

Volunteers are in better health than non-volunteers

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Researchers of Ghent University analysed data on volunteering, employment and health of more than 40,000 European citizens. Their results, just published in *PLOS ONE*, show that volunteering is associated with better employment and health outcomes.

Volunteers are as healthy as 5 years younger non-volunteers

Even after controlling for other determinants of [health](#) (gender, age, education level, migrant status, religiosity and country of origin), volunteers are substantially in better health than non-volunteers. Doctoral researcher Jens Detollenaere: "This association is comparable in size to the health gains of being a man, being five years younger or being a native (compared to being a migrant)." This direct association between volunteering and health is highly statistically significant so that it is ruled out that this association is occurring by coincidence.

Partly explained by higher income among volunteers

When decomposing the total association between volunteering and health in a direct association and an indirect association via income, the researchers found that the indirect association accounts for about one fifth. Volunteers have, after controlling for the aforementioned personal characteristics, a higher income and this higher income is associated with better health. Professor Stijn Baert: "This finding corroborates with

previous research ([dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.econlet.2016.07.035](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econlet.2016.07.035)) showing that volunteering activities on one's cv yield higher employment opportunities, especially for non-natives."

Other explanations

The researchers put forward three other explanations for an association between volunteering and health. Professor Sara Willems: "Firstly, volunteering may improve access to psychological resources (such as self-esteem and self-efficacy) and social resources (such as social integration and access to support and information), both of which are found to have an overall positive effect on health. Secondly, volunteering increases physical and cognitive activity, which protects against functional decline and dementia in old age. Finally, neuroscience research has related volunteering to the release of the caregiving-related hormones oxytocin and progesterone, which have the capacity to regulate stress and inflammation."

Method

The research results are based on data from the sixth round of the European Social Survey (conducted in 2012 and 2013). This survey measures the beliefs, preferences and behaviour of more than 40000 citizens of 29 European countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Germany, Denmark, Spain, Estonia, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Albania, Iceland, Israel, Kosovo, Norway, Switzerland, Russia and Ukraine). These data were analysed by means of a state-of-the-art mediation model with self-reported [volunteering](#) and health as main variables.

More information: Jens Detollenaere et al. Volunteering, income and

health, *PLOS ONE* (2017). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0173139](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0173139)

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