



## RESEARCH BRIEF

# LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF FOSTER GRANDPARENT AND SENIOR COMPANION PROGRAMS: SERVICE DELIVERY IMPLICATIONS AND HEALTH BENEFITS TO THE VOLUNTEERS



## INTRODUCTION

As the federal agency for volunteering and service, the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) is one of the nation's largest grant makers for service and volunteering, and plays a critical role in strengthening America's nonprofit sector by addressing social and economic challenges through service. Senior Corps, one of the agency's signature programs, provides national service opportunities for Americans aged 55 and over, leveraging their skills and experience while addressing some of the nation's most pressing challenges.

Senior Corps volunteers in the Foster Grandparents Program (FGP) serve as one-on-one tutors, mentors, role models, and friends to young people with exceptional needs, while Senior Companion Program (SCP) volunteers help elderly, homebound seniors and other adults maintain independence and remain in their own homes, often avoiding costly institutional care. One key difference between Senior Corps and other volunteering opportunities is a small hourly stipend for income-eligible volunteers to help remove the barriers to volunteering and ensure participants do not incur additional costs while serving.

Senior Corps conducted a longitudinal evaluation of FGP and SCP to build an evidence base of these programs' effectiveness, as well as to assess next steps in strengthening and expanding the national service programs in support of overall adult health and well-being.

### Study Objectives

**Objective 1:** Describe the demographic profile, knowledge of national service, and motivation for volunteering among first-time FGP and SCP volunteers.

**Objective 2:** Assess retention, satisfaction, and engagement with FGP and SCP.

**Objective 3:** Examine how participation in national service contributed to changes in self-rated health and well-being.

## METHODOLOGY

The study recruited 1,200 first-time volunteers with FGP or SCP between July and November 2015 to collect data on social, demographic, and economic backgrounds; interest and motivation for volunteering; experience with the program's training and support; and measures of health and well-being. The survey instrument included questions about the volunteer profile (objective 1), retention, satisfaction and engagement with the program (objective 2), and self-assessment of health and well-being (objective 3). The five health and well-being measures of self-rated health, life satisfaction, social isolation and loneliness, symptoms of depression, and self-efficacy were derived from the Health and Retirement Study (HRS), a longitudinal survey administered by the University of Michigan to a nationally representative sample every two years.

Participants completed a baseline survey prior to the start of their service and two follow-up surveys during a two-year period. The survey maintained a response rate greater than 80 percent at each phase of the study. The analysis sample for the final report consists of the 841 volunteers who completed the three surveys.

The full sample was used to examine each of the three objectives, and the analysis compared outcomes for several subgroups. For each objective, the analysis specifically compared FGP and SCP volunteers. The second objective also compared differences between those who remained in service (stayers) and those who left their program (leavers) during the study period. The third objective also compared FGP/SCP volunteers to similar adult volunteers and non-volunteers in the general population from the HRS survey, generated using the Propensity Score Matching technique to strengthen the comparability between the groups.

Study objective/comparison group	FGP	SCP	Stayers	Leavers	HRS Volunteers	HRS Non-volunteers
Volunteer profile	•	•				
Retention, satisfaction, engagement	•	•	•	•		
Health and well-being			•	•	•	•

## KEY FINDINGS

### Objective 1: Portrait of first-time volunteers

- First-time FGP and SCP volunteers were primarily female (91 percent) and racially and ethnically diverse (47 percent white, 45 percent black and 10 percent Hispanic).
- Roughly 60 percent of the volunteers completed post-secondary education (associates degree or higher). About half (49 percent) of the volunteers were older than 65 years and a quarter of the volunteers were married.
- Most (80 percent) reported total annual household income of less than \$20,000. Forty-three percent were fully retired but more than half of these retirees remained active in the labor force, either in search of or currently working.
- One-third (34 percent) reported a disability such as severe vision or hearing impairment or a condition that limits basic physical activities.

- The volunteers' expectations were not solely altruistic (e.g., a desire to better their community, to help others). They sought to learn new skills, gain more experience, keep busy, and achieve a sense of accomplishment. For some, the modest stipend was also an important factor: 31 percent had an underlying financial reason for volunteering.

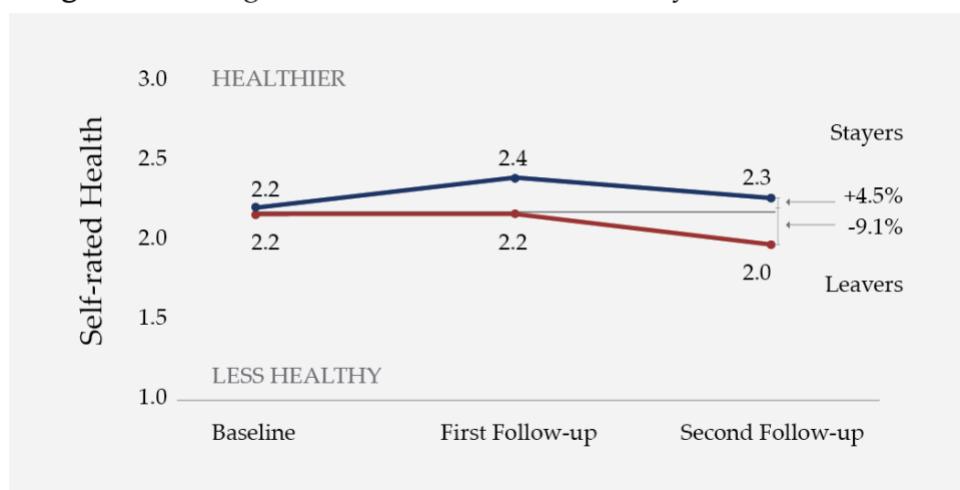
### **Objective 2: Retention, satisfaction, and engagement**

