

# IMPACTFUL VOLUNTEERING

## UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF VOLUNTEERING ON VOLUNTEERS

### Key findings

We looked at the impact of volunteering on volunteers across four areas: mental health and wellbeing, physical health, social connections, and employability and skills. We found that:

- **There is strong evidence on the link between volunteering and improved mental health and wellbeing.** Studies that control for factors such as prior self-esteem, as well as research that looks at the same people over a long period of time, suggest a causal relationship between the two.
- **Volunteering can improve people's social connections and is positively associated with improved mental health and wellbeing.** However, the way volunteers are recruited sometimes means having high social capital is needed to get involved in the first place.
- **Volunteering is associated with increased physical health, but evidence for a causal relationship is weaker than for mental health.** The extent to which other factors, such as existing levels of health, account for these effects deserves greater attention in research.
- **Volunteering has a weak impact on people's chances of finding work.** Volunteering can improve people's skills (including soft skills such as teamwork) but this doesn't guarantee finding a job.

Where possible we have also identified features of volunteering that increase the effects on volunteers, including those that cut across the different areas outlined above. We found that:

- **Motivation for volunteering affects the impact on volunteers.** Research in this area suggests that volunteering for altruistic reasons is more likely to benefit volunteers than doing so for 'self-orientated' reasons, although the distinction between them may not be clear-cut.
- **A positive impact on mental health is more likely when people take part voluntarily, rather than when mandated to do so.** Moreover, some research suggests that those taking part voluntarily contribute more time than those required to volunteer.
- **The time spent volunteering influences the benefits people get from volunteering.** But the exact levels at which positive impacts begin and end are not yet clear. Volunteering over a sustained period, however, does appear to be more likely to produce benefits for volunteers.
- **Evidence suggests that whether volunteers feel appreciated in their role is an important factor in making volunteering impactful.** Older volunteers who feel appreciated, for example, report more improvement in quality of life and are less socially isolated than those who do not feel appreciated.
- **The quality of relationships formed while volunteering should also be considered when evaluating volunteering programmes.** Research points to the importance of developing a connection with beneficiaries as important in improving mental wellbeing.

### Introduction

Volunteering is often seen a solution to many of society's problems, for both those volunteering and those they are helping. Unemployed people and students, for example, are encouraged to volunteer so that they gain skills and experience that will increase their employability. Similarly, volunteering is seen as one answer to the problem of loneliness that is receiving increasing attention. The idea of volunteering impacting on recipient and volunteer is sometimes referred to as 'double benefit' - a term which has entered the language used by volunteering campaigns ([#iwill](#)). Here we focus on the impact of volunteering on volunteers.

### Our aims and objectives

With this briefing, we aim to:

- Summarise current understanding of the impact of volunteering across four main areas: mental health and wellbeing, physical health, social connections, and employability and skills
- Provide insights to inform volunteering policy and practice.

### Our approach

Where possible we have included the most recent research available, with some less recent studies also referenced where they support or contradict recent findings, or fill gaps in recent research. Our review mainly focuses on academic research, however where appropriate evaluations of government volunteering initiatives have also been included. We acknowledge that all four areas considered in this briefing could receive a dedicated review of their own, however this review offers a

digestible summary of existing research across each area.

### Impact on mental health and wellbeing

We have looked at studies that examine the impact on mental health conditions like depression and others that look at levels of general mental wellbeing, which considers self-reported levels of satisfaction with life, for example. Sometimes the terms are used interchangeably in the studies and we have kept the terms used by the authors.

#### The benefits of volunteering vary with age

Emphasis has been given to older people in the research to date. There is now a solid body of evidence demonstrating that volunteering is related to reduced increases in depression and greater feelings of mental wellbeing ([Lum and Lightfoot 2005](#), [Wilson and Musick 2003](#), [Wilson et al, 2016](#)). Older people themselves also identify volunteering as an important way for them to feel they are contributing to society, which has been shown to be good for mental health ([Age Concern, 2010](#)).

However, research indicates that other age groups, including young people, can benefit from volunteering as well. An evaluation of the National Citizen Service, for example, indicates that it helped reduce anxiety and increase levels of satisfaction with life ([DCMS, 2017](#)). This study provides a snapshot of volunteers' feelings after completing the programme, and does not continue to investigate whether it had long-lasting effects on wellbeing. A longitudinal US study looking at the same people over a long period of time, however, demonstrates that young people who volunteer experience fewer depressive symptoms over the long term, although it finds that these benefits only accrue

to those who take part voluntarily, rather than involuntarily ([Kim and Morgul, 2017](#)).

