

Characterizing the Propensity to Volunteer in America

Shelton M. Jones¹, David Weitzenkamp¹, Kathleen Jordan¹, Jeniffer Iriondo-Perez¹,
John Foster-Bey², Heather Meier¹, Annette M. Green¹

¹RTI International, 3040 Cornwallis Road, Research Triangle Park, NC 27709

²Corporation for National and Community Service, 1201 NY Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20525

1. Introduction

The birth of the Baby Boomer generation marked one of the single most significant contributions to our society today. Born after World War II, between 1946 and 1964, Baby Boomers are followed from their birth through the present, to not only document their specific volunteer experiences, but to better understand how they contribute to their community and to society. Since volunteering and the activities undertaken by volunteers are so important to our society, it is very important to understand why people volunteer. If understood, we can establish policies, programs, or campaigns that better encourage volunteering or better harness the immense resources volunteers can bring. Specifically, if we can better motivate one of the largest generations also well-suited to volunteering, the Baby Boomers, our entire nation will benefit.

Over time, researchers have investigated how and why the boomers volunteer. While research has shown progressive snapshots of boomer volunteering, there has been little research showing the trends over time in this behavior. Certainly, as a person ages, his or her willingness to volunteer and volunteer interests change. Not surprisingly, these patterns are apparent in both prior research and the new results reported here. To reach a thorough understanding of boomer volunteering, it is helpful first to know more about who the Baby Boomers are. Examining both the prior work and new data, we find that measures of community engagement to be a particularly compelling predictor of volunteering. Specifically, ownership of a home or business correlates with increased volunteering. The relationship is particularly strong with voting, where those who voted in a recent election are more than twice as likely to volunteer as those who did not. Also exciting, is the discovery that once a person is sufficiently engaged in volunteering, volunteering continues. Both people who volunteer more than an hour a month and people who spread their volunteering out over many weeks in the year are more likely to continue volunteering the next year.

In looking at things like voting and demographics, this paper addresses two kinds of predictors of volunteering: those that describe volunteers, and those that seem to suggest ways to increase volunteering. While the focus is on Baby Boomers, the lessons are applicable to all.

2. Background

There are three primary objectives of our research as indicated below:

To characterize Baby Boomer volunteering

Determine how Baby Boomers differ from other generations

Determine how their volunteering changes over time.

Our statistical analyses are based on large nationally representative datasets, specifically the Volunteer Supplement of the Current Population Survey for 1989, 2002, 2003, and 2004. The CPS sample is a monthly survey of about 50,000 households selected to represent the civilian non-institutional population of the United States. Participants aged 15 years and older are interviewed about their labor force characteristics such as employment, income, number of hours worked, education, and reasons for not working. These data are used to provide national estimates on specific characteristics and statistical models are examined to better understand labor force issues. Information may be obtained at <http://www.bls.census.gov/cps/overmain.htm>.

Since differences across and within generations can lead to different volunteering behavior, we will compare Baby Boomers with four other age cohorts, namely; Greatest Generation, Silent Generation, Generation X, and the Echo Boomers. The specific age categories for each cohort are provided in **Table 1**.

Table 1: Generation Groups

| | |
|---|--|
| The Greatest Generation | born from 1901 to 1924 (Boomers' parents) |
| The Silent Generation (and the WWII babies) | born from 1925 to 1945 |
| Baby Boomers | born from 1946 to 1964 |
| Older Boomers | born from 1946 to 1957 |
| Younger Boomers | born from 1958 to 1964 |
| Generation X or GenX | born from 1965 to 1976 |
| The Echo Boomers | born from 1977 to 1995 (Boomers' children) |

3. Statistical Analysis

The proportion of Americans who report they volunteer varies widely based on the study methods employed (Brudney and Gazley, 2006). In virtually all studies, however, the proportions who report volunteering are quite high: about one-quarter to one-half of all Americans. Most national studies ask only about “formal” volunteering, that is, volunteering through organizations such as the PTA or Red Cross, rather than what is termed “informal” volunteering, such as helping a neighbor or family member (Weitzman et al., 2002, p. 241). In these studies, about one quarter of all American households have at least one adult who does formal volunteering. In about one household in ten, both husband and wife volunteer (BLS, 2004; Osili, 2005). Volunteers were also more likely to support their communities in other ways, such as through voting and charitable giving (BLS, 2004; Kutner and Love, 2003; Weitzman et al., 2002).

