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READY, WILLING, AND NEEDED: RENEWING OLDER ADULT VOLUNTEERING IN CANADA

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FOREWORD

Canada is set to become a super-aged nation in 2026, with at least 20% of the population aged 65 or older. The choices we make now will shape how people experience ageing, and the social, health, and economic outcomes that follow, for decades to come. As our population grows older, the question is no longer simply how long we live, but whether we are ageing well.

Too many older Canadians are experiencing social isolation and loneliness. According to the National Institute on Ageing's 2025 Ageing in Canada Survey, **43% of older adults are at risk of social isolation, and 57% report experiencing loneliness**—figures that have remained persistently high in recent years. At the same time, social participation is declining, with fewer older Canadians engaged in the groups, activities, and networks that foster connection and belonging. Together, these trends have profound implications for both individual well-being and the strength and resilience of our communities.

Volunteering can help address these challenges. It supports healthy ageing, strengthens social connections, and helps build more vibrant communities. Yet, as this report shows, fewer older Canadians are volunteering. Many are missing out, not due to a lack of willingness, but rather a lack of accessible and meaningful opportunities.

Reversing the decline in participation will require a shift in how we think about volunteering. At the National Institute on Ageing, our vision is a Canada where older adults feel valued, included, supported, and better prepared to age with confidence. By removing barriers and making it easier for more older adults to volunteer, we can unlock the full potential of older Canadians to contribute, connect, and thrive.

Alyssa Brierley

Executive Director, National Institute on Ageing (NIA)

***

Volunteering has long been one of the quiet forces that strengthens communities across Canada. Every day, older adults contribute their time, knowledge, and lived experience to support neighbours, strengthen organizations, and enrich civic life. Yet, as this report makes clear, the role of older adult volunteers is at a critical crossroads.

Canada's population is aging rapidly, bringing both opportunities and challenges. While many older adults remain eager to contribute, formal volunteering has declined in recent years due to changing social dynamics, lingering impacts of the pandemic, transportation barriers, financial pressures, and a growing disconnect between willing volunteers and meaningful opportunities. At the same time, community organizations across the country are facing increasing demand and ongoing volunteer shortages.

This report reminds us that volunteering is far more than an act of service. More than that, it is an investment in healthier individuals, stronger communities, and a more connected society across backgrounds and generations. The data presented in this report demonstrates what we have long known to be true: volunteering supports physical and mental well-being, reduces social isolation, fosters a sense of purpose, and creates lasting social and economic value. When we remove barriers and create welcoming pathways for older adults to engage in volunteerism, everyone benefits.

At HelpAge Canada, we believe older adults are not simply recipients of services — they are leaders, mentors, caregivers, advocates, and changemakers. Their experience, resilience, and generosity are among our country's greatest assets. As we work toward building age-friendly communities and strengthening Canada's community-based seniors' services sector, ensuring that older adults have meaningful opportunities to volunteer must be part of our ageing landscape.

We are proud to support this report and the practical toolkits that accompany it. Together, they provide valuable evidence and actionable recommendations for governments, nonprofits, healthcare leaders, employers, and communities seeking to unlock the full potential of older adult volunteers.

We invite you to read this report with curiosity and optimism, and to consider the role each of us can play in creating communities where older adults are empowered to continue contributing, connecting, and thriving.

Kahir Lalji

Chief Executive Officer, HelpAge Canada

ABOUT VOLUNTEER CANADA

Volunteer Canada is the national voice and leadership body for volunteerism in Canada. Since 1977, it has worked with volunteers, volunteer centres, nonprofit organizations, businesses, governments, and educational institutions to strengthen the quality, quantity, and accessibility of volunteering. Its mission is to advance volunteerism to grow connection, community, and belonging. Through its research, policy, convening, training, and public engagement work, Volunteer Canada supports the people and organizations that make volunteering possible across Canada.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report was developed as part of Volunteer Canada's broader efforts to strengthen participation and volunteering across Canada. Through the National Volunteer Action Strategy, Volunteer Canada is working with partners to build a more coordinated and enabling environment for volunteerism, including new participation frameworks and pathways, stronger volunteer infrastructure, and more inclusive approaches to community engagement. Volunteer Canada's pathways-to-participation work focuses on making it easier for people at different life stages and from different backgrounds — including newcomers, youth, and older adults — to connect with meaningful opportunities to contribute. This report also aligns with Volunteer Canada's intergenerational engagement work, including GenerationsCo, which supports research, tools, networks, and resources that help people of different generations connect, collaborate, challenge ageism, and build stronger communities.

This report examines the changing landscape of older adult volunteering in Canada and identifies practical opportunities to renew engagement. Drawing on national survey data, interviews with older adult volunteering and intergenerational engagement practitioners, and a review of promising programs and research, the report explores why formal volunteering among older adults has declined, who is most affected, and what can be done to rebuild meaningful pathways into participation. It focuses on three priorities: strengthening the volunteer ecosystem, connecting volunteering to health and social connection initiatives, and reducing the barriers that prevent older adults from contributing. Companion guides are also available to support organizations, communities, and partners in applying the report's findings in practice. Companion guides are also available to support organizations, communities, and partners in applying the report's findings in practice.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A quiet transformation is reshaping Canada's volunteer landscape. Many older adults—once the bedrock of community life—are stepping back from formal volunteering at a striking pace. The stakes are enormous.

According to Statistics Canada's 2023 Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating, adults aged 65 and older still contributed an estimated 361 million hours of formal volunteering in 2023—roughly $12.1 billion in volunteer labour.

But this contribution has declined even as Canada's older adult population has grown. If older adults had volunteered at the same per-person level as in 2018, Canada's 2025 older adult population would have contributed an estimated 211 million additional hours of formal volunteering—equivalent to roughly $7.1 billion more in volunteer labour. The steepest decline in formal volunteering participation is among those aged 65–74, a group that historically bridged work and retirement through service.

Yet this is not simply a story of decline—it is one of divergence. Who volunteers, and who doesn't, is increasingly shaped by income, education, health, gender, and immigration background. While retirement is often imagined as an open door to civic engagement, for many it has instead become a point of disengagement.

At the same time, the evidence base linking volunteering with healthy aging continues to grow, with studies associating volunteering with better physical health, mental wellbeing, and social connection. Research has shown that volunteering can slow biological aging, reduce inflammation, and lower the risk of disability,—all while building the social connections that protect against loneliness. But even as these benefits become clearer, the total hours volunteered by older adults have fallen dramatically.

This contradiction of increasing evidence of the health benefits with declining participation sits at the heart of the report's central question: **how can we help older adults re-engage in volunteering?**

The future of volunteering depends on closing gaps—not only increasing participation but redesigning volunteer roles to reflect the realities of modern aging. That means making opportunities more flexible, socially connected, and accessible for those facing mobility, financial, or health barriers. Volunteering must be seen not as a luxury, but as an essential part of healthy, connected aging.

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF OLDER ADULT VOLUNTEERING

- **A growing and more diverse older population.** Canada's population aged 65+ now exceeds 8.1 million and will reach roughly 9.3 million by 2030. Within this group, the share of racialized older adults is projected to reach 25% by 2032.
- **A long-term decline in volunteer participation.** Volunteer rates among those aged 65–74 have dropped from 37% in 2013 to 25% in 2024, while rates among those 75+ have held steady or risen slightly (from 27% to 31%).
- **Fewer hours volunteered.** Even where participation persists, intensity has dropped sharply — average annual hours have declined by over 40% among those 75+, mirroring declines across all age groups.
- **A major source of community capacity.** Newly available SGVP data suggest adults aged 65+ contributed 361 million hours of formal volunteering in 2023, representing about 30% of all formal volunteer hours in Canada and what we estimate to be about **$12.1 billion** in volunteer labour.
- **Unequal engagement.** Only 13% of older adults in households earning under $30,000 volunteer, compared with 39% in households earning $100,000 or more. Financial strain, health challenges, and limited transportation compound these disparities.
- **Disconnection from opportunities.** Only one-third of older adults say they were invited to volunteer in the past year—the lowest of any age group. However, nine in ten responded positively to at least some requests, including almost half that generally said yes to requests, a higher positive response rate than any other age group.
- **Retirement not translating to volunteering.** 39% of adults 65 to 74 who were working volunteered, compared to just 22% of those who are retired, suggesting many disengage at the point of retirement and/or are not finding meaningful opportunities.
- **Eroding social group participation.** In 2024, 61% of older adults reported belonging to no social groups, up 24 points since 2013. Because volunteering is strongly linked to group participation, this collapse in social connection has had profound ripple effects.

The Path Forward: Three Pillars to Strengthen Older Adults Volunteering

Traditional pipelines into volunteering—workplaces, civic clubs, religious groups—have weakened. But this is also a moment of renewal. Drawing from new national data, interviews with 16 experts and practitioners, and several innovative case studies, the report outlines a roadmap anchored in three pillars:

1. **Pillar 1: Elevate and Strengthen the Volunteer Ecosystem.**
   Canada doesn't have a volunteer shortage—it has an infrastructure shortage. To re-engage older adults, organizations need the staff, systems, and coordination capacity to match willing volunteers with meaningful roles. That means restoring volunteer management positions, strengthening volunteer centres and community hubs, and modernizing the tools

that connect people to opportunities. Without this ecosystem, even the most motivated volunteers may have nowhere to go.

2. **Pillar 2: Leverage Existing Investments in Health and Social Connection.**
   Huge investments are flowing into older adult health, social prescribing, loneliness reduction, and healthy-aging programs. Volunteering is a missing link—a proven activity that improves health, strengthens social connection, and expands community capacity. Embedding volunteer pathways into these initiatives can unlock participation at scale, turning health investments into engines for engagement.

3. **Pillar 3: Address the Barriers Facing Would-Be Volunteers.**
   Older adults want to contribute, but most aren't being asked. A renewed focus on invitations and opportunity creation—combined with reducing financial, mobility, and digital barriers—is critical. Flexible, accessible pathways must be built for new retirees, older adults with health challenges, and those with limited incomes.

By 2030, a five percentage point increase in volunteering among older adults would mean an estimated **465,000 older adult volunteers** contributing **37 million hours** of service annually. This is the equivalent of adding about 20,000 full time positions to the nonprofit sector. Achieving this requires more than recruitment—it demands rebuilding the systems, relationships, and invitations that connect people to purpose. If we succeed, Canada can move from decline to renewal—creating a model where older adults, nonprofits, and communities all thrive together.

INTRODUCTION AND METHOD

This report brings together evidence from five major research studies, two conducted by Statistics Canada, two by the Environics Institute in 2022 and 2024, and one conducted by Sector3Insights, complemented by interviews with 16 informants and a review of recent studies and best practices for older adult volunteering. Together, these sources provide one of the most comprehensive looks to date at the state of volunteering among older adults in Canada.

Our approach has been to triangulate findings across diverse data sources—national surveys, custom polling, and qualitative interviews—to better understand both the opportunities and the barriers facing older adults who want to contribute through volunteering. We also examine intergenerational volunteering: how different age groups connect, learn from, and support each other through volunteer engagement.

The result is a holistic view of what's working, what's changing, and where action is needed. The report identifies practical ways to strengthen volunteer engagement infrastructure, support transitions into and through retirement, and create inclusive pathways that link generations through shared purpose.

METHOD

DATA ANALYSIS

Our trend analysis is primarily based on four key datasets, all of which ask a common simple question about formal volunteering[1]:

- **2013** – *General Social Survey on Social Identity* (Statistics Canada)
- **2018** – *Canadian Housing Survey* (Statistics Canada)
- **2022** – *Social Capital in Canada Survey* (Community Foundations of Canada & Environics Institute)
- **2024** – *YMCA in Canada Study* (YMCA Canada & Environics Institute)

A special thank you to YMCA Canada and CFC Canada for allowing the data to be shared through the Environics Institute.

[1] Question: In the past 12 months did you do unpaid volunteer work for any organization? Responses: Yes / No / Cannot Say. The 2013 survey had an option for 'don't know' but it has a lower rate than the 2022 and 2024 surveys, though it is not enough to materially affect the data here.
In 2013, 0.2% of respondents were unable or unwilling to provide an answer. This increased to 3.1% in 2022 before declining to 1.6% in 2024.

Critically, the 2023 General Social Survey on Giving, Volunteering, and Participating was not used, as no data on older adults was available at the time of analysis, so initial results became available shortly before release and were incorporated briefly.

Each dataset includes significant measures[2] related to social identity and social capital[3], and all share a common question about volunteer participation. Three of them also have a very similar question on volunteer hours.[4] However, these surveys differ methodologically, which likely has biasing factors that contribute to some of the differences we discuss in this report. That being said, and as we discuss later, we believe these findings in this report still shed some important light on the changes in volunteering since 2013.

We rely most heavily on the **2022 and 2024 datasets**, sometimes combining them into a larger dataset for analysis. The 2022 study has a sample of 2,000, and the 2024 study has 2,201, creating a collective weighted sample of 4,201, which is representative of the population. For older adults, there were 392 older adults in 2022 and 384 older adults in 2024, for a total of 776 older adults in total.

The **2013 and 2018 surveys** were conducted by Statistics Canada—2013 via telephone interviews and 2018 via mixed methods—while the **2022 and 2024 surveys** were conducted online using weighted panel samples. These methodological differences should be considered when interpreting trends.

Additional Volunteering Insights Data Source

We also reference a supplementary dataset that includes more extensive questions on volunteering well beyond a single measure of formal volunteering:

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[2] All of these are comprehensive surveys with extensive questions on values and priorities and social networks, but they do vary. The 2013 questionnaire is the longest by some margin, and the 2022 survey is shorter but often still takes more than 20 minutes, while the 2024 survey is the shortest. This could have some upward bias on volunteer rates for the longer surveys even though the questions on volunteering represent a small share of the overall questionnaire.

[3] Toronto Foundation's 2022 report on social capital defines social capital as following: "Social capital refers to the vibrancy of social networks and the extent to which individuals and communities trust and rely upon one another. It is a key ingredient in making communities productive, healthy, inclusive and safe. Social capital can be seen as a resource that communities can draw upon to respond to crises (through collaboration and mutual support); at the same time, it is a resource that can be depleted, leaving communities less well-positioned to face what comes next."

[4] The question text was: On average, about how many hours per month did you volunteer? The 2013 questionnaire uses the following response options: 1) 15 hours or more per month; 2) Between 5 and less than 15 hours per month; 3) Between 1 and less than 5 hours per month; and 4) Less than 1 hour per month. The 2022 survey adds "Only volunteered once or twice".

- **2023** – Generosity in Canada Study (Sector3Insights)

A special thank you to Sector3Insights for sharing this data.

This is used where appropriate to add context to our findings on volunteering.

Statistics Canada's 2023 Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating (SGVP)

The 2023 SGVP was not used as a key dataset for this report, as no data was available at the time of writing of the core report. The SGVP was previously known as the General Social Survey on Giving, Volunteer, and Participating (GSS GVP).

However, as the 2023 SGVP data as become available shortly before release, it has been referenced selectively throughout the report as a validation source. Because the SGVP uses a more detailed volunteering module and has historically produced higher estimates than the simpler questions used in this report, its results should be interpreted cautiously alongside this report's the main sources.

Interpreting Trends Across Surveys

Survey methodology significantly impacts reported formal volunteer rates. For example, Statistics Canada's Survey on Giving, Volunteering, and Participating (SGVP) has historically produced higher estimates than the surveys used here. In 2013, the GSS-Social Identity reported a 36% volunteer rate, while the General Social Survey on Giving, Volunteer, and Participating (GSS GVP) found 44%. Similarly, in 2018, the Canadian Housing Survey reported 32%, whereas the GSS GVP recorded 41%.

We rely on the 2013 GSS-Social Identity and the 2018 Canadian Housing Survey over the 2013 and 2018 GSS GVP data both because at the time of writing we lacked the 2023 SGVP data and because the SGVP questions are less comparable to the post-pandemic sources we do have. However,

examining both the 2023 SGVP and the datasets in this report would provide a clearer picture of volunteering trends.[5]

Despite methodological differences, the 2013, 2018, 2022, and 2024 datasets show consistent trends in volunteer participation over time that we believe reflect an actual shift in volunteering.[6]

However, methodological differences may also amplify the appearance of these declines, and with this single dataset and approach to measuring volunteerism, we cannot determine the extent of that effect. We share this data in the hope that it will be analyzed alongside other sources to understand better how volunteering has evolved.

A detailed breakdown of the datasets, including methodologies, sample sizes, and geographic coverage is provided on the following pages.

Interviews with Older Adult Volunteer Experts and Intergenerational Volunteering Practitioners

A total of 15 interviews were conducted with 16 individuals representing a wide range of perspectives on older adult and intergenerational volunteering. Interviewees included older adult volunteers themselves, as well as leaders from volunteer centres, aging-sector specialists, and practitioners involved in social prescribing and community engagement initiatives. Most participants were identified from an initial list provided by Volunteer Canada, with several additional interviewees recommended through referrals during the process to ensure diverse regional and thematic representation. Individuals were selected because of their interest and work in the topic area, so this could have some sources of bias.

The interviews were conducted either via video calls or by phone in September and October 2025. A list of standard questions was used to guide the conversations, but the interviews were open-

[5] It is also important to note biases in dataset design. For instance, the 2018 Canadian Housing Survey targeted individuals responsible for housing decisions, which may skew volunteer participation rates. While its trends align with the GSS GVP in 2013 and 2018, we rely on it less due to this potential bias.

[6] As one example discussed in this report, volunteer rates by religious service attendance remained remarkably consistent between 2013 and 2022, among older adults. Frequent attendees (at least once a week) had almost identical volunteer rates at 48% and 50%, while monthly attendees stayed nearly unchanged at 37% to 38%, as were less frequent attendees (once or twice a year) with volunteerism rates at 31% and 30%. We see similar stability in volunteer rates by group participation with almost identical patterns in the 2013 and 2022 and 2024 datasets. The striking stability in volunteer rates across multiple questions over time suggests that observed declines in volunteerism are real and may be particularly linked to shifting participation patterns.

ended and flowed in different directions depending on the expertise and interests of the interviewee.

Table – Comparisons of surveys used in this report					
Study	**Method**	**Conducting Organization(s)**	**Field Date**	**Sample Size**	**Age Range**
2013 General Social Survey on Social Identity	Mostly Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI)	Statistics Canada	June 2013 to March 2014	27,534	15+
2018 Canadian Housing Survey	Online + CATI	Statistics Canada in partnership with Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC)	November 2018 to March 2019	61,764	15+
2022 Social Capital in Canada Study	Online survey	Community Foundations of Canada and Environics Institute	June 15 to 27, 2022	2,001	18+
YMCA in Canada 2024	Online survey	YMCA Canada and Environics Institute	January 25 to February 2, 2024	2,200	18+
2023 Generosity in Canada Study	Online survey	Sector3Insights	October 20 to 25, 2023	1,026	18+

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF AGING AND VOLUNTEERING

Older adults make up a growing share of Canada's population, with more than 8.1 million Canadians aged 65 and over in 2024, up from just over 7 million a decade earlier, and projected to reach 9.3 million by 2030. As Canadians live longer and healthier lives, this group represents an increasingly large and diverse portion of potential volunteers. However, the ways older adults engage with their communities are changing. This section explores both the broader demographic and social trends shaping the experiences of older adults and the declining rates of volunteerism observed over the past decade.

General trends for older adults

Older adults in Canada are living longer, healthier lives, but how they spend their later years is evolving. The characteristics of this population are shifting, shaped by demographic changes, technological adoption, and economic pressures. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated some trends, particularly around social isolation and digital engagement, while also exacerbating financial and health challenges for many. At the same time, the proportion of racialized older adults is growing, signalling the need for more inclusive approaches to aging-related programs and policies. While dozens of factors influence the experiences of older adults, this section highlights six key interrelated trends that are particularly relevant to the broader findings in this report.

Key takeaways

- **Trend 1. The Silver Wave: Canada's Growing Older Adult Population:** Canada's older adult population continues to grow, but growth will slow after 2030.
- **Trend 2. The Loneliness Epidemic: Social Isolation and Its Impact on Older Adults:** Social isolation and loneliness remain major challenges for older adults.
- **Trend 3. A Digital Shift: Older Adults Are Embracing Technology**: Older adults have rapidly increased their use of digital technologies in recent years.
- **Trend 4: Inflation and Financial Pressures on Older Adults**: Over a quarter of older adults reported that rising prices were greatly affecting their ability to meet day-to-day expenses in 2024.
- **Trend 5: Diversity in Aging: The Growing Racial Shifts Among Older Adults:** The proportion of racialized older adults in Canada is rapidly increasing.

- **Trend 6: Healthy and Wealthy: Many older adults are healthier, wealthier, and have more competing interests:** While some are struggling, other older adults are healthier and wealthier than previous generations, and they have many competing opportunities and interests.

Trend 1. The Silver Shift: Canada's Growing Older Adult Population

There are 8.1 million older adults in Canada in 2025, over 2.3 million more than a decade ago (5.7 million), a 41% increase.[7] Under a medium growth scenario, 9.3 million older adults are expected by 2030.

This trend is a combination of people living longer, healthier lives and a shift in the composition of the population, with many baby boomers reaching this stage of life.

The share of Canadians aged 65+ is projected to increase from 18.9% in 2024 to between 21.6% and 31.7% by 2074, depending on how demographic trends unfold.[8] However, growth in this age group will slow after 2030, as all baby boomers will have reached or passed this threshold.

The number of Canadians aged 85+ will also rise significantly, particularly between 2031 and 2050, when large baby-boom cohorts reach this stage. The population in this age group is projected to increase from 911,900 in 2024 to between 3.2 million and 4.1 million by 2074.[9]

As the number of older adults grows, organizations seeking to engage volunteers will need to adapt their strategies to meet this cohort's evolving interests, capacities, and needs. Ensuring volunteer opportunities are flexible, meaningful, and accessible will be essential in harnessing the potential of an aging but active population.

Interview Insights – Making the case for the economic and social value of older adult volunteers can help combat ageist assumptions that they are a drain on society

Canada's growing older adult population means that the number of people considered 'dependent' on the working-age population will rise rapidly.

[7] See: Population Projections for Canada, Provinces and Territories: Interactive Dashboard

[8] Statistics Canada. (21 January, 2025). Population Projections for Canada (2024 to 2074), Provinces and Territories (2024 to 2049). https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/91-520-x/91-520-x2025001-eng.htm

[9] Statistics Canada. (21 January, 2025). Population Projections for Canada (2024 to 2074), Provinces and Territories (2024 to 2049). https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/91-520-x/91-520-x2025001-eng.htm

However, these discussions often overlook the significant contributions older adults make through volunteer work and other unpaid labour.

Interviewees spoke about how there needs to be a strong business case that older adults are not just dependents but productive, vital members of our communities. Without their time, experience, and volunteer efforts, much of the important work being done today simply wouldn't be possible.

There is a real opportunity to highlight the economic and social value provided by older adults that often go uncounted in traditional measures. Whether through the care economy, community service, or other forms of volunteering, older adults play an essential role in supporting society.

Trend 2. The Loneliness Epidemic: Social Isolation and Its Impact on Older Adults

Social isolation and loneliness remain major challenges for older adults, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, over one-third of older adults reported feeling lonely, a concern that persists as many continue to experience reduced social interaction.[10] Volunteering can play a key role in combating social isolation, especially for older adults.[11]

Health deterioration and social withdrawal due to pandemic-related restrictions have also been observed[12], although some of these effects have started to subside.

Trend 3. The Digital Shift: Older Adults Are Embracing Technology

Older adults have rapidly increased their use of digital technologies in recent years:

- Internet usage: Between 2018 and 2020, the proportion of older adults classified as non-users or basic internet users decreased from 62% to 48%, indicating a major shift toward

[10] Hong, Joanna H., Nakamura, Julia S., Sahakari, Sakshi S., Chopik, William J., Shiba, Koichiro., VanderWeele, Tyler J., & Kim, Eric S. (March 2024). The silent epidemic of loneliness: identifying the antecedents of loneliness using a lagged exposure-wide approach. *Psychological Medicine*. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291723002581

[11] Seo, Hannah. (January 6th, 2025). 'Keeps me grateful': how volunteering can help older adults. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/jan/06/volunteering-older-adult

[12] Wister, Andrew V. & Kadowaki, Laura. (2021). Social Isolation Among Older Adults During the Pandemic. https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/canada/employment-social-development/corporate/seniors/forum/covid-19-social-isolation/covid-19-social-isolation-en.pdf

digital engagement.[13] The number of older adults actively using the internet continued to increase during the pandemic.[14]

- Smartphone ownership: The percentage of older adults owning a smartphone rose from 58% in 2019 to 65% in 2020, with 83% using their devices daily.[15]
- Video conferencing: The use of video calls nearly doubled between 2018 and 2020, to 37% in 2020, up from 21% in 2018.[16] This stayed constant in 2022.

While these shifts present opportunities for digital inclusion for older adults to engage in new types of volunteering, they may also reduce face-to-face interactions and traditional volunteer engagement.

Trend 4: Inflation and Financial Pressures on Older Adults

Recent economic trends have significantly impacted the financial well-being of older Canadians. Inflation surged in 2022–2024, leading to increased financial strain. In spring 2024, nearly 28% of older adult Canadians reported that rising prices greatly affected their ability to meet day-to-day expenses, lower than the rest of the population, but still a substantial share.[17]

While income trends for older adults have generally been positive in recent years[18], the growing cost of living—particularly in housing, healthcare, and food—has placed many in financially precarious situations. The vulnerability is particularly great for renters, who often face rapidly growing costs with fixed incomes.[19]

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[13] Wavrock, David, Schellenberg, Grant, & Schimmele, Christoph. (28 April, 2022). Canadians' use of the Internet and digital technologies before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Statistics Canada*. https://doi.org/10.25318/36280001202200400004-eng

[14] Statistics Canada. (23 January, 2024). *Canadian seniors more connected than ever*. https://www.statcan.gc.ca/o1/en/plus/4288-canadian-seniors-more-connected-ever

[15] AGE-WELL NCE. (September 2020). *Older adults and technology: Insights from the AGE-WELL National Technology Survey*. https://agewell-nce.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/OATechSurvey-SEP2020-FINAL.pdf

[16] Statistics Canada. (23 January, 2024). *Canadian seniors more connected than ever*. https://www.statcan.gc.ca/o1/en/plus/4288-canadian-seniors-more-connected-ever

[17] Statistics Canada. (August 15th, 2024). Nearly half of Canadians report that rising prices are greatly impacting their ability to meet day-to-day expenses. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/240815/dq240815b-eng.htm

[18] Statistics Canada. (September 23rd, 2024). The older people are all right. https://www.statcan.gc.ca/o1/en/plus/7059-older-people-are-all-right

[19] Ayer, Steven. (2023). Waterloo Region's Vital Signs - 2023 Report Affordable Housing. *Waterloo Region Community Foundation*.

These trends may contribute to lower volunteer participation, as older adults facing financial strain may prioritize paid work or limit transportation costs. Ironically, those who stand to benefit the most from volunteering—such as lower-income older adults who may gain social connections, a sense of purpose, and access to support networks—often face the greatest barriers to participation, as we will elaborate on throughout this report.

Trend 5: Diversity in Aging: The Growing Racial Shifts Among Older Adults

The proportion of racialized older adults in Canada is increasing:

- As of the 2021 Census, only 14% of Canadians aged 65 and over identified as belonging to racialized groups, compared to 25% of the total population.[20]
- However, between 2016 and 2021, the number of racialized individuals aged 65+ grew by 38%, outpacing the 18% growth of non-racialized older adults.[21]
- By 2032, projections suggest that one in four older Canadians will identify as a racialized person.[22]

These demographic shifts highlight the need for culturally responsive volunteer programs and services tailored to diverse older adults, addressing barriers such as language, discrimination, and community engagement. Racialized older adults have lower volunteer rates in our data, which is another topic we explore further in the section on the current state of volunteering for older adults.

Interview Insights – Organizations need to be prepared to address language and cultural barriers

Several interviewees spoke about the need to offer programs and services in different languages, especially as the older adult population becomes more diverse. However, it is expensive to translate program materials, and one interviewee said they are finding it already challenging to offer their programs in both English and French.

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https://static1.squarespace.com/static/629f5ec7c1e9382dc5ce72b9/t/6565e5e86747eb106fda5241/1701176818686/2023+Vital+Signs+-+Final.pdf

[20] Statistics Canada. (February 3rd, 2025). Study: Sources of income of racialized individuals 65 years and over in Canada, 2020. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/250203/dq250203a-eng.htm

[21] Statistics Canada. (February 3rd, 2025). Study: Sources of income of racialized individuals 65 years and over in Canada, 2020. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/250203/dq250203a-eng.htm

[22] Tong, Catherine E. et. al. (October 10th, 2022). Understanding racialised older adults' experiences of the Canadian healthcare system, and codesigning solutions: protocol for a qualitative study in nine languages. *BMJ Open*. doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2022-068013

One effective strategy to make programs more inclusive is to recruit volunteers who speak a wide variety of languages. For example, the West End Seniors' Network in Vancouver offers a friendly visiting and friendly calling program for socially isolated older adults, and they have volunteers that speak Chinese, Farsi, Portuguese, and Spanish, among other languages.

Interview Insights - Can AI help solve language barriers?

One interviewee said they have already used AI to translate some of their videos from English to French, and that these received positive feedback. There is a huge potential for AI tools to help address language barriers, but there is little information available on how such tools are currently being used.

TREND 6: HEALTHY AND WEALTHY: MANY OLDER ADULTS ARE HEALTHIER, WEALTHIER, AND HAVE MORE COMPETING INTERESTS

One of the key themes that emerged in the interviews is that the current generation of older adults is healthier than previous generations and that they have more leisure options available to them.

Many older adults are choosing to work longer, either continuing in full-time roles or taking up part-time opportunities (for example retired teachers or nurses who take occasional shifts).

Many older adults were also able to buy their homes before the historic run-up in home prices and have also experienced decades of strong growth in the stock market, which has provided them with the significant wealth and the opportunity to pursue extensive travel or other hobbies that were previously out of reach for most retirees.

We also heard that many older adults are more involved in the child-care of their grandchildren, especially as many families have two working parents and are struggling to find affordable childcare. Older men especially seem to be more involved in the care of grandchildren than previous generations.

Interview Insights – Engaging two distinct groups of older adults

One of the key takeaways from our interviews is that older adults are a highly diverse group — spanning a wide range of ages, cultures, life experiences, and incomes.

Some are active, independent, and socially connected, while others face isolation, limited resources, and a need for deeper community support. And some fall on a continuum between each of these dimensions.

The challenge is designing both programs for both ends of this spectrum that offer meaningful engagement for all.