A large national-level longitudinal study in the UK looked at the association of volunteering with mental wellbeing across people's life course. It found that those who volunteer frequently have higher levels of mental health and emotional wellbeing. However, there was no clear evidence that volunteering was positively associated with mental health during early adulthood to mid-adulthood. The positive association became apparent after the age of 40 years and continued up to old age ([Tabassum et al, 2016](#)).

### Feeling appreciated and forming relationships matters

A study based on the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) shows that volunteers who feel appreciated report a greater improvement in quality of life, life satisfaction, and a greater decrease in feelings of depression than those who do not ([Royal Voluntary Service, 2012](#)).

The quality of relationships formed while volunteering can also influence the impact on volunteers. A UK study of volunteers taking part in a peer support programme for carers found that those taking part experienced an increase in mental wellbeing ([Charlesworth et al, 2017](#)). Volunteers said that a sense of 'getting something back' from the relationship with the person they were supporting was an important factor ([Brooks et al, 2014](#)).

### There is evidence to support a causal relationship

A challenge for research investigating the link between volunteering and mental health and wellbeing is whether improved outcomes are really caused by volunteering. Instead, it could be that people already with higher levels of mental health and wellbeing are more likely to volunteer.

Some of the research in this area attempts to account for this potential problem. For example,

a study based on the analysis of three waves of the Americans' Changing Lives dataset found that older people who volunteered were less likely to suffer from depression even when controlling for factors such as prior self-esteem and social interaction (how often people attended clubs or met with friends and family) ([Wilson and Musick, 2003](#)).

Another longitudinal study, showing that volunteers reported higher levels of mental wellbeing more than a decade after their volunteering taking place, found strong evidence that this was caused by volunteering improving people's sense that they matter and have a role in society ([Piliavin and Siegl, 2007](#)).

Longitudinal studies, such as the one mentioned above where the same group of people are looked at over a period of time, help to identify whether there is a causal relationship between volunteering and improved mental health and wellbeing. However, we still should be careful not to inflate any claims to a causal effect. Many studies do not control for all factors that could lead to improved mental health and wellbeing, meaning we can't be sure that it is caused by volunteering or something else (for instance, education attainment or marital status).

### We can't be sure how much volunteering is enough or too much

Despite evidence for a positive effect of volunteering on mental health and wellbeing, research is less clear on how the frequency and extent of volunteering impact on mental health and wellbeing. While the basic principle of 'enough, but not too much' is backed up by evidence, there is conflicting research about the exact levels at which volunteers start and stop experiencing any benefits.

A study of Australian adults aged 64-68 suggests that people need to volunteer for at least 100 hours a year to feel benefits to their wellbeing. The benefits appear to drop off if people volunteer for over 800 hours a year ([Windsor et al, 2008](#)). However, another study on people of a

similar age in the US suggests that the benefits to mental health *drop off* beyond 100 hours a year, rather than *begin to take effect* after 100 hours a year ([Wilson and Musick, 2008](#), [Morrow-Howell et al, 2003](#)).

It should be noted that the optimum level of time spent volunteering may differ with age and employment status. Evidence shows unemployed people who volunteer frequently (on a weekly basis) reduce their chances of re-employment ([Kamerade, 2013](#)).

Research indicates, however, that the longer the period of time someone volunteers, the more likely they are to experience a positive effect on mental wellbeing ([Wilson and Musick, 2003](#)).

### Impact might depend on the volunteer's motivations

Recent research suggests that volunteering for altruistic reasons has the strongest positive effect on wellbeing, as opposed to 'self-enhancing' reasons where volunteers seek benefits and to enhance themselves through volunteering ([Yeung et al, 2017](#)).

There may also be differences between religious and secular volunteering. Volunteering in both church and non-church settings is associated with increased wellbeing for both men and women. But while women in church settings appear to experience a greater sense of wellbeing than those who volunteer in non-church settings, there is no difference in outcomes for men ([Krause and Rainville, 2018](#)).

### It's not always positive

Some research points to possible negative effects of volunteering on mental health. For example, the economy and welfare system within which people volunteer can have an impact on volunteers. A study of unemployed people in 29 European countries suggests that, while volunteering can help improve volunteers' sense that their life is worthwhile, it can also damage their mental health in countries with

low levels of welfare benefits ([Kamerāde and Bennett, 2017](#)).

