	**
100 to 499 hours	79.9%	20.1%	**
500 hours or more	83.2%	16.8%	**
Episodic volunteers (0-2 weeks per year)	52.8%	47.2%	**
Occasional volunteers (3-11 weeks per year)	63.6%	36.4%	**
Regular volunteers (12 or more weeks per year)	78.6%	21.4%	**
Coach, tutor, teacher, mentor	70.3%	29.7%	**
Be an usher, greeter, or minister	62.6%	37.4%	NO
Collect, prepare, distribute or serve food	58.8%	41.2%	**
Collect, make, or distribute clothing	58.5%	41.5%	NO
Fundraise or sell items to raise money	58.5%	41.5%	**
Provide counseling, medical care, fire/EMS	63%	37%	NO
Provide general office services	64.3%	35.7%	NO
Provide professional or management	74.8%	25.2%	**
Engage in music, performance, or other	70.9%	29.1%	**
General labor, supply transportation	55.6%	44.4%	**
Any other type of activity/specify	60.2%	39.8%	**
1 organization	62.4%	37.6%	**
2 organizations	76.7%	23.3%	**
3 organizations	84.9%	15.1%	**
4 organizations	90.6%	9.4%	**
5 or more organizations	90.6%	9.4%	**
<b>HOW YOU BECAME A VOLUNTEER</b>			
Approached the organization	69.6%	30.4%	NO
Was asked	68.3%	31.7%	*
Some other way	69.9%	30.1%	NO
<b>ASKED BY</b>			
Boss or employer	53.9%	46.1%	**
Friend, relative or coworker	66%	34%	**

\*\* - Significant at 1 percent level

\* - Significant at 5 percent level

NO - Not significant

Table A-1 Volunteer Retention and Volunteer Turnover Rates for Baby Boomers, 2002-2006			
FACTORS	2-Year Retention Rate	1-Year Turnover Rate	Significant Relationship
<b>ASKED BY</b>			
Someone in the org/school	70.5%	29.5%	**
Someone else	63.9%	36.1%	NO
Work Hours Increased	71.6%	28.4%	**
Work hours Decreased	68.4%	31.6%	NO
Work Hours remained stable	68.4%	31.6%	**
Civic, political, professional, international	67.5%	32.5%	NO
Educational or youth services	69%	31%	NO
Environmental or animal care	77%	23%	**
Hospital or health	63.2%	36.8%	**
Public safety	73.4%	26.6%	NO
Religious	72%	28%	**
Social or community service	66.1%	33.9%	**
Sport, hobby, cultural, arts	66.9%	33.1%	NO
Other	62.6%	37.4%	**
Total	69%	31%	—
Moved out of workforce	60.5%	39.5%	**
Lost job	70.2%	29.8%	NO
No change in labor force status	69.3%	30.7%	**
Not working to working	67.6%	32.4%	NO
Total	69%	31%	—
Kids in year 2 no kids year 1	54.4%	45.6%	**
Kids in year 1 no kids year 2	62.2%	37.8%	**
Kids in year 1 and year 2	73.3%	26.7%	**
No kids year 1 or year 2	65.6%	34.4%	**
Total	69%	31%	—
One Volunteer Activity	63.5%	36.5%	**
Two Volunteer Activities	69.1%	30.9%	NO
Three Volunteer Activities	73%	27%	**
Four Volunteer Activities	76.9%	23.1%	**
Five or more Volunteer Activities	82.1%	17.9%	**
Total	69%	31%	—

\*\* - Significant at 1 percent level  
 \* - Significant at 5 percent level  
 NO - Not significant