- Seventy-eight percent of FGP/SCP volunteers stayed through the first year.
- FGP/SCP volunteers who persisted in service were among the most vulnerable in terms of risk factors associated with poorer health outcomes. The stayers were more likely to have a disability that could limit employment and a lower education level.
- Overall satisfaction and perception of the volunteer experience (e.g., feeling that their assignment was a match for their skills and the assignment was interesting) were high:
  - Satisfaction was higher among stayers compared to leavers, with 94 percent of stayers and 74 percent of leavers being "completely/very satisfied."
  - Leavers continued to act as ambassadors for their program, with 85 percent reporting they were "extremely/very likely" to recommend FGP/SCP to a friend.
- Volunteers who left did so for myriad reasons: personal health, need to help family and friends, lack of flexibility to manage time, and lack of satisfaction because their expectations and motives for volunteering were not met.
- Stayers were highly engaged, contributing more than 900 hours of service during the year. Two-thirds (64 percent) reported five to six hours per day of service in the month.

### **Objective 3: Health and well-being**

- Overall, volunteers' perceptions of their health and well-being improved among stayers, while leavers perceived a decline (Figure 1). A higher proportion of stayers reported improved self-rated health, a decrease in perception of social isolation/loneliness, and fewer symptoms of depression in their first two years of service.
- FGP/SCP stayers reported significant improvement in how they perceived their health compared to other similar adult non-volunteers in the general population (Figure 2). At baseline, the difference in average self-rated health between FGP/SCP stayers and HRS non-volunteers was 11 percent, which increased to 22 percent at second follow-up. The self-rated health measures were similar between FGP/SCP stayers and HRS volunteers.

**Figure 1 Average Self-rated Health Score, Stayers and Leavers**



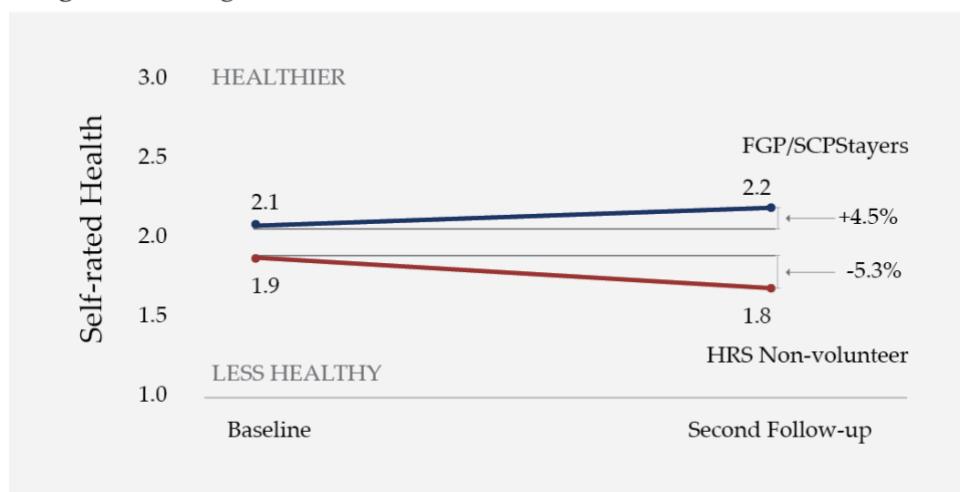
- The size of the difference in perception of health, life satisfaction, social isolation/loneliness, and symptoms of depression between stayers and leavers – and between stayers and other volunteers and non-volunteers – is similar.
- FGP stayers were more likely than SCP stayers to report improvement in self-rated health. But SCP stayers reported higher life satisfaction and lower social isolation/loneliness scores than FGP stayers.
- Number of hours served was not a significant contributor to health outcomes, though there was a positive association between the hours served and self-rated health.
- The volunteers motivated by personal growth (e.g., to learn, get more experience); had self-oriented goals (e.g., keep busy, feel better, have a sense of accomplishment); and were financially motivated, had higher likelihood of improvement in self-rated health.

## IMPLICATIONS

Through Senior Corps, CNCS is providing opportunities to older adults with low-incomes who may otherwise not have the opportunity to serve and improve their community as well as improve their own health. Previous research correlated service activities, service hours, and motivation with positive health benefits. This study demonstrated a causal link between Senior Corps service and self-perception of physical health and well-being. Additional areas for research can guide future policy directions and strengthen management practices.

- Research efforts could examine whether volunteering with national service leads to improved physical health through more objective measures of health such as longevity and biometric screening and objective measures of health.
- Future research could examine the additional characteristics of volunteering that promote mental and physical health.
- Future studies could examine policies and practices that contribute retention including varying minimum hourly requirements and schedule flexibility.

**Figure 2 Average Self-rated Health, FGP/SCP and HRS Non-volunteers**



Full report and methodology: [seniorcorps.gov/healthystay](http://seniorcorps.gov/healthystay)  
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The mission of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) is to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering.