

Americans Serving Their Communities Gain Well-Being Edge

Community volunteers are less likely to report feeling daily stress and worry

by Lindsey Sharpe



WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Americans who actively work to better their communities have higher overall well-being than those who do not. U.S. adults who agree that they have received recognition for helping to improve their communities in the last year have an average Well-Being Index score of 70.0, while those who disagree have an average of 58.5. Importantly, this relationship between well-being and receiving recognition for community involvement persists even after controlling for the effects of age and income -- two factors that are related to higher community well-being.

Americans' Well-Being Index Average Scores, by Community Involvement

	Have received community service recognition	Have not received community service recognition
Well-Being Index score	70.0	58.5
Score by age group:		
18 to 29	70.3	58.4
30 to 45	68.8	57.2
46 to 64	68.6	56.8
65+	73.0	62.9
Score by annual household income:		
Less than \$36,000	67.2	52.4
\$36,000 to less than \$90,000	69.9	58.7
\$90,000 or more	71.3	62.6

Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index

Jan. 2-July 30, 2014

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While wealthier Americans typically have higher well-being than their lower-income counterparts, lower-income Americans who have received recognition for community work have a higher average index score than even the highest-income earners who have not received community recognition, at 67.2 vs. 62.6, respectively. Similarly, older Americans typically have higher well-being than those who are younger. But younger adults who have received recognition for community involvement have higher well-being than older Americans who have not received recognition.

Although the data indicate a link exists between community involvement and high well-being, the direction of the relationship is not clear. It is possible that those who already have higher well-being might be more likely to volunteer in their communities.

These data are based on more than 100,000 interviews with U.S. adults from Jan. 2 to July 30, 2014, as part of the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index. Gallup asks Americans to rate their level of agreement with the following statement using a five-point scale, where "5" means strongly agree and "1" means strongly disagree: "In the last 12 months, you have received recognition for helping to improve the city or area where you live."

Overall, 19% of U.S. adults report receiving recognition for their community involvement, answering with a 4 or a 5, while two-thirds of U.S. adults disagree that they have received recognition by answering with a 1 or a 2.

Active Community Participation Inoculates Against Stress and Worry

U.S. adults who say they have received recognition for work in their communities in the past year are also less likely to say they experienced stress or worry the day before being interviewed.

Overall, 40% of American adults report feeling stressed "yesterday." However, the rate drops to 34% among those who say they have received recognition for community involvement, and rises to 42% among those who say they have not received such recognition. Similarly, a quarter of adults who say they have received recognition report feeling worry on any given day, compared with 32% of those who indicate they have not received recognition.

Americans' Daily Emotional Health, by Community Involvement

Did you experience the following feelings during a lot of the day yesterday? How about [worry/stress]?

	Have received community service recognition	Have not received community service recognition	Difference (pct. pts.)
Experienced worry	25%	32%	-7
Experienced stress	34%	42%	-8

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The same patterns hold true across age and income groups. At each age or income level, those who agree that they have received recognition for community work consistently report less daily stress and worry than those who do not agree.

Implications

These findings, in addition to [previous Gallup research](#), suggest that community involvement may help improve well-being and may protect individuals from daily stress and worry. However, the causal relationship remains unknown. It is possible that those who already have higher well-being and less stress -- possibly indicating they have more free time to be involved in community activities -- are simply more likely to volunteer in their communities.

Still, working to better the community may help bolster key areas of well-being. Volunteering to improve a community can foster a sense of purpose and meaning, help volunteers build social relationships and connections, increase physical activity, and provide a fresh perspective on life. Looking beyond the day-to-day struggles of one's own life and focusing externally may help decrease stress, worry, and other negative emotions.

Given that two-thirds of U.S. adults say they have not been recognized for improving their

communities in the past 12 months, there are a considerable number of Americans who could still benefit from volunteering. Local governments should consider promoting existing community service opportunities and causes within their communities. Doing so clearly benefits the community directly through the services provided, and also may boost volunteers' well-being. Similarly, business leaders could help their employees' well-being by organizing workforce community service efforts and encouraging and recognizing participation.

Survey Methods

Results are based on telephone interviews conducted as part of the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index survey Jan. 2-July 30, 2014, with a random sample of 103,301 adults, aged 18 and older, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia.

For results based on the total sample of national adults, the margin of sampling error is ± 1 percentage point at the 95% confidence level.

Interviews are conducted with respondents on landline telephones and cellular phones, with interviews conducted in Spanish for respondents who are primarily Spanish-speaking. Each sample of national adults includes a minimum quota of 50% cellphone respondents and 50% landline respondents, with additional minimum quotas by time zone within region. Landline and cellular telephone numbers are selected using random-digit-dial methods. Landline respondents are chosen at random within each household on the basis of which member had the most recent birthday.

Samples are weighted to correct for unequal selection probability, nonresponse, and double coverage of landline and cell users in the two sampling frames. They are also weighted to match the national demographics of gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education, region, population density, and phone status (cellphone only/landline only/both, and cellphone mostly). Demographic weighting targets are based on the most recent Current Population Survey figures for the aged 18 and older U.S. population. Phone status targets are based on the most recent National Health Interview Survey. Population density targets are based on the most recent U.S. census. All reported margins of sampling error include the computed design effects for weighting.

In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

For more details on Gallup's polling methodology, visit www.gallup.com.

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