A review of research on volunteering in disaster settings found that volunteers had higher complaint levels than staff, due to a range of factors including a lack of post-disaster social support ([Thormar et al, 2010](#)).

### Impact on physical health

The most recent reviews of academic research consistently find that those who volunteer report better physical health ([Fiorillo and Nappo, 2017](#)) ([Casiday, 2015](#)) ([Wilson et al, 2016](#)). Measuring physical health is complex, so the most common measure used in the existing research is self-reported health ([Detollenaere et al, 2017](#)) ([Wilson et al, 2016](#)). However, self-reported health is shown to be strongly related to objective health measures, such as diagnosed diseases ([Schnittker and Bacak, 2014](#)).

### Research focuses on older people, but young people can benefit as well

Impact on the physical health of older people receives particular attention in the research literature to date, as it does in research into effects on mental health and wellbeing ([Anderson et al, 2014](#)). Several studies suggest that volunteering can help protect against cognitive ageing ([Proulx et al, 2017](#)) ([Guiney et al, 2017](#)). A randomised control trial study indicated that volunteering increased the walking activity of the women taking part, although it did not produce the same result for men ([Varma et al, 2016](#)). Research also suggests that volunteering can help slow the progression of physical disability among older people ([Carr et al, 2017](#)).

Volunteering has also been linked with better physical health amongst students ([Lederer et al, 2015](#)). Evaluations of the National Citizen Service point to a positive impact on behaviour related to improved physical health, with young people less likely to have smoked or drunk alcohol after taking part ([Ipsos Mori, 2017](#)).

### There is some evidence on the impact on specific diseases, but it's limited

Most research looks at overall self-reported health but there are some longitudinal studies on the possible beneficial impact of volunteering on those suffering from specific diseases. There are indications that a modest, but not high, amount of volunteering is positively associated with lower hypertension, which is a risk factor for cardiovascular disease, although there may be a range of factors operating here ([Burr et al, 2011](#)).

### It might be that healthy people are more likely to volunteer

An understandable question in this area of research is the extent to which volunteers report better health because those who volunteer are more likely to be healthy than those who do not.

Indeed, a study that controls for health habits, like levels of exercise and whether people smoke, finds that the relationship between volunteering and self-reported health disappears when these factors are taken into account ([Piliavin and Siegl, 2007](#)). However, the population in this study had above average levels of physical health, and was not a random sample, so we cannot be sure that there wouldn't be a positive effect on physical health if a different population was studied.

Further research is needed before we can be certain one way or the other.

## Impact on social connections

### Volunteering can improve social connectedness

Volunteering brings people together and links those taking part with others in their community, which helps build social capital ([IVR, 2011](#)). People who volunteer are also more likely to have higher social connectedness than non-volunteers ([Brown et al, 2012](#)).

Being better connected and integrated with other people has been shown to be able to give

volunteers a sense of belonging and feel part of wider society, which it is argued combats depression associated with loneliness (Konwerski and Nashman, 2008). Social connectedness also gives volunteers sources of support they might not have access to otherwise, as they build relationships and trust with other people ([IVR, 2011](#)). The possible benefits of social connections are relevant when looking at the relationship between volunteering and mental wellbeing, as discussed earlier.

### More connections for younger and older people alike

There is much research on the potential for volunteering to help connect older people with others in their communities. Older people who volunteer, and who feel appreciated when doing so, are less socially isolated than those who do not volunteer ([Royal Voluntary Service, 2012](#)). Additionally, a recent US study demonstrates that volunteering for two or more hours a week can help reduce feelings of loneliness amongst widows ([Carr et al, 2017](#)).

A study on the participants of the UK programme Step Into Sport, which targets 14-19 year olds and provides volunteering opportunities in sport, demonstrated that the younger people taking part reported increased social connectedness ([Kay and Bradbury, 2009](#)). This study also highlights that providing training to those taking part and properly supporting volunteers in their roles is important to making volunteering impactful.

### People's motivations for volunteering lead to different outcomes

People volunteer for different reasons. A distinction is sometimes made between 'self-orientated' volunteering (volunteering for reasons related to career or to help alleviate personal problems) and 'other-orientated' volunteering (volunteering for reasons related to values and altruism) ([Konrath et al, 2012](#)).

Those who volunteer for other-orientated reasons ('to express their prosocial values or to

reaffirm their relationships with close others, or for exploration reasons, to learn more about other people, the world, their own strengths') are more likely to report higher levels of social connectedness and trust. Those who volunteer for self-orientated reasons, 'to distract themselves from personal problems or to advance their careers', are more likely to report lower social connectedness and trust than those who volunteered for other-orientated reasons ([Stukas et al, 2016](#)).