1. **Younger, healthier, and/or more socially connected**

Recently retired boomers are generally more energetic, healthier, independent, and already engaged in a variety of social and recreational activities, according to several interviewees. This group typically has more options and resources.
When they do get involved, they are more likely to take on leadership roles with the goal of sharing their expertise and skills.

As one interviewee put it: *"Ask a busy person to help you, and you'll probably get a yes."*

2. **Older, less healthy, and/or more isolated**

This group often faces significant barriers: limited financial resources, health challenges, social isolation, and a lack of daily purpose. They can't afford out-of-pocket expenses and struggle with transportation, which makes many programs inaccessible to them. This group is often overlooked or treated as if they no longer have anything left to give.

One interviewee described one of their volunteers like this:

"One guy came to us, he was 84, and he said "everyone is treating me like it's the final chapter, but I feel like there is another chapter, but I don't know what it is". He found that next chapter through our program, and he has done it for two years now, and he will probably do it again next year."

The distinctions between these two types of groups of older adults are important to consider when interpreting the trends in the section below.

LONG-TERM VOLUNTEERING TRENDS AMONG OLDER ADULTS

This section looks at how formal volunteering rates and the number of hours volunteered have declined since 2013, including a breakdown by age.

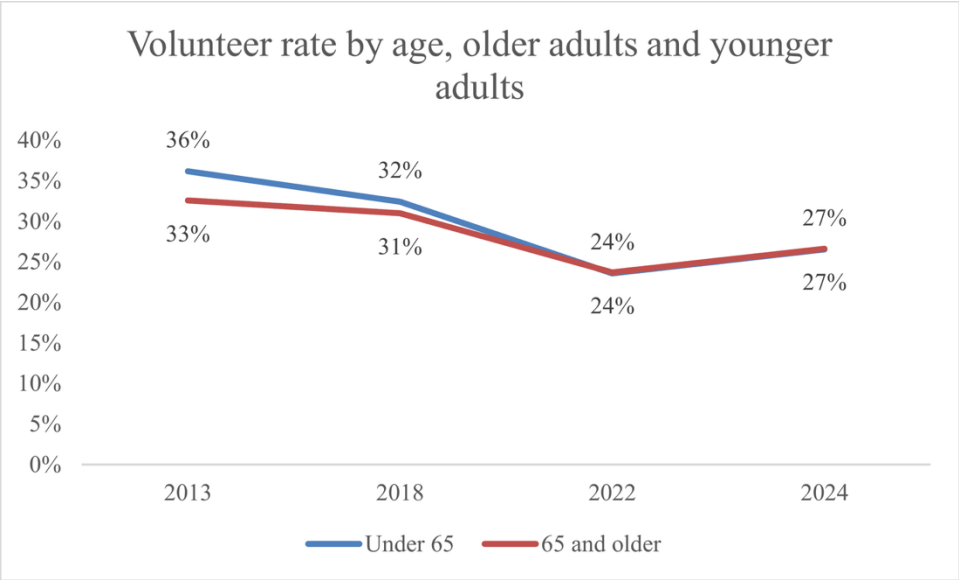
Key takeaways

- There are diverging trends in the data for the youngest and oldest older adults. Volunteer rates declined substantially among younger older adults (ages 65–74)—falling from 37% in 2013 to 25% in 2024—while rates among the oldest adults (75+) rose modestly from 27% to 31% over the same period.
- Older adults of all ages are now volunteering less intensively: the average hours volunteered dropped by more than 40% among those aged 75+, and similar declines were seen across all other age groups.
- Overall, the combination of lower participation and reduced hours means that despite an aging population, the total volume of volunteer effort contributed by older adults has fallen sharply over the past decade.
- Formal volunteer rates capture only part of the picture, but we were limited in our ability to look at broader trends of informal volunteering.

VOLUNTEERING TREND 1: SIGNIFICANT DECLINES IN OLDER ADULT VOLUNTEERING RATES SINCE 2013

The volunteer rate among older adults has declined (and then rebounded slightly) at almost the exact same rate as the volunteer rate among those under 65.

- Adults under 65 volunteered at slightly higher rates than older adults in 2013, but in 2022 and 2024, the volunteer rates among older adults and adults under 65 were identical.
- We initially analyzed all individuals over 65 as a single group but found distinct patterns between those aged 65-74 and 75+. Given these differences, we have separated them for the remainder of this section and recombined them cautiously in other analyses.



Sources: 2013 and 2018 (Statistics Canada); 2022 (Environics Institute with Community Foundations of Canada); 2024 (Environics Institute with YMCA Canada). Analysis by authors. See Methods for full details.
Note: 2018 data is from the Canadian Housing Survey and should be interpreted cautiously.[23]

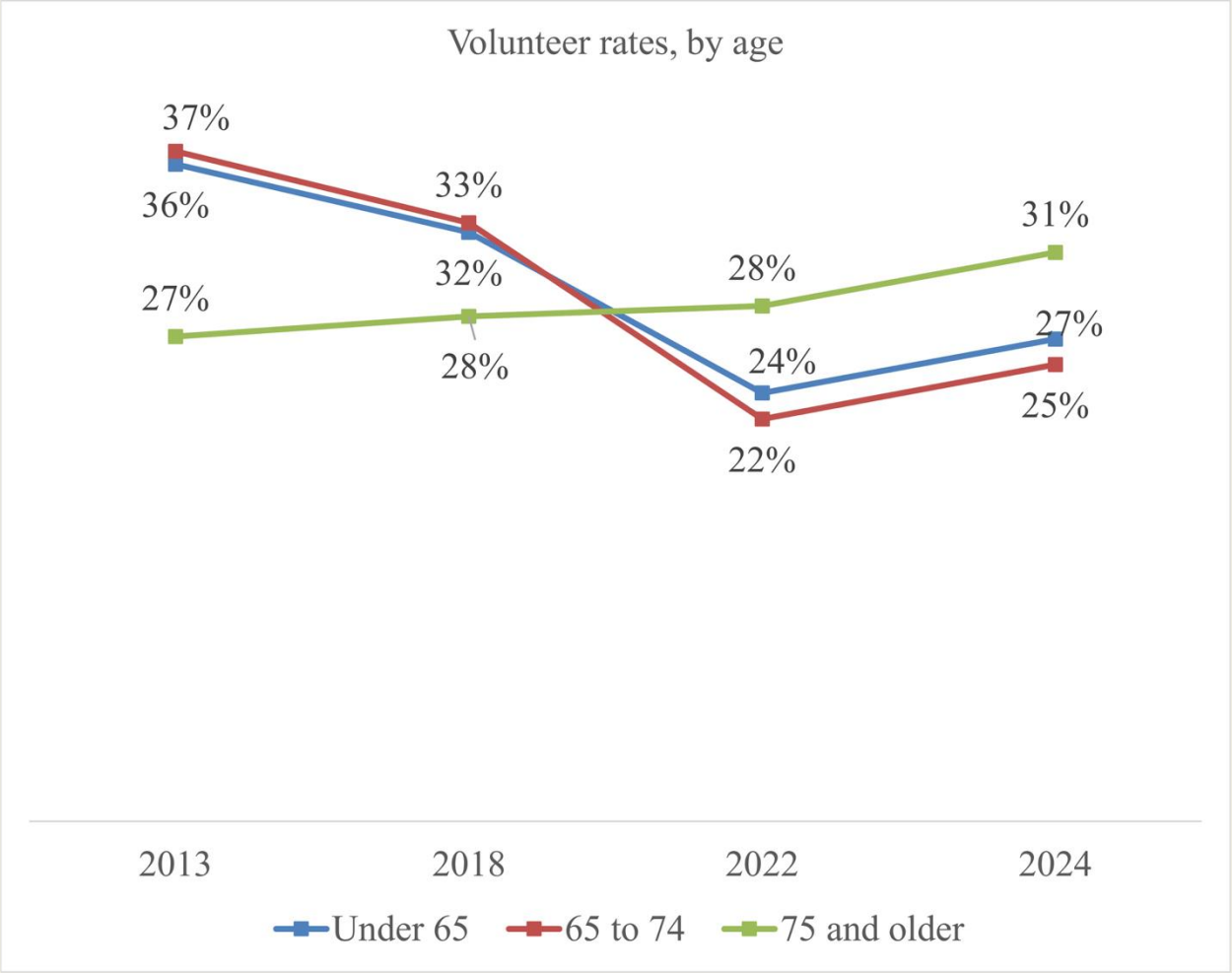
VOLUNTEERING TREND 2: STEADY VOLUNTEERING RATES AMONG THE OLDEST ADULTS, DECLINES AMONG YOUNGER OLDER ADULTS

Volunteer participation has declined for younger older adults over the last decade (65-74) but remained stable or even increased for the oldest adults (75+).

- Volunteer participation has declined across most age groups over the past decade, with notable differences by age group.
- In 2013, people under the age of 75 volunteered significantly more than the oldest adults (75+). However, by 2022, these rates among people 75 and under had fallen sharply.
- In contrast, those aged 75 and older have seen relatively stable participation, increasing slightly from 27% in 2013 to 31% in 2024, so the oldest adults have the highest volunteer rate in 2024.
- Volunteer rates had already declined before the pandemic for those under 65 and those aged 65 to 74, but had remained stable for those 75 and older.[24]

[23] We debated extensively whether to include the 2018 data since its from the Canadian Housing Survey and it surveys people responsible for housing decisions. This data should be interpreted with caution, as the survey differs significantly from the others. We chose to include it despite these caveats because it aligns with the slight decline observed in the Survey on Giving, Volunteering, and Participating from 2013 to 2018, providing some indication that volunteer rates were trending downward even before the pandemic.

[24] While our 2018 dataset should be interpreted with caution, it suggests that volunteering was already in decline pre-pandemic. A similar trend appears in aggregate **GSS GVP** data we accessed, though we did not analyze this data by age.



Sources: 2013 and 2018 (Statistics Canada); 2022 (Environics Institute with Community Foundations of Canada); 2024 (Environics Institute with YMCA Canada). Analysis by authors. See Methods for full details.



Sources: 2013 and 2018 (Statistics Canada); 2022 (Environics Institute with Community Foundations of Canada); 2024 (Environics Institute with YMCA Canada). Analysis by authors. See Methods for full details.
Notes: These trends compare many different sources and should be interpreted cautiously. The 2018 data was intended to sample someone making housing decisions for their household and should be interpreted with additional caution, especially in the 18 to 24 age category. Also, the 2013 survey covered 15 to 25, not 18 to 24.

Oldest Adults (75+) Increasing Volunteer Rates.

- Volunteer rates for those 75+ have steadily risen from 27% in 2013 to 31% in 2024, making them the only age group with a consistent upward trend.
- This may reflect longer healthy life expectancy, greater community ties, and more time post-retirement to volunteer. However, it should be considered in conjunction with the declining volunteer hours discussed in the next section.

Midlife Adults (45 to 64) and Older Adults (65 to 74) Not Recovering.

- Volunteer rates in this group have declined significantly and show no meaningful recovery.
- Ages 45 to 54: Down from 36% in 2013 to 19% in 2024.
- Ages 55 to 64: Down from 33% to 19%.
- Ages 65 to 74: Fell from 37% to 25%, with only slight improvement after 2022.

This suggests a long-term structural decline in volunteerism for midlife adults, likely due to work demands, financial pressures, and changing priorities.

Younger Adults (18 to 44) Showing Some Recovery.

- Ages 18 to 24 and 25 to 34 have seen rebounds in levels of volunteering to levels seen in 2013.[25]
- Those 35 to 44 are seeing partial rebounds but are still below pre-pandemic levels. The oldest adults (75+) are becoming an increasing share of volunteers, while midlife adults and other older adults are disengaging.
- On the other hand, older adults have seen their hours decrease more than other volunteers, which is the case regardless of age, as discussed in the next section.
- Organizations may need to rethink engagement strategies for adults at various ages and stages, and there may need to be some differences in strategies based on age and stage. We explore many of the particulars of who is disengaging among older and who isn't in the section on the current state of volunteering.

New 2023 data adds another lens on the scale and value of older adult formal volunteering

Data from Statistics Canada's 2023 Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating (SGVP) became available late in this project, after the main analysis for this report had already been completed. As a result, we have not been able to fully integrate or compare the SGVP data with all the sources used throughout the report.

The SGVP is Statistics Canada's primary national source on giving and volunteering and includes a more comprehensive volunteering module than the datasets used in the main analysis. However, the datasets used throughout this report remain valuable because they provide consistent trend data across the report's selected time period and support analysis of changes within more specific age groups.

Most importantly, the 2023 SGVP shows that adults aged 65 and older contributed an estimated 361 million hours of formal volunteering in 2023. Using a simple replacement-cost estimate

[25] The 2018 data should be interpreted with even more caution here given that 18 to 24 year olds responsible for housing decisions are even less representative than the rest of the analysis.

based on the average hourly wage in the Canadian economy, this represents roughly $12.1 billion in annual volunteer labour.

If older adults had continued volunteering at the same per-person level as in 2018, Canada's larger 2025 population aged 65+ would have generated roughly 572 million formal volunteer hours. That would be about 211 million additional hours compared with the 2023 SGVP estimate—equivalent to roughly $7.1 billion more in volunteer labour.

Formal volunteer rate

Age group	2018	2023	Change
Total, all ages	41.1%	32.4%	-8.7 pts
65 to 74	39.2%	30.7%	-8.5 pts
75+	30.5%	26.0%	-4.5 pts

On participation, the SGVP supports the broader story of decline while adding nuance. Formal volunteer rates fell among both older adult age groups. However, the decline was smaller among those aged 75+ than among those aged 65 to 74 or the population overall. This is directionally consistent with the broader finding in this report that the oldest adults appear to be more resilient in their formal volunteer participation than younger older adults. At the same time, the SGVP shows a decline among those 75+, while the main survey series used in this report suggests stability or a modest increase. This difference highlights how estimates can vary across survey sources, even when they point to similar underlying trends.

Average annual hours among formal volunteers

Age group	2018	2023	Change	% decline
Total, all ages	131	112	-19	-14.5%
65 to 74	183	163	-20	-10.9%
75+	226	181	-45	-19.9%

On intensity, the SGVP strongly reinforces one of the most important findings in this report: older adults who continue to volunteer are volunteering fewer hours than before. Adults aged 75+ still contributed more hours per volunteer than the average (see the following section for additional details) Canadian volunteer in 2023, but their average annual hours fell by 19.9% between 2018 and 2023, compared with declines of 10.9% among those aged 65 to 74 and 14.5% among volunteers overall.

Total annual formal volunteer hours

Age group	2018	2023	Change	% decline
Total, all ages	1,657M	1,199M	-458M	-27.6%
65 to 74	263M	214M	-49M	-18.6%

75+	176M	147M	-29M	-16.5%
65+ combined	439M	361M	-78M	-17.8%

Across datasets, the core pattern is clear: older adults remain central to Canada's formal volunteering landscape, but the amount of formal volunteering being contributed by older adults has declined. Canada is becoming more dependent on older volunteers, even as their total formal volunteer contribution is shrinking.

That contrast is central to the renewal challenge: older adults remain one of Canada's most important sources of volunteer capacity, but that capacity cannot be taken for granted.

Source note: Statistics Canada, Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating (SGVP), 2018 and 2023. Replacement-cost estimates calculated using 2025 average hourly wage data from Statistics Canada's Labour Force Survey. Calculations by the author.[26]

VOLUNTEERING TREND 3: SIGNIFICANT DECLINES IN VOLUNTEER HOURS AMONG ALL AGE GROUPS

While participation rates have fluctuated, the number of hours volunteered has declined significantly for all age groups.

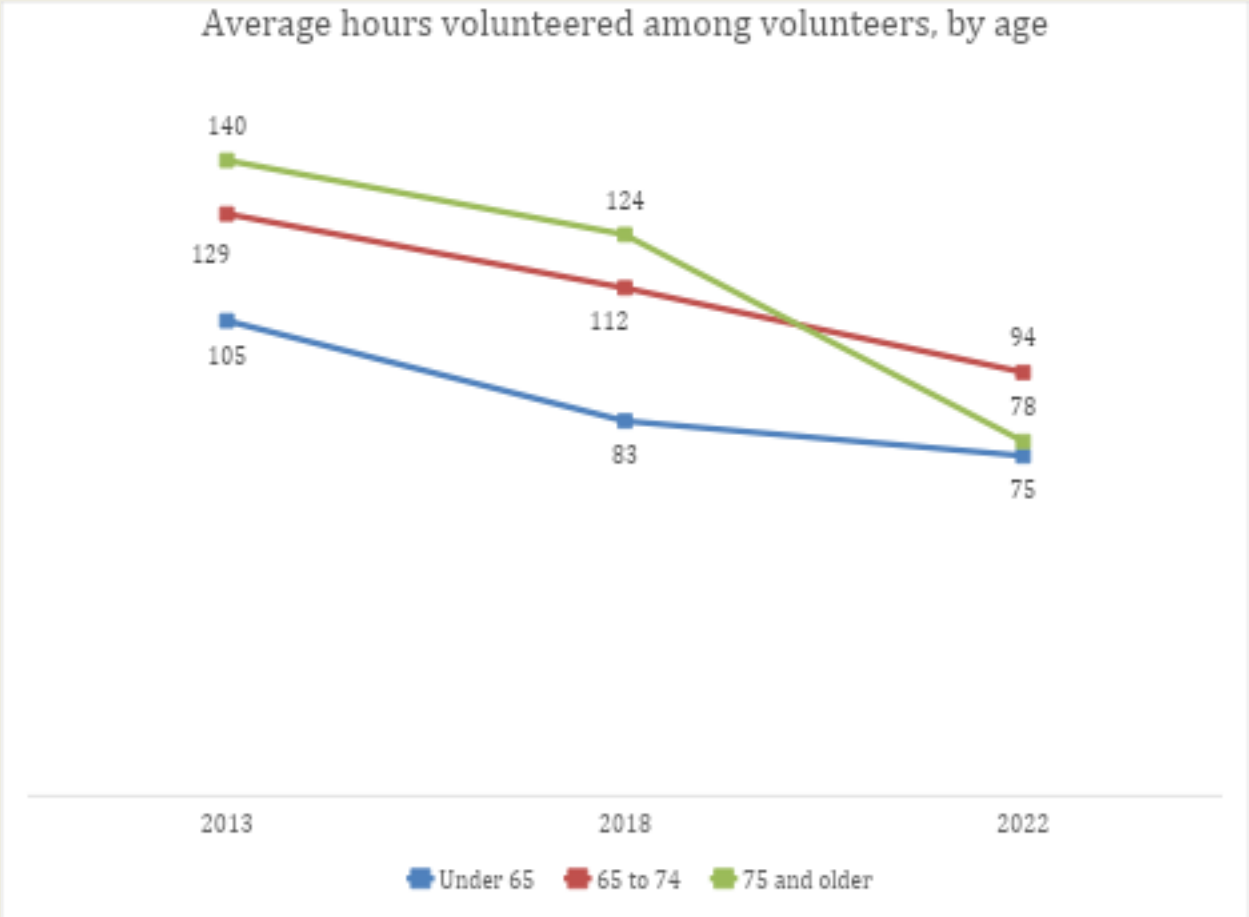
- In 2013, adults aged 75 and older contributed the most volunteer hours, at 140 hours per year, followed by those aged 65 to 74 (129 hours) and those under 65 (105 hours).
- While we interpret 2018 data with special caution because our volunteer rate is from the Canadian Housing Survey[23], the data suggest volunteering hours were declining by about 10% among volunteers even before the pandemic.
- By 2022, volunteer hours had declined sharply across all groups, with older adults aged 75+ now volunteering 78 hours annually, while those aged 65 to 74 contributed 94 hours and adults under 65 contributed 75 hours.
- From 2013 to 2022, average hours volunteered declined by 44% among those 75 and older and 27% among those 65 to 74.

[26] Source note: Formal volunteering estimates are from Statistics Canada, Table 45-10-0039-01, Volunteer rate and average annual volunteer hours, by definition of volunteering and age group, 2018 and 2023 Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating (SGVP), Canada, formal volunteering. Replacement-cost estimates were calculated by multiplying 2023 formal volunteer hours by the 2025 average hourly wage rate for Canada from Statistics Canada, Table 14-10-0064-01, Employee wages by industry, annual (Labour Force Survey; average hourly wage rate; all industries; total employees; both full- and part-time employees; both sexes; age 15 years and over). The illustrative 2025 counterfactual also uses Statistics Canada, Table 17-10-0005-01, Population estimates on July 1, by age and gender, Canada, both sexes, ages 65 and over, 2025. Calculations by the authors.

- The 2024 dataset did not ask about volunteer hours, so we do not know whether hours have also recovered. This also substantially limits our ability to disaggregate this data across groups, so we will not explore this in-depth throughout the report.
- When we combine the effect of decreased volunteer rates and decreased hours over the last decade, the number of hours volunteered per older adult declined by more than half from 2013 to 2022.

Interview Insights – Older adults are increasingly less likely to commit to regular roles

Several interviewees noted that older adults are less likely to commit to fixed, ongoing volunteer roles. One person highlighted how past generations were more inclined to volunteer on a set Monday through Friday schedule, whereas people increasingly prefer flexible roles. Another interviewee pointed out that some older adults are hesitant to commit to weekly positions due to travel or other personal obligations. This shift in attitudes and preferences may help explain some of the decline in volunteer hours observed in the data.



Sources: 2013 and 2018 (Statistics Canada); 2022 (Environics Institute with Community Foundations of Canada). Analysis by authors. See Methods for full details. **Note:** This only includes those who volunteered. Several assumptions were used to calculate volunteer hours since people were asked to select a range of hours volunteered per month. See the footnote for full details.[27] This method of calculating volunteer hours resulted in an estimated volunteer average hours about 40 hours lower than the GSS GVP for 2018. 2024 did

[27] Volunteer hours were estimated using assumptions to convert categorical ranges into numerical averages. Specifically, 'Less than 1 hour per month' and 'Only once' were converted to 5 hours annually, '1 to 5 hours per month' to 30 hours, '5 to 15 hours per month' to 120 hours, and '15+ hours per month' to 225 hours. These estimates assume continuous volunteering throughout the year, though respondents may have only reported periods when they were actively volunteering. Additionally, the categories 'Less than 1 hour per month' and 'Only once' were used inconsistently across surveys but were aggregated for these purposes. While this approach may underestimate some volunteers' contributions, it also accounts for unreported hours and aligns with broader distribution patterns. The final estimates were approximately 40 hours lower than those from the 2013 GSS GVP, with similar distributional trends and a lower estimated total for 2018.

not ask about volunteer hours. It is possible that the methodology used underestimates the volunteering of older adults who may be more likely to volunteer full-time hours than the rest of the population.

VOLUNTEERING TREND 4: PEOPLE ARE STILL INFORMALLY HELPING OTHERS DIRECTLY, BUT FEWER ARE INFORMALLY HELPING THE COMMUNITY

According to the 2023 Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating (SGVP), both formal and informal volunteering have declined since 2018, though in different ways. The overall rate of informal volunteering fell from 74% in 2018 to 66% in 2023, driven primarily by a 19% drop in the share of Canadians engaged in activities to improve their community, while helping others directly declined by only 3%. Data from the SGVP became available only at the end of this project.

Although formal volunteer hours dropped by 28% between 2018 and 2023 in this data and time spent improving the community declined by 34%, the data show that Canadians remain generous in helping others directly with no statistically significant decline in helping others.

Before the pandemic, informal helping was far more common than formal volunteering. Data from the GSS GVP via givingandvolunteering.ca showed that Canadians were about twice as likely to informally volunteer as formally volunteer in 2018.[28]

Among those aged 65 to 74 in 2018, 39% volunteered formally for an average of 181 hours annually. However, when looking at broader helping behaviours, 69% reported assisting others, averaging 190 hours in these broader behaviours. These figures highlight the critical role of informal support in communities—one that traditional volunteer metrics often fail to capture.

This report focuses on formal volunteering because data is readily available from the sources we previously discussed. Still, it likely represents only a fraction of the real impact of volunteering, particularly in understanding how engagement shifted during the pandemic.

Throughout this report, it is critical to remember that while formal volunteering remains a valuable measure of civic engagement, it captures only part of the picture. Understanding the full impact of community involvement requires looking beyond traditional volunteerism to include the informal, everyday acts of support that sustain social connections.

New 2023 GSS-GVP data adds important nuance on informal volunteering

Most of the trend analysis in this report focuses on formal volunteering because comparable age-specific data were available earlier in the project. Newer GSS-GVP data on informal

[28] This data is from givingandvolunteer.ca with analysis by the authors.

volunteering became available near the end of this work and does not change the core finding that volunteering has declined, but it does add important nuance to the story.

Earlier in this section, we showed that formal volunteer hours declined among older adults. In the GSS-GVP data, average formal volunteer hours fell from 183 to 163 among adults aged 65 to 74, and from 226 to 181 among adults aged 75 and older.

Informal volunteering shows a more mixed pattern.

Informal volunteer rates and average annual hours, by age group, Canada, 2018 and 2023

Age group	2018 informal volunteer rate	2023 informal volunteer rate	2018 average informal hours	2023 average informal hours
Total, all ages	73.6%	66.3%	149	135
65 to 74	71.7%	62.8%	204	226
75+	55.3%	49.7%	182	132

For the population overall, both the informal volunteer rate and average informal hours declined. Among adults aged 65 to 74, however, average informal hours increased, even as the share helping informally declined. This contrasts with the formal volunteering trend, where both participation and average hours declined for this age group.

The pattern is different for adults aged 75 and older. For this group, both informal participation and average informal hours declined, mirroring the broader decline in formal volunteer hours.

These findings reinforce the need to distinguish between formal volunteering and informal helping. Some adults aged 65 to 74 may be contributing less through organizations while still providing substantial direct support to others. Among the oldest adults, however, the decline appears broader, affecting both formal and informal contributions.

Source: Table 45-10-0039-01, *Volunteer rate and average annual volunteer hours, by definition of volunteering and age group*, 2018 and 2023 Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating (SGVP).

Interview Insights – Neighbourliness as a type of informal volunteering

In apartment buildings with many older adult residents, there is an opportunity to build a stronger sense of community among residents. One interviewee talked about how some older adults have been taking on informal roles in their buildings such as organizing events, checking in on each other, and offering support. This kind of neighbourly engagement, while not part of a formal volunteer program, contributes to mutual care and community-building. This is particularly valuable in big cities where people generally know fewer of their neighbours than in the past.

There is potential to get more people involved by formalizing these types of efforts and creating volunteer committees within residential buildings. These committees would create easily accessible volunteer opportunities for older adults, and they would also improve social connection for people who are feeling isolated.

WHY VOLUNTEERING MATTERS

"Doing good, does you good" – Nova Scotia Health Volunteer Services Slogan

This section looks at the physical and mental health benefits of volunteering and how volunteering can help older adults stay engaged and avoid loneliness.

Key takeaways

- A large and growing body of research links volunteering with physical and mental health benefits for older adults, but there remains limited high quality experimental evidence.
- Volunteering plays a critical role in combating loneliness and social isolation.
- Because of the health benefits of volunteering, investments in volunteering programs can lead to reduced costs for the health care system.
- Although the health and well-being benefits of volunteering are well-known within the sector, more work needs to be done to make them more widely known among potential volunteers.

Even as volunteer rates and hours have declined over the past decade, the evidence of volunteering's benefits—both for individuals and society—has grown stronger. As discussed in this chapter, volunteering isn't just good for communities—it's also good for individuals. Research shows it can slow biological aging, reduce inflammation, and lower the risk of disability while enhancing brain health and emotional well-being. Just as importantly, volunteering helps combat loneliness, with studies linking it to lower rates of isolation and depression. Globally, evidence reinforces these benefits, including its role as a protective factor during the pandemic and its measurable returns in healthcare savings. As discussed in this section, volunteering is far more than a charitable act—it's a vital force for personal and societal well-being.

A recent systematic review in The Gerontologist reinforces this overall picture, finding that studies of older adult volunteering largely report biological, psychological, and social benefits.[29] However, the review also cautions that the strongest experimental evidence remains limited. Potential harms may also be under-reported, especially when volunteering leaves people feeling overwhelmed. The

[29] Williams, N., Maghidman, M., Pu, D., Mitchell, D., & Haines, T. (2026*). Health benefits and harms of older adult volunteering*. The Gerontologist, 66(5). https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnag043

review also argued that additional high-quality research is needed to elevate the level of evidence of the benefits of volunteering for older adults.

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS

Research studies continue to reinforce the physical benefits for older adults who volunteer.

Ontario Age-Friendly communities has documented how volunteering improves pain control and psychological stimulation while decreasing the risk of disability, hypertension, and inflammation.[30]

In a previous study about older adults, Volunteer Canada outlined how volunteering improves physical functioning, enhances emotional health, and improves brain health.[31]

Volunteering has also been associated with reduced epigenetic age[32], and informal helping has also been found to reduce mortality risk[33].

COMBATING LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

Many older adults struggle with feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Volunteering provides an avenue for older adults to avoid loneliness and to stay socially engaged. The ways in which volunteering reduces feelings of loneliness and isolation have been well-documented in studies around the world.

A 2024 study in Psychological Medicine found that volunteering predicted declines in future loneliness.[34] Eric Kim, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia,

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[30] Ontario Age-Friendly Communities. (2024). *Benefits of Volunteering for Older Adults*. https://sagelink.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Updated-Benefits-Infographic-Long-Version-March-18th-2024.jpg

[31] Volunteer Canada. (February 2013). *Volunteering and Older Adults*. https://volunteer.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Volunteering_and_Older_Adults_Final_Report_2013.pdf

[32] Nakamura, Julia S., Kwok, Cherise., Huang, Andrew., Stretcher, Victor J., Kim, Eric S., & Cole, Steven W. (February 2023). Reduced epigenetic age in older adults who volunteer. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psyneuen.2022.106000

[33] Nakamura, Julia S., Shiba, Koichiro., Jensen, Sofie M., VanderWeele, Tyler J., Kim, Eric S. (December 2023). Who Benefits From Helping? Moderators of the Association Between Informal Helping and Mortality. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*. https://doi.org/10.1093/abm/kaad042

[34] Hong, Joanna H., Nakamura, Julia S., Sahakari, Sakshi S., Chopik, William J., Shiba, Koichiro., VanderWeele, Tyler J., & Kim, Eric S. (March 2024). The silent epidemic of loneliness: identifying the antecedents of loneliness using a lagged exposure-wide approach. *Psychological Medicine*. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291723002581

has also found that older adults who volunteer are more optimistic and have lower rates of loneliness and depression.[35]

A 2023 study in the European Journal of Ageing analyzed data from over 30,000 adults aged 50+ during the pandemic and found that "volunteering has a protective effect against experiencing feelings of loneliness."[36] A 2024 study in the American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry showed "significant positive effects of volunteering on both measures of loneliness, social network engagement, stress and depressive symptoms compared to control participants."[37]

In the US, 88% of older adult participants in AmeriCorps volunteering programs felt less isolated after two years of volunteering.[38] People in Australia who stopped volunteering during the first year of the pandemic were far more likely to say they felt lonely at least some of the time than those who continued to volunteer.[39]

The National Seniors Council's Report on the Social Isolation of Seniors (2013–2014) identifies several factors that increase the risk of social isolation and loneliness, many of which are associated with lower volunteering rates.[40] The overlap is striking and presents a challenge: while volunteering is often promoted as a way to reduce social isolation, the very factors that contribute to isolation—such as poor health, lack of transportation, and low income—also serve as barriers to volunteering. This means those who may benefit most from the social connections and sense of purpose that volunteering provides often face the greatest obstacles to participating. This will be explored later in the recommendations section.

