



The Double-Edged Sword of Volunteering: Positive Impacts, Negative Stereotypes, & Barriers to Participation

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Abstract – This article examines the dual nature of volunteering, highlighting both its well-documented benefits and its often-overlooked drawbacks, including negative stereotypes and structural barriers to participation. Drawing on interdisciplinary research and a decade of practice-based observation, the analysis demonstrates that volunteering improves physical and mental health, strengthens social connections, and enhances community resilience through a “community of caring” framework. At the same time, the study identifies significant challenges: untrained volunteers can unintentionally harm vulnerable populations, voluntourism may reinforce dependency and harmful stereotypes, and service professionals may perceive volunteers as incompetent, reducing engagement and retention. Barriers to participation remain substantial, with lack of time cited by a majority of non-volunteers, alongside concerns about inflexible commitments, financial costs, and lack of skills or confidence. Additionally, compulsory volunteering and poorly designed programs contribute to perceptions of volunteering as a chore rather than meaningful engagement. The findings suggest that increasing participation requires flexible, accessible, and well-supported opportunities, including short-term and skill-appropriate roles, proper training, and proactive outreach. By addressing both the benefits and the barriers, organizations can design volunteer programs that maximize positive impact while minimizing harm, ultimately fostering sustainable, inclusive communities.

Keywords - Volunteering contributes to the development of a “community of caring” that transforms neighborhoods through visible demonstrations of support, with activities like walks, runs, cleanup events, and fundraisers showing neighbors that they matter and that the community will not let them face challenges alone. Research indicates that volunteering is associated with reduced mortality rates, increased functioning, stronger social connections

I. INTRODUCTION

Volunteering represents a powerful force for community transformation, offering significant benefits to individuals, organizations, and society at large. However, volunteering also carries potential negative effects, stereotypes, and barriers that may limit widespread participation. This article examines the comprehensive landscape of volunteering, exploring its documented positive impacts on communities and programs, identifying harmful stereotypes and negative consequences, and analyzing why many people avoid volunteering or view it as punishment. Research indicates that volunteering is associated with reduced mortality rates, increased functioning, and stronger social connections. [1] Conversely, untrained or undertrained volunteers can cause harm, particularly when working with vulnerable populations. [5] Voluntourism may reinforce harmful stereotypes and unequal relationships between volunteers and host communities. [6] Service professionals may also judge volunteer competence based partly on stereotypes rather than solely on task-specific skills. [7] The primary barriers include lack of time, inflexible schedules, financial concerns, lack of confidence in one’s skills, and the perception that volunteering requires an ongoing commitment. [2][3]

Volunteering, the voluntary act of offering one's time, skills, and energy for the betterment of others and the community, has become a cornerstone of civil society. Every day, people in the United States donate their time, skills, and energy to their communities by volunteering with nonprofit organizations. Despite its widespread

recognition as a positive activity, volunteering remains an important area of study because significant barriers can prevent individuals from participating. [2][3] This article uses a narrative review of existing literature supplemented by practice-based observations developed over approximately a decade of volunteer experience to examine the benefits, challenges, and participation barriers associated with volunteering.

II. AUTHOR OBSERVATIONS AND PRACTICE-BASED INSIGHTS

Over the past decade, my personal experience with volunteering has revealed benefits that extend far beyond individual satisfaction. The most significant impact I have witnessed is the creation and strengthening of a “community of caring.” Through participation in and organization of walks, runs, cleanup events, and fundraisers, field observations over a decade suggest that these collective efforts expand community capacity to support others.

The benefits of volunteering become most visible when we observe how different types of volunteers contribute to our community. Field observations over a decade suggest distinct patterns in how people engage: some volunteer with a specific organization or group, committing to regular activities within that structure. Others join committees, working on strategic planning and decision-making that shapes how organizations operate. Other individuals go on their own to help, initiating projects



independently and reaching communities that formal organizations might miss.

This diversity in volunteering approaches creates what I have observed as a powerful ecosystem of care. When people organize walks and runs, they raise funds while building awareness for important causes. Cleanup events bring neighbors together to improve shared spaces, demonstrating tangible care for the environment and community. Fundraisers directly address financial needs, providing resources intended to support individuals and causes in need. Each of these activities sends a visible message to the community: we care about you, we are here for you, and we will not let you face challenges alone.