In our statistical analyses, synthetic design variables are defined to represent the stratification and cluster variables because these characteristics are censored from the CPS public-use data files. These design variable surrogates are used in the estimation of sampling variance based on an approximation method described by Jolliffe (2003). This method is applicable for point estimation and estimation of conditional means from regression analyses.

Since the prior data suggested that demographic differences were important in volunteering, we examined Baby Boomers, looking first at their distribution of demographic characteristics. Using data from the entire 2004 CPS (not just from the Volunteer Supplement) we compared the demographic characteristics of the two subgroups of Boomers (**Table 2**).

Table 2: Volunteering Differences in Two Age Groups of Boomers from the 2004 CPS

| | Birth Year | |
|--|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| | Older Boomers 1946-1957 | Younger Boomers 1958-1964 |
| Volunteered | | |
| Past Year | 32.6 | 35.3 |
| Prior to Past Year | 18.5 | 14.9 |
| Never | 48.9 | 49.8 |
| Median Hours Volunteered Among Volunteers | 53.0 | 52.0 |
| Proportion Who Worked 100+ Hours | 35.7 | 34.1 |

There were no major differences across the two subgroups of Boomers for the proportion that volunteered in the past year, ever volunteered, or in the number of hours spent volunteering.

3.1. Organization Comparisons

To better understand what motivates volunteers, it is important to understand where people who volunteer contribute their time. When asked what motivates them, volunteers were most likely to express their desire to help others (Okun, Barr, and Herzog, 1998; Prisuta, 2003; Weitzman et al., 2002). Most give their time for a combination of altruistic and instrumental reasons (Brudney, 1990; McCurley and Lynch, 1996). The altruists serve out of a sense of personal responsibility or civic duty, a desire to make a difference, and an extension of religious convictions. But volunteers also serve to pursue a personal interest in a cause, to learn new skills, and to meet new people (Brudney, 2005). Compared with older generations, Boomers were more likely to volunteer to be with people they enjoy and less likely to mention that they volunteered out of a sense of civic duty or religious commitment (Prisuta, 2003).

Investigations into why volunteers serve were valuable not only to inform promotional and recruitment activities, but also to understand how organizations can retain volunteers over time. Retention issues were complicated by the fact that volunteers may enter service for altruistic reasons (e.g., desire to make a difference) but stay because of the personal benefits they derive from the activity (e.g., forging new social bonds) (Brudney, 2005).

The CPS groups volunteer organizations into seven types (plus an “other” category):

- Civic, political, professional, or international
- Educational or youth service
- Environmental or animal care
- Hospital or other health
- Public safety
- Religious
- Social or community service
- Sport, hobby, cultural, or arts.

Approximately one third of all Baby Boomers volunteer for religious organizations (**Figure 1**). Educational or youth service organizations occupy another quarter, with 12% volunteering for social or community service organizations.

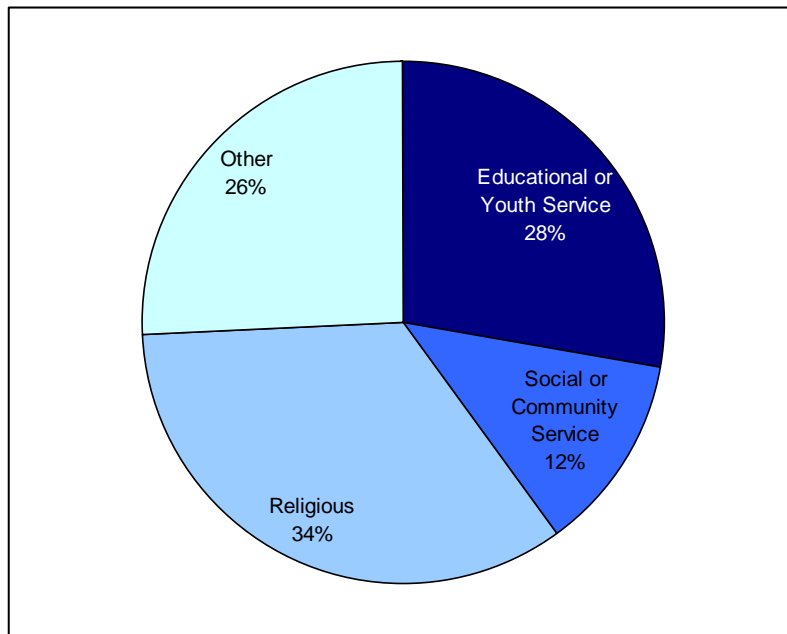


Figure 1: Baby Boomer Volunteering by Organization

3.2 Age Cohort Comparisons

The characteristics of Baby Boomer volunteers may be noted not just by examining the boomers themselves, but by comparing them to other generations. The level of volunteer involvement among Americans peaks at midlife. Surprisingly, this means that volunteering at midlife is associated with more, rather than fewer, obligations (Center

for Health Communication, 2004). Other studies support the contention that the busiest people really do volunteer more (Weitzman et al. 2002).

Previous studies have found Americans 35 to 44 years old to be the most likely to volunteer, followed by 45- to 54-year-olds, 55- to 64-year-olds, and teenagers. Other age groups have been found to volunteer less. We found that, using the 2004 CPS data, the rankings of propensity to volunteer has not changed for the various age groups, although the rate of volunteering among those aged 35 to 44 years was only 1% higher than the rate for those 45 to 54 years old.

When we look at the age cohorts, we find that the Boomers, who were aged 40 to 58 years in 2004, volunteered in the greatest proportions of any age group, with one third of Baby Boomers reporting having volunteered in the previous year (**Figure 2**). GenX individuals (28 to 39 years old) volunteered next most often.

For the most part, these findings suggest which groups of people are more or less likely to volunteer rather than describing a particularly actionable predictor of behavior. Still, these demographic relationships do describe populations that may be targeted without necessarily specifying the best way to target them.