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[35] Seo, Hannah. (January 6th, 2025). 'Keeps me grateful': how volunteering can help older adults. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/jan/06/volunteering-older-adult

[36] Torres, Zaira., Martinez-Gregorio, Sara., & Oliver, Amparo. (October 2023). Senior volunteers: addressing loneliness in times of COVID-19. *European Journal of Ageing*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10433-023-00788-5

[37] Warner, Lisa M., Yeung, Dannii Yuen-lan., Jiang, Da., Choi, Namkee G., Ho, Rainbow Tin Hung., Kwok, Jojo Yan Yan.,,& Chou, Kee-Lee. (May 2024). Effects of volunteering over six months on loneliness, social and mental health outcomes among older adults: The HEAL-HOA Dual Randomized Controlled Trial. *The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jagp.2023.12.022

[38] AmeriCorps. Make Giving Back Your Second Act. https://americorps.gov/serve/americorps-seniors. Accessed January 30th, 2025.

[39] Volunteering Australia. (2023). *National Strategy for Volunteering 2023–2033*. https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/National-Strategy-for-Volunteering-2023-2033.pdf

[40]Employment and Social Development Canada. (2024). Social isolation of seniors - Volume 1: Understanding the issue and finding solutions. https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/seniors-forum-federal-provincial-territorial/social-isolation-toolkit-vol1.html#section5

THE BENEFITS FOR SOCIETY

A recent study from the Canadian Institute for Social Prescribing examined the Social Return on Investment (SROI) of different social prescribing programs. Social prescribing is a healthcare approach that connects individuals to non-medical services, such as community activities, social support, and volunteering, to improve their overall well-being and address social determinants of health.

The report, based on an independent analysis conducted by KPMG LLP, found that every dollar invested into these programs "may return $4.43 to society through improved well-being and reduced costs incurred on the health system and government."[41] The report focused on the role of social prescribing for aging adults and youth, making the results particularly salient for this report.

While the work to date cannot separate the specific role of volunteering in helping drive this SROI, it is noteworthy that 5 of the 12 social prescribing studies reviewed for return on investment included volunteering, either through volunteers participating in the social prescribing project or having volunteer opportunities as one of the things that medical practitioners can prescribe.

The potential of social prescribing to increase volunteering rates among older adults will be reviewed in-depth later in this report.

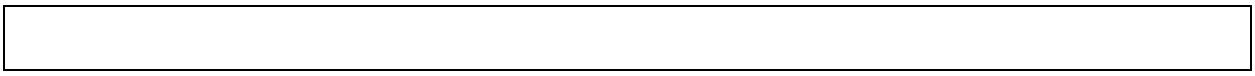
Interview Insights: The benefits of volunteering are well known within the charitable sector, but they need to be advertised more widely

"There's a whole segment of older people who probably don't realize their quality of life and their mental health might be better if they volunteered and contributed to the communities they live in."

Many interviewees talked about the need to promote the health benefits of volunteering. Some argued it's important to make this clear to the health sector and policy makers, while others talked about making the case directly to potential volunteers. Many older adults are interested in healthy living, but many of them have not considered how volunteering could become an important part of their wellness routine.

Risk of overemphasizing the personal benefits of volunteering rather than the altruistic motivations: Interviewees mentioned that some volunteers are turned off by the messaging of personal benefit, because they are volunteering with the goal of helping others, not themselves.

[41] Canadian Institute of Social Prescribing. (2024). *A Healthier Canada: An Analysis of the Potential Economic and Social Impacts of Social Prescribing.* https://irp.cdn-website.com/92bb31b3/files/uploaded/A_Healthier_Canada-An_Analysis_of_the_Potential_Economic_and_Social_Impacts_of_Social_Prescribing.pdf



UNDERSTANDING THE DECLINE IN FORMAL VOLUNTEERING

With clear declines in both the rates and intensity of volunteering among older adults, we set out to understand why. The data and interviews point to a mix of factors—declining participation in community and social groups, lingering effects of pandemic-related disruptions, and widespread feelings of burnout and disconnection. For most, health concerns are no longer the main barrier; instead, many older adults describe logistical and emotional hurdles that make it harder to stay involved. Yet this is also a group that remains highly motivated to contribute. Older adults are the most likely to say yes when asked to volunteer, but they are also the least likely to be asked.

Key takeaways

- Many older adults cut back on public interactions, including volunteering, at the height of the pandemic. Still, for most older adults, health concerns no longer seem to be playing a main role in the decline of volunteering.
- Over a third of older adults say they are volunteering less than before the pandemic because they feel burned out.
- Older adults participating in social groups and clubs are more likely to volunteer, but participation in these groups (including religious services) has dropped significantly over the past decade.
- Although older adults are the least likely group to be asked to volunteer, they are the group most likely to say yes when asked.
- One of the reasons older adults are most likely to say yes when asked to volunteer is that they have fewer time constraints than other age groups.
- Organizations have been reporting difficulties in attracting and retaining volunteers since the pandemic. Some of the barriers include shifting interests and priorities and the lack of staff capacity to engage volunteers.
- Organizations may sometimes be misinterpreting declining participation as a shift in interest when logistical barriers (burnout, time constraints, financial pressures, and disconnection) are more likely at play.
- Volunteers overwhelmingly describe external barriers, not personal disinterest, when asked why they do not volunteer. Few explicitly stated they were less interested in volunteering.

Interview Insights – Transportation and Out-of-Pocket Costs Were the Most Cited Barriers

Many older adults lack the physical fitness necessary to drive, which creates challenges not only in rural communities but also in cities without adequate public transportation. Some interviewees mentioned how transportation for older adults should be government-funded but that it instead has fallen to the charitable sector. Older women are also significantly less likely than older men to have a driver's license.[42]

The British Columbia 2024 Provincial Summit on Aging heard that "many clients requiring transportation have walkers or mobility aids and volunteers able to drive may not be able to lift the aid or accommodate the size in a compact vehicle".

Charities are having difficulty keeping up with the demand for volunteer drivers

Interviewees said that many nonprofits cannot afford to pay drivers, but that they are having difficulty recruiting volunteers for these roles.

One reason is the out-of-pocket costs, as volunteers are not always reimbursed for the gas or the depreciation costs of using their own vehicles. This is particularly a challenge when volunteers are required to drive long distances.

Interviewees also said that these programs have faced challenges as society has become more risk averse, and there are greater concerns around insurance and liability, especially when volunteers are asked to use their personal vehicles.

One idea suggested in the interviews is for organizations to work together to recruit and schedule volunteer drivers. This type of collaboration can help optimize resources without overburdening volunteers who are willing to drive.

Out-of-pocket costs are a significant barrier for low-income older adults

These older adults may find it difficult to afford the bus fare to get to volunteer opportunities, or paid parking may be a deterrent for those who can drive. Some volunteer opportunities also require a personal laptop or smartphone which not all older adults have.

Dedicated funding for transportation could help boost engagement

[42] Statistics Canada. (2009). Proportion of people aged 65 and over with a driver's licence, who drove a vehicle in the previous month and for whom driving was the main form of transportation, by selected characteristics, https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-008-x/2012001/t/11619/tbl01-eng.htm

Funding could be used on programs to drive isolated seniors, or also to reimburse the transportation costs of volunteers. For example, we heard that the BC United Way has specific grants for transportation.

WHY CANADIANS SAY THEY ARE VOLUNTEERING LESS

The 2023 *Generosity in Canada* study explored changes in volunteering by asking people whether they volunteer and how many hours they contribute.

The study asked why people were volunteering less; the responses in the table below highlight key barriers.[43] The data also reveals generational differences, with older adults citing challenges different from those of the general population.

Older Adults (65+):
Concerns about COVID-19 remained a significant factor for older adults in 2023, with 42% saying they had cut back on social and public interactions due to the pandemic during the past few years, compared to just 24% of the general population. Burnout was also a substantial barrier, with 38% of older adults reporting a lack of energy to volunteer. Additionally, 23% said they felt more disconnected from volunteer opportunities since COVID, which may reflect how shifts to digital outreach or new engagement methods have not fully reached this group. Notably, 26% selected "Other" as their reason for volunteering less—making it the third most common response—indicating that the list of barriers may not have fully captured the range of challenges older adults face.

General Population (All Ages):
Among all respondents who say they are volunteering less, time constraints are the most frequently cited barrier, with 40% saying they have less free time than before. Financial pressures are also a key factor, with 29% stating they must prioritize paid work to make ends meet. In contrast to older adults, COVID-19 concerns were less prominent, and "Other" was a less common response (10%), suggesting that the listed reasons captured most of the general population's barriers. These findings highlight how different age groups experience volunteering

[43] Only a small group of 249 respondents were asked why they were volunteering less than they had four years prior, before the pandemic. The sample size for older adults was 48. The results need to be interpreted with caution but remain a useful jumping-off point for further research.

challenges in distinct ways, with older adults facing disconnection and lingering health concerns. In comparison, younger and middle-aged adults are more constrained by work and time pressures.

Table – Why people are volunteering less, total population and older adults

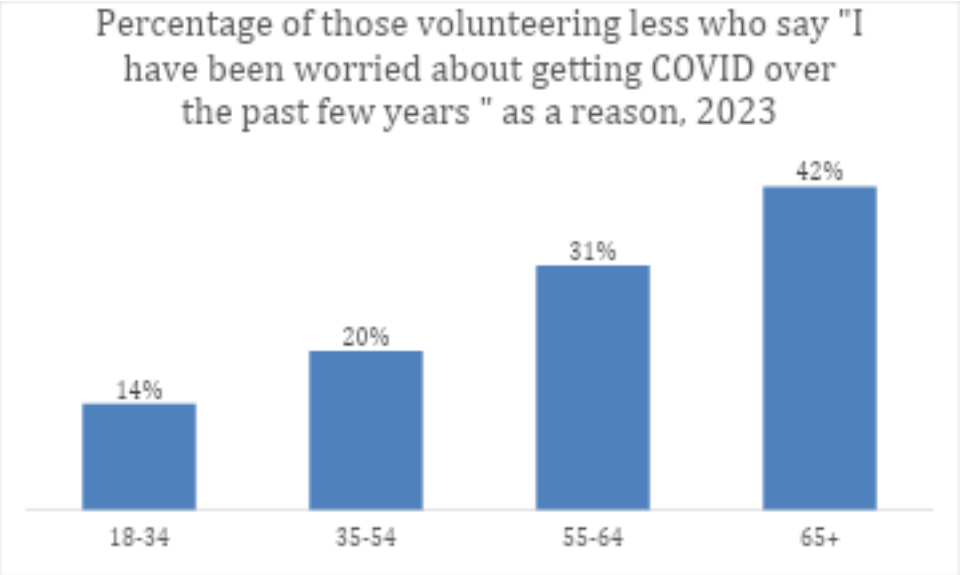
Question: Which of the following might explain why your amount of volunteering in the past year decreased compared to 4 years before COVID-19?

	Total, Population	**Aged 65+**
I have been worried about getting COVID over the past few years and have cut back on social and public interactions.	24%	42%
I am just more burned out nowadays and do not have as much energy to volunteer.	36%	38%
Other	10%	26%
I feel more isolated from volunteering needs since COVID. I am less aware and more disconnected from volunteering opportunities.	14%	23%
Greater time constraints now. Less free time to volunteer.	40%	18%
I need to spend more time on paid work to make ends meet now.	29%	9%
With more polarization of (political) views, fragmentation of social values, and social demonstrations, I am worried about getting involved in volunteering outside of my home.	9%	9%
Nowadays, I do not have as much confidence, trust, and respect for the organizations which need volunteering.	11%	7%
I am working remotely more often which blurs the lines between work, personal time, and convenient times to volunteer.	15%	1%
Digital technology is using up more time these days: I am busier trying to keep up with social media, online news, streaming, and so on.	5%	0%
Volunteering is not what my peer group does. It is less popular than it used to be.	6%	0%

Source: 2023 Generosity in Canada study by Sector3Insights. Analysis by authors.

Respondents could select multiple reasons but generally only chose one, suggesting that most people identified a single major barrier to volunteering rather than a mix of smaller obstacles.

For older adults, many initially stopped due to health concerns related to COVID-19, but as time passed, the primary issue has shifted. Rather than lingering health fears, many now cite feeling disconnected from opportunities as their main reason for not returning. This reinforces the idea that COVID-19 played a key role in severing the relationship with volunteering, but it is no longer the primary factor preventing re-engagement. Instead, the challenge now is reconnecting potential volunteers with opportunities in ways that feel accessible and inviting. Ideas for how to better engage older adult volunteers are explored in the Recommendations section.



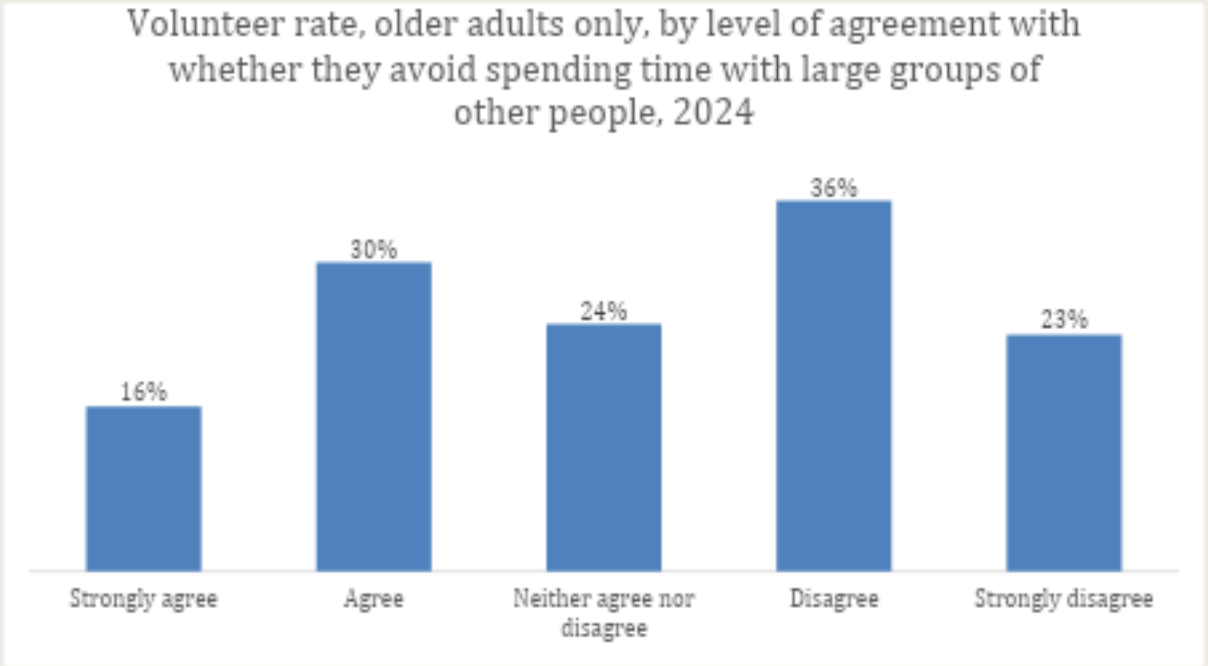
Source: 2023 Generosity in Canada study by Sector3Insights. Analysis by authors.

THE SURPRISINGLY SMALL DIRECT ROLE OF COVID-19 IN 2024

The 2023 *Generosity in Canada Study* shows that older adults commonly cited health concerns related to COVID-19 as a reason for declining volunteer rates. However, when asked more directly about their attitudes, perceptions, and current volunteer behaviours in the *2024 YMCA in Canada study*, the actual impact of COVID-19 on volunteering appeared much smaller, and it is unclear why this discrepancy exists, though we explore this further in this section.

While a group of older adults report avoiding large gatherings to protect their health, they represent a relatively small portion of the population. Among them, those who strongly agreed they avoided

large groups had lower volunteer rates, but there was no clear pattern or statistically significant difference in volunteer participation for others. Similarly, there were no significant differences in volunteer rates between those who enjoy being in crowds and those who do not. This suggests that while health and social interaction concerns exist, they may not be the main driver of declining volunteerism.



Source: Environics Institute and YMCA Canada (2024). Analysis by authors. Note: Interpret with caution as the sample sizes are small. There were no statistically significant differences.

Further, in the 2024 YMCA in Canada study, having had COVID-19 was not a predictor of volunteer rates. Among older adults, the volunteer rate was identical (27%) between those who said they had definitely or probably been sick with COVID-19 and those who said they had probably or definitely not been sick.

Interestingly, those who reported a more serious illness from COVID-19 were more likely to volunteer in that study. Among older adults who had COVID-19, 41% of those who described their illness as somewhat or very serious reported volunteering, compared to just 24% of those who said their illness was not serious.

These findings suggest that while COVID-19 may have influenced volunteering decisions for some individuals, it does not appear to be the primary factor driving overall declines in participation.

Other social and structural factors may play a larger role in shaping long-term engagement trends among older adults.

If health risks related to COVID-19 played a major role in older adults' decisions to stop volunteering in the 2023 Generosity in Canada study but were not as prominent in the 2024 findings—despite no increase in volunteer rates—what explains the shift?

One possibility is that in 2023, respondents were reflecting on what initially caused them to stop volunteering, even if those concerns were no longer a present-day barrier. Another is that the 2023 survey's more direct measurement made health concerns more salient, whereas the 2024 survey may not have framed the question in a way that captured the full impact of past disruptions. It is also possible that the 2024 measures were not structured to capture the role of health concerns in volunteer participation effectively.

It is also possible that by 2024, older adults were no longer concerned about COVID-19 to the same extent as in 2023.

While it is difficult to determine which factor is at play, the findings suggest that COVID-19 may have played a significant role in severing the relationship between older adults and volunteering—but it may not be as strong a factor in preventing them from returning.

Further research should explore how big of a barrier health fears remain for older adults and highlight what preventative measures could encourage them to return, especially for those who remain the most concerned about the health impacts of COVID-19.

Interview Insights – Some older adult volunteers never returned after the pandemic

Many interviewees echoed how the pandemic caused volunteer activities to either slow down significantly or cease completely. While volunteering has been rebounding, interviewees spoke about a cohort of the oldest adults who never returned.

THE ROLE OF BURNOUT

Feelings of burnout have been widespread in recent years, and older adults are no exception. The 2023 Generosity in Canada study shows that over a third (37.5%) of older adults who volunteer less

than before the pandemic say they are "just more burned out nowadays and do not have as much energy to volunteer."

This matches the experiences of charities attempting to recruit and retain volunteers. In The Giving Report 2023, charities were asked to rate potential concerns on a scale of 1-10 for 'today' and 'five years from now.' Four in 10 charities ranked volunteer burnout as eight or higher for 'today' and 'five years from now', meaning they anticipate volunteer burnout as an ongoing problem and not simply something associated with the pandemic.[44]

A recent systematic review in The Gerontologist also discussed the potential harm of volunteering for volunteers who feel overwhelmed, including a decrease in self-fulfillment.[45]

As discussed later in this report, perceived mental health does not appear to play as major a role in volunteer participation among older adults as one might expect, with volunteer rates not strongly linked to self-reported mental well-being (this is in sharp contrast to younger adults where mental health has a much stronger relationship).

On the other hand, the data suggests that physical health and perceived energy levels play a significant role in volunteering.

There are a few possible explanations for this trend. It may be that some older adults have been in worse health since COVID-19, with fatigue and lower energy levels acting as barriers to volunteering. At the same time, past mental health challenges may have contributed to disconnection from volunteering opportunities, even if they are no longer the primary reason people cite for staying disengaged. Understanding whether this burnout is primarily physical, mental, or a combination of both is key to addressing re-engagement challenges among older volunteers.

As discussed previously, volunteering helps improve mental health outcomes, so the fact that people who are feeling burnt out volunteer less means they are missing out on the benefits of volunteering that could reduce their feelings of burnout.

Interview Insight – Burnout and Mental Health Challenges Tied to Specific Volunteer Roles

While the survey data considered general feelings of burnout, our interviews touched on how certain types of intensive volunteer roles can cause burnout.

[44] CanadaHelps. (2023). The Giving Report 2023. https://www.canadahelps.org/media/The_Giving_Report_2023.pdf

[45] Williams, N., Maghidman, M., Pu, D., Mitchell, D., & Haines, T. (2026). Health benefits and harms of older adult volunteering. The Gerontologist, 66(5). https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnag043

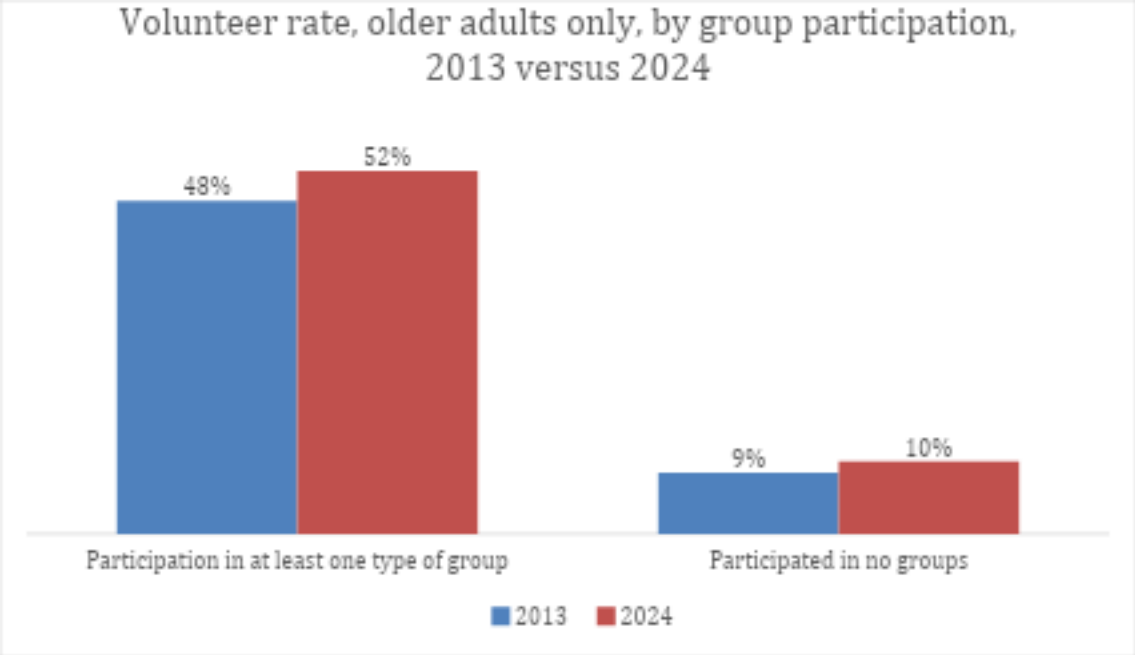
Interviewees highlighted the emotional toll that certain volunteer roles can take, especially those in peer support settings. They described how challenging it can be to witness someone else's difficult circumstances, and how it can make older adults reflect on how they could soon be in the same type of challenging situation. More attention needs to be paid to the mental health of volunteers, especially those in high-stress situations.

THE ROLE OF DECLINING PARTICIPATION AND SMALLER SOCIAL NETWORKS

Participation in social groups remains a strong predictor of volunteer rates in 2024, just as in 2013.

Over half of older adults (52%) who participated in at least one social group reported volunteering in 2024, up slightly from 48% in 2013 (see chart below).

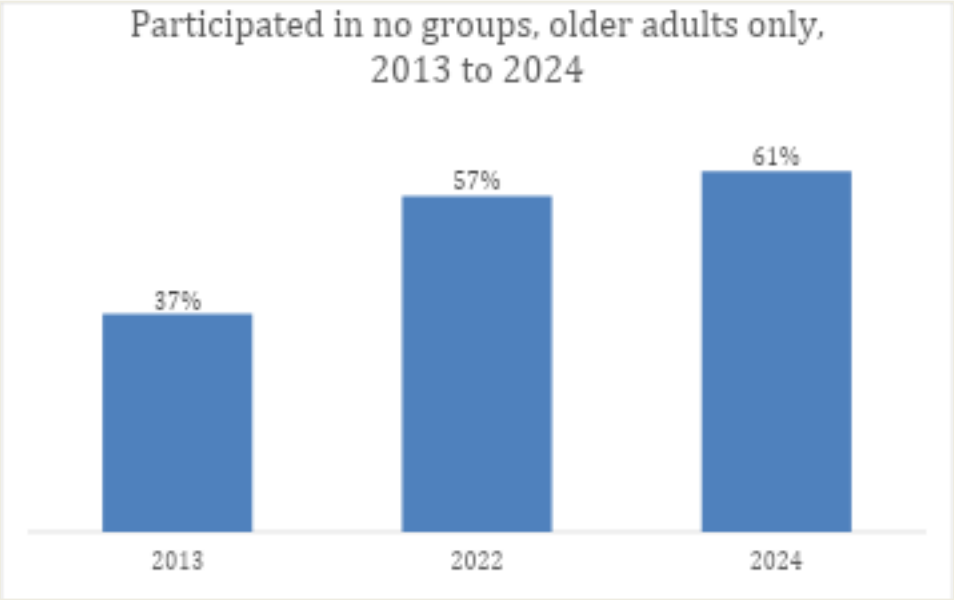
On the other hand, only 10% of older adults who did not participate in any social groups volunteered in 2024, almost unchanged from 2013 (9%).



Sources: Statistics Canada (2013). Environics Institute and YMCA Canada (2024). Analysis by authors. **Note**: Small sample sizes in the 2024 data so interpret with caution.

What has changed significantly since 2013 is the number of older adults who do not participate in social groups, which makes them less likely to volunteer.

In 2013, just over a third (37%) of older adults did not participate in any social groups, but this number increased to 57% by 2022. The lower participation in 2022 could be somewhat related to continued uneasiness around the pandemic, but in 2024, the number of older adults not participating in any social groups reached 61%.

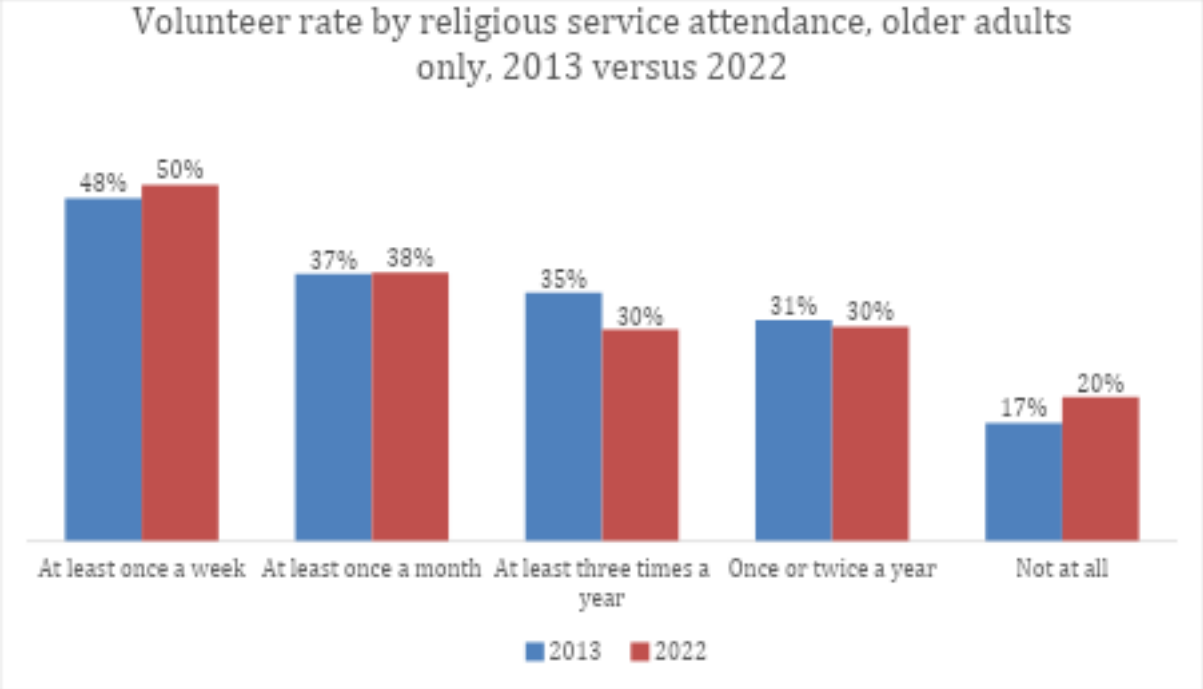


Sources: 2013 (Statistics Canada); 2022 (Environics Institute with Community Foundations of Canada); 2024 (Environics Institute with YMCA Canada). Analysis by authors. See Methods for full details.[46]

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN RELIGION AND VOLUNTEERING AMONG OLDER ADULTS

In 2022, half of older adults (50%) who attended religious services at least once a week volunteered, compared to only one in five older adults (20%) who did not attend religious services at all. The patterns for religious attendance and volunteer rates were unchanged from 2013. The fact that these patterns are so consistent over time lends credence to the use of these datasets as a comparison.

[46] People were asked if they had participated in any of a large umber of groups and this refers to those who did not participate in any of the groups in the last 12 months. The list differs slightly between sources but generally encompasses: A union or professional association / A political party or group / A sports or recreational organization / A cultural, educational or hobby organization / A religious-affiliated group / A service club / A seniors group / A youth organization / An immigrant or ethnic association or club



Sources: 2013 (Statistics Canada); 2022 (Environics Institute with Community Foundations of Canada); Analysis by authors. See Methods for full details.