The impact of this community of caring becomes especially clear when we consider the role volunteers can play in addressing unmet community needs. The volunteers who step forward, whether through organizations, committees, or independent action, can help address these needs and provide additional support within the community.

Field observations over a decade suggest that volunteering is not just about helping others; it is about building a culture where caring becomes the norm. In my experience, visible volunteer participation can encourage others to become involved. When children see their parents participating in cleanup events or fundraisers, they are exposed to the value of contributing to their community. This ripple effect may contribute to an ongoing culture of care that strengthens the community.

III. THE POSITIVE EFFECTS OF VOLUNTEERING

Individual Health and Well-Being Benefits

The positive effects of volunteering are well-documented across multiple domains. Research consistently demonstrates that volunteering is associated with improved well-being across social, mental, and physical health domains. [1] Studies show benefits across these three domains, with reduced mortality and increased functioning among the largest reported effects. [1] Volunteering in the community may also provide important opportunities for social participation and engagement among individuals who otherwise experience limited involvement in community life. [1]

Individual benefits from volunteering are substantial and multifaceted. Physical health benefits associated with volunteering include reduced mortality, increased functioning, and improved physical well-being. [1] Mental health benefits encompass enhanced mental well-being, reduced feelings of isolation, and increased life satisfaction. [1] Social connections may be strengthened through increased social interaction, expanded social networks, and greater community connection. [1] Personal growth may also occur through opportunities to develop

experience, skills, confidence, and a sense of purpose. [1] These findings are consistent with practice-based observations, as volunteering has expanded my social network and provided me with a deeper sense of purpose and connection to my community.

Community-Level Benefits

Communities benefit from volunteering in numerous ways. Volunteering can help individuals develop social connections and expand their social networks, contributing to a greater sense of belonging and community connection. [1] Volunteers can also supplement existing community services and contribute time, knowledge, and skills to organizations and community initiatives. [8] Volunteering may help strengthen relationships among community members and increase access to programs, resources, and social support. [8]

The community of caring that I have witnessed through walks, runs, cleanup events, and fundraisers exemplifies these benefits. These activities create visible demonstrations of care that bring neighbors together and demonstrate a shared commitment to the community. When people participate in cleanup events, they improve shared physical spaces while creating opportunities for community interaction. When families participate in fundraisers together, they demonstrate the value of community participation to younger generations.

Program and Organizational Benefits

Organizations can gain important operational and community benefits from volunteer participation. Volunteers contribute time, knowledge, and skills that can supplement the work performed by paid staff and allow organizations to extend programs and services. [8] Organizations can expand their reach and services beyond what paid staff alone could accomplish. Volunteer participation can also help organizations connect programs and services with populations and communities they serve. [8] Volunteers may support educational, mentoring, community-service, and other programs according to organizational and community needs. [8]

The independent volunteers who go on their own to help, as I have observed, may address community needs outside the structure of formal organizations. In my experience, these individuals can bring flexibility, creativity, and personal commitment that complement organized volunteer efforts.

IV. NEGATIVE EFFECTS & STEREOTYPES OF VOLUNTEERING

Harm Caused by Untrained Volunteers

While volunteering is generally viewed positively, harmful consequences can occur when volunteers lack proper training. Research shows that un- and undertrained volunteers may cause unintended harm in the communities they work with. Volunteers who are un- or undertrained to



work with vulnerable populations may cause psychological harm, particularly when they lack the preparation necessary to understand the needs and circumstances of the populations they serve. [5] Lack of proper skills may lead to poor-quality service that fails to meet community needs or produces unintended consequences. [5] Untrained volunteers may also use limited resources inefficiently when appropriate training, supervision, and program oversight are absent. [5]

Voluntourism and Colonial Stereotypes

Voluntourism, the practice of combining travel with volunteer work, has become increasingly popular. However, this practice can produce negative consequences when programs are poorly designed or fail to prioritize the needs and perspectives of host communities. [6] Voluntourism programs can inadvertently reinforce harmful stereotypes, perpetuate unequal relationships, and promote the idea that outside volunteers can solve complex social problems without sufficient understanding of local circumstances. [6] Some voluntourism practices have also been criticized for reinforcing “white savior” narratives in which Western volunteers are positioned as rescuers of communities portrayed as dependent or helpless. [6] These practices can economically disadvantage local communities by undermining the value and expertise of local professionals. Poorly designed programs may foster dependency rather than supporting locally led and sustainable solutions. [6] Volunteers may develop a perceived sense of superiority, while host communities may be portrayed in ways that reinforce stereotypes about poverty, helplessness, or dependency. [6] Voluntourism may therefore contribute to processes of “othering” when cultural differences and unequal relationships are emphasized rather than mutual respect, local expertise, and community empowerment. [6]

This contrasts sharply with the community of caring I have witnessed, where local volunteers work alongside their neighbors to address real needs with genuine respect and understanding.