But people often have mixed motivations for volunteering. They might volunteer primarily to help others, but also expect to feel benefits themselves. Equally, one person's definition of 'altruism' may look 'self-enhancing' to another. Indeed, the study mentioned above, looking at UK sports volunteers, suggests that although some young people taking part did so initially because it would provide them with training they could include on their CVs, the programme still lead to greater feelings of altruism ([Kay and Bradbury, 2009](#)).

### **Volunteering can reinforce existing levels of social capital**

As well as giving opportunities to better connect people with their communities, the way in which volunteering programmes and initiatives are designed can favour those already with high social capital.

A study of a UK youth volunteering programme, for example, suggests that the way in which the programme was set up and the selection criteria designed favoured young people with higher levels of social capital, and provided them with additional opportunities to increase their social capital ([Storr and Spaaij, 2017](#)). Similar conclusions can be found in another study on the role of parent volunteers at UK rugby clubs. Again, the recruitment processes were found to be 'exclusive', while the programmes reinforced 'exclusive ties and identities' ([Whittaker and Holland-Smith, 2016](#)).

### **Impact on skills and finding a job**

Particularly during economic downturns, the UK government has turned to structured volunteering programmes as a way for those without a job to gain the skills and connections that might enable them to find employment.

#### **Volunteering can improve skills but can't guarantee a job**

The few studies looking at the impact of UK government volunteering initiatives on finding a job show that only a minority of people who complete the programme find a paid job and say that it was volunteering that helped them do so ([Kamerāde and Ellis Paine, 2014](#)). For instance, an evaluation of the Personal Best programme in London found that 27% of unemployed volunteers found work after the programme, but only 16% of them said that they would definitely not have done so without taking part (SQW, 2011).

However, volunteering can improve people's skills, which may in turn help them find employment. Research suggests that volunteering improves both 'hard' skills, such as IT or customer relations, and 'soft' skills, such as teamwork and communication ([Kamerāde, 2013](#)).

#### **Whether people volunteer on their own terms matters**

A randomised control trial that required a group of volunteers to donate a minimum amount of time to volunteering, but allowed others to decide for themselves how much time to contribute, found that the latter group contributed more time on average ([McCarty et al, 2017](#)).

Two other studies compared a cohort of students in Canada who were required to undertake 40 hours of community service with other cohorts who were not mandated to do so. They indicate that those who were required to complete the community service did not become more altruistic, develop more positive attitudes towards civic engagement or volunteer more in

the future, unlike those who were not required to do so ([Henderson et al, 2007](#), [Yang, 2017](#)).

Some government schemes, such as the UK government's now discontinued [Community Work Placement](#) programme, have mandated some unemployed people to volunteer as a requirement for them to receive welfare benefits. We need to better understand how the fact that volunteering is not done out of people's own free choice may shape potential outcomes.

### External factors can limit how much volunteering can help

Whether volunteering leads to employment can depend on a range of different factors, including age and how often it takes place; as volunteering too regularly can have a negative impact ([Ellis Paine et al, 2013](#)). A recent Danish study that examined whether volunteers were less likely to experience unemployment and whether volunteers who did experience unemployment did so at a lower rate than non-volunteers, found no statistically significant gain in employability for the typical volunteer ([Petrovski et al, 2017](#)).

It is perhaps not a surprise that volunteering is not a silver bullet for overcoming unemployment. Volunteering cannot overcome factors such as lack of access to childcare, for example, which can prevent people finding employment. Research suggests, however, that volunteering programmes with specific employability aims may improve their success rate if the skills and experiences they provide are better aligned with those needed by employers ([Kamerāde, 2013](#); [Rego et al, 2016](#)).

## Conclusion

We have considered in this briefing the existing research on the impact of volunteering on volunteers in four areas: mental health and wellbeing, physical health, social connections, and employability and skills. The evidence is stronger in some areas than others, and our review highlights clear knowledge gaps. We will

continue to monitor new evidence in the areas discussed.

While it is important for charities to understand and communicate the benefits of volunteering to volunteers, we should also aim to assess the wider impact of their work and the difference they make. We will be looking to produce a similar review on this very topic in the coming months.

**John Davies**

### NCVO research

The research team at NCVO exists to inform and shape policy agendas about the current and future strategic challenges facing the sector, and to improve practice development and decision-making.

We produce, share and communicate research findings for the benefit of NCVO, its members and the wider voluntary sector.

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