The connection between religious attendance and volunteer rates has been well-researched. A widely-cited 2013 study found that increased religious belief and attendance increased the likelihood that people would volunteer in religious institutions. This type of volunteering, in turn, made it more likely that people would move into other types of nonreligious types of formal volunteering. The study argued that religious institutions function as feeder systems for other types of volunteering, regardless of personality traits.[47]

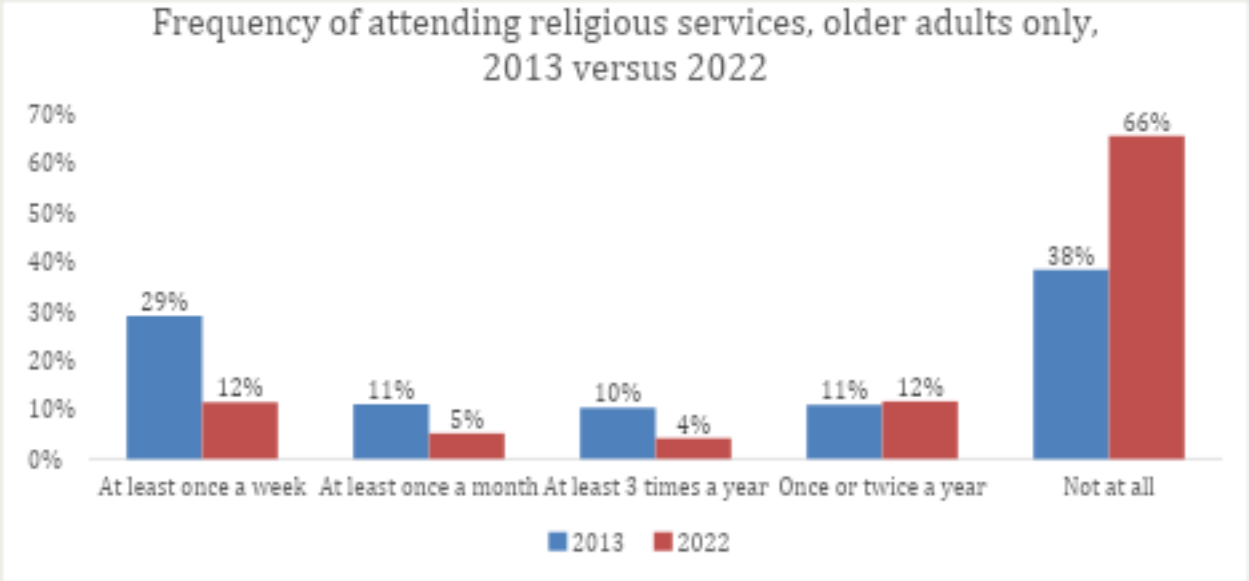
According to the 2021 Census, the proportion of non-religious Canadians has doubled over the past two decades, reaching 34.6%.[48] This trend is likely to increase, as only 19% of older adults had

[47] Johnston, Joseph B. (December 4th, 2013). Religion and Volunteering Over the Adult Life Course. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12065

[48] Thompson, Nicole. (October 27, 2022). More Canadians than ever have no religious affiliation, census shows. *CBC News*. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/kitchener-waterloo/canadian-census-religious-affiliation-none-1.6631293

no religious affiliation, compared to 36.5% for those aged 15-64 and 42.5% for those 14 and younger.[49]

According to our data, the number of older adults not attending religious services has skyrocketed from 38% in 2013 to 66% in 2022. This drop in religious attendance among older adults matches the drop in overall group participation.



Sources: 2013 (Statistics Canada); 2022 (Environics Institute with Community Foundations of Canada); Analysis by authors. See Methods for full details.

The fact that people are attending religious services at lower rates means they are less likely to be presented with both religious and non-religious volunteering opportunities.

Lower attendance also contributes to the closure of religious institutions. Don McRae has written about the closure of churches and the associated loss of community social capital.[50] As with other community organizations, the closure of churches diminishes the supply of volunteer opportunities and removes one of the key ways that people are brought into volunteering.

[49] Statistics Canada. Table 98-10-0353-01 Religion by gender and age: Canada, provinces and territories. https://doi.org/10.25318/9810035301-eng

[50] McRae, Don. (March 26th, 2023). Church Closures and the Loss of Community Social Capital. *PANL Perspectives - Carleton University.* https://carleton.ca/panl/2023/church-closures-and-the-loss-of-community-social-capital-by-don-mcrae/

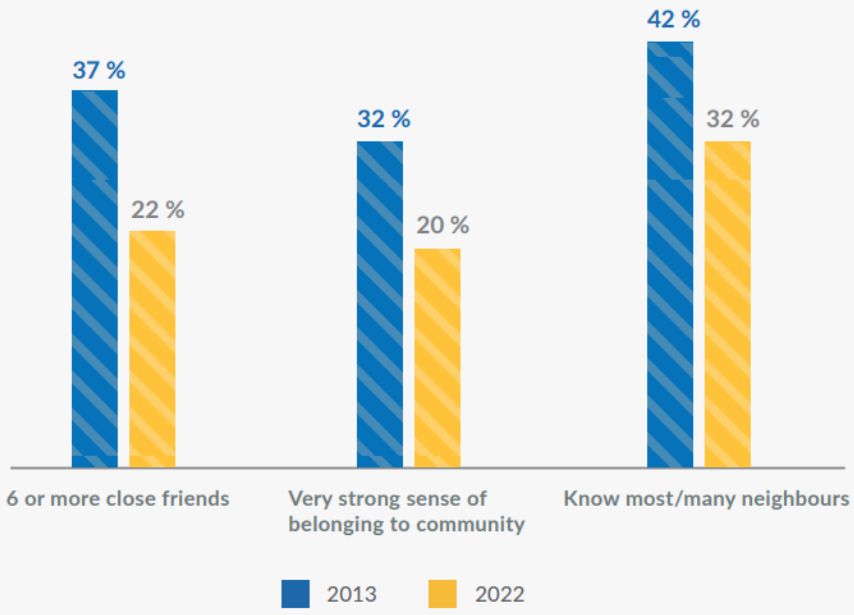
The closure of churches affects not only the congregations themselves but all the community groups that use church space either for free or at significantly below market rates.

Interview Insights – The declining influence of churches

"In the past, once you were done work, you volunteered. It was also just given that more people were involved in their church than now. Churches were also behind most of the charities. So the transition from work to volunteering was much easier."

CONNECTION AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

FIGURE 9
Percentage of Canadians Reporting Key Connection Indicators, Canada, 2013 vs 2022



Source: Connection, Engagement, and Well-being: A Report from the 2022 Social Capital in Canada Study.

Image source: CanadaHelps. Data from the 2013 General Social Survey on Social Identity and the 2022 Social Capital in Canada study were used.[51]

One factor influencing this trend in decreased volunteering may be the decline in key social connection indicators, as highlighted in *Community Foundations of Canada's 2022 Social Capital Study*.[52]

Since 2013, fewer Canadians report having six or more close friends (falling from 37% to 22%), having a very strong sense of belonging to their community (from 32% to 20%), or knowing most or many of their neighbours (from 42% to 32%). Given the well-established link between social connections and volunteerism, these shifts may have broader implications for community engagement.

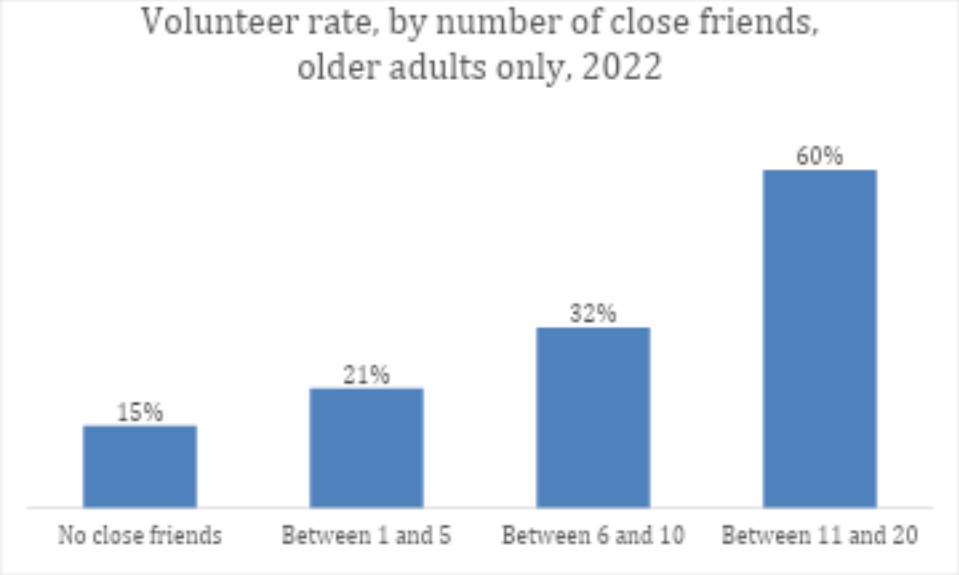
Data show that both having close friends and a sense of belonging are associated with volunteering. Among older adults, 44% of those with a very strong sense of belonging volunteer, compared to just 14% among those who describe their sense of belonging as somewhat weak. Similarly, volunteering rates rise dramatically with the number of close friends: 60% of those with 11 to 20 close friends volunteer, compared to just 15% of those with none.

These trends suggest that strengthening social ties—through community programming, neighbourhood networks, and opportunities for meaningful connection—could boost volunteerism.

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[51] CanadaHelps. (2024). The Giving Report 2024 -From Disconnection to Collective Action. https://indd.adobe.com/view/publication/763060b8-d8a0-48c9-8325-c9e619340e9a/51rd/publication-web-resources/pdf/TGR_24_EN_Final.pdf

[52] Ayer, Steven. & Parkin, Andrew. (2023). Connection, Engagement and Well-being - A Report from the 2022 Social Capital in Canada Study. Environics Institute for Survey Research. https://www.environicsinstitute.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/env-canadiansocap-full-eng-v04_finalf418d6ff349f4ad884640ba0ecc8873e.pdf?sfvrsn=cb879c19_0

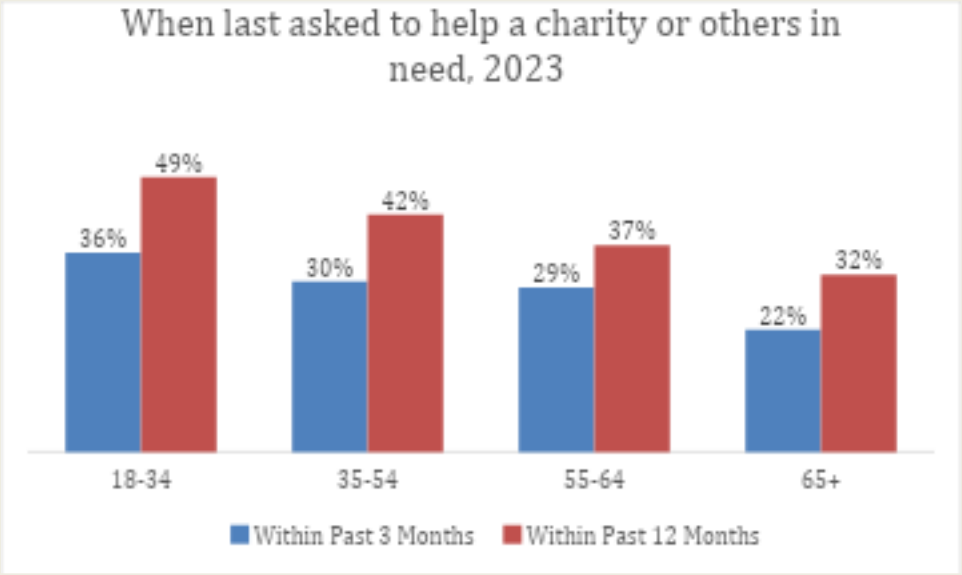


Source: 2022 (Environics Institute with Community Foundations of Canada); analysis by authors. See Methods for full details.

OLDER ADULTS ARE LEAST LIKELY TO REPORT BEING ASKED TO VOLUNTEER

The 2023 Generosity in Canada looked at the frequency at which people are asked to volunteer and how likely they are to say yes to such requests (see charts below).

About a third (32%) of older adults have been asked to volunteer in the last 12 months, the lowest for any age group. Almost half (49%) of people aged 18-34 had been asked to volunteer in the past year.



Source: 2023 Generosity in Canada study by Sector3Insights. Analysis by authors.

Table – What did you do when you were last asked to volunteer for a charity or help someone in need

	18-34	**35-54**	**55-64**	**65+**
You generally ignored the request(s)	18%	21%	14%	11%
You ignored some, but responded to others with some act of generosity	48%	49%	47%	41%
You generally supported the request(s)	35%	30%	39%	48%

Source: 2023 Generosity in Canada study by Sector3Insights. Analysis by authors.[53]

Although older adults are the least likely group to be asked to volunteer, they are the group most likely to say yes when asked. In total, just over a third of people (36%) generally say yes when asked to volunteer, which rises to almost half (48%) among older adults. People aged 35-54 (30%) are the least likely group.

This mismatch between the number of older adults being asked to volunteer and the number of older adults willing to say yes is a major opportunity to boost volunteering rates.

THE MISSING PIECE: MOTIVATIONS AND COMMUNITY CONNECTION

While much of the available data focuses on barriers to volunteering, far fewer studies explore the motivations behind volunteering and whether those motivations have changed over time.

Academic researchers have found that while younger volunteers are more likely to volunteer for career-related reasons, older adults are more likely to volunteer out of a desire to contribute to their communities and because of abstract ideas of good citizenship.[54]

We have some data on motivations and general enablers, and they seem quite positive, but we often lack comparable data for other periods.

Older adults generally express strong support for charities, with high levels of agreement that charities make a positive difference in society (92% for those 65+, compared to 84% of those aged 18-34) and that there are easy ways to volunteer (90% vs. 86%). They are also more likely to see charitable giving and volunteering as a personal responsibility, with 80% agreeing that "everyone has a responsibility to give and help those in need," compared to just 68% of those aged 55-64 and 77% of those aged 18-34.

On the other hand, compared to older generations, younger adults are more likely to believe that charities already have enough volunteers and that social support should be the government's responsibility. Among those aged 18-34, nearly one in three (32%) believe that charities and community groups already have enough volunteers and do not need their time, compared to just 13% of those 65 and older. Additionally, nearly half (49%) of younger adults agree that it is the

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[53] When were you, yourself, most recently solicited or asked (via online, email, SMS, face-to-face in-person, or via traditional mail) to volunteer your time to help a charity or others in need. Which response best applies

[54] Winerman, Lea. (2006). Helping others, helping ourselves. *Monitor on Psychology*. https://www.apa.org/monitor/dec06/helping

government's responsibility—not that of individual citizens—to provide for those in need. By contrast, only 22% of older adults (65+) share this view.

While younger adults broadly support charities, their responses indicate a more transactional or system-level perspective on giving rather than one rooted in personal obligation. This shift in mindset may affect how nonprofits engage new generations of donors and volunteers.

Table - Percentage that agrees with select statements about community and volunteering by age, 2023

	18-34	35-54	55-64	65+
I feel charities make a positive difference in society.	84%	88%	85%	92%
If one decides to volunteer time to help others in need, there are easy ways (methods) to do so.	86%	87%	82%	90%
There are many charitable needs and social problems in my community which require donations, volunteers and general community support	84%	90%	83%	89%
I feel everyone has a responsibility to give and help those in need.	77%	79%	68%	80%
I know of several other people I respect who donate money or volunteer in their own meaningful way.	74%	77%	75%	80%
I generally feel charities are trustworthy.	70%	73%	67%	79%
I enjoy supporting nonprofits and/or registered charities.	77%	78%	74%	78%
As a child, I was raised to help others and to give to charities.	71%	69%	61%	66%
I do not feel citizens have a responsibility to help provide for those in need. It is the governments' responsibility	49%	35%	33%	22%
Charities and community groups have enough volunteers and do not need my time.	32%	24%	17%	13%

Source: 2023 Generosity in Canada study by Sector3Insights. Analysis by authors.

Perhaps people want to be involved in their communities but are struggling to find or commit to opportunities. In that case, the challenge may not be about changing interests but making engagement more accessible, flexible, and rewarding. Future research should explore whether declining trust in charities, changing perceptions of volunteering, or shifting expectations of community involvement play a meaningful role in volunteer trends.

THE DECLINE IN VOLUNTEERING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF NONPROFITS

ORGANIZATIONS HAVE BEEN REPORTING DIFFICULTIES IN ATTRACTING AND RETAINING VOLUNTEERS SINCE THE PANDEMIC

Many nonprofits rely on volunteers to deliver services, but volunteer recruitment and retention have been significant challenges since the pandemic, something which was a common theme in our interviewees.

In November 2022, 65% of nonprofit organizations across the country were struggling with a volunteer shortage[55], and Volunteer Canada reported that, as a result, up to 35% of those organizations had to reduce services.[56] Only 12% of organizations could recruit volunteers for all available roles. Similarly, our interviewees highlighted how many nonprofits cannot recruit enough volunteers, especially for driver and peer support programs.

In a May 2024 survey by Carleton University, six in ten (61%) organizations reported a decrease in volunteers in 2020-2022 versus before the pandemic, while 20% said the number of volunteers stayed the same, and only 5% reported an increase in volunteers.[57] This is during a period when demand for services increased significantly.

Also, in the May 2024 survey, organizations that had lost volunteers were asked whether they had been able to recruit them back, and only a third of organizations said they had either exceeded or returned to pre-pandemic numbers.[58] Four in ten (41%) recruited some of the volunteers back, but

[55] Statistics Canada. Table 33-10-0617-01 Volunteers and challenges businesses face in volunteer recruitment and retention, fourth quarter of 2022. https://doi.org/10.25318/3310061701-eng

[56] CBC News. (January 24, 2023). *Critical lack of volunteers putting Canadian non-profit services at risk: Volunteer Canada.* https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/volunteer-shortage-caanada-1.6723348

[57] CICP-PCPOB. (2024). *CICP-PCPOB Weekly Report- Rapport Hebdomadaire* (No. 2.5.15) Philanthropy and Nonprofit Leadership, Carleton University. https://carleton.ca/cicp-pcpob/homepage/research-data/

[58] CICP-PCPOB. (2024). *CICP-PCPOB Weekly Report- Rapport Hebdomadaire* (No. 2.5.15) Philanthropy and Nonprofit Leadership, Carleton University. https://carleton.ca/cicp-pcpob/homepage/research-data/

not all of them, and almost a quarter (24%) have not been able to recruit back the volunteers they lost.

In a February 2023 survey from Carleton University, organizations that don't work with volunteers were also asked why not. Almost half (48%) said volunteers were not required, but a third (34%) also said they don't have the staff to manage volunteers. This suggests that more volunteer opportunities could be created if organizations received additional funding for volunteer management. This was also a major theme of the interviewees, that even organizations with successful volunteer programs cannot scale their programs because they don't have the necessary staff capacity.

Speaking at the House of Commons in 2024, Volunteer Canada CEO Megan Conway noted that "volunteer manager positions were the first ones to be cut during the pandemic and that many of these positions have not returned."[59] An in-depth discussion of ways to boost engagement through investments in volunteer management is provided later in this report.

Interview Insights – Using Impact Stories to Recruit Volunteers

Several interviewees mentioned the power of using impact stories featuring older adults as an effective way to promote volunteering. A recent campaign from Volunteer Toronto was cited as a good example.

THE PRECARITY OF VOLUNTEER-RUN ORGANIZATIONS

Volunteer-run charities are significant sources of volunteering opportunities, but the pandemic hit them hard, and some types were already experiencing long-term declines. Interviewees also highlighted how many organizations led by older adults are having trouble finding other volunteers who are willing to take over the leadership of the organization.

Service clubs, associations that gather for social activities and to make a difference in their communities, are an important source of volunteer opportunities for older adults. According to an analysis by Don McRae, in 2023, there were 440 Rotary, Lions, Kiwanis and Optimist Clubs charities in Canada. However, since 2000, only 88 new service club charities have been created,

[59] House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. (June 2024). *Promoting and Encouraging Intergenerational Volunteerism.* https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/441/HUMA/Reports/RP13180385/humarp25/humarp25-e.pdf

while 199 were revoked.[60] Similar trends were found for community resource groups, public amenities, and volunteer centres, with more revoked than created.

However, there are some examples of positive growth. For example Men's Sheds is a grassroots movement focused on men's health and well-being which has more than 170 Sheds across Canada, and the goal is to have 1,000 active Sheds by 2032. Men's Sheds is discussed at length later in the report.

ORGANIZATION'S PERCEPTIONS OF CHANGING VOLUNTEERING TRENDS

Carleton's Charity Insight project asked organizations why there was a decline in volunteering and what was working to get people back.

Many organizations continue to struggle with recruiting back volunteers lost during the pandemic. The most commonly cited reasons include changes in volunteer preferences or interests over time (52%), economic factors impacting volunteerism (50%), and organizations not prioritizing volunteer recruitment (37%). Burnout (34%) and scheduling conflicts (29%) also remain significant barriers, highlighting external challenges and organizational factors affecting re-engagement.

For organizations that have successfully recruited volunteers, the most effective strategies have been social media outreach (59%), personal outreach (59%), and offering flexible schedules (45%). Engaging in community events (45%) and collaborating with schools and universities (28%) have also proven useful.[61] These findings suggest that while structural challenges persist, proactive engagement and flexibility in volunteer opportunities can help organizations rebuild their volunteer base.

A key contrast between volunteer organizations' perceptions and volunteers' self-reported reasons for stepping away is the emphasis on changing interests. Organizations cite "changes in volunteer preferences or interests over time" as the top reason for declining participation (52%). However, this was not a dominant theme in volunteer responses in the data we reviewed earlier. When volunteers were asked why they were volunteering less, they primarily pointed to burnout, time

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[60] McRae, Don. (August 22nd, 2023). Volunteer-Supporting Charities Are Closing at Alarming Rates. *PANL Perspectives - Carleton University*. https://carleton.ca/panl/2023/volunteer-charities-close-at-alarming-rates/

[61] CICP-PCPOB. (2024). *CICP-PCPOB Weekly Report- Rapport Hebdomadaire* (No. 2.5.15) Philanthropy and Nonprofit Leadership, Carleton University. https://carleton.ca/cicp-pcpob/homepage/research-data/

constraints, COVID-related concerns, financial pressures, and feeling disconnected from opportunities.

This discrepancy suggests that organizations may interpret declining participation as a shift in interest when many volunteers still want to engage but face logistical, psychological, or structural barriers.

OLDER ADULTS: WHO'S VOLUNTEERING AND WHO'S NOT?

Volunteering is a key indicator of civic engagement and social capital, reflecting how individuals contribute to their communities. Understanding who volunteers—and how participation varies across demographic groups—can help policymakers, nonprofit leaders, and researchers identify gaps in engagement and opportunities to strengthen community involvement.

This section examines demographic differences in volunteer rates across Canada, drawing on data from the 2022 and 2024 Social Capital Surveys. By leveraging consistent measures of volunteering and identical demographic questions across both survey waves, we can provide a more robust analysis of patterns in volunteer engagement. The results show how gender, region, racialized identity, income, and education influence volunteering behaviour.

Key takeaways

- **Gender:** Among older adults, men and women volunteer at nearly equal rates. Women aged 65 to 74 volunteer at rates 15 percentage points lower than in 2013 (23% vs. 38%).
- **Employment status:** Older adults who were still working volunteered at much higher rates than those who were retired. Among working 65 to 74 year olds, 39% volunteered. Among retired 65 to 74 year olds, 22% volunteered.
- **Income:** Among older adults, volunteer rates rise sharply with income, from 13% among those with less than $30,000 per year in household income to 39% among those with $100,000 in household income.
- **Education:** Higher levels of education are associated with increased engagement among all age groups, but this is particularly pronounced among older adults.
- **Immigration status:** First-generation Canadians report the highest levels of volunteering across all age groups.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

This analysis is based on a combined dataset from the 2022 and 2024 Social Capital Surveys, both of which used the same measures of volunteering and identical demographic question formats. Because the surveys also share a similar framework for assessing social capital, potential biases related to differences in question-wording or survey structure are minimized.

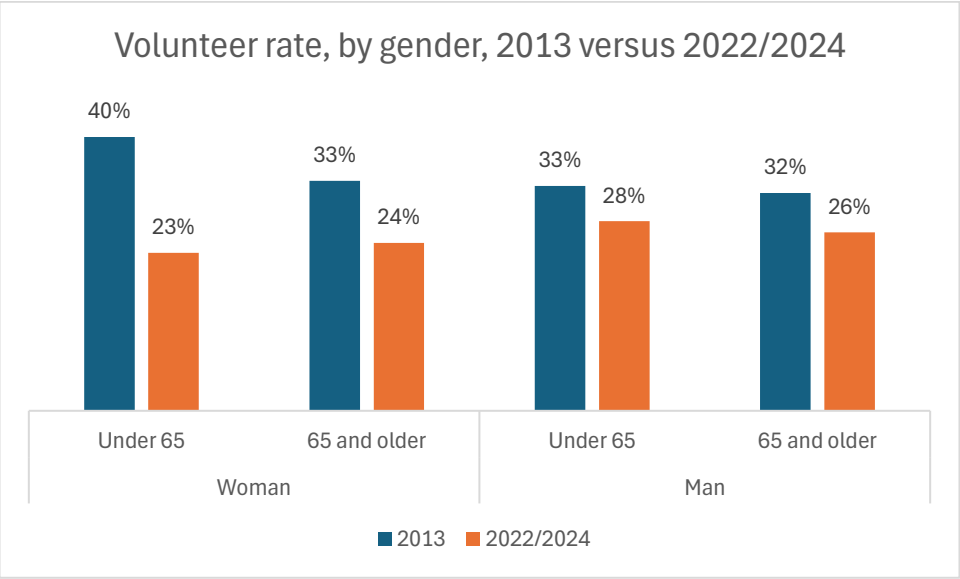
Both surveys were weighted to be representative of the total population. The combined dataset includes responses from 776 individuals aged 65 and older, allowing for a closer examination of trends among older adults (392 older adults in 2022 and 384 older adults in 2024). All reported volunteer rates reflect a blended population unless otherwise specified. We only discuss results as important differences when they are statistically significant, but do not always specifically note them.

It is important to note that while the 2022 survey included questions on the number of hours volunteered, the 2024 survey did not. As a result, this section focuses solely on participation rates rather than time commitments.

The following analysis explores key demographic variations in volunteering across Canada, highlighting both areas of strong participation and potential disparities in engagement. See the opening method section for more details.

Gender

Our data from 2022–2024 shows that older men and women now volunteer at nearly equal rates, with men at 26% and women at 24% among older adults.



Sources: 2013 (Statistics Canada); 2022 (Environics Institute with Community Foundations of Canada); 2024 (Environics Institute with YMCA Canada). Analysis by authors.

Looking further back, data from the 2013 General Social Survey on Social Identity shows a 9-percentage-point decline in volunteer rates among older women and a 6-point decline among older men over the past decade.

However, the most striking trend is the **17-point decrease in volunteering among women under 65, a decline surpassing** any other group. While this report primarily focuses on older adults, the steep decline among younger women raises questions about whether generational shifts or structural barriers contribute to long-term changes in volunteer engagement.

While overall volunteer participation remained relatively stable between 2022 and 2024, some significant shifts emerged:

- Older men experienced a statistically significant increase in volunteer rates, rising by eight points (from 22% to 30%).
- Older women saw a slight decrease in volunteer rates (26% to 23%), though this change was not statistically significant.
- Younger women showed an increase of six points (from 20% to 26%), suggesting some recovery in volunteer engagement that was not extending to older adult women.

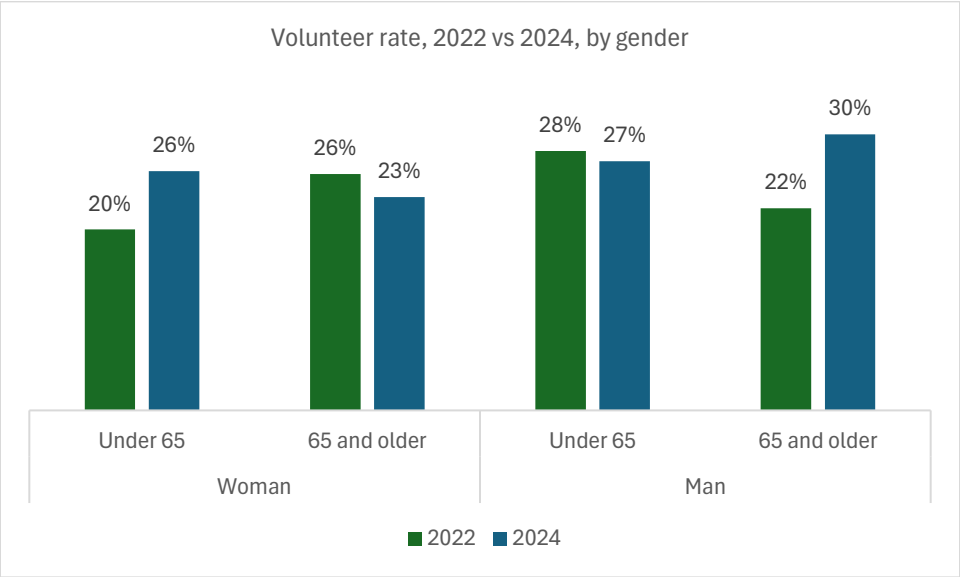
Although the sample size for older adults in this dataset is relatively small (776 respondents, further divided by gender and age groups), the trends suggest that men over 65 may be volunteering at increasing rates while women's participation is stagnating or declining.

Interview Insights – A concern that men are participating at lower rates

Although the survey data shows older adult men and women volunteering at the same rates, and that volunteering rates for older men are in fact increasing, several interview respondents expressed concern about low participation rates among older men.

One interviewee said that in their experience women account for about 70% of older adult volunteers. Another said that fitness and social activities targeting older adults can often have 80-90% of participants be women.

As discussed below, women aged 65 to 74 are participating at significantly lower rates in 2024 than they were in 2013. The perception among some interviewees that older adult women are more likely to volunteer may reflect dynamics specific to certain volunteer programs, or it may indicate that the higher participation of older women in the past continues to influence how people perceive current volunteer patterns.



Sources: 2022 (Environics Institute with Community Foundations of Canada); 2024 (Environics Institute with YMCA Canada). Analysis by authors. **Note**: Caution, small sample sizes.

To better understand the decline in women's volunteerism, we broke down the comparison into finer age categories. While **sample sizes require cautious interpretation**, the data still provides valuable insights into shifting trends in engagement.

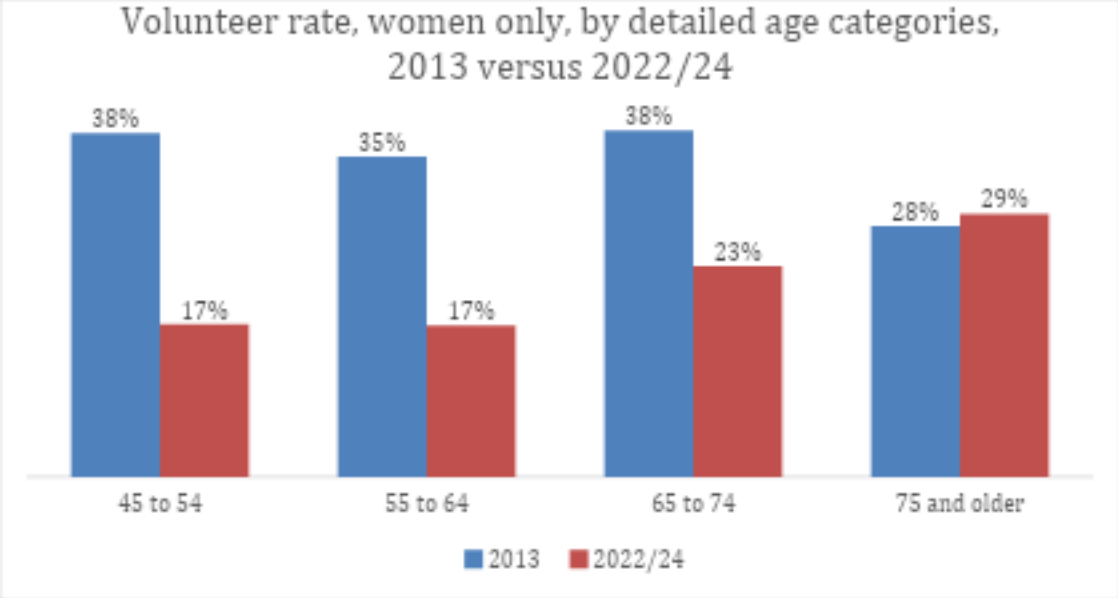
One key finding is that **women aged 75 and older volunteer at roughly the same rate as in 2013 (29% vs. 28%)**, suggesting stability in volunteer participation among the oldest age group. However, **women aged 65 to 74 volunteer at rates 15 percentage points lower than in 2013 (23% vs. 38%)**, marking a significant decline.

While this is concerning for older adult engagement, the trend is even more pronounced among middle-aged women, suggesting a pattern that is beginning earlier in women's lives.

- Women aged 55 to 64 saw an 18-point drop (from 35% in 2013 to 17% in 2022/24).
- Women aged 45 to 54 experienced the steepest decline, with a 21-point drop (from 38% to 17%).

The larger declines among middle-aged women contrast with smaller decreases among younger women. For example, women aged 25 to 34 experienced only a 9-point drop in volunteerism between 2013 and 2022/24 (not shown in the chart), reinforcing that the most significant declines occur among women in mid-life and into older adulthood.

This suggests that the decline in volunteerism may not be exclusive to older women but rather part of a broader structural shift affecting middle-aged and older women.



Sources: 2013 (Statistics Canada); 2022 (Environics Institute with Community Foundations of Canada); 2024 (Environics Institute with YMCA Canada). Analysis by authors.

Findings from *Connection, Engagement, and Well-Being: A Report from the 2022 Social Capital in Canada Study* suggest that declining group participation may be a key factor in the drop in women's volunteerism. People aged 35 and older now participate in about half as many groups as they did in 2013, reducing natural pathways into volunteering.

Women's disengagement has been especially pronounced. While men and women participated in group activities at equal rates in 2013, by 2022, women participated in fewer groups (0.54 on average vs. 0.80 for men). They were more likely to engage in no activities at all (63% vs. 52%). Men, meanwhile, were more likely to participate in structured organizations such as political parties, service clubs, and sports groups—spaces that often facilitate volunteer engagement.

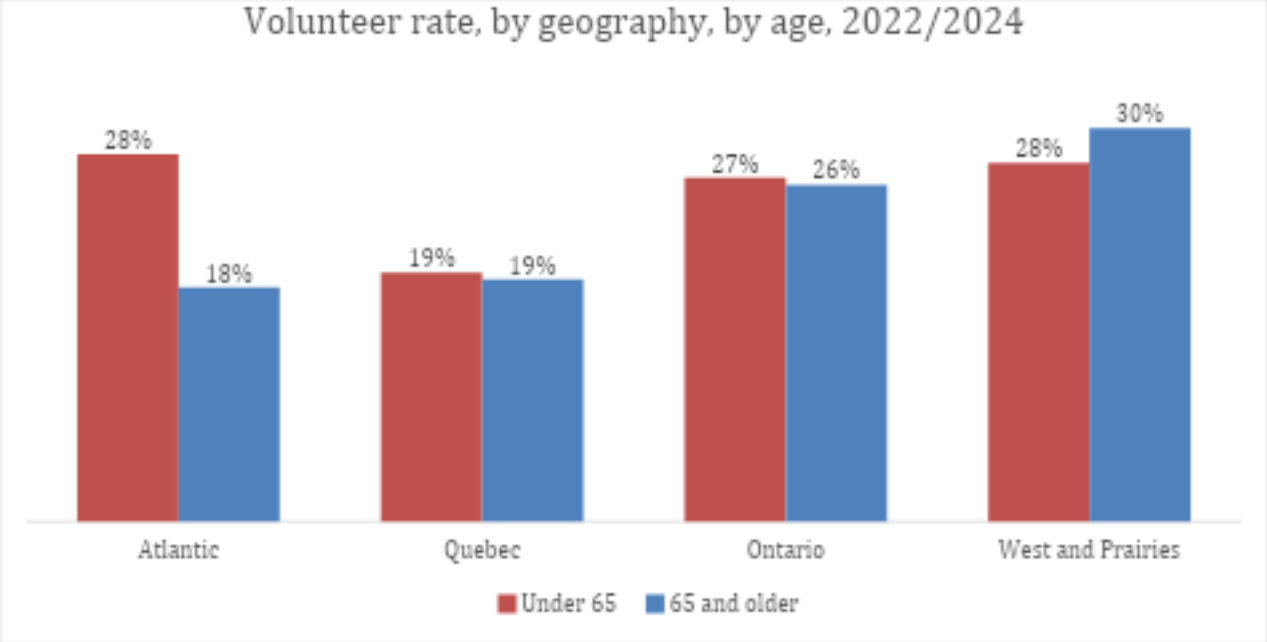
Notably, participation declines were not just tied to aging. People aged 35 to 44 saw drops as large as those aged 65+, suggesting structural factors like time constraints, shifting social norms, and caregiving responsibilities could be common challenges driving declining volunteering in all these age groups.

Implications and Opportunities

These trends highlight the need for new strategies to re-engage women in volunteering, including:

- Rebuilding social connections and broader participation through community organizations serve as entry points for volunteering.
- Expanding flexible opportunities to accommodate changing lifestyles and responsibilities.
- Targeted outreach beyond traditional group-based recruitment, given women's declining participation in structured organizations.

GEOGRAPHY



Sources: 2022 (Environics Institute with Community Foundations of Canada); 2024 (Environics Institute with YMCA Canada). Analysis by authors.

Volunteer rates vary across Canada, with some regional differences emerging—particularly among older adults. However, sample sizes in certain regions, particularly Atlantic Canada, necessitate caution in interpretation.

Older adults in Western Canada reported the highest volunteer rates (30%), slightly exceeding the 28% participation rate observed among younger adults in the region. In contrast, Quebec had the lowest volunteer rates, with both younger and older adults reporting a 19% participation rate.

Ontario showed relatively consistent engagement across age groups, with 26% of older adults and 27% of younger adults volunteering.

Atlantic Canada presents a more complex picture. Among younger adults, 28% reported volunteering, similar to levels seen in Western Canada. However, older adults in the region reported a significantly lower rate of 18%. While this suggests a potential regional disparity in volunteering opportunities for older adults, the small sample size (113 respondents aged 65 and older) means the difference between older and younger adults was not statistically significant. However, among older adults, those in the West did have a higher volunteer rate than those in Atlantic Canada.

Implications and Opportunities

Historical data on giving and volunteering suggests that Atlantic Canada had relatively high volunteering rates among older adults before the pandemic. For example, in the 2018 GSS GVP, 47% of those aged 65–74 reported volunteering in the Atlantic, compared to 39% for Canada as a whole. The decline observed in this dataset warrants further exploration, particularly regarding whether fewer opportunities for older adults have emerged post-pandemic.

Quebec shows similar patterns of lower volunteering, which have been observed in many other studies.

Despite some regional differences in absolute volunteer rates, no part of Canada showed a statistically significant difference in volunteering rates between younger and older adults. This suggests that while regional engagement levels vary, age-related patterns in volunteering remain relatively stable across the country.

When looking at differences between those living in urban, suburban, and rural settings, we did not see any statistically significant differences among older adults. However, the sample sizes were insufficient to pick up anything but the largest differences.

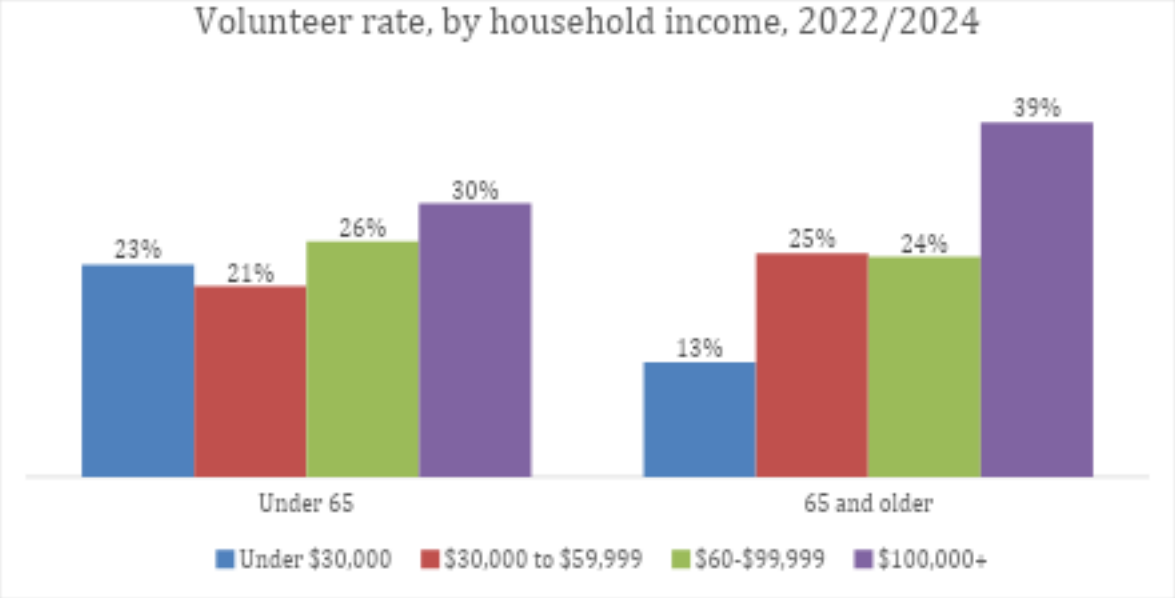
Interview Insights – The challenges for rural older adults

Many interviewees highlighted specific challenges for older adults in rural communities, especially around transportation. Older adults in rural areas also often struggle with social isolation, and they have fewer regular opportunities for social engagement and activities.

Income and Income Sufficiency

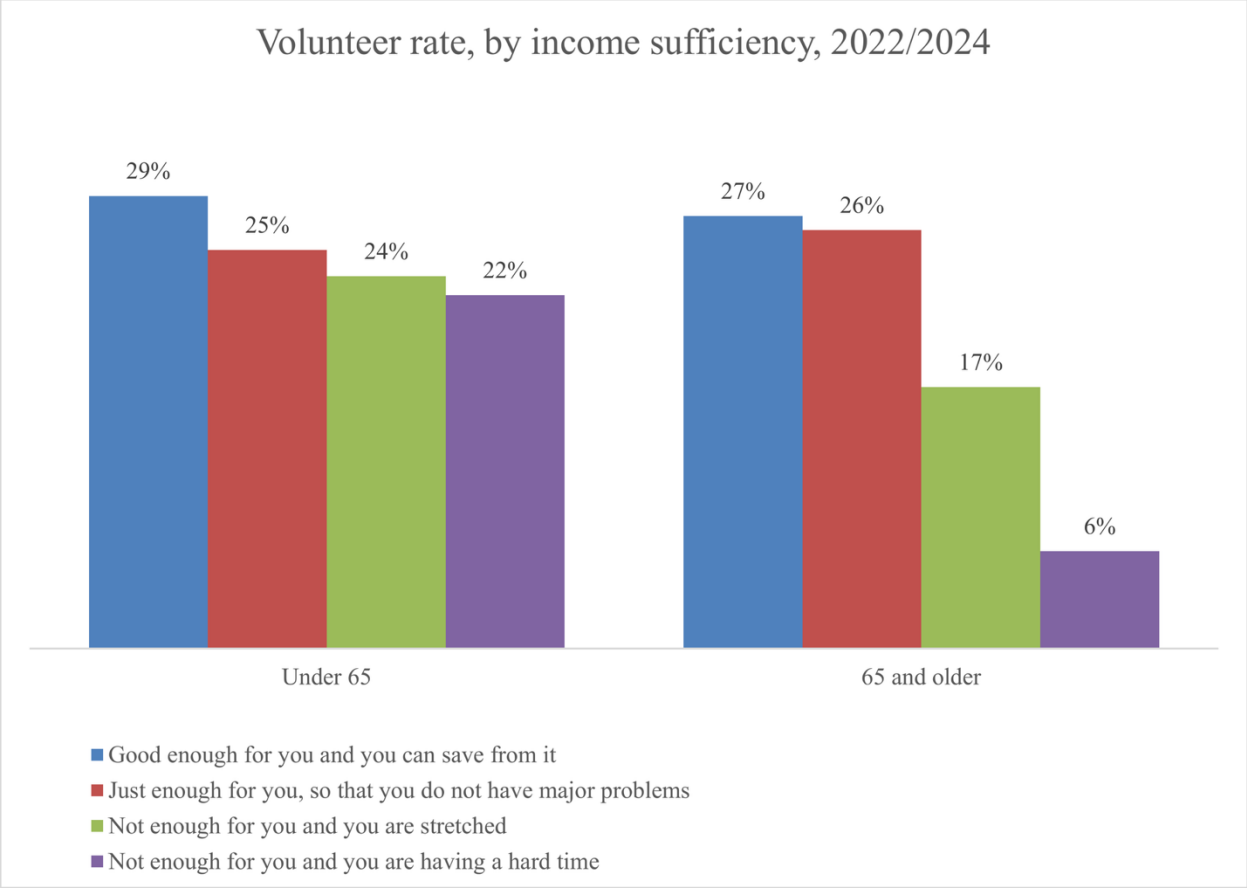
Income plays a significant role in predicting volunteer participation, particularly among older adults. Higher-income individuals are much more likely to volunteer, while those with lower incomes—especially those facing financial hardship—are significantly less engaged. This pattern is consistent across both measures used in this analysis: household income and self-reported income sufficiency.

Among older adults, volunteer rates rise sharply with income. Only 13% of older adults with household incomes below $30,000 reported volunteering, compared to 39% earning $100,000 or more—a nearly threefold difference. In contrast, income is a weaker predictor of volunteering among those under 65. Volunteer rates in this group remain relatively stable across income brackets, ranging from 21% to 30%.



Sources: 2022 (Environics Institute with Community Foundations of Canada); 2024 (Environics Institute with YMCA Canada). Analysis by authors.

A similar pattern emerges when looking at self-reported income sufficiency. Older adults who report feeling financially secure—either having enough to save or at least meeting their needs—volunteer at higher rates than those who are struggling. Among those who say their income is "not enough, and they are having a hard time," only 6% of older adults volunteer compared to at least 26% of those who say their income is enough for them.



Sources: 2022 (Environics Institute with Community Foundations of Canada); 2024 (Environics Institute with YMCA Canada). Analysis by authors.

For those under 65, however, income sufficiency does not appear to impact volunteering in the same way. Volunteer rates are almost identical across financial well-being groups (26–27%), suggesting that other barriers, such as time constraints or work demands, may play a more prominent role in shaping engagement.

Among older adults, financial hardship and disability are closely linked, presenting significant barriers to volunteering. Nearly 69% of older adults who say their income is "not enough, and they are having a hard time" also report a condition limiting their daily activities. This is more than double the rate observed among those who are financially secure (27%).

The data suggests that those facing the greatest financial strain are also the most likely to experience physical, cognitive, or mental health limitations—factors that can make volunteering more difficult. Addressing accessibility and reducing financial barriers to participation may be crucial for ensuring that those who could benefit most from volunteering opportunities are not excluded.

Later in this chapter, we also discuss lower volunteer rates among racialized volunteers, who, as a recent Statistics Canada report highlighted, have lower retirement incomes than non-racialized older adults.[62]

Implications and Opportunities

Research from previous studies suggests that reducing the financial costs of volunteering—such as transportation expenses, required materials, or police checks—could be an effective strategy for increasing participation among older adults. The data in this analysis reinforces this point: those who may most need social connection and engagement through volunteering are also the ones most likely to face financial and physical barriers. Addressing these challenges could help create a more inclusive and equitable volunteer landscape.

Similar trends have been observed elsewhere. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Australians experiencing financial difficulties were more likely to have stopped volunteering and less likely to have restarted. This suggests that economic downturns and financial insecurity can have long-term effects on civic participation—patterns that may also be relevant for understanding post-pandemic trends in Canada.

Interview Insights – Many older adults are wealthier than previous generations, while others are struggling

The fact that the current generation of older adults is wealthier than previous generations was brought up in many interviews, but ideas on how this influenced volunteer rates was mixed.

On the one hand, many people suggested that older adults are less likely to volunteer regularly as they now have more options in terms of travel and other leisure pursuits.

[62] Statistics Canada. (February 3rd, 2025). Study: Sources of income of racialized individuals 65 years and over in Canada, 2020. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/250203/dq250203a-eng.htm

On the other hand, the greater financial stability of older adults was seen as a reason why they would be able to volunteer even more hours. Financially independent older adults would have the capacity to volunteer regularly as they do not have to work regular hours.

Some interviewees also highlighted increasing levels of inequality in society, and that there is a stark difference in the realities of the rich retirees and those who are either unable to retire or living on fixed modest incomes.

Low-income older adults are less likely to volunteer, which is backed up by our survey data, and yet they are also people who often would benefit from volunteering. There is a challenge in ensuring that volunteer opportunities are inclusive, and not another leisure activity accessible only to the upper classes.

EDUCATION

Education is a strong predictor of volunteer participation, with higher levels of education associated with increased engagement. This pattern holds across all age groups but is particularly pronounced among older adults.

Among older adults who have completed tertiary education, 34% volunteer, compared to only 19% of those with some college or less. Those with apprenticeship or trades training also report relatively high volunteer rates (25%), suggesting that additional formal training beyond secondary education is linked to increased engagement. In contrast, the gap between education levels among younger adults is smaller, with 29% of those with tertiary education volunteering, compared to 21% of those with some college or less.

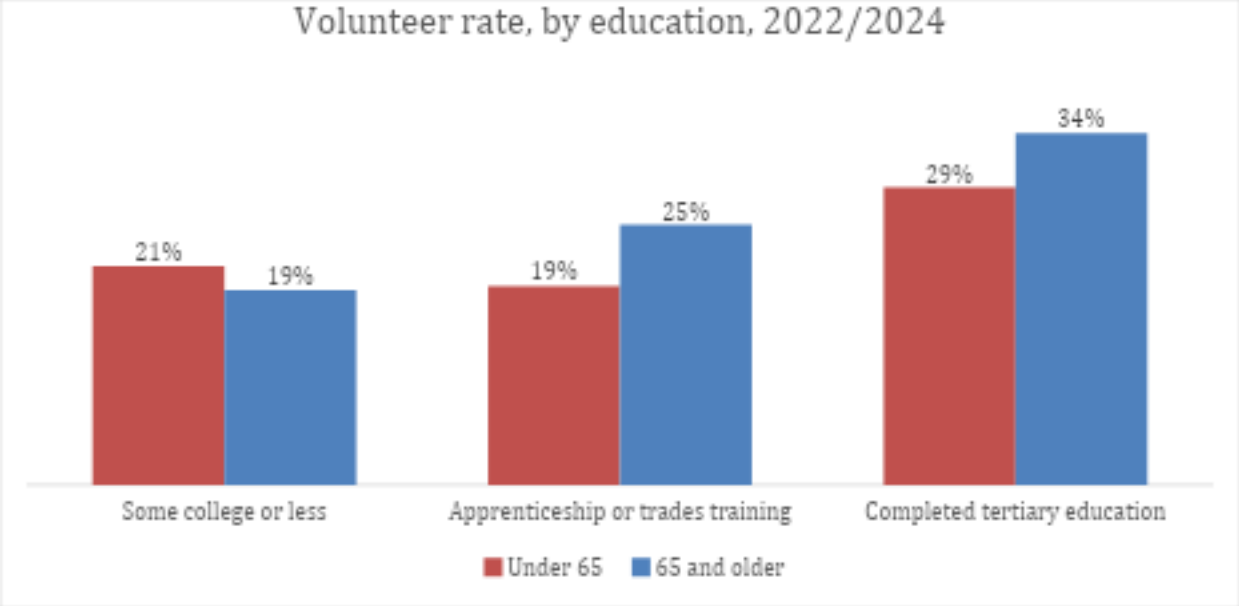
This trend aligns with a growing body of research indicating that education plays an important role in shaping social capital. Higher education often provides greater exposure to civic engagement opportunities, professional networks, and the skills needed to participate in volunteer work effectively. Education may also influence confidence in one's ability to contribute, making those with more formal schooling more likely to see volunteering as a meaningful way to engage with their communities.

Implications and Opportunities

The strong link between education and volunteerism suggests that those with lower education levels may face participation barriers. Some individuals may feel their skills are not valued in traditional volunteer roles or that opportunities are not as readily available. People with less

education generally have lower incomes, less career stability, and often must work multiple jobs, leaving them with less time and energy to volunteer.

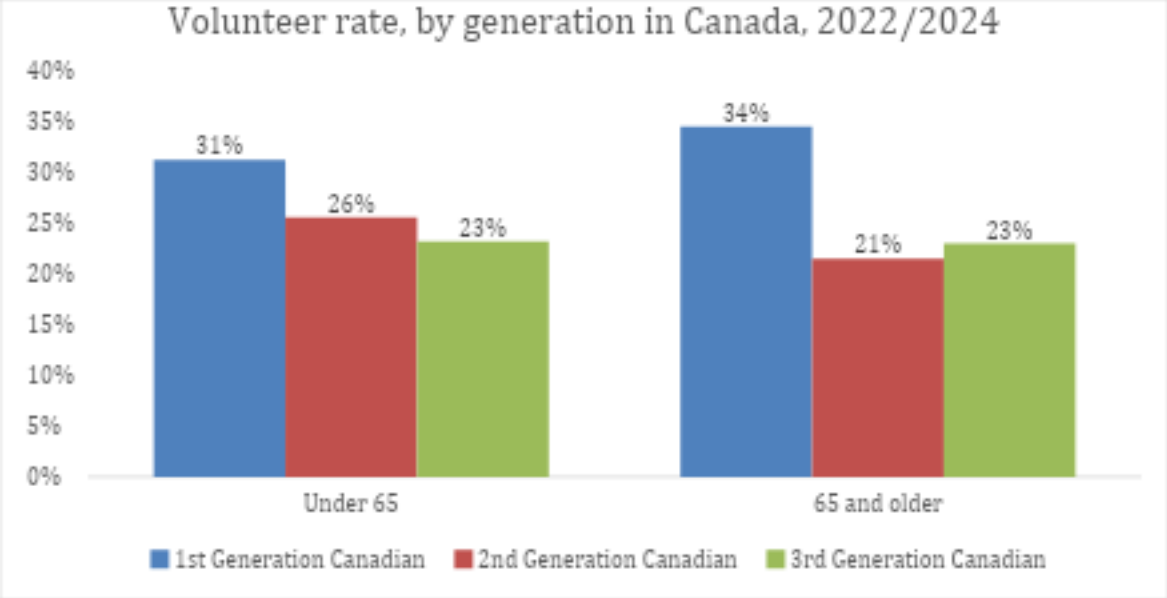
Organizations looking to engage a broader range of older adults may need to consider outreach strategies emphasizing the diverse skills and experiences that all volunteers bring—beyond formal education. Providing flexible, skills-based volunteer roles and targeted recruitment efforts could help those with less formal education feel welcomed and empowered to contribute.



Sources: 2022 (Environics Institute with Community Foundations of Canada); 2024 (Environics Institute with YMCA Canada). Analysis by authors.

Immigration Status

Volunteering rates vary by immigration status, with first-generation Canadians reporting the highest levels of engagement across all age groups. Among older adults, 34% of first-generation Canadians volunteer, compared to 21% of second-generation Canadians and 23% of third-generation Canadians. A similar pattern is seen among younger adults with slightly lower overall rates.



Sources: 2022 (Environics Institute with Community Foundations of Canada); 2024 (Environics Institute with YMCA Canada). Analysis by authors. **Note**: A first generation Canadian is an immigrant to Canada. A second generation Canadian has at least one parent born outside of Canada. And a third generation has both them and their parents born in Canada.

The reasons for this trend are not immediately clear from this dataset. Still, prior research suggests that many first-generation immigrants volunteer to integrate into their communities, build social networks, and develop employment opportunities. Additionally, some may participate in volunteer roles that serve newcomer communities, further reinforcing their engagement. The Government of Canada also actively encourages newcomers to be active citizens by volunteering[63], and many newcomer-serving organizations work to place newcomers with volunteer opportunities.

Implications and Opportunities

The high volunteer rates among first-generation Canadians—particularly among older adults—suggest that there may be successful models of engagement at play. However, volunteering among first-generation Canadians may also be in part driven by difficulties in finding employment, or a feeling that volunteering is an expected way to integrate into their communities. Understanding

[63] Government of Canada. Be Active in your Community. https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/canadian-citizenship/take-part-citizenship/active-community.html

what drives this participation could provide insights into strategies for increasing volunteer rates more broadly.

Given broader trends in declining participation, immigrant groups, cultural associations, and continued involvement in religious communities may play key roles in sustaining volunteer engagement.

These findings suggest opportunities to learn from and build upon successful engagement models within immigrant communities. Organizations aiming to boost volunteerism could explore the following:

- Strengthening partnerships with cultural and faith-based groups that already foster high levels of participation.
- Adapting outreach strategies that resonate with newcomers, including community-driven approaches emphasizing social connections and mutual support.
- Creating more inclusive volunteer opportunities recognizing diverse skills, experiences, and motivations for getting involved.

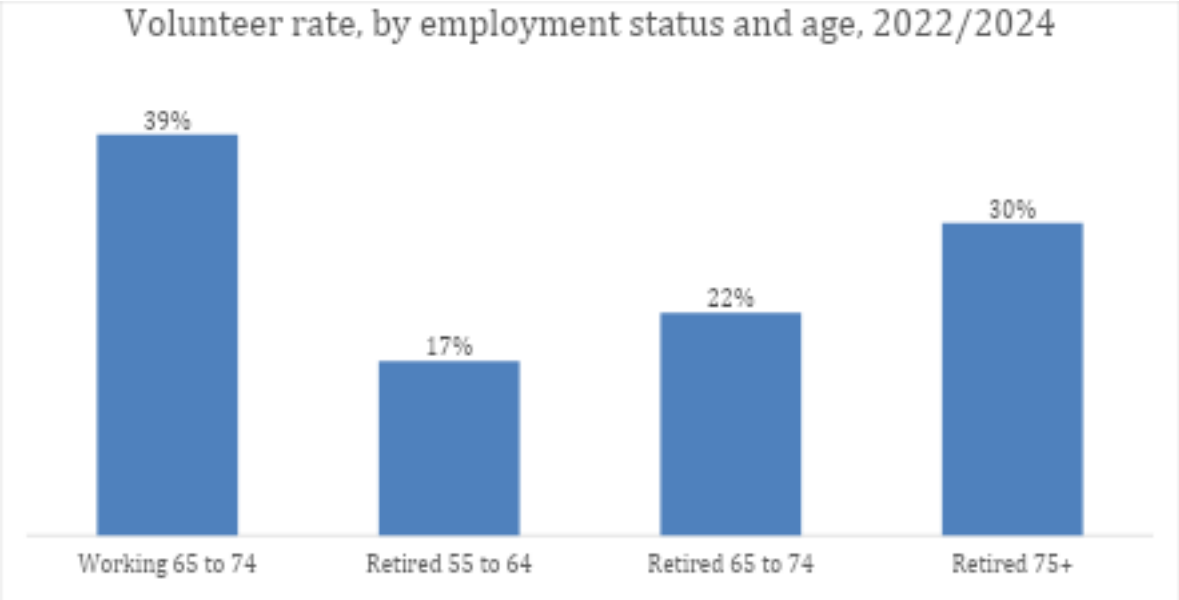
By understanding what drives participation among first-generation Canadians, organizations can apply these insights more broadly to rebuild engagement among other groups where volunteer rates have declined.

Employment Status

The data suggests a strong relationship between employment status and volunteering among older adults. Those who remain in the workforce between the ages of 65 and 74 have the highest volunteer rate (39%), significantly higher than their retired peers. [64] While this could be influenced by various individual characteristics—such as health, education, and professional networks—it also highlights how continued employment may help older adults stay connected to social networks and volunteer opportunities.

[64] Statistics Canada similarly found based on 2023 data that adults aged 55+ were more likely to volunteer if they were semi-retired (38%) than if they were not retired (28%), or fully retired (27%). https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2026018-eng.htm

At the same time, while only 17% of retirees aged 55 to 64 volunteer, this rate rises to 22% for those aged 65 to 74 and 30% for those aged 75 and older. This suggests that suggest that retirement may be a point of disengagement or a missed transition into volunteering.



Sources: 2022 (Environics Institute with Community Foundations of Canada); 2024 (Environics Institute with YMCA Canada). Analysis by authors.

Implications and Opportunities

These patterns point to an opportunity for community organizations to create structured pathways for older adults to transition into volunteer roles. This aligns with broader findings in the research: older adults generally want to volunteer, have the time to do so, and are likely to say yes when presented with the right opportunity.

Some potential strategies include:

- Developing post-retirement volunteer matching programs, similar to job placement programs, that help retirees find meaningful roles based on their skills and interests.
- Strengthening outreach through workplaces, encouraging older employees to consider future volunteer roles before they retire.

- Ensuring that volunteering is accessible and flexible, recognizing that older adults may have different needs or constraints than younger volunteers. This can range from different preferred times to volunteer to some volunteers having different schedules in the winter versus the remainder of the year.

Given that volunteering can play a key role in maintaining social connection and purpose post-retirement, this seems to be a big opportunity.

Research has shown that informal helping can contribute to older adults having a higher purpose in life. Eric Kim, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia, says that a sense of purpose is one of the most overlooked aspects of well-being.[65]

Interview Insights – Post-retirement pathways to volunteering

Several interviews also touched on the importance of getting recently retired people engaged in volunteering, especially as many of them are used to high-pressure jobs and have significant capacity to volunteer. One interviewee highlighted how some big companies hold sessions for employees who are about to retire, and that these sessions offer a significant opportunity for local nonprofits to make their case.

