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Article

# Foster Grandparent Programs Impact on the Quality-of-Life of Older Adult Volunteers

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**Abstract:** Volunteering among older adults in the United States is rising, with rates up by 65% since 1974. With this tremendous growth in volunteering among seniors, examining how it affects them is essential. One such volunteering program we look at in this research is the Foster Grandparents Program (FGP) of the High Country, which allows older adults to volunteer at local schools to help in-need children. Previous research has shown how volunteering as an older adult positively impacts people's quality of life. This paper will explore the quality-of-life changes for the FGP older adult volunteers, explicitly comparing the quality-of-life changes with demographics and program satisfaction. This study looked at 93 participants of the FGP and their survey responses. We used cross-tabulation and correlation to look for relationships between demographics, satisfaction with volunteer experience, and overall changes in the quality-of-life of volunteers. Age, gender, and years of service were not good predictors of quality-of-life changes. On the other hand, overall satisfaction with the program proved to be the best predictor for change in quality of life. When satisfaction with positive program experiences is high, volunteers are more likely to have less symptoms of depression, state they have a greater sense of belonging to a community and were able to build a positive identity for themselves, all of which impacted their overall quality-of-life.

**Keywords:** quality of life (QoL); community participation; volunteering; older adults; United States; foster grandparent program

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## 1. Introduction

Last year the Senior Corps, an organization working with seniors to help them find ways of volunteering, had over 200,000 senior volunteers across the nation [1]. Since 1974 volunteer rates among seniors, adults 55 and older, has gone up by 65% and these volunteers tend to commit twice the volunteer hours compared to younger volunteers [2]. For decades now, studies have shown that volunteering has a positive impact on older adult's sense of well-being, quality of life and physical health [3–5]. It is, therefore, beneficial to provide supportive opportunities to older adults to volunteer, as people are living longer and healthier lives. Volunteering has a positive impact for the socialization and health of seniors. Volunteering has also been found to increase self-esteem, improve volunteers' satisfaction in life, thus also impacting their sense of well-being [6]. Countless studies have shown the impact of volunteering on the older adult population, but there are still more questions to ask.

The Foster Grandparents Program (FGP) is one of the programs ran by the Appalachian Senior Programs. The FGP allows older adults to provide support services to youth who have special emotional, social, or educational needs. Older adult volunteers in these programs devote 20 to 40 hours of their week to help these kids. The Appalachian Senior Programs is federally funded by the Senior Corps program and allows older adults within the High Country consisting of Allegheny, Ashe, Avery, Watauga and Wilkes counties of North Carolina the opportunity to volunteer time to help in their community. This community-based program impacts about 100 older adult volunteers and helps about 428 children [7]. Volunteering through this program is important as it better the lives of the volunteers and the "at-risk" children they assist.

The benefits are reciprocal to both the volunteers and the children that they assist in the K-12 school system. FGP engages people 55 and can help them stay active and enrich their lives. Volunteers receive benefits such as a tax-exempt hourly stipend, mileage reimbursements, and paid vacation and sick leave. They also receive accident and personal liability insurance. The FGP also provides one-on-one support to children with special needs, which can help improve their academic, social, or emotional development. Volunteers can help children learn to read, tutor them, mentor teenagers, care for premature infants or children with disabilities, and help children who have been abused or neglected.

According to researchers, volunteering bridges the gap between working and retirement, applying activity theory to explain the benefits of volunteering [8,9]. Also, by having new motivations for seniors, they can enhance their self-identity. Moving into the role of “senior volunteer” or “foster grandparent” [10]. Volunteering has also been shown to have a positive psychosocial impact on one’s sense of well-being, happiness in life, and even their health [11]. Finally, volunteering has been shown to have many positive effects on the elderly, but there are still more questions to be asked.

Using volunteer impact scales, this paper will look at the influence of volunteering for the FGP on senior volunteers. Through this, one will better understand the aspects of volunteering that directly affect senior’s quality of life. This research will also examine the program’s impact on their sense of well-being and the satisfaction of those volunteering. Consequently, this paper will show how the FGP impacts seniors and deserves further support.

The Appalachian Foster Grandparents Program (FGP) has been helping older adults volunteer in the High Country for over 30 years. This program significantly influences the community, but more importantly, it impacts the older volunteers who serve the community. Volunteerism has been a focus in the field of gerontology for years. There have been many findings on the benefits of volunteering on the volunteers themselves. These benefits affect a large portion of older adults and impact seniors’ health and well-being. These results have been attributed to many sociological theories, including activity, self-determination, and socioemotional selectivity theories. In recent years, volunteerism has seen many changes in who volunteers and the number of hours each volunteer gives.

The number of seniors currently active in volunteer programs has been the focus of much research. Trends show that those who have demonstrated a practice of volunteering throughout their life do not slow down in older age as paid work declines [12]. This trend continues in new volunteers, rating volunteer compensation as a low factor in joining [13]. While younger adult volunteer participation is decreasing, the opposite is happening with older adults. Volunteering in older adults is up 64% from 1976 with 23.5% of those older than 65 volunteering [8,14]. With the baby boomer generation retiring, this is expanding the volunteer pool, and many believe they will reinvent volunteering as organizations work with this new, larger, diverse group [15]. Within the baby boomer generation there is not one age group that can be predicted to volunteer more than another [16,17]. While there are still more younger people volunteering overall, seniors tend to volunteer more hours and stay with the organization longer than younger adults [8]. Older adults are also more likely to stop volunteering in later life than to start, with those who put in more hours and have been with the organization longer being more likely to stay [18,19]. While these trends paint a clear picture of how volunteering has changed through volunteer participation, there is other research on why these may be the trends.

### *Theories Related to Volunteerism*

Studies have shown that volunteering in older age is attributed to a more satisfying retirement and better health outcomes. Most of the research in this area has been credited to activity theory. Activity theory states that the more active a senior is, the more satisfaction they have in life, and this positively increases their self-image [8,9]. For those just retiring, keeping up with activity is a way of aiding the adjustment from working to retirement [8,20,21]. Additionally, working and volunteering have shown positive results in the prevention of mental decline in older adults [22–24]. In senior surveys, when asked about their state of mind and regard for life, those who volunteered or had a

strong organizational tie were more likely to report less depression and felt they had improvement in quality of life [24–26]. Therefore, the more invested seniors are in their volunteer programs, the more likely they are to age better, leading to better health benefits and less risk of mortality. Furthermore, studies show there is an increased risk of mortality in seniors who feel of little use to others [24]. In sum, volunteering is shown to be a good way of allowing seniors to be active and feel useful.

The access to new activities and challenges in volunteering can bring a sense of expansion and growth mentally. This is also known as self-determination theory. Self-determination theory states that humans tend to do things that will help them grow and challenge them as a person [27]. Most of these studies look at how volunteering affects people's feelings of values being met and connectedness with their environment. Research on this theory of volunteering is limited. However, there is important research showing that people who feel challenged to volunteer feel internal satisfaction [27,28]. These internal factors also help determine whether a senior will stay with a certain program or if they will move on to something else that satisfies their growth in other ways. A recent study found that the self-determination motivations behind volunteering were values, understanding, and social justice [28]. While self-determination theory may be a large part of the motivation behind volunteering, it is not the only theory.

Alongside the above-mentioned activity and self-determination theory, many researchers have looked at socioemotional selectivity theory (SST) as an explanation for why people