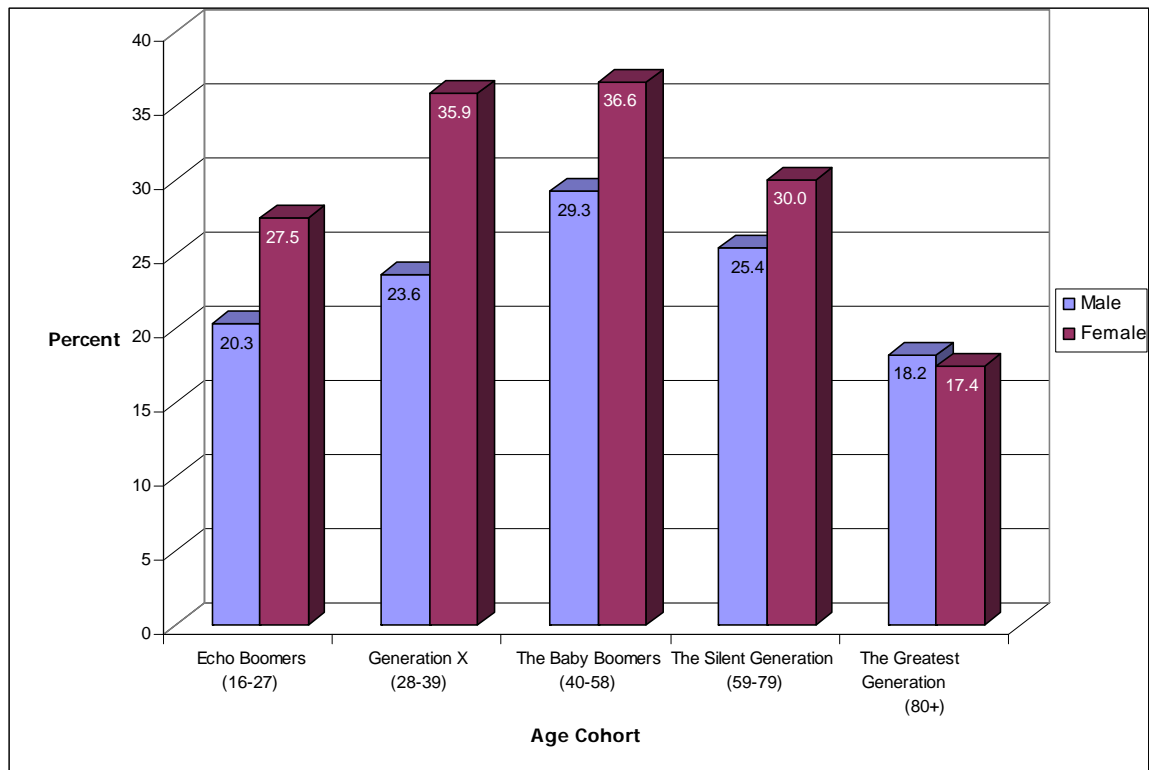


Figure 2: Percent Volunteering by Cohort and Gender

The 2004 CPS data were consistent with previous studies showing that volunteering follows traditional gender roles—across all age groups except those over 80, women volunteer more than men (**Figure 2**). In the CPS data, about 37 out of 100 Boomer women volunteered, compared to 29 Boomer men out of 100. Women may be more likely to volunteer because somewhat fewer women work outside the home or because they view volunteering as an extension of their role as family nurturers (Center for Health Communication, 2004).

In all age cohorts, whites volunteered in the largest proportions (31%) (**Figure 3**). Except for the Echo Boomers, the ranking of other racial-ethnic groups with regard to volunteerism was blacks second (21%), Asians third (19%), and Hispanics last (15%). (Among Echo Boomers, Asians volunteered more than blacks.)

Consistent with previous studies, higher education was associated with higher rates of volunteering: half of all college-educated Baby Boomers volunteered in the past year. Across all age cohorts, at least one third of individuals with a college education volunteered (**Figure 3**). Excluding Echo Boomers (many of whom were still in high school or college), only 1 in 10 of Americans without a high school diploma volunteered.

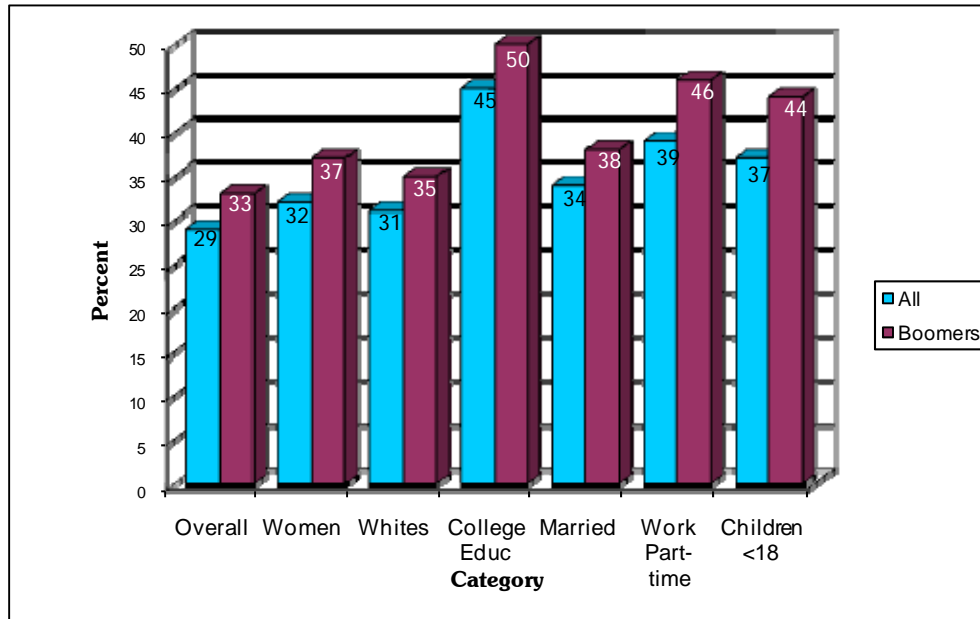


Figure 3: Comparison of Volunteering During Past Year (Boomers versus Overall Population)

3.3 Race/Ethnicity Comparisons

Because differences in behavior that appear to be the result of Americans' race and ethnicity may actually result from educational and income differences between whites and minorities, we examined race and ethnic differences for different levels of education.