There were also several mentions of how partnerships with professional associations could help reach more potential volunteers, such as provincial teacher associations or federal public servants in Ottawa.

At least one member of Volunteer Canada's corporate community has its volunteer programs targeted at staff also available to retirees.

Juggling family commitments with work/volunteering

Several interviewees also had some interesting thoughts about work/life balance and its connection to volunteering. There was a suggestion that many boomers defined themselves around their work, and that for this cohort there is an opportunity to get them to get define themselves by their volunteering activities.

However, many people suggested that the boomers are now also taking on more caregiving responsibilities for grandchildren, especially as more families have two parents working full-time and need more childcare. This matches polling from the US, which found that 1 in 5 (20%)

[65] Seo, Hannah. (January 6th, 2025). 'Keeps me grateful': how volunteering can help older adults. *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/jan/06/volunteering-older-adult

grandparents provide care for their grandchildren at least once a week, and 8% are providing daily or near daily care.[66]

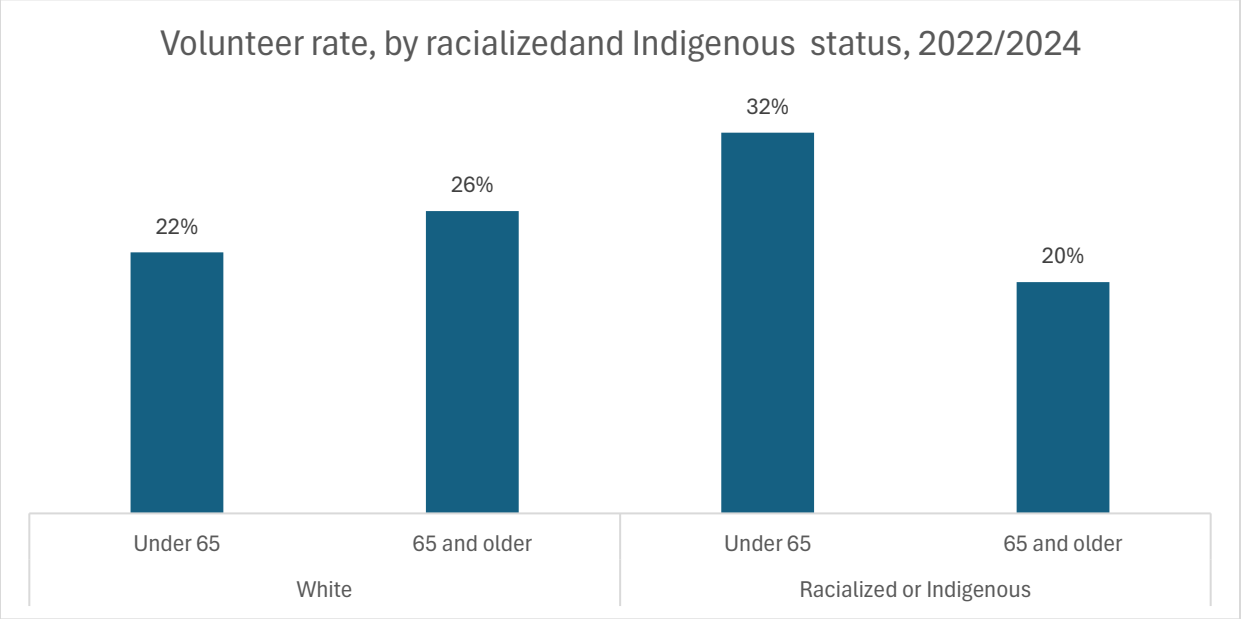
Racialized Identity or Indigenous Status

The number of racialized or Indigenous older adults in our dataset is too small to draw any statistically significant findings. To provide an analysis of these populations, we combined them into a single group (n=70), but interpretations should be made with caution due to the small sample size.

The volunteer rate among white older adults was 26%, compared to 20% of racialized or Indigenous respondents. While this suggests a potential gap in volunteer participation among older racialized adults, the difference is not statistically significant.

However, among adults under the age of 65, racialized or Indigenous respondents are more likely to volunteer (32%) than white respondents (22%), and this difference is statistically significant. The reasons for this discrepancy in volunteer engagement between generations are unclear from this dataset. Still, they may be influenced by community engagement norms, recent immigration status, and access to volunteer opportunities.

[66] University of Michigan Institute for Healthcare Policy & Innovation. (November 12th, 2024). Grandparents help grandkids in many ways – but the reverse may be true too, poll suggests. https://ihpi.umich.edu/news-events/news/grandparents-help-grandkids-many-ways-reverse-may-be-true-too-poll-suggests



Sources: 2022 (Environics Institute with Community Foundations of Canada); 2024 (Environics Institute with YMCA Canada). Analysis by authors.

Implications and Opportunities

This lower volunteer rate has significant implications as racialized populations grow, especially in certain parts of the country. Between 2016 and 2021, the number of racialized older adults grew by 38%, outpacing the 18% growth observed among non-racialized older adults during the same period.[67]

According to a recent Wellesley Institute report, these changes are particularly evident in Toronto, which experienced a 131% increase in visible minority older adults between 2006 and 2011. Between 1980 and 2006, the number of older adults of Chinese origin multiplied tenfold, and the number of older adults of South Asian origin grew by 20 times.[68]

[67] Statistics Canada. (February 3rd, 2025). Study: Sources of income of racialized individuals 65 years and over in Canada, 2020. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/250203/dq250203a-eng.htm

[68] Laher, Nazeefah. (2017). Diversity, aging, and intersectionality in Ontario home care. *Wellesley Institute*.https://www.wellesleyinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Diversity-and-Aging.pdf.

The lower volunteer rate among older racialized adults could reflect barriers to participation, differences in how volunteering is defined, or systemic challenges in accessing formal opportunities. It is possible that racialized older adults are more engaged in informal volunteering—such as mutual aid, caregiving, or faith-based community support—which may not be fully captured in traditional volunteer surveys.

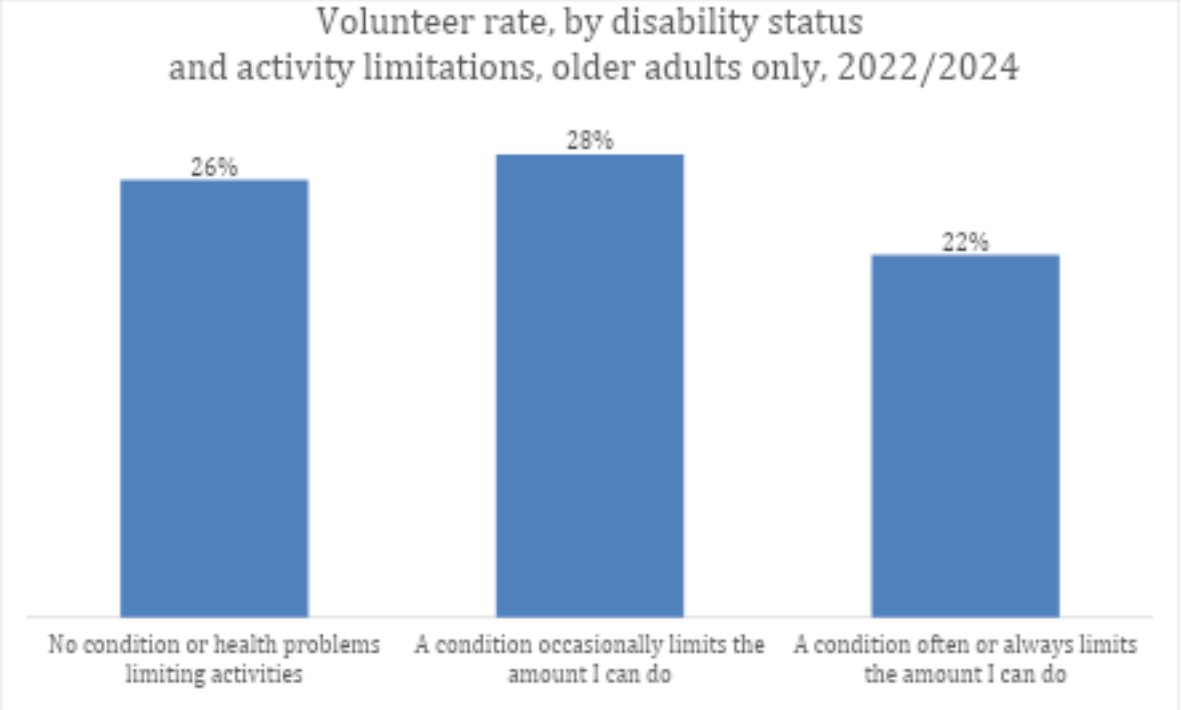
Further research is needed to understand whether specific outreach efforts, culturally responsive volunteer programs, or structural barriers affect participation rates among older racialized Canadians. Ensuring that volunteer opportunities are inclusive, accessible, and reflective of diverse experiences could help support engagement across all communities.

Interview insights – Making organizations prepared to serve diverse populations

Interviewees emphasized the importance of designing volunteer programs that are culturally sensitive and can meet the needs of diverse groups. One interviewee also highlighted the need for organizations to be well-prepared to serve everyone and improve their cultural competence. They pointed out that certain groups are often overlooked because of a belief they will be taken care of by ethnocultural organizations. This presents an opportunity for organizations to receive training on how to better serve diverse populations. For example, the WIN Intergenerational Network has been preparing a sensitivity guide on how to bring people together who have different lived experiences in terms of hearing, vision, mobility, neurodiversity, and family structures.

Disability Status and Health Status

Self-reported disability was not a strong predictor of volunteering among older adults, which is somewhat surprising given that poor health is one of the most cited reasons for not volunteering. Volunteer rates were similar between those without a disability (26%), those with a disability that occasionally limits the amount they can do (28%), and those with a disability that often or always limits their activity (22%).



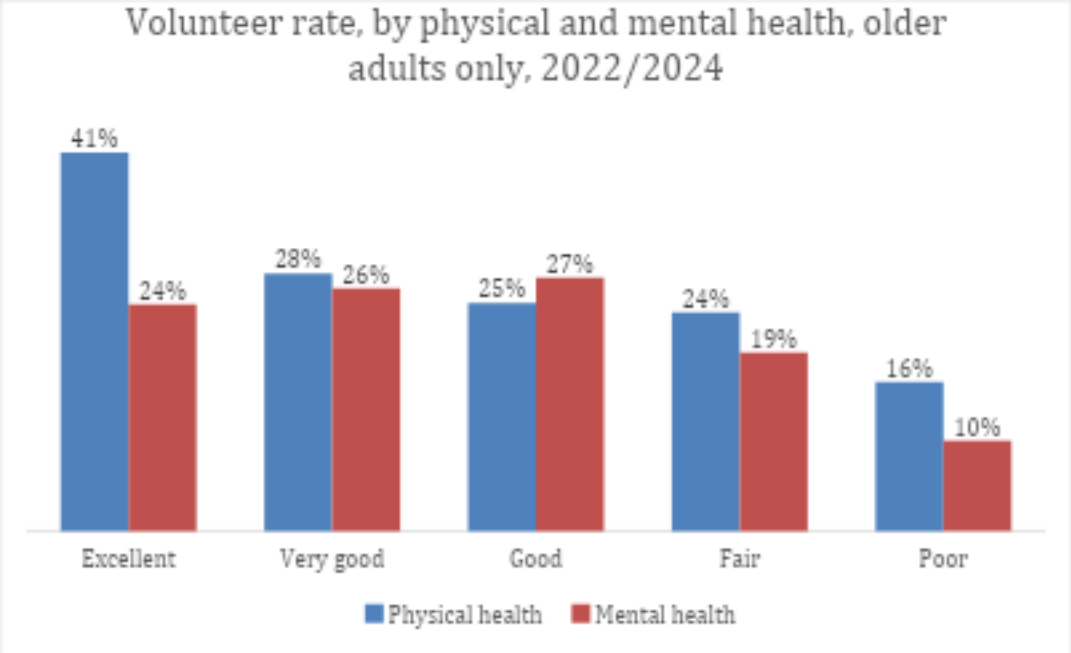
Sources: 2022 (Environics Institute with Community Foundations of Canada); 2024 (Environics Institute with YMCA Canada). Analysis by authors. **Note**: Respondents are asked "Do you have a physical condition; a cognitive difference; an emotional, psychological or mental health condition; or health problem that limits activity on a typical day?" and then if they say yes, they can specify how frequently it limits them.

To explore this further, we examined disability by type. However, almost all disabilities reported by older adults were physical conditions or health problems. Fewer than 20 of nearly 800 respondents identified as having an emotional, psychological, or mental health condition or a cognitive difference.

While disability status alone was not highly predictive, self-reported physical health and perceived energy levels were much stronger indicators of volunteer participation. Among those who rated their physical health as excellent, 41% volunteered, compared to just 16% among those in poor health. Similarly, individuals who reported high energy levels were more likely to volunteer (data not shown since the trend is similar to perceived physical health).

Mental health, on the other hand, showed a weaker relationship with volunteering. At first glance, it appears that those with poor mental health volunteer less. Still, given the very small number of older adults reporting poor mental health, none of these differences were statistically significant.

This contrasts with younger adults, where mental health was a stronger predictor of volunteer participation.



Sources: 2022 (Environics Institute with Community Foundations of Canada); 2024 (Environics Institute with YMCA Canada). Analysis by authors.

Implications and Opportunities

Recent research has highlighted declines in physical health throughout the pandemic. We can see that people are much less likely to report that their physical health is excellent or very good than it was a decade ago. This may be reversing some progress in recent decades at improving the health of older adults, which could have contributed to the steady volunteer rate among the oldest adults (75+).

The data also suggests that organizations may successfully engage some older adults with disabilities in volunteer roles. However, it also highlights the need to consider health and energy levels as key factors in volunteer participation.

Future research should examine:

- The number of hours volunteered by people with disabilities or those with lower energy, who may volunteer at lower intensities rather than opting out entirely.
- Ways to support those who feel their health or energy levels are a barrier, especially given the well-documented health benefits of volunteering.

BRIGHT SPOTS AND INNOVATIONS

PROMISING PROGRAMS

As part of our interviews, we asked people about existing programs that are successfully engaging older adults. We were looking for programs that have strong track records and that could also be replicated in different contexts.

We heard about a wide variety of different programs, some with thousands of volunteers and others that were much smaller scale but with innovative approaches.

The next section includes descriptions of eight different programs. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but it provides a sample of the types of programs highlighted in our interviewees.

The following organizations are featured in this section:

1. Men's Sheds
2. Nova Scotia Health
3. An intergenerational classroom at the University of Toronto
4. Intergenerational board games at Volunteer Waterloo Region
5. Multilingual friendly visiting at the West End Seniors' Network in Vancouver
6. The WIN Intergenerational Network
7. GrandPals
8. Canada 150 events
9. GoodLinks Intergenerational Clubs

Key findings from successful programs

- The decline of traditional volunteer organizations offers an opportunity for new grassroots organizations to take innovative approaches in recruiting older adults.
- Successful programs need staff dedicated to volunteer management.
- Creating the conditions for intergenerational social connection can lead to intergenerational volunteering.
- One-on-one volunteering programs are labour intensive, but they can be highly successful in helping isolated people.
- Local initiatives can benefit from the resources created by regional or national organizations.
- A cohort approach to onboarding volunteers creates a greater sense of ownership and makes volunteers feel more connected to each other.

- Events requiring volunteers can benefit from bringing on the volunteers early and allowing them to be part of the design process.

MEN'S SHEDS ARE 'SHEDDING' LIGHT ON A NEW WAY TO BUILD COMMUNITY AND COMBAT SOCIAL ISOLATION AMONG OLDER MEN

Men's Sheds is a grassroots movement focused on men's health and well-being that started in Australia in the late 1990's. The men who participate are known as 'Shedders' and they gather regularly to talk and work on projects together. The Sheds are structured around the interests of the 'Shedders' themselves rather than being tied to any larger organizational goals. The vibrancy and sustainability of the Sheds come through the forging of peer-to-peer connections. Many of these are 'sawdust' Sheds where men work together with equipment and tools. Other Sheds are focused on activities such as cooking, cycling, hiking, music, while others are exclusively social.

Men's Sheds are responding to the reality that older men have worse participation rates than older women in activities such as fitness classes, chair yoga, nutrition, and other types of activities targeting older adults.

The first Canadian Shed opened in Winnipeg in 2011, and there were 35 Sheds in Canada by 2020. The last five years has seen rapid growth, and there are currently more than 170 Sheds across Canada, and the goal is to have 1,000 active Sheds by 2032. Men's Sheds Canada (MSC) was awarded charitable status in 2025.

Volunteering and community service among 'Shedders'

Many of the Sheds are involved in community service and volunteer work, although this is not a requirement. Men's Sheds partner with countless community organizations on projects such as: repairs, maintenance, and restoration of community facilities; home repairs for low-income seniors; bat boxes for ecology groups; garden beds for seniors' homes; shelving for food banks; bicycle repairs and donations to refugees and homeless shelters; repair cafes; benches for hospital gardens; and much more.

The Shed in Squamish, B.C. volunteered 3,000 hours in 2024, and they listed all the projects where they are active as part of a successful funding appeal to the local government. A Shed in Maple Ridge, B.C. tracked 4,000 volunteer hours from their members last year.

Barbara McMillan, the Executive Director of Men's Sheds Canada, has heard that some of the men who volunteer through Men's Sheds are more likely to then go on to volunteer with other community organizations.

Monthly online meetups for Sheds across Canada

The national organization hosts monthly virtual meetings – "Cross Canada check-ins" where Sheds can discuss their activities, governance issues, community projects, as well as seek resources and support. There are also monthly Zoom sessions that have themes and guest speakers, such as social prescribing; grief and loss; and suicide and mental health.

These meetings allow the national organization to learn how they can best support the Sheds. If a Shed expresses interest in developing a specific type of program, the national organization can look to see if other Sheds have previously done similar projects and if any resources already exist to support them. The approach is hearing what Sheds are doing or want to do and responding to that.

Funding for regional social events and to promote Sheds in their local communities

Another way MSC supports Sheds is by funding regional social events where Sheds from nearby communities can come together to further build community and hear about different ideas.

The national organization provided micro-grants to mark International Men's Day so that Sheds can do something at the local level to promote their work, such as inviting community members and local leaders on a Shed tour to raise awareness of their activities.

Local Sheds were also asked to submit short videos which were compiled by MSC to give a sense of the breadth of activities of Men's Sheds across the country

The national organization is building platforms and resources to provide support to local Sheds and to improve program evaluation

MSC is developing "ToolBoxes" on a variety of topics to support local Sheds. These include Governance; Fund Development; Communications and Marketing; Diversity and Inclusion; Social Prescribing; Intergenerational Activities; and more

A new system to make it easier for individual Sheds to track volunteer hours is also being planned.

Some work is underway to understand the social return on investment for both the Shedders and the community at large, and the results of this research will be used in support of communicating the value of Sheds to policy makers, funders, and other stakeholders. Tools will also be developed to assist local Sheds in analysing their social value so they can better understand and communicate their impact.

Opportunities for growth program - veterans and active military personnel

MSC is planning an initiative around outreach and engagement of veterans. While many veterans are already active in Sheds, there is an opportunity for increasing the numbers and demonstrating that Sheds offer a valuable bridge into community and finding purpose after military service. At the same time, veterans bring valuable experience and skills that can benefit a Shed. The initiative will

also focus on how Sheds can become “vet friendly”. Connecting with active military personnel is also a priority for Sheds that are nearby military bases.

Many Men’s Sheds are involved in intergenerational programming

Some Sheds have industrial arts or shop projects with high school students, which is especially valuable as these opportunities have become less common in high schools. Other Sheds work with schools on gardening projects.

Some Sheds run regular programs or activities teaching children basic woodwork skills through activities such as building birdhouses in annual summer day camps. There are Sheds that include youth who are in alternative programs. Many Sheds have members under 30, and these provide valuable opportunities for intergenerational learning. MSC will be initiating mechanisms to track the diversity and impact of intergenerational activities in Sheds across the country.

Testimonials

- *“What we’re trying to do in the community is do projects that benefit everybody. The thought of being able to give back makes us feel good inside.”*

- *“If you’re participating, doing things for the community, doing things with the other guys, working shoulder to shoulder, then it’s a benefit for you.*

- *“It’s rewarding to be working with these other guys, doing something worthwhile.”*

- *“The thought of being able to give back and give a positive impact on their lives makes us feel good inside.”*

Lessons for increasing older adult engagement and designing successful volunteer programs:

- The decline of traditional volunteer organizations such as service-clubs offers an opportunity for new grassroots organizations to take innovative approaches in recruiting older adults.
- Grassroots organizations like Men’s Sheds can benefit from the support of a national organization that can create platforms and resources

“We’ve learned that when you invite men to gather around a purpose — to build something, repair something, or lend a hand in the community — something else happens quietly in the background. Conversations start. Friendships form. Confidence grows. And before long, men who might never have joined a support group find themselves part of one — without ever calling it that. That’s health by stealth.”

- Robert Goluch, President, Men's Sheds Canada

Volunteering at Hospitals in Nova Scotia

Nova Scotia Health currently has over 2,300 volunteers (26% older adults aged 65+) at 47 health care sites across the province. They have several different types of volunteer programs, and one of the most successful is the friendly visitor program, where volunteers work directly on medical units enhancing the quality of care delivered to patients.

Nova Scotia Health has 18 Volunteer Services staff spread out across the province. After introducing a new volunteer management database in the pandemic period, they are progressively leveraging the data and insights the new system provides. They also will be launching a volunteer pulse survey in January to help formally evaluate their programs (currently they ask volunteers for informal feedback at the end of their shifts).

Additional insights on how Nova Scotia Health is working to improve internal capacity and strengthen its volunteer programs before recruiting additional volunteers is discussed later.

Lessons for increasing older adult engagement and designing successful volunteer programs:

- Dedicated volunteer management staff are required to run large-scale volunteer programs

Intergenerational classroom

Dr. Raza Mirza teaches his University of Toronto class at a retirement home, and 25 of the residents are also enrolled as auditors in the class.

The class started three years ago. Previously Dr. Mirza would invite older adults to come into his class to talk to students, but after discussions with the CEO of Christie Gardens retirement home, they decided it would be beneficial to everyone if he could teach the entire class on-site at the retirement home.

Students are becoming volunteers because of the classroom

Dr. Mirza is noticing that several past students that are now volunteering at Christie Gardens, including joining the intergenerational choir and dancing with people with Parkinsons. The personal connection of participating in the class led to an interest in volunteer. Dr. Mirza didn't encourage students to volunteer; it happened organically because they were put in the right environment. Most of the students had previously never been in a retirement or long-term care home. This is an important lesson how creating the conditions for intergenerational engagement can lead to volunteering.

One older adult who audited the class last year has gone back to finish their degree and is taking the class for credit this year.

Lessons for increasing older adult engagement and designing successful volunteer programs:

- Hosting events and programs in non-traditional spaces can lead to social engagement and spark an interest in volunteering

Volunteer Waterloo Region Board Games and Mingle

Volunteer Waterloo Region has been running a weekly board game night in Kitchener to bring together older adults and youth with the goal of getting both groups more comfortable with each other. The current ratio is about seven older adults to 25 youth, and the youth have been asking to get more older adults involved, although some older adults remain hesitant. About 70% of the participants are newcomers in the last five-to-seven years. The program was originally scheduled to run just for the summer but because of its popularity it is now being offered year-round. During the winter, with input from youth leaders, the program has become more conversation-focused, exploring topics where young participants feel older adults can offer meaningful guidance.

One of the long-term goals of the board game nights is to get both groups volunteering together in other contexts. One way the groundwork for future volunteering is being laid is through leadership teams. There is currently a youth leadership team, and they are building an older adult leadership team, and these two groups will be volunteering together to run the program.

The program was successful in creating connections and reducing isolation

Evaluation data from the summer of 2025 showed that 100% of participants engaged aged across generations, and 88% made meaningful connections across connections. Three in four (76%) participants also reported no social isolation after participating in the program (compared to only 36%).

Challenge in recruiting enough older adults

The evaluation survey respondents skewed heavily toward youth (72%) compared to older adults (16%), which matches the feedback from youth who wanted more older adult participants.

Laying the groundwork for future intergenerational programming

An evaluation of the program in October 2025 is being used to help design a similar program but adapted for a rural context in nearby Wellesley Township.

Lessons for increasing older adult engagement and designing successful volunteer programs:

- Collaborative social events can help build relationships between generations
- Evaluations of small projects can provide insight on how to expand the projects to other areas

Multilingual friendly visiting at the West End Seniors' Network in Vancouver

The West End Seniors' Network (WESN) serves older adults in Vancouver's West End and has over 1,400 members who pay $10 annually to access their services including ESL classes, peer support, karaoke, TED Talks, and friendly visiting.

They currently have over 250 volunteers, most of whom are older adults motivated to give back to their community. More volunteers are always welcome, especially for their friendly visiting and friendly calling programs which provide one-on-one support to isolated older adults. Many of the isolated older adults speak different languages, and WESN has been successful in recruiting volunteers that speak Chinese, Farsi, French, Portuguese, and Spanish, among other languages.

WESN faces some challenges in recruiting volunteers, with transportation being the most significant barrier. If they had funding for volunteers, they would use some of it to cover transportation costs. In addition, as more members are living alone and experiencing isolation, they need additional volunteers who have a car and can help transport members to medical appointments or to pick up prescriptions. There are also some technological barriers associated with the volunteer applications and the need for a police record check. The recent rise in the cost of living also means that many older adults are having to find paid jobs and therefore do not have much available time for volunteering.

Lessons for increasing older adult engagement and designing successful volunteer programs:

- Recruiting volunteers from diverse backgrounds is essential in serving a diverse clientele
- Small amounts of funding for volunteer recognition would be beneficial
- Older adults want to be part of the community in different ways. They want to stay connected, but we must be mindful and create opportunities that match their abilities and challenges

The WIN Intergenerational Network (WIN) is showing how local organizations can partner together to share Promising practices and implement projects

WIN is connected with about 60 organizations working in different sectors, including research institutions, long-term care homes, schools, universities, youth-serving organizations, and community-based organizations supporting youth and older adults. WIN is a strong believer in promoting successful intergenerational practices and not having to reinvent the wheel. WIN's goal is to build, empower, and engage the community through shared learning, collaboration, and thoughtful problem-solving, all in an intergenerational context.

Through a collaborative approach, people can learn from what is working across sectors and build partnerships. WIN is finalizing a sensitivity guide shaped by abilities and life experiences, to invite awareness, foster inclusive conversation, and support continuous learning.

One challenge identified by WIN is that funders often want to fund new projects, rather than continue funding for existing projects that are working well.

Lessons for increasing older adult engagement and designing successful volunteer programs:

- Information-sharing networks help organizations leverage knowledge and resources, inspiring small shifts that provide both older and younger people with opportunities to contribute purposefully and meaningfully in their communities.

GRANDPALS IS UNLOCKING THE POWER OF OLDER ADULTS SHARING THEIR STORIES

GrandPals is an organization connecting older adults aged 55+ with students in grade five and above. The GrandPals meet with students on a weekly basis to share stories and build relationships. One of the challenges GrandPals has faced in recruiting participants is to convince older adults that they have a life narrative that is meaningful to young people.

Training through a cohort approach

Older adults participating in the program spent between four and six hours being trained. Part of the training involves older adults talking through major life decisions they have made and discussing how they can best share these stories with youth.

GrandPals are generally onboarded in groups of 10-12, and they have found that this approach allows volunteers to feel a greater sense of ownership of the program and to feel connected with their fellow volunteers.

GrandPals provides a backbone structure for people to establish programs quickly

Older adult participants are rooted within a community-based organization, and GrandPals provides the implementing organization with all the resources and digital infrastructure required to recruit volunteers, implement the program, and track progress. This structure allows for programs to get off the ground quickly and to be scaled across the country.

GrandPals is thriving in areas that are struggling to recruit volunteers for existing programs

GrandPals faced skepticism from potential partners in some communities that have been struggling to recruit older adult volunteers. But they found that older adults have been drawn to GrandPals because of the power of storytelling. They also have found that volunteers are more

likely to willingly perform more mundane tasks if they are doing it as a cohort and find meaning in the program.

Potential to get the GrandPals more engaged in other community activities

Many of the participants in GrandPals have the capacity to contribute more to the community, especially during periods when the GrandPals program is on a break. This means there is an opportunity to get the GrandPals cohorts more involved in other community activities.

Lessons for increasing older adult engagement and designing successful volunteer programs:

- Storytelling is a powerful way to engage older adults
- Training older adults as a cohort helps build connections and create a sense of ownership of the program
- Having one organization build the digital infrastructure to run a program and then sharing this with a community organization can be an effective method of expanding programs

"You can have a library program, you can have aqua fit, you can have zumba, you can pick something off a menu and consume it, and maybe even volunteer to help lead that. But it's very different when you start to shift your paradigm and realize that you can be a powerful and impactful contributor in your community based on simple stories from your own life."

– Marc Mailhot, CEO GrandPals

The GrandPals Program gave my students a chance to appreciate the diversity of cultures and human experiences. Many enjoyed the conversations and gained valuable insights from their GrandPals' life stories. Students paired with GrandPals from different cultural backgrounds were especially curious to learn about other ways of life, broadening their perspectives and fostering a deeper understanding of cultural differences. In the future, I may make an effort to pair the students with GrandPals from cultures, countries or religions that are not their own.

– GrandPals Teacher Participant

CREATING A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN OLDER ADULTS AND YOUNGER ADULTS FOR CANADA 150 EVENTS

In 2017, celebrations were held across the country to celebrate Canada's 150th anniversary. Over the span of 12 months, in Ottawa, over 2,600 volunteers played a key role in executing over 200 events.

The leadership within the workforce management group brought volunteers on early so that from the beginning they would feel like valued members of a team and have a sense of ownership of the events. Organizers took the time to identify potential barriers to volunteer participation and worked proactively to address them, like offering transportation and parking solutions to help cover the volunteers' small out of pocket expenses.

One intentional successful strategy was pairing older volunteers with younger ones. This fostered mutual mentoring relationships, allowing older adults to share their experience and wisdom while drawing fresh energy and inspiration from young volunteers.

"We thanked them and we celebrated them all. We made them feel valued from the start. It wasn't just what they were doing for us; it was a partnership"

- Interview participant

Lessons for increasing older adult engagement and designing successful volunteer programs:

- Event organizers who are planning on using volunteers should recruit volunteers early in the process so that they feel a sense of ownership in the project.

GoodLinks Intergenerational Clubs

GoodLinks runs several intergenerational clubs Intergenerational Clubs bring youth and older adults together to connect and learn from each other in a social environment. The clubs are generally held once a week during the school year, and many students who participate return year after year. Training is provided for both youth and older adults, and then the clubs in high school are run by student leaders. The clubs have also seen strong retention rates among older adult participants.