Professional Stereotypes of Volunteers

Service professionals may rely on negative stereotypes when evaluating the competence of volunteers. Research suggests that judgments of volunteer competence can be influenced by stereotypes in addition to assessments of the skills needed to perform particular tasks. [7] Negative volunteer stereotypes can lead to stigmatized identities, with potential consequences for volunteer recruitment, satisfaction, and retention. [7] Professional concerns about maintaining service quality and protecting professional roles may also influence how volunteers and their contributions are perceived. [7]

Compulsory Volunteering as Chore

Compulsory volunteering can change how individuals perceive and experience volunteer service. When participation is mandatory, individuals may view the

activity as an obligation rather than a freely chosen opportunity to contribute. [4] This perception is particularly relevant to mandatory volunteer programs in schools or workplaces. Compulsory volunteering may create resentment, reduce feelings of autonomy, and weaken the sense of genuine engagement that is normally associated with freely chosen volunteer participation. [4]

The volunteers I have observed who choose to participate independently, through organizations, or on committees demonstrate genuine commitment because their participation is voluntary, not mandated. This authenticity contributes to the powerful sense of a “community of caring” that I have observed through voluntary community participation.

V. WHY PEOPLE PREFER NOT TO VOLUNTEER & VIEW IT AS PUNISHMENT

Primary Barriers to Volunteering

Research identifies multiple barriers preventing people from volunteering, with time and competing commitments representing significant factors. [2] Not wanting an ongoing commitment represents a major barrier at 33 percent. Doing other things with spare time accounts for 32 percent. Work or study commitments create conflicts at 23 percent. Having less time than they would like to commit is reported by 21 percent. [2] No matching opportunities that fit an individual’s interests, skills, or experience is reported by 14 percent. Programs not being flexible enough is reported by 14 percent. Concerns about being out of pocket for expenses, such as transportation costs, are also reported by 14 percent, compared with 5 percent in 2019. [2]

Specific Reasons People Avoid Volunteering

Busy work and life schedules get in the way for many potential volunteers. Time constraints are consistently identified as a significant barrier. Many people may have difficulty volunteering because of job obligations or family responsibilities. Financial constraints can also limit the ability to participate in unpaid roles, especially when participation involves additional expenses. Costs such as transportation and other out-of-pocket expenses can create barriers to participation. [2] People may also lack information about available volunteer opportunities or may not be directly invited to participate. Research suggests that being asked to volunteer can play an important role in participation. [3] People may worry that they lack the necessary skills, experience, or confidence to volunteer. [2] Volunteer schedules and commitments may also be too inflexible for some potential participants, particularly those who do not want to make an ongoing commitment. [2] Previous experiences with poorly organized or unwelcoming volunteer environments may further discourage participation. [2]



My experience suggests that events like walks, runs, cleanup days, and fundraisers can help address many of these barriers because they are often single-day events that do not require ongoing commitment, they are accessible to people with varying skill levels, and they provide immediate, visible results that demonstrate value.

Why Volunteering Is Viewed as Punishment or Chore

Several factors may contribute to the perception that volunteering is punishment rather than meaningful service. When volunteering is mandatory through school requirements or other compulsory programs, participants may perceive it as an obligation rather than a freely chosen form of service. Compulsory volunteering may create resentment or reduce the sense of autonomy associated with genuine volunteer participation. [4] When tasks feel trivial or lack a clear purpose, participants may also have difficulty seeing the value of their contribution. Disorganized volunteer programs and inadequate support can create negative experiences, while a lack of transportation assistance, financial support, or scheduling flexibility may discourage continued participation. [2] Unwelcoming groups may also discourage future participation. [2] Involvement may require more time than individuals can commit or involve expenses they cannot reasonably afford. [2] Negative stereotypes about volunteer competence may also affect how volunteers are perceived and treated by service professionals, with potential consequences for volunteer satisfaction and retention. [7]

The community of caring I have witnessed through volunteer events demonstrates the opposite: in my experience, when volunteering is meaningful, well-organized, flexible, and welcoming, people are more willing to participate and may be more likely to remain engaged.