Black and White Differences. For those with a high school education or less, rates of volunteering for blacks were higher than for whites. In fact, for Americans over age 58 without a high school education, blacks volunteered at rates two to three times those of whites. Rates of volunteering among blacks with a college degree were lower than those for whites with a college degree. Among those with some college, blacks volunteered at higher rates than whites among those ages 58 or younger, but at lower rates than whites for those over age 58.

Differences Between Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites. Among those without a college degree, Hispanics also volunteered at rates similar to or higher than those of non-Hispanic whites. Among those without a high school degree, Hispanics volunteered at rates three to four times those of non-Hispanic whites.

Differences for Asians Compared to Whites. Overall, Asian Americans tended to be less likely to volunteer than white Americans, except among those with a college education. Asian Americans with a high school degree or some college tended to have substantially lower rates of volunteering than white Americans, whereas Asians with a college degree tended to volunteer at substantially higher rates than white Americans.

All Minorities Compared to Whites. The rate of volunteering increases with education for all minority groups, and 30% or more of all college-educated minority Americans reported that they volunteered in the past year. Income discrepancies between whites and minorities may also be a factor as wealthy individuals were three times more likely to be asked to volunteer than were poor individuals (Hodkinson, 1995).

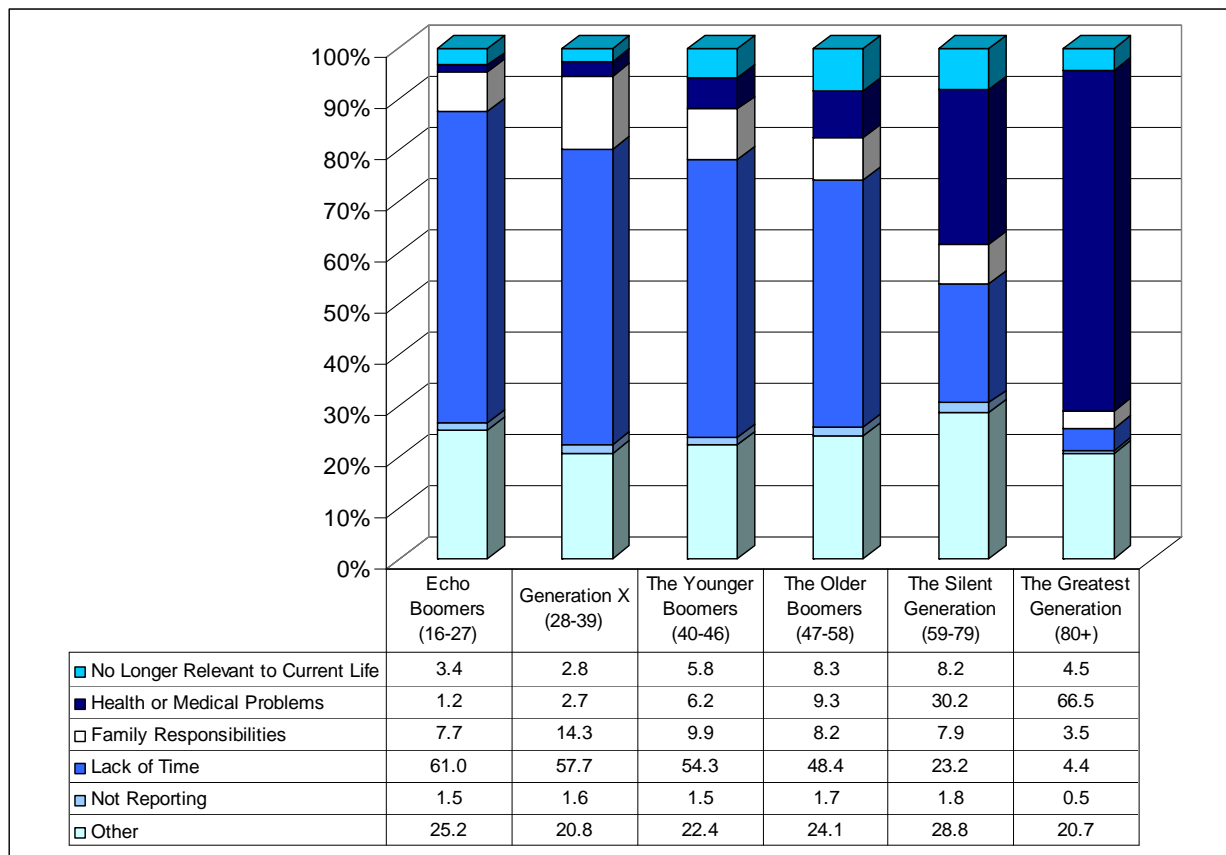


Figure 4: Reasons for Not Volunteering in the Past Year

Lack of time was the most frequently reported reason for not volunteering in the past year among those younger than age 59 and the proportion reporting lack of time declined with age (**Figure 4**). The proportion reporting health problems as the main reason for not volunteering increased with age. A medical or health problem was the reason reported most often for not volunteering among the two older cohorts of Americans. Having family responsibilities was the third most important reason for not volunteering, and the proportion giving this explanation also declined with age.

4. Age Cohort Analysis over Time

To examine how Boomers' volunteering behaviors were different from those of earlier generations, we compared changes in volunteering between 1989 and 2004 for those aged 45 to 54, the middle 10 years of the Boomer age group in 2004. For comparison, we used the findings from an analysis of the CPS Volunteer Supplement administered in May of 1989 (Hayge, 1991).