Over 200 people participated in the clubs in 2024-2025, including 63 older adults who volunteered an average of 17.5 hours.

	Youth	Older Adults	Adult Volunteers (to run programs)
Program numbers	158	63	16
Total # of hours	2482	1102	253
Average # of hours	15.7	17.5	15.8

"I know my students have grown empathy skills that will serve them throughout their lives. I feel so lucky to have been part of this beautiful intergenerational relationship building program."

-Junior High teacher

Through my participation, I also observed seniors mentoring my peers while students developed their communication skills. I like to believe this club has started to bridge the generational gap in our world. My experiences have inspired me to pursue leadership roles and a career in medicine.

-High School student leader

I feel uplifted with being with the young people, especially with my son's depression. I always come away feeling like I have the strength to carry on.

- Older Adult participant

I feel like I have a better understanding of the struggles elderly can face as part of ageism and isolation. Spending a lot of time with the community within the club has really expanded my understanding of shared similarities and differences between the age groups.

- Youth participant

SOCIAL PRESCRIBING AND VOLUNTEERING

Social prescribing is increasingly recognized as a promising way to connect older adults to their communities—sometimes through volunteering, but often through a broader range of social, cultural, and recreational activities. While **volunteering is one of the most commonly cited examples** of what social prescribing can include, our interviews revealed that it is **only sometimes a formal component** of current practice in Canada. In most cases, the focus remains on connecting people to social supports, fitness programs, or friendship groups, rather than explicitly encouraging volunteering as part of a care plan.

Given Volunteer Canada's interest in this emerging area, many of our interviews explored the **intersection between social prescribing and intergenerational engagement**, two areas of growing relevance as Canada's population ages. Interviewees emphasized the potential of these approaches to reduce isolation, improve well-being, and strengthen local volunteer networks—but also noted that realizing this potential will require more intentional integration of volunteering into social prescribing pathways. This section explores what social prescribing looks like in Canada today, how it can serve as a gateway to volunteering, and how link workers, volunteers, and community organizations are collaborating to make these connections possible.

Key Insights

- Social prescribing has been gaining traction in jurisdictions across Canada, but because of the fragmented nature of the Canadian health care system it is difficult to gage how widespread it is.
- Physicians refer patients to a link worker, who is the key person in assisting an older adult to co-design a care plan, which can involve activities such as joining a book club, attending a fitness class, or volunteering.
- Link workers often work with a team of volunteers who help referred patients to navigate potential services. When people mention the potential of increasing volunteering through social prescribing, sometimes they are referring to the volunteers who work with the link workers, especially those providing peer support.
- However, volunteering itself can be prescription, and there is an opportunity for volunteering to become an even more common prescription because of the associated health and well-being benefits that we have covered earlier in this report. There is currently no good data available about how often volunteering is prescribed.
- Social prescribing provides a significant avenue for increasing the rates of older adult volunteering across Canada if it becomes even more formalized within the provincial health

care systems and if more practitioners see the value of using volunteering as an effective prescription.

"There was a seniors centre with a soup program, and one woman was connected with the program through a social prescribing pathway. She started making soup once a week with four or five other people and now she feels like she has a purpose and she keeps coming back."

- *Interview participant*

"Healthcare teams in Newfoundland generally have someone working on social prescriber, and they will talk to older adults about non-clinical needs. They will connect them with a friendship group or bowling club or something according to their interests. The link worker will help connect them with people, and this will be beneficial for the physical and mental health of the older adults."

- *Interview participant*

WHAT IS SOCIAL PRESCRIBING AND HOW DOES IT WORK FOR OLDER ADULTS?

Social prescribing is an intentional collaboration between healthcare workers and the community-based sector to provide non-clinical supports and connect people with the community resources.

If an older adult goes to a healthcare provider with a health problem that has a non-clinical reason behind it, the physician would prescribe them to meet with a link worker who will sit down with the older adult and take the time to fully understand their situation.

Whereas healthcare workers traditionally have the option to prescribe medication or refer someone to a medical specialist, social prescribing offers a third option.

THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF THE LINK WORKER

The link worker (also called a community connector) and the older adult work together to co-design a care plan, which can involve activities such as joining a book club, attending a fitness class, or volunteering.

Ideally, the link worker will not only connect the older adult with programs and services, but will also meet with the older adult to track their progress and share outcomes with the healthcare provider who made the initial referral.

Referrals can also be made from non-health care workers

Although referrals from medical professionals are the most common, people working at community-based organizations can also identify a non-clinical need and then refer someone for social prescribing. For example, the Toronto Public Library recently received funding for this social prescribing.

Volunteering as a social prescription

When people hear about social prescribing and volunteering, they may imagine a doctor taking out their prescription pad and writing '20 hours of volunteering'. But in reality, the role of the physician is to connect the older adult with a link worker who is best placed to understand all the options in the community and then suggest which ones would meet the needs of the individual. For older adults who are isolated and lonely, volunteering could be an effective prescription.

There is currently no good data on how often volunteering is actually prescribed. There are also limitations in that many of the people going through a social prescription pathway are vulnerable and not currently in a position to volunteer.

Volunteers helping with social prescribing itself, including by addressing key infrastructure gaps

Many who have gone through the social prescribing pathway become patient advocates and active volunteers facilitating social prescribing pathways. Many older adults are prescribed peer support, meaning there is significant demand for this type of service.

One challenge is that the type of services that would be beneficial are not always available, especially in smaller communities with less community infrastructure. In these cases, the link workers could work with volunteers to create activities that would be beneficial.

For example, if a link worker identified that an older adult physical activity program would be beneficial, but none exist in the community, they could work with volunteers to fill this gap, perhaps by reaching out to groups that provide other activities for older and adults and seeing how they could add a physical activity component.

Asset Maps and Service Navigation

Effective social prescribing depends on **strong service navigation systems** that help link workers connect people to the right community opportunities. Link workers rely on comprehensive "asset maps" that identify existing activities—such as volunteer programs, social groups, recreation opportunities, and peer support networks—within a community. These maps are only useful when organizations maintain open communication, up-to-date information, and relationships of trust with one another. Social prescribing doesn't create programs; it **connects people to what already exists**. In communities where volunteer or social opportunities are limited, link workers face barriers in making meaningful referrals, underscoring the importance of collaboration and coordinated data-sharing among local nonprofits.

Funding and Sustaining Social Infrastructure

For social prescribing to succeed at scale, the **social infrastructure** it relies on must be strong, stable, and adequately funded. Volunteer programs, community organizations, and social activities are the foundation that enables link workers to connect individuals to meaningful engagement. Investing in this infrastructure—through flexible, long-term funding, shared platforms, and cross-sector partnerships—ensures that referred individuals can find real options to support their well-being.

Looking ahead, there may be growing opportunities to fund preventative health activities in the volunteering and community space through social prescribing, particularly as the evidence base for specific types of "prescriptions"—including volunteering—continues to strengthen.

Link workers can be embedded in different types of organizations

Link workers are working for different types of organizations depending on the province and municipality. Sometimes the link workers are located with the health authorities like in BC, others at community-based organizations such as Healthy Aging Alberta, and sometimes they are staff of municipalities, like in the example below of Cambridge, Ontario.

The UK shows how social prescribing could be better integrated into the healthcare system, but the Canadian system allows for more flexibility

In the UK, social prescribing is funded by the National Health Service and link workers are placed within general practitioner offices. This means that social prescribing is much more integrated within the overall healthcare mandate.

A national approach would be challenging to implement because the way Canadian healthcare is structured. The benefit of the Canadian approach is that because initiatives are community-led, there is much more flexibility with the resources available in the community.

Social prescribing in action in Cambridge, Ontario

Kim Cusimano is the Age-Friendly Coordinator at the City of Cambridge. Within her current portfolio, Kim is the designated centre contact (link worker) within the Links2Well-being project.

In Cambridge, people aged 50+ who are experiencing loneliness, social isolation, or mild depression and/or anxiety, can be referred by healthcare providers to meet with Kim in her capacity as a link worker. Kim has made several presentations to healthcare providers making the case how social prescribing can be beneficial for their clients/patients. Approximately 135 referrals have been received since the program began in 2023. Older adults participate in co-creating a wellness plan with Kim and her team of volunteers including a check-in after six and 12 months.

Funding for this program is through the Older Adult Centres Association of Ontario, which assists to remove financial barriers to social participation, including membership costs or the fees for registered programs such as a fitness class.

One challenge is that link workers do not have access to health care systems and portals, meaning it can be challenging to provide timely feedback to the referring healthcare worker.

At this time, there is no capacity to increase the number of older adults supported through this program. More link workers and volunteers would be needed to increase social prescribing activities.

Kim has also found that older adults tend to be quite open with her about their mental health or other challenges because they have been referred by a trusted healthcare provider. Older adults may be less likely to share these types of struggles with staff at community organizations if they have not been referred.

INTERGENERATIONAL VOLUNTEERING

In recent years, there has been growing interest in the potential of intergenerational volunteering programs—initiatives designed to bring younger and older people together through shared purpose and community service. Proponents see these programs as mutually beneficial, offering opportunities for learning, empathy, and connection across generations, while also helping boost engagement among both youth and older adults. Because many people now have fewer natural opportunities for intergenerational interaction in their daily lives, interviewees emphasized that successful programs must be intentional by design**,** creating structured opportunities for meaningful exchange.

This focus on intergenerational volunteering reflects a broader conversation about intergenerational living and aging in place, particularly relevant as Canada's long-term care system faces growing strain and more older adults seek to remain in their homes and communities. Canada has also seen an increase in multigenerational households—driven by economic pressures and immigration from cultures where multigenerational living is common.

While quantitative data on intergenerational volunteering remains limited, **many of the interviews for this study centered on this theme**, reflecting Volunteer Canada's specific interest in the topic. As such, the findings presented here should be interpreted with that focus in mind. This section takes a broader look at the benefits of intergenerational volunteering, highlights organizations already active in this space, and outlines resources for those seeking to start or expand intergenerational programs.

Key Insights

- Successful intergenerational programs need to be mutually beneficial to all age groups
- Intergenerational social engagement can lead to intergenerational volunteering
- Ageism remains a pervasive prejudice, and intergenerational activities can help combat ageist stereotypes
- Although many successful intergenerational volunteering projects are ongoing, there is little data available about the effectiveness of these programs or how participants perceive these programs.
- There is also a lack of a hub to keep track of what people are doing across the country in terms of intergenerational programming
- Intergenerational living is already the norm in many cultures and therefore initiatives promoting intergenerational activities as innovative may miss the mark for some people

Interview Insights – Testimonials from Intergenerational Programming

Tracie Swim is the Director and co-founder of WIN and also the Coordinator of the Extra Miles senior visiting program, which is an outreach project of the Montreal West United Church. For more than 15 years, she has been creating and collaborating on intergenerational programs and championing intergenerational practice. She shared some testimonials she has gathered through her two roles.

Older adults say:

- "Nice to know they are thinking of us."
- "The youth are so polite—and they wanted to hear my story."
- "I guess their problems are similar to ours. Perhaps at a different level."
- "I feel validated reflecting, as I write to my much younger Pen Pal."
- "We learn from the students, and they learn from us. We share with each other. I really needed this." (GrandPals 2025)

Youth say:

- "They're interested in listening to me."
- "They're not scary—they're kind and polite."
- "They have energy!"
- "They are really nice."
- "They have lots of wisdom and lots of experience."
- "When can we come back?"
- "I liked speaking to the older adult I was paired with about things I haven't talked about with my grandparents."

How intergenerational activities help combat ageism

This recently released federal Report on Policy Options Related to the Topic of Ageism Targeting Older Canadians only briefly touches on volunteering, but it is still of interest as it provides insights into how intergenerational programs can help combat ageism.

The report found that intergenerational social, recreational, and volunteering activities are often advanced as ways to combat ageism, and that the academic research shows that these programs need to be mutually beneficial in order to be successful. Both young and old participants need to acknowledge each other's strengths. Unidirectional programs where one group is a passive recipient could actually reinforce age-based stereotypes.

The academic research also outlines four key conditions for intergenerational programs to positively influence attitudes about older adults:

1. *Members of the two groups have equal status or at least perceive having equal status. Intergenerational contact in which members of one group are treated as subordinate wouldn't reduce age-based stereotypes — and could actually increase them;*
2. *Members of the two groups have common goals;*
3. *Members of the two groups work cooperatively. Only when young and old do things together can result in changing attitudes;*
4. *There is strong institutional support for the intergenerational contact initiative (i.e., group leaders or other authority figures support the contact between groups).*

The studies also suggest that in-person and one-on-one initiatives are more effective than either group or online programs

However, the report also found that most strategies and initiatives addressing ageism undertaken by community organizations "have not been empirically tested as to their efficacy at decreasing ageist attitudes and behaviour." A major recommendation of the report is that future initiatives include a proper evaluation.

The report also included several examples of successful intergenerational programs, including GeriActors & Friends, which *"brings together seniors and younger generations through performer-created play development. Ranging in age from early twenties to nineties, the GeriActors are seniors from the Greater Edmonton Area, and the Friends are students from Concordia University of Edmonton."*[69] Researchers have evaluated the program and found that it significantly reduced ageism and increased well-being among both the older adults and the university students.

Interview Insights – Intentional Intergenerational Engagement Heps Combat Ageism

[69] https://geriactors.ca/geriactors-friends/

The importance of intergenerational programs to combat ageism was one of the most frequent refrains in our interviewees. People noted that ageism continues to be rampant in society and that it remains more socially acceptable than other forms of prejudice. Outside of their grandparents, young people don't have much exposure to older adults, and intentional engagement programs help reduce stereotypes and build community.
There was some optimism expressed that the increased interest and uptake of intergenerational programming signals to at least some extent that society is becoming less ageist.

As one interviewee put: *"I think the whole concept that people think older adults are flush with dollars and flush with time is inaccurate. It's a paradigm we definitely need to look at changing."*

Interview Insights - Intergenerational living is already the norm for some cultures

During our interview discussions around intergenerational volunteering, several people talked about how certain cultures are more likely to already living intergenerationally as a norm, rather than following the Western approach of siloing off people of different age-groups.

Whereas intergenerational approaches to volunteering are seen as a potential new area to explore for some groups, other groups are already 'living intergenerationally by default.' The fact that some people are organically living intergenerational lives provides the opportunity for cross-cultural learning, and the people already living intergenerationally could be best placed to help design volunteer programs with an intergenerational lens.

Interview Insights - Mentorship and the importance of non-family role models

For young people who are struggling for one reason or another, research has shown that non-family adults can play an important role in helping them persevere and build resilience. Older adults who respect and guide younger people can play a tremendous role in shaping their lives for the better.

Interviewees also emphasized that as much as mentorship is conceived as an older person mentoring a younger person, that it is in fact reciprocal, and that younger people have lots to offer to older adults.

INTERGENERATIONAL HOUSEHOLDS AND VOLUNTEERING

The growth of multigenerational households has outpaced other household types, increasing by 50% since 2001, compared to a 30% overall rise in private households. In 2021, Canada had nearly

442,000 multigenerational households, accounting for 2.9% of all private households and housing 2.4 million people, or 6.4% of the total population.[70]

Given population dynamics, it is possible that multigenerational living is growing even faster among older adults. For example, data on the presence of grandparents in the home shows that 8.9% of children aged 0 to 14 in Canada have at least one grandparent living with them, and this is considerably higher among those with Indigenous identity and is even higher among those aged 0 to 4.[71] This trend will likely play an increasingly important role in areas with the highest immigration rates, where multigenerational households can make up a quarter of all households.

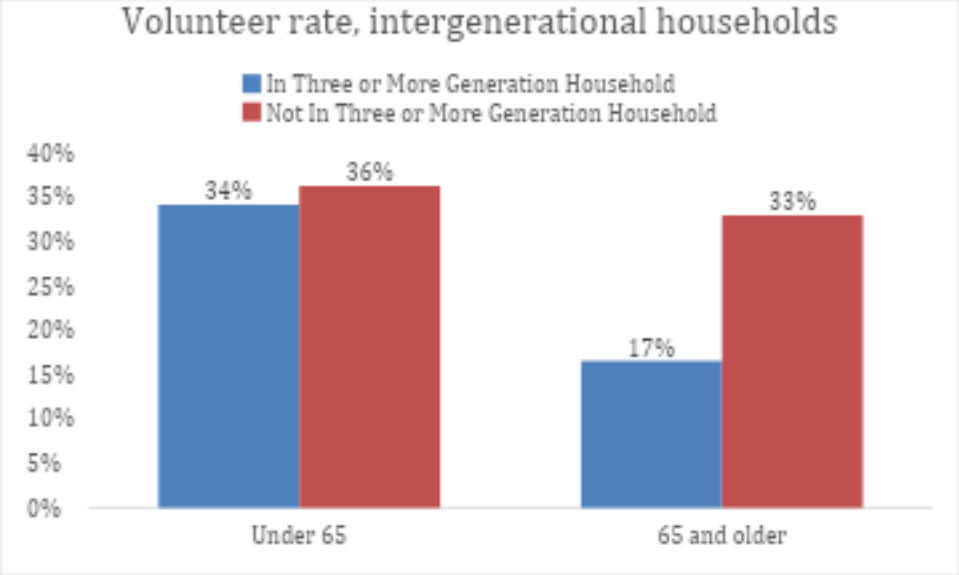
In 2013, older adults living in multigenerational households were significantly less likely to volunteer through formal organizations than their peers in other living arrangements. Just 17% of older adults in three-or-more-generation households report volunteering, compared to 33% of those not in such households—a gap of 16 percentage points. We do not have more recent data for this indicator.

On the other hand, adults under the age of 65 living in multigenerational households volunteer at almost the same rates (34%) as those in non-multigenerational households (36%).

The findings raise questions about the role of caregiving responsibilities in limiting volunteer participation among older adults. While multigenerational households can offer social and economic benefits, they may also create additional caregiving obligations that reduce the time available for formal volunteering.

[70] Battams, N., & Mathieu, S. (2024). Multigenerational households are one of the fastest growing household types. In Families count 2024, The Vanier Institute of the Family. https://vanierinstitute.ca/families-count-2024/multigenerational-households-are-one-of-the-fastest-growing-household-types

[71] Calculations by author. Statistics Canada. Table 98-10-0278-01 Presence of grandparents in household by Indigenous identity and residence by Indigenous geography: Canada, provinces and territories. https://doi.org/10.25318/9810027801-eng



Sources: 2013 (Statistics Canada. Analysis by authors. See Methods for full details.

Implications

The connection between intergenerational caregiving obligations and volunteering has been poorly explored.[72] When we look at all forms of caregiving, almost a quarter of older adults are caregivers.[73] This shows that this gap is an important area to fill in the future when understanding how to support older adult volunteers.

THE PROMISE AND POTENTIAL OF INTERGENERATIONAL VOLUNTEERING PROGRAMS

The benefits of intergenerational volunteering programs

A systematic review of the impacts of intergenerational engagement on older adults' cognitive, social, and health outcomes in the Journal Ageing Research Reviews looked at 44 studies

[72] For example, the 2018 General Social Survey on Giving, Volunteering, and Participating (GSS GVP) explicitly excludes helping household members from its definition of informal volunteering. Meanwhile, the 2018 GSS on Caregiving and Care Receiving only briefly addresses the potential impact of caregiving on volunteering, asking whether caregiving interferes with participation. The 2013 GSS on Social Identity does not ask any questions beyond whether someone lives in an intergenerational household, while more recent social capital surveys have not covered this topic at all.

[73] Arriagada, Paula. (November 24, 2020). The experiences and needs of older caregivers in Canada. *Statistics Canada*. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2020001/article/00007-eng.htm

addressing the potential benefits of intergenerational engagement.[74] The review found that "regarding quantitative evidence, 4 out of 8 studies found significant intergenerational engagement effects on cognitive outcomes, 15 of 24 on social outcomes, and 21 of 31 on health-related outcomes." However, the review also found that only 11 of the studies fully met the criteria of high-quality research, showing that additional research is needed to understand the benefits and challenges of intergenerational engagement fully.

In *Making the Case for Intergenerational Programs*, Generations United outlines how all age groups benefit from intergenerational practice, including through a greater sense of belonging and improved mental, physical, and cognitive health. The report also cites numerous research papers about specific benefits for different age groups.[75]

Interview Insights – How intergenerational engagement leads to intergenerational volunteering

The research around intergenerational living often focuses on the benefits of intergenerational engagement, and not specifically on volunteering. But several interviewees talked about how intergenerational engagement often leads to intergenerational volunteering.

For example, as discussed in a previous section, Dr. Raza Mirza talked about how students in his intergenerational classroom are now volunteering in a long-term care home.

Other interviewees echoed the idea that once you have a connection to a person or group that you are more likely to volunteer with them. This speaks to the potential locating events targeting younger people in retirement homes or older adult centres, as this could serve as the spark to get someone interested in volunteering with older adults.

A GROWING INTEREST IN INTERGENERATIONAL VOLUNTEERING WITHIN THE CANADIAN CHARITABLE SECTOR

There is optimism within the Canadian charitable sector that intergenerational volunteering programs could be increased significantly and that this would benefit older adults, young people, and nonprofits.

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[74] Krzeczkowska, Anna. Spalding, David M., McGeown, William J., Gow, Alan J., Carlson, Michelle C., & Nicholls, Louise A. Brown. (November 2021). A systematic review of the impacts of intergenerational engagement on older adults' cognitive, social, and health outcomes. *Ageing Research Reviews*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.arr.2021.101400

[75] Generations United. (2021). Making the Case for Intergenerational Programs. https://www.gu.org/app/uploads/2021/03/2021-MakingTheCase-WEB.pdf

As part of the growing interest in intergenerational volunteering, The House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities held three meetings between December 2023 and February 2024 on the topic of intergenerational volunteerism and published a report in June of 2024.[76]

The House of Commons report talks about a growing loneliness epidemic among both youth and older adults, and intergenerational volunteer programs were put forth as a way to combat loneliness among both groups. As discussed earlier, volunteering can be important for older adults to stay socially engaged.

Witnesses at the committee called for the federal government to support an intergenerational volunteerism hub, which could include a database of intergenerational volunteer opportunities available across the country, and they pointed to Generations United in the US as a model for this initiative.

Sharon McKenzie, the Executive Director of the i2i Intergenerational Society of Canada, recommended that intergenerational volunteerism be included as part of national standards for long-term care homes, saying that research from New York had shown the health benefits for older adults of such arrangements.

Despite the significant potential, several key research gaps remain. Few studies assess the overall scale of intergenerational volunteer opportunities and how younger and older generations perceive them. Research on these aspects would be valuable in understanding the broader impact and feasibility of expanding intergenerational volunteer initiatives.

While data on participation and engagement remains limited, increasing toolkits are available for those interested in developing these programs. Several international organizations have emerged to provide support, and some of the most effective resources are linked below.

Interview Insights - Lack of hub to keep track of what people are doing across the country in terms of intergenerational programming

Our interview participants echoed calls from the House of Commons for the need to create an intergenerational volunteering hub.

People are running successful intergenerational programs across the country, but there is not a centralized database of these programs. Organizations looking to start intergenerational programs

[76] House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. (June 2024). *Promoting and Encouraging Intergenerational Volunteerism*. https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/441/HUMA/Reports/RP13180385/humarp25/humarp25-e.pdf

would also benefit greatly from the tools and templates that have already been created, but it is not easy to find what information is available.

The interviewees called for a one-stop-shop for all the information on how to overcome barriers, attract funding, and implement programs. This hub itself would require proper funding and resources, as part of the current challenge is that many of the people currently running intergenerational programs across the country are themselves volunteers and don't have the necessary capacity to promote resource sharing.

There are some people already engaged in this type of work.

For example, Betty Good through her organization GoodLinks offers live online training on how intergenerational program planning, and she also includes templates on how to get started. She is working on creating a self-guided course that could be purchased and completed by anyone at anytime.

The WIN Intergenerational Network in Montreal shared resources with about 60 organizations, but their membership is predominantly local, even though their resources could be beneficial to other organizations across the country.

Interview Insights – Making volunteering opportunities to be inclusive of children

One potential avenue for increasing volunteering in the interviews was to make volunteer opportunities more inclusive of children. For example, more adults with young children might be willing to volunteer in long-term care homes if they are able to bring their children instead of needing to arrange childcare. This could not only get more people volunteering, but it would also be beneficial for the older adults and would be truly embodying the spirit of intergenerational engagement.

Some interviewees discussed that this is currently a challenge because places where older adult lives are often not close to parks or schools, so there is not much change for organic interaction.

Interview Insights - Funders are not always interested in intergenerational programming, but interest is growing

The idea that the nonprofit works in silos was mentioned in many interviews. Funders also often have specific interests in either older adults or youth, and they are not always interested in funding programs that are targeting a single group. This can make it difficult not only to attract funding, but

also for reporting, when funders only want to hear about the benefits to one group and not the more holistic achievements of the program.

One interviewee mentioned that in 2010, the federal government's New Horizons for Seniors program was focused exclusively on older adults and didn't want any spillover to youth or education. Now, 15 years later, the program is more inclusive and includes an intergenerational component, which is a positive example of funding becoming less siloed.

See Appendix – Additional Resources for Practitioners for toolkits and best practices related to starting intergenerational programming.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This section includes recommendations based on the data analysis, the interviews with practitioners, and a review of some of the academic literature around volunteering as well as several guidebooks and lists of best practices.

- Key Insights Driving Recommendations
- The three overarching priorities
    1. Invest in Volunteer and Organizational Infrastructure
    2. Leverage Existing Investments in Health and Social Connection
    3. Address the Barriers Facing Would-Be Volunteers
- Other Ideas on How to Unlock More Engagement
- How Volunteer Canada can help organizations across the country boost older adult engagement
- How to best design volunteer programs for older adults

Findings Informing Recommendations

Before outlining the main recommendations arising from this research, here is a recap of some of the key data insights outlined through the report.

The size and impact of older adults

- **8.1 million Canadians aged 65+ in 2025, up from 5.7 million a decade ago.**
    - Expected to reach 9.3 million by 2030 under medium-growth projections.
- **Interest in volunteering interest remains high:**
    - Only one-third (32%) of older adults say they've been *asked* to volunteer in the past year.
    - Of those asked to volunteer, 89% responded positively to at least some requests, including 48% that generally say yes to requests, a higher positive response rate than any other age group.
    - The issue is *opportunity and outreach*, not motivation.
- **A modest increase would have major impact:**
    - A 5% percentage point increase in volunteering among older adults by 2030 would translate to approximately 465,000 new volunteers.
    - At an average of ~80 hours annually, that's 37 million additional hours of service.

- This translates to the equivalent of about 20,000 FTE positions.
- This is both substantial in terms of impact, but also requires thinking through how to provide more opportunities at scale

Trends in Participation

- **Stable among the oldest volunteers (75+):**
  - 31% volunteered in 2024, up slightly from 27% in 2013.
- **Sharp decline among "younger older adults" (65–74):**
  - Dropped from 37% in 2013 to 25% in 2024.
- **Total volunteer hours** have fallen for both groups—especially among those aged 75+, suggesting lower intensity of engagement even where participation remains steady.

Social and Economic Drivers

- **Erosion of group participation:**
  - Older adults active in community or social groups are *just as likely to volunteer* as a decade ago.
  - But the share of those saying they participate in *no groups at all* has risen 24 percentage points.
- **Income gap:**
  - A 26-point difference in volunteering rates between those with household incomes under $30,000 vs. over $100,000.
- **The impact of retirement:**
  - Among those aged 65–74, 39% of people still working volunteered, compared to 22% of retirees—indicating many disengage at retirement.

Organizational Capacity Challenges

- Many nonprofits report that they **lack staff to manage volunteers**, not interest from volunteers themselves.
- **Volunteer manager and coordinator positions** were among the first cut during the pandemic and remain unfilled in many organizations.
- This loss of capacity makes it harder to recruit, onboard, and sustain volunteer engagement at scale.

In Summary

Older adults want to contribute — they're simply not being asked or supported to do so.
The path forward lies not in persuading volunteers, but in **rebuilding the systems, relationships, and invitations** that connect them to meaningful roles.

THREE PILLARS TO STRENGTHEN OLDER ADULT VOLUNTEERING

With these insights in mind, three overarching priorities emerge to strengthen older adult volunteering in Canada:

1. **Elevate and Strengthen the Volunteer Ecosystem**
   Build the systems and staff needed to connect willing volunteers with meaningful opportunities.
   - This requires a *cross-sector effort* spanning funders, governments, and nonprofits.
   - Restoring and modernizing volunteer coordination capacity is essential for scaling engagement.
2. **Leverage Existing Investments in Health and Social Connection**
   Align volunteer initiatives with areas already being funded—such as **older adult health, social prescribing, and loneliness reduction programs.**
   - These programs offer natural entry points to re-engage older adults through volunteering, and many current and future funding streams are already directed toward them.
   - Health benefits of volunteering make it a win–win for both well-being and community capacity.
   - Volunteering is not often being considered within these frameworks right now.
3. **Address the Barriers Facing Would-Be Volunteers**
   Ensure that all older adults—not just the healthiest or wealthiest—can participate.
   - First, we need to find meaningful ways to ask older adults to participate. This barrier is paramount and flows across all older adults.
   - Four key groups need targeted support:
     • Those with **low income**, who face financial barriers (transportation, checks, meals).
     • Those in **poor health** or limited mobility, who need accessible, flexible roles.
     • Those experiencing **burnout**, who need low-pressure, restorative engagement options.
     • **New retirees**, who often disengage from volunteering as they leave the workforce.

Together, these three pillars form a roadmap: **rebuild the infrastructure, integrate with existing systems, and reduce participation barriers.**

Within each pillar lie dozens of actionable steps and innovations that could multiply volunteer engagement even further, and a few of the key ideas that came up in our interviews and during our research are outlined below.

Pillar One: Elevate and Strengthen the Volunteer Ecosystem

Canada doesn't have a volunteer shortage—it has a volunteer **infrastructure** shortage. Older adults want to contribute, but meaningful opportunities depend on the strength of the volunteer ecosystem: local hubs, trained staff, coordination systems, and professional volunteer management. Rebuilding this backbone is essential to unlocking engagement at scale.

Advocate for funding to rebuild local hubs and community participation infrastructure; volunteering doesn't exist without opportunity.

Volunteer participation is closely linked to broader civic and social participation. Yet many local hubs—community centres, libraries, arts groups, sports clubs, and volunteer centres—remain underfunded or have struggled to recover since the pandemic. Volunteer Canada could champion increased investment in this local infrastructure, ensuring that older adults and others have accessible, meaningful opportunities to connect, contribute, and volunteer in their communities. This approach should not assume that all traditional pipelines will return to their former scale, but it is important that current gathering places can extend invitations into volunteering.