Solutions & Recommendations

Overcoming Barriers

To increase volunteer participation, organizations should create flexible, well-supported, meaningful opportunities that address identified barriers. Organizations should prioritize flexible, short-term volunteer opportunities and offer virtual volunteering options when appropriate. [2] Flexible opportunities can help address concerns about ongoing commitments, competing demands on participants' time, and scheduling limitations. [2] Reimburse transportation costs when possible to reduce financial barriers associated with participation. [2] Provide thorough training before volunteering begins and create mentorship programs pairing new and experienced volunteers when appropriate to the volunteer role. [5] Offer skill-building volunteer opportunities and clearly communicate the skills and experience required for each role so potential volunteers can identify opportunities appropriate to their abilities. Organizations should also use proactive recruitment and community outreach to encourage participation among individuals who may be

willing to volunteer but have not been directly invited to become involved. [3] Use social media and community networks for outreach and partner with schools, workplaces, and community organizations to increase awareness of available volunteer opportunities.

The success of walks, runs, cleanup events, and fundraisers I have observed suggests that single-day, accessible, visible-impact events can help address many barriers. These events may require little or no ongoing commitment, can accommodate people of varying skill levels, and provide immediate results that participants can see and feel.

Improving Volunteer Programs

Organizations should ensure that volunteer roles are purposeful and meaningful and offer flexible scheduling when possible to reduce concerns about long-term commitments. [2] Provide training, mentorship, and ongoing support while creating welcoming spaces for diverse participants. Appropriate training is particularly important when volunteers work with vulnerable populations or perform activities where inadequate preparation could result in unintended harm. [5] Train professionals to work effectively with volunteers and address stereotypes that may influence perceptions of volunteer competence. [7] Whenever possible, volunteer participation should remain voluntary rather than compulsory so that individuals retain a sense of choice and autonomy in their participation. [4]

Voluntourism and international volunteer programs should prioritize locally identified needs, respect local knowledge and expertise, and avoid narratives that portray outside volunteers as rescuers of dependent communities. [6] Organizations should work collaboratively with local communities and professionals so that volunteer activities support, rather than replace or undermine, locally led efforts. [6]

Supporting the diverse types of volunteers I have observed, including those who join organizations, those who serve on committees, and those who act independently, may contribute to a robust ecosystem of care that supports a broad range of community needs.

VI. CONCLUSION

Volunteering presents a complex landscape with profound benefits alongside significant challenges. The positive effects are well-documented, as volunteering is associated with reduced mortality, increased functioning, and strengthened social connections. [1] Volunteering can also provide important benefits to organizations and communities by supplementing services, expanding community engagement, and strengthening social connections. [8] However, negative effects can occur, including harm from untrained or undertrained volunteers, [5] potential reinforcement of harmful stereotypes and



unequal relationships through voluntourism, [6] and negative professional stereotypes concerning volunteer competence. [7] Significant barriers to participation include concerns about ongoing commitments, competing demands on personal time, inflexible schedules, financial costs, lack of confidence in one's skills, and negative volunteer experiences. [2] A lack of direct invitation or awareness of opportunities may also discourage participation. [3] The perception that volunteering is a punishment or chore may also be influenced by compulsory participation, lack of meaningful engagement, poor program organization, financial burdens, and negative experiences. [2][4] The solution lies not in increased pressure, but in more adaptive and inclusive program design and flexible ways to help that fit modern life. By understanding both the benefits and barriers, organizations can create volunteer programs that maximize positive impact while minimizing harm and exclusion.

A decade of practice-based observation has taught me that one of the most significant measures of volunteering's value is the "community of caring" it can create. When people participate in walks, runs, cleanup events, and fundraisers, they send a powerful message: these activities can reinforce shared responsibility and social connection within communities while demonstrating that community members are willing to support one another. The diversity of volunteers who join organizations, those who serve on committees, and those who act independently may contribute to a resilient ecosystem of care that addresses a broad range of community needs. From my practice-based perspective, this "community of caring" represents one of volunteering's most meaningful and lasting impacts, influencing not only what individuals do for their communities, but also how community members understand their responsibilities to one another.

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