The reported rate of volunteering among Americans overall in the CPS was substantially higher in 2004 than in 1989 and the increase occurred for all age cohorts. For the population as a whole, volunteering increased 8% between 1989 and 2004 (from 20.4% to 28.8%). The greatest increase in volunteering was among teenagers—the volunteering rate for 16 to 19 year olds escalated from 13% to 29% in the intervening 15 years.

We also examined the difference in the reported rates of volunteering among Boomers themselves between the 1989 and 2004 surveys. In 1989 the youngest Boomers would have turned 25 and the oldest would have turned 43. In the 1989 survey, the reported volunteering among those aged 25 to 34 was 22% and it was 31% among those aged 35 to 44 years old. This is a typical pattern. There was also an 8% to 9% difference in rates of volunteering between these two age groups in the CPS in 2002-2004.

To examine the interaction of the factors that influence volunteering for Boomers, we constructed a statistical model, using data on Baby Boomers only, which included a number of different possible influences, for example, age, race/ethnicity, marital status, and the presence of school-aged children in the home. We then examined what factors besides demographics still predicted volunteering.

Homeowners and their resident family members were 37% more likely to volunteer than renters. Controlling for all other predictors, business owners or family members of business owners were more than 40% more likely to volunteer than non-owners. This is consistent with other studies that have found home ownership to be strongly correlated with community involvement, including formal volunteering. Homeowners were significantly more involved in community affairs, such as participating in neighborhood associations, community action groups, and social clubs (Sampson, 1988). This relationship has been found to exist even in low-income households (Reingold, 1995).

Although it would seem logical that having to work at a job would reduce volunteering activities, previous research has found that the busiest people actually tend to volunteer more. In our analyses, we found that those who were still employed were twice as likely to volunteer as those who had already retired, even controlling for age and disability.

The addition of children to a household or the increase in the numbers of children was associated with an increased likelihood of volunteering. For each child added to a household, the chances of volunteering increased by 37%. This is consistent with literature that has found that people with children under age 18 in the home were more likely to volunteer than those without children.

All told, the strongest predictor of volunteerism was whether or not the respondent voted in the last election. People who voted were twice as likely to volunteer as those who did not. This, together with home/business ownership, reinforces the notion that community engagement is strongly linked to volunteering.