Help nonprofit leaders understand how much not investing in volunteering has cost the sector

Volunteer Canada should lead efforts to raise awareness of the scale and consequences of declining volunteer engagement. Between 2013 and 2023, Canada lost an estimated 700 million volunteer hours according to the SGVP—the equivalent of roughly 325,000 full-time positions, more than half the size of the entire community nonprofit workforce.[77] Many organizations likely do not appreciate just how much capacity of the sector was lost during the last decade. Volunteer Canada could help nonprofit leaders quantify and communicate the value of volunteering and the cost of neglecting it, reframing investment in volunteering as essential to organizational sustainability.

Continue championing and investing in professional volunteer management roles

Volunteer Canada is already a leading advocate for the importance of volunteer management professionals, and this work remains critical. These roles are the backbone of effective volunteer programs—essential for recruiting, supporting, and retaining volunteers, and ensuring that experiences are meaningful for everyone involved. As one interviewee noted, *"There's sometimes the misconception that volunteers save time—but managing a good program takes real skill and can't be done off the side of a desk."* Continuing to highlight and resource these positions will

[77] Note that Imagine Canada estimated this at 451,000 full-time equivalents using a slightly different assumption around full-time hours. See https://imaginecanada.ca/en/360/new-results-statistics-canadas-survey-giving-volunteering-and-participating

strengthen the sector's capacity to engage older adult volunteers and grow overall participation nationwide.

FIND WAYS TO TRAIN MORE STAFF ON WORKING EFFECTIVELY WITH VOLUNTEERS

Many staff, even in experienced organizations, lack up-to-date training or confidence in engaging volunteers. Volunteer Canada could develop accessible, scalable training and resources to refresh these skills across the workforce—not only for volunteer coordinators, but also for program and frontline staff. Better-trained teams would prevent negative experiences, improve retention, and make volunteering more rewarding for everyone involved.

SHOWCASE ORGANIZATIONS THAT HAVE SUCCESSFULLY LEVERAGED VOLUNTEERING

Volunteer Canada could collect and share case studies of organizations that have dramatically expanded their reach and impact through innovative volunteer engagement. Highlighting examples of groups that started small and achieved significant outcomes would demonstrate what's possible when volunteer management is done well—and help inspire others to follow.

Example – Volunteer Services at Nova Scotia Health is currently focused on internal capacity building

Pre-pandemic there were about 4,000 volunteers in hospitals across the province. Volunteering stopped completely for a couple of years at the outset of during the pandemic, and now they are back up about 2,300 volunteers.

Much of their focus right now is on educating staff on volunteer engagement and in improving the quality of their volunteer programs, rather than simply increasing numbers.

There was significant healthcare staff turnover during the pandemic, and so once volunteer programs resumed many, many of the new staff had never engaged with volunteers before. The prioritization of internal capacity building is aimed at improving volunteer retention and fostering long-term commitment.

As capacity grows, so will the number of programs and volunteers.

PILLAR TWO: LEVERAGE EXISTING INVESTMENTS IN HEALTH AND SOCIAL CONNECTION

Volunteering is one a powerful, low-cost tools for improving health and social connection, yet it remains largely untapped within Canada's existing health investments. By embedding volunteering into social prescribing, healthy-aging programs, and community wellness initiatives, we can turn

current spending into engines for engagement. This pillar focuses on aligning volunteering with the systems already designed to support well-being.

Position volunteering as part of Canada's preventative health strategy

Volunteer Canada can play a leadership role in framing volunteering as an evidence-based contributor to health and well-being. Volunteering reduces loneliness, increases purpose, and supports mental and physical health—especially among older adults. By aligning messaging and partnerships with the health sector, Volunteer Canada could help position volunteering as a cost-effective, preventative health investment.

Help leverage the social prescribing movement as a real pathway into volunteering

Social prescribing initiatives already connect individuals to community programs through healthcare referrals. Volunteer Canada could work with health authorities and funders to ensure volunteering is consistently included within these referral options. Doing so would create new entry points for volunteers, particularly among people seeking purpose and connection after health or life transitions.

Build partnerships between volunteer centres and health networks

To sustain these efforts, Volunteer Canada could help connect local volunteer centres with regional health teams, social prescribing networks, and community wellness initiatives. Strengthening these relationships would ensure that volunteering opportunities are visible to those making health and social referrals, and that data on participation and impact flows in both directions.

Map existing health and social connection investments that overlap with volunteering

Many current funding streams—such as those focused on aging well, mental health, or community connection—could naturally support volunteering initiatives. Volunteer Canada could catalogue and share examples where volunteering aligns with these investments, helping nonprofits and funders recognize and leverage overlapping priorities.

Develop a national model for "community volunteer guides"

Volunteer Canada could pilot and promote a model inspired by social prescribing's link worker role. *Community volunteer guides*—trained volunteers or staff who introduce others to local opportunities—could help overcome one of the biggest barriers to engagement: people simply not knowing where to start. This would also create new, low-barrier volunteer roles for older adults. These need to be in the community and integrated into services.

Expanding Social Connector Roles

Many older adults would benefit from **volunteers whose sole purpose is connecting others—** linking isolated individuals to social groups, helping newcomers integrate into their communities, or guiding older adults to services that enhance their quality of life. This could be an opportunity for **low-barrier, high-impact volunteering** that builds stronger, more connected communities.

"I think navigation and peer support programs can be powerful when older adults are offering support and mentoring other older adults. But those types of programs require intensive training, and it is a large commitment that not everyone will want to undertake. But sometimes having that peer support of somebody who's been in your same shoes, that can be really powerful."

-Interview participant

Pillar Three: Address the Barriers Facing Would-Be Volunteers

Even highly motivated older adults face practical barriers that prevent participation—financial strain, poor health, mobility challenges, and a lack of clear entry points after retirement. But one of the biggest barriers is simple: most older adults are not being asked to volunteer, even though the vast majority say "yes" when they are. This means we need new, flexible types of opportunities and intentional outreach that rebuilds the invitation to participate. Reducing these obstacles and creating accessible pathways is essential to broadening who can volunteer and ensuring that those who want to contribute actually can.

Create post-retirement volunteering pathways

Many older adults desire to stay engaged after retiring, yet our research shows that volunteer rates do not automatically increase post-retirement. While those aged 75+ have maintained stable or slightly increased participation, retirees aged 55-74 have seen significant declines in volunteering versus those who remain working. This suggests that many retirees lack structured pathways into volunteer roles, something which was echoed by many of our interviewees, who also felt that recently retirees have many other competing leisure activities to choose from.

To address this, organizations should:

- Develop **retirement transition programs** that introduce volunteering as an option alongside financial and lifestyle planning.

- **Partner with employers and professional networks** to connect retirees with meaningful volunteer opportunities before they leave the workforce.
- Offer **mentorship and skills-based volunteering roles**, allowing retirees to leverage their professional expertise.
- Provide **gradual engagement options**, where older adults can start with small commitments and scale up as they adjust to post-retirement life.

By integrating volunteering into retirement planning, organizations can capture the energy and expertise of new retirees while preventing disengagement.

MEETING OLDER ADULTS WHERE THEY ARE: TAILORED OUTREACH STRATEGIES

Reaching older adults effectively requires a mix of traditional and digital strategies, particularly for those who are most isolated. While technology offers powerful engagement tools, it may not reach older adults living alone or with smaller social networks. Insights from the 2018 GSS GVP indicate that direct mail remains the most effective solicitation method for donations, suggesting that more analog approaches—such as print outreach, phone calls, and in-person engagement—may also be necessary for volunteer recruitment. **Programs designed to reduce isolation should allocate budget for these higher-cost but higher-impact outreach methods**, as those who respond to such techniques often demonstrate greater commitment.

As more older adults adopt online platforms, it is important to recognize that their digital engagement may differ from younger demographics. While many older adults use the internet, their navigation skills, trust in online sources, and responsiveness to digital marketing can vary. This means that tailored approaches—such as simplified messaging, larger text, or direct, distraction-free calls to action—may be required even within digital channels. A combination of analog investments and refined digital strategies will ensure more effective outreach, particularly for those who are hardest to reach.

ADDRESS BARRIERS FACED BY PEOPLE WITH LOW INCOME OR POOR HEALTH

Volunteer Canada should work with funders and partners to develop targeted supports for people who want to volunteer but face significant barriers due to health challenges or limited financial means. For many older adults, poor health, disability, or mobility issues make traditional volunteer roles inaccessible. Programs could include flexible, home-based, or low-intensity volunteer opportunities, as well as partnerships with health providers to integrate volunteering into rehabilitation and wellness plans.

For those with lower incomes, volunteering can involve real costs—transportation, meals, equipment, or even lost paid hours. Volunteer Canada can help pilot and promote models that

offset these expenses through stipends, transit vouchers, or recognition credits. Removing these financial barriers would open the door for a far broader and more diverse group of volunteers to participate.

The differences in volunteering rates between older adults in poor versus good health—and between lower- and higher-income households—are enormous. Without deliberate effort to reduce these gaps, the sector risks leaving out those who could benefit most from the social connection, sense of purpose, and improved well-being that volunteering can provide.

How Volunteer Canada can help organizations: according to interviewees

We asked interviewees how Volunteer Canada (and/or other national organizations) could help support them in their work. We also asked if they had any recommendations for the development of the National Volunteer Action Strategy, and this section explores some of the ideas for how Volunteer Canada can best support nonprofits across the country.

Key Insights

- A national approach and a commons system to onboard volunteers would reduce the burdens of volunteer managers
- A national campaign on the health and wellness benefits of volunteering would help make these benefits known to the wider public
- Volunteer Canada could create a database to easily make it easier for organizations to track volunteer hours
- Small organizations could benefit from support to improve volunteer recognition efforts
- Volunteer Canada could make better connections with large groups of untapped volunteers, such as groups of recently retired employees
- Getting buy-in from across the political spectrum can help build long-lasting programs

A national approach to make it easier to onboard volunteers

Something we heard repeatedly from our interviewees is that the screening process for volunteer opportunities can be onerous. Volunteers are often required to get separate police checks for different roles, which can be a deterrent—not only for the volunteers themselves but also for the organizations, especially those serving older adults who may struggle with onboarding processes. One interviewee mentioned that while they frequently receive inquiries from people interested in volunteering, they simply don't have the capacity to onboard everyone.

A common platform where volunteers could complete a single screening process for multiple opportunities would simplify things considerably. Several interviewees felt there is a role for Volunteer Canada or another national organization to take the lead in creating such a platform. This kind of system—where volunteers are vetted and complete a single vulnerable sector screening—could save organizations countless hours. Volunteers could also be issued a kind of "volunteer passport" to show other organizations that they have already been accredited. The goal would be to reduce unnecessary duplication, costs, and delays while preserving existing safeguards.

In addition to streamlining screening, such a platform could also help match volunteers with opportunities based on their interests, making it a valuable tool for volunteer recruitment.

One existing example for such a platform is the BC United Way's free volunteer recruitment and management platform (ivolunteer.ca). The platform is described as "an easy-to-use, feature-rich platform that can help you save time and energy by automating administrative tasks, streamlining, fostering volunteer communication, and, most importantly, helping you access qualified and skilled volunteers."[78]

Interview Insights - Large organizations might still prefer their own unique system

We asked one interviewee with a complex and rigorous screening system if their system could be shared with smaller organizations to help avoid duplication of efforts, but they were skeptical because of how their process is tailored to the needs of their own organization and not widely applicable to other organizations.

The Health and Wellness Benefits of Volunteering Need to Be Made More Forcefully

Much of the traditional thinking around volunteering frames it as an activity you do to help others. However, as we have outlined previously, volunteering is beneficial for the health and well-being of the volunteers themselves. This means that volunteer programs could be advertised to potential volunteers for 'selfish' reasons, essentially making the pitch that you should volunteer not necessarily to help other people but because it is good for your own health and well-being.[79]

Volunteer Canada could take the lead in developing a national campaign highlighting the *personal health benefits of volunteering*—a message that resonates both with individuals and with policymakers focused on preventative health. Several interviewees noted that while these benefits are well understood within the sector, they are not widely known by the general public and/or those making investments in our healthcare system. Any national campaign should also direct people to concrete opportunities, as awareness without available roles or onboarding capacity is unlikely to translate into participation.

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[78] https://www.ivolunteer.ca/for-communty-agencies-and-non-profit-organizations/

[79] According to one of the leading researchers on volunteer motivations, "people who have more seemingly "selfish" motivations--esteem enhancement, personal development and understanding--are more likely to stick with a volunteering organization longer than people with more "other focused" motivations, such as values." One of the most influential papers about volunteer motivations also found "that people can be recruited into volunteer work by appealing to their own psychological functions, that they will come to be satisfied volunteers to the extent that they engage in volunteer work that serves their own psychological functions, and that they will plan to continue to serve as volunteers to the extent that their psychological functions are being served by their service."

At the same time, health leaders and policymakers also need to better understand volunteering as a key component of community health and social connection. Volunteer Canada could play a role in promoting volunteering within broader health policy and preventative care conversations—framing it as a proven, low-cost intervention to reduce loneliness and support well-being. Volunteer coordinators would also benefit from resources and tools to help them make this case within their own organizations, especially when advocating for investment in volunteer engagement.

Data Collection and Information Sharing

Creating resources and templates

Interviewees suggested that Volunteer Canada, as well as other national and provincial organizations, have a key role to play in terms of creating resources guidebooks, and templates to better manage volunteer programs. Interviewees felt there was especially a need for more resources on working with diverse populations, as small nonprofits don't have the capacity to create their own materials for all types of people.

Data Collection

Many of the interviewees talked about the difficulties in tracking data, including the number of hours volunteered and the demographic profiles of their volunteers. They felt that Volunteer Canada could take the lead in creating a platform making it easier for organizations to track volunteer hours, and this data collection would in turn help Volunteer Canada be able to better report and advocate using national data.

Volunteer Canada could collect demand-side measures: unfilled roles, onboarding backlogs, roles not posted because of limited staff capacity, and organizations that have stopped recruiting.

Volunteer Recognition

Mini-granting program for volunteer recognition or to cover out of pocket expenses

One interviewee suggested that there could be a pool of money available from Volunteer Canada so that organizations could improve the recognition of their volunteers, including a small monetary gift around the holidays as a way of saying thank you for your contributions.

Volunteer Recognition Awards

Some interviewees mentioned awards as a type of volunteer recognition, and there was an idea that Volunteer Canada could create national volunteering awards as part of the rollout of the national volunteer strategy.

Tax Credit for Volunteering

Several interviewees suggested that tax credit for volunteer hours could be an effective way to recognize the contributions of volunteers, especially those who are volunteering significant amounts of hours. Volunteer Canada could take the lead in researching and advocating for such an approach.

Volunteer Canada could make better connections with large groups of untapped volunteers, such as retired teachers

One interviewee spoke about an attempt to connect with a provincial retired teachers association, but even though they had a large volunteering program they were unsuccessful in making a meaningful connection. They highlighted that smaller organizations would have even more difficulties in making these connections, and so that Volunteer Canada could take the lead in reaching out to these big pools of volunteers.

The importance of getting buy-in from across the political spectrum

One interviewee shared an experience of having a successful volunteering program shuttered as soon as there was a change of government, and even the evaluation of the program was shelved.

This shows the risk of having any strategies or programs too closely tied with the party currently in power, and the need to get engagement from people from stakeholders across the political spectrum.

Other Ideas on how to unlock more engagement

We asked interviewees what they felt were important polices, resources, and practices to unlock more volunteer engagement among older adults. Many of their responses echoed the three pillars discussed above of rebuilding the volunteer infrastructure, integrating with existing systems, and reducing participation barriers. Several other key topics emerged during our interviews and research that are worth pursuing.

INCREASE VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESIDENTS OF RETIREMENT AND LONG-TERM CARE HOMES

Many traditional volunteer opportunities in retirement and long-term care homes include people from outside coming to volunteer with the residents.

Retirement and long-term care homes should develop robust volunteering programs that include not only external volunteers, but also their own residents. As the benefits of volunteering for older adults are numerous, residents should be encouraged to volunteer as much as possible, even on small projects within the homes themselves.

Generations United - Connecting Generations in Senior Housing: A Program Implementation Toolkit: This toolkit was designed specifically to help older adult housing organizations plan and implement high-quality intergenerational programs that will benefit residents and young people in their communities.

MAKE OLDER ADULT VOLUNTEERS KEY PLAYERS IN COMBATING THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY

Several interviewees discussed how volunteering on advocacy campaigns is both an excellent way to build community and of bringing different generations together. Climate change was cited as an area that could unite all different types of people.

A 2019 survey of 1,000 Canadians aged 65+ found that 89% of older adults believe "they can play a significant role in working towards solutions to the issues affecting the world." The same report found that the environment was the issue that older adults care the most about (54%). [80]

The next decade will be pivotal for humanity's long-term survival, and an army of older adult volunteers could play an essential role in creating a habitable planet for future generations.

MATCH OLDER ADULTS WITH EARLY EDUCATION PLAYGROUPS

Many communities have playgroups where parents bring their young children to play and learn with other neighbourhood families. These sites are perfect areas to promote intergenerational volunteering, as older adults could come to play with the children and help provide guidance to young parents. Playgroup organizers could also hold playgroups in retirement homes to facilitate this type of engagement.

MORE MUNICIPALITIES COULD ADOPT AGE-FRIENDLY STRATEGIES

[80] Revera. (2019). *Revera Report on Aging*. https://a.storyblok.com/f/182809/x/84bce23f2f/reverareport_livingalifeofpurpose.pdf

Many municipalities across Canada have already developed Age-Friendly strategies and they are following the guidelines from the World Health Organization (WHO). The Global Age-friendly Cities Guide covers eight overlapping domains that affect the well-being of older adults.

1. Outdoor Spaces and Buildings
2. Transportation
3. Housing
4. Social Participation
5. Respect and Social Inclusion
6. Civic Participation and Employment
7. Communication and Information
8. Community and Health Services

One interviewee suggested that even municipalities that do have such strategies tend to focus on physical aspects of the city such as benches and outdoor spaces, but that more attention needs to be paid to civic participation. There is an opportunity for more municipalities to adopt age-friendly strategies, and those with existing strategies could place a greater emphasis on social and civic participation.

BUILDING A 'CANADCORPS' FOR VOLUNTEERS

One model that could be beneficial for Canadian older adults is AmeriCorps, which is an independent agency of the United States government which was formed in 1993.

AmeriCorps Seniors is open to people aged 55+, with 143,000 volunteers serving.[81] The AmeriCorps Seniors Pathfinder is a tool that allows people to search for current AmeriCorps Seniors opportunities in their region. The program has been successful in combating loneliness, and 88% of older adults who felt a lack of companionship reported fewer feelings of isolation after volunteering through the program.

[81] AmeriCorps. Make Giving Back Your Second Act. https://americorps.gov/serve/americorps-seniors. Accessed January 30th, 2025.

How to best design volunteer programs for older adults

Our interviewees had many ideas on how to better design volunteer programs for older adults, and several key principles emerged consistently:

1. Volunteer roles need to be meaningful
2. Recognition is essential for volunteer retention
3. Programs need to be as flexible as possible
4. Volunteering needs to be accessible and inclusive
5. Financial barriers need to be reduced

Creating meaningful volunteer opportunities

Volunteers want to contribute meaningfully, and organizations should be mindful to create opportunities where volunteers can apply their skills and expertise. People will walk away if they don't think their contributions have value.

Making volunteers feel like they're part of a team working toward a common goal can help enhance both morale and retention. Organizations that are struggling with retention should see if they can foster social connections during volunteer activities so that volunteers feel more connection to both the mission and each other.

One successful strategy discussed in the interviews was a cohort approach to volunteering. With this approach, volunteers go through their orientation together, creating a shared experience. For example, GrandPals brings cohorts onboard in groups of 10-12 people.

Even when volunteers will not be volunteering together, a shared onboarding and then regular opportunities social events can help volunteers have more meaning and purpose, even if the tasks they are doing are routine.

For example, the Nova Scotia Health Authority found that many volunteers in the western part of the province were volunteering because they were new to the area and they wanted to meet people. As a result, a few social events have been organized so that volunteers get to know each other and feel more connected to the community.

As highlighted previously, many organizations struggle to recruit drivers, and there was a recommendation that drivers should be sent out in groups so that they don't feel isolated during long stretches of driving.

The challenge of recruiting and retaining board members

As discussed previously, interviewees cited drivers as the most in-demand but hard to recruit volunteer position.

Several interviewees also mentioned that nonprofits find it hard to recruit board members, and that highly skilled board members who are recruited find that they are simply rubber-stamping things rather than being given the opportunity to apply their expertise and passions.

Volunteer Recognition and Appreciations Needs to Be a Priority for All Organizations

The need to properly recognize the contributions of volunteers was one of the most common ideas expressed by interviewees. Many also shared stories of people being turned off volunteering entirely because of one bad volunteering experience.

All too often, volunteers are often not seen as integral to the identity of an organization, and they are excluded from events such as holiday parties. This lack of inclusion can undermine their sense of belonging and devalue their contributions.

Creating a welcoming environment where volunteers feel respected and valued is crucial. Toxic participants or negative dynamics can make volunteers feel disengaged and unappreciated, which can impact their motivation and commitment.

Additionally, it's important for organizations to actively ask volunteers how they would like to be appreciated. Some may prefer tangible recognition, like an honorarium that could be donated for a tax receipt, while others might appreciate more informal acknowledgments. The key is to tailor recognition to their preferences.

Make volunteering programs as flexible as possible

The need for flexibility was a near constant across the interviews. There was a sense that nonprofits need to be open to negotiation rather than being rigid about implementing volunteer programs exactly as they were designed and developed. Volunteer managers should invite people to have informal conversations with potential volunteers about their interests and skills and then they can work together to find a mutually beneficial role.

"Previous generations would come in and volunteer Monday to Friday on a regular schedule and commit to a regular role. But boomers have not done that and they don't have that interest. They have an interest in leadership and in advisory roles. They have an interest in drop-in projects, but not the day-to-day operations."

-Interview participant

Older adults are more likely to volunteer when they can choose a schedule and length of commitment that best fits their needs.

- Allow for **short-term, episodic, or project-based volunteering** rather than requiring long-term commitments. One interviewee talked about how the research literature shows that some people want more short-term positions and skilled positions.
- Offer **seasonal or periodic engagement**, recognizing that older adults may have shifting availability throughout the year. For example, GoodLinks programs are run weekly, but volunteers are told they can participate even if they will miss some sessions due to travel or other commitments.
- Provide **remote and hybrid volunteer opportunities**, particularly as older adults are increasingly adopting digital technology.
- Emphasize **low-barrier opportunities** that don't require extensive onboarding or training.
- Allow people to **start small and expand their roles.** Many older adults are willing to commit considerable hours but may be put off by making a major commitment from the onset.

ENSURE THAT PROGRAMS ARE ACCESSIBLE AND INCLUSIVE:

Volunteer programs must ensure their spaces are accessible, especially as many older adults have limited mobility. Organizations should also work to attract diverse volunteers in terms of language and culture.

- Ensure **physical accessibility** in volunteer spaces, including ramps, accessible restrooms, and seating options.
- Offer **language-inclusive programs** to engage racialized older adults and immigrant communities, who currently volunteer at lower rates than their first-generation Canadian counterparts.
- Create **socially inclusive spaces** emphasizing the value of lived experience over formal education or past volunteering experience. For example, the GrandPals program and its emphasis on storytelling.

- The difficulty in offering programs in different languages was highlighted in many interviewees, both because of the associated costs and also because of the difficulty of recruiting volunteers who speak different languages. But as discussed earlier, some organizations have successful peer support programs operating in different languages.

Ensure digital inclusion: Older adults increasingly embrace technology, yet digital barriers remain challenging for volunteer recruitment and participation. Many nonprofits have shifted to online applications, virtual training, and digital engagement, but not all older adults are comfortable navigating these systems. Our findings show that while digital adoption has increased, there is a significant gap in confidence and accessibility for some older volunteers. Some options include:

- Ensure volunteer applications and platforms are **user-friendly and accessible**, with clear instructions and support.
- Provide **in-person and hybrid options** for those who prefer traditional engagement but want to benefit from digital tools.
- Leverage **peer mentoring programs**, where tech-savvy older volunteers assist those less comfortable with digital systems.

REDUCE FINANCIAL BARRIERS

While volunteering is often seen as a cost-free activity, our research shows that financial constraints significantly impact participation, especially for lower-income older adults. Those with household incomes below $30,000 are far less likely to volunteer than those earning $100,000 or more. The data also suggests that transportation costs, out-of-pocket expenses, and the need for paid work can discourage older adults from engaging in unpaid volunteer roles. Financial barriers, especially those associated with transportation and police checks, were also mentioned by many interviewees.

To make volunteering more accessible, organizations could:

- **Reimburse transportation costs or offer rides,** particularly for volunteers in rural areas or those with limited mobility.
- **Cover the costs of police checks,** especially since multiple checks can be required for different volunteer roles.
- **Provide stipends or honorariums** for older adults who may otherwise be unable to afford to volunteer.
- **Offer meals or refreshments during volunteer shifts** to ease financial burdens for low-income volunteers.

See Appendix – Additional Resources for Practitioners for additional tools and guides on how to best design volunteer programs for older adults.

APPENDIX

Additional Resources for Practitioners

During our research, we uncovered several practical tools that may be useful for people designing, managing, or evaluating older adult volunteer programs. While by no means an exhaustive list, these resources were either mentioned in interviews or discovered through a desk review. Although some of these resources were designed for specific regions, they have broadly applicable principles that can be used by practitioners across the country.

Research on how to engage older adults in volunteer programs

- Spar BC - Research Synthesis: Volunteerism in BC's Community Social Services Sector: This report includes sections on challenges and barriers, mitigation strategies, and strategic opportunities.
- Volunteer Toronto - Resource Guide: Engaging Seniors and Older Adults as Volunteers (2023): Ideas for how to get older adults volunteering again after the pandemic.
- Community Links and Impact Organizations of Nova Scotia - What We Heard: Community Connections Research Report (2023): This report about older adult-serving organizations has important insights on how to better serve older adults, including with volunteers.
- What it Takes: Key Strategies for Optimizing Volunteer Participation (2024): Although not specifically about older adults, this report draws on the Canadian Social Connection Survey and focus groups to provide evidence-based recommendations to revitalize volunteerism.
- Volunteer Canada - Volunteering and Older Adults (2013): This report has a section with strategies for engaging older adult volunteers.

Online learning for volunteer management practitioners

- Volunteer Toronto - Webinars and Workshops: These training sessions cover trends and best practices in volunteer management.
- Volunteer Lab: This peer-to-peer digital learning space offers video-based courses to drive change and build resilience in volunteerism.
- Volunteer Toronto Free Learning Library: The library includes resource guides on a variety of topic as well as case studies of successful volunteer programs. New resources are added regularly.

- Pan-Canadian Intergenerational Hub: A partnership between Volunteer Canada and the International Longevity Centre Canada, this hub is an evolving and expanding source for resources, network engagement, research and tools that will help build an intergenerational engagement ecosystem.

Resources for creating age-friendly cities and helping older adults age in place

- BC United Way - Healthy Aging Resources & Reports: A variety of reports on how older adults can stay active and connected through community-based services and resources.
- Resources to help older adults and seniors age in their community (Government of Alberta): A list of resources to help meet the needs of both the growing older adult population and those who support them.
- WHO - Global Age-friendly Cities: A Guide: Informed by WHO's approach to active ageing, the purpose of this guide is to engage cities to become more age-friendly to tap the potential that older people represent for humanity.
- Healthy Aging CORE Canada Research Knowledge Mobilization: A variety of quality and trusted resources to help practitioners find the latest research on healthy aging.

Professional Development for Volunteer Management Practitioners

- University of Waterloo - Volunteer Management for the Not-for-Profit Sector Course: This self-guided 12-module course addresses key components of volunteer management practices with the goal of equipping practitioners with the skills and competencies required to understand the management of diverse groups of volunteers.
- Volunteer Management Professionals of Canada/Conestoga College Certificate Program: The three-course online certificate program is the longest-running program in Canada (since 1984) and provides students with the knowledge, resources, and tools to be effective, creative and inspiring volunteer managers. It is delivered online and can be completed within a year.
- Volunteer Management Professionals of Canada Professional Development: Opportunities include events, conferences, webinars, and a national forum.
- GoodLinks Intergenerational Training: The training workshops are designed for anyone who wants to build authentic intergenerational experiences, especially nonprofits, care facilities, community centres and faith communities.
- Professional Association of Volunteer Leaders Ontario (PAVRO) - Mentorship Program: This program offers an opportunity for PAVRO members to connect to work on a specific topic or project.

Certification Programs

- CVRM – Certified Volunteer Resource Manager (offered by VMPC)
- AVRM – Advanced Volunteer Resource Management, available through some provincial centres

Toolkits and Resources for Creating Intergenerational Programs

- City of Edmonton - Intergenerational Programming Toolkit: A toolkit to assist organizations to plan and implement intergenerational programs.
- World Health Organization - Connecting generations: planning and implementing interventions for intergenerational contact: A step-by-step guide for people who want to use intergenerational programming to combat ageism and to promote understanding and mutual respect among generations.
- WHO Age-Friendly Cities Framework: The WHO Age-friendly Cities framework proposes eight interconnected domains that can help to identify and address barriers to the well-being and participation of older people.
- Griffith University - Intergenerational Learning Program Operational Guidelines and Toolkit: Guidelines for the development, implementation and evaluation of intergenerational programs.
- New Brunswick Department of Social Development - Connecting Generations: A toolkit for Planning Intergenerational Events: Practical information to support educators, care providers, community groups and agencies in coordinating successful intergenerational initiatives.

Intergenerational Engagement Organizations in Canada

- i2i Intergenerational Society of Canada was created in 2008 by educators, health care workers, older adults, community, youth and parents, to promote intergenerational programs and learning opportunities, and to assist in developing rich and sustainable connections between generations.
- GoodLinks: Offers training and consulting, as well as support to organizations who are wanting to develop intergenerational programs.
- WIN Intergenerational Network: WIN facilitates collaboration and sharing of resources among community partners in Montreal, but its resources are applicable to organizations across the country.

- GénérActions: Innovates with partner organizations to co-create programs and opportunities for people of all generations and cultures to foster genuine relationships and community engagement.

Intergenerational Engagement Organizations

- Generations Working Together supports the development and integration of intergenerational work across Scotland and they have a wide variety of resources available on their website.
- Generations United: This American organization was founded in 1986 to promote intergenerational collaboration. It implements programs, conducts research, and its website is full of resources for people looking to implement intergenerational volunteering programs



Volunteer
Bénévoles
Canada



GenerationsCo

Connection
Collaboration
Community