<b>Table A-2 Volunteer Retention Rates and Volunteer Turnover Rates By Selected Characteristics For Volunteers Born Before 1946 (2002-2006)</b>			
<b>FACTORS</b>	<b>2-Year Retention Rate</b>	<b>1-Year Turnover Rate</b>	<b>Significant Relationship</b>
1 to 14 hour(s)	51.1%	48.9%	**
15 to 49 hours	65%	35%	**
50 to 99 hours	73.3%	26.7%	**
100 to 499 hours	82%	18%	**
500 hours or more	84.8%	15.2%	**
Episodic volunteers (0-2 weeks per year)	52.6%	47.4%	**
Occasional volunteers (3-11 weeks per year)	65.3%	34.7%	**
Regular volunteers (12 or more weeks per year)	78.8%	21.2%	**
Coach, tutor, teacher, mentor	66.2%	33.8%	NO
Be an usher, greeter, or minister	65.1%	34.9%	NO
Collect, prepare, distribute or serve food	69.3%	30.7%	*
Collect, make, or distribute clothing	68.3%	31.7%	NO
Fundraise or sell items to raise money	56.7%	43.3%	**
Provide counseling, medical care, fire/EMS	51.9%	48.1%	*
Provide general office services	70.4%	29.6%	*
Provide professional or management	76.5%	23.5%	**
Engage in music, performance, or other	60.7%	39.3%	NO
General labor, supply transportation	52.2%	47.8%	**
Any other type of activity/specify	63.4%	36.6%	NO
1 organization	65%	35%	**
2 organizations	80.5%	19.5%	**
3 organizations	89.2%	10.8%	**
4 organizations	90.1%	9.9%	**
5 or more organizations	91%	9%	**
<b>HOW YOU BECAME A VOLUNTEER</b>			
Approached the organization	73.4%	26.6%	**
Was asked	69.3%	30.7%	**
Some other way	70.7%	29.3%	NO
<b>ASKED BY</b>			
Boss or employer	65.1%	34.9%	NO
Friend, relative or coworker	69%	31%	NO

\*\* - Significant at 1 percent level  
 \* - Significant at 5 percent level  
 NO - Not significant

<b>Table A-2 Volunteer Retention Rates and Volunteer Turnover Rates By Selected Characteristics For Volunteers Born Before 1946 (2002-2006)</b>			
<b>FACTORS</b>	<b>2-Year Retention Rate</b>	<b>1-Year Turnover Rate</b>	<b>Significant Relationship</b>
<b>ASKED BY</b>			
Someone in the org/school	69.7%	30%	NO
Someone else	72.7%	27.3%	NO
Work Hours Increased	73%	27%	NO
Work hours Decreased	70.4%	29.6%	NO
Work Hours remained stable	72.5%	27.5%	NO
Civic, political, professional, international	71.8%	28.2%	NO
Educational or youth services	64.4%	35.6%	**
Environmental or animal care	76.2%	23.8%	NO
Hospital or health	67.4%	32.6%	**
Public safety	73.1%	26.9%	NO
Religious	72.9%	27.1%	**
Social or community service	72.1%	27.9%	NO
Sport, hobby, cultural, arts	70.3%	29.7%	NO
Other	66.5%	33.5%	NO
Total	71%	29%	—
Moved out of workforce	70.1%	29.9%	NO
Lost job	42.2%	57.8%	**
No change in labor force status	71.2%	28.8%	NO
Not working to working	71.8%	28.2%	NO
Total	71%	29%	—
Kids in year 2 no kids year 1	62.6%	37.4%	NO
Kids in year 1 no kids year 2	74.9%	25.1%	NO
Kids in year 1 and year 2	64.5%	35.5%	NO
No kids year 1 or year 2	71.1%	28.9%	NO
Total	71%	29%	—
One Volunteer Activity	64.4%	35.6%	**
Two Volunteer Activities	70.9%	29.1%	NO
Three Volunteer Activities	77.3%	22.7%	**
Four Volunteer Activities	82.5%	17.5%	**
Five or more Volunteer Activities	85.2%	14.8%	**
Total	71%	29%	—

\*\* - Significant at 1 percent level  
 \* - Significant at 5 percent level  
 NO - Not significant

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