5. Additional Analyses over Time

Comparing Baby Boomers to other generations reveals some generational differences suggesting that the older generations are more likely to volunteer than the younger generations. If this pattern holds, it would seem likely that Baby Boomers themselves volunteered less often when they were younger. Given a dataset that follows a cohort of Baby Boomers from year to year over a long time period, we could test this hypothesis. No such data is known to exist. Since a volunteer supplement has been part of the CPS data collection in 1989 as well as yearly after 2002, it is possible to produce an analysis similar to the cohort or panel analysis. A representative sample of the older half of Baby Boomers also responded in 1974 and, where possible these results are discussed below.

To conclude the analyses, we compare results on people over two successive years to clarify what predicts sustained or future volunteering. In this case, we find that reaching a certain threshold of regular volunteering predisposes one to continuing that behavior over time.

Before examining potential changes in Baby Boomer volunteering over time, it's important to note that the generation itself has changed, particularly in ways already shown to predict volunteering. Baby Boomers are older and with that age comes an increased likelihood of owning a home or a business, being married/divorced, having kids, and working for different kinds of employers. Immigration and differential mortality have changed the current demographic make-up of the Baby Boomers. In 2004, nearly 80% of Boomers owned their own home compared to 62% in 1989 (**Table 3**). Percentage of boomers with college degrees increased from about 24% in 1989 to more than 30% in 2004. Never married Baby Boomers dropped from 21% of the cohort in 1989 to 11% in 2004. On the other hand, more than 70% of the Baby Boomer generation lived with their own children in 1989 compared to 36% in 2004.

Table 3: Selected Predictors of Baby Boomer Volunteering Over Time (%)

| | 1989 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 |
|-------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Owned home | 62.09 | 78.04 | 78.58 | 79.76 |
| College degree | 23.76 | 29.87 | 30.1 | 30.58 |
| Lived with own children | 70.85 | 42.59 | 39.49 | 36.34 |
| Never been married | 20.63 | 11.1 | 11.32 | 11.06 |

6. Summary

Overall, Baby Boomers volunteer more than other Americans under age 59. The statistical analyses conducted using Jolliffe’s variance estimation approach found differences between Baby Boomers and others were most often associated with age-related life stage changes. However, Putnam (2000, p.130) provided data indicating that in 1998 the rates of volunteering among the older Boomers had increased slightly compared to Americans who were the same age in 1975, whereas the rate of volunteering among younger Boomers declined substantially compared to individuals who were that age in 1975. This decline in rates of volunteering was seen among those born between the years of 1953 and 1962.

Boomers have the opportunity to make an enormous contribution to volunteerism post-retirement. They are healthier and more financially secure and are expected to live longer than their older counterparts. Nonprofits have opportunities to link them to volunteering through their longer employment spans; their strong expressed interest in volunteering post-retirement; and their conception of a more active, engaged retirement when compared to current seniors (Freedman, 1999; AARP, 2004). For example, Freedman (1999) notes that among 50- to 75-year-olds, volunteering is surpassed only by travel as their top post-retirement priority, and a substantial minority within this age group expresses interest in post-retirement volunteer assignments with a high time commitment.

To attract and keep Boomers in volunteering as they approach retirement, experts recommend two tactics: first, more targeted efforts to attract Boomers to volunteering as they age, and second, a greater focus on the “supply side of the equation”—on improving the institutional ability not only to attract volunteers but to retain them (Eisner, 2005, p. 1; Ellis, 2002; Gazley and Brudney, 2005; Hager and Brudney, 2004; Johnson, 2003). Supporting this perspective are studies that find a decline over time in agency concerns about volunteer availability, while concerns about a lack of institutional capacity to involve volunteers were increasing (Gazley and Brudney, 2005; Hager and Brudney, 2004).

One theme suggesting viable interventions is the connection of community engagement to volunteering behavior. Programs that encourage choices that more closely tie a person to a community could, based on these results, increase volunteering as well. Voting and volunteering both suggest people caring about the future of a community. Ownership and volunteering both imply a person having a stake in the success of a community.

In conclusion, the signs are hopeful that Boomers will continue to help solve the nation’s problems by contributing their time to important civic activities. Further, there appear to be a variety of strategies that agencies can use to harness the interests and energies of Boomers who are not currently volunteering and to keep Boomers volunteering as they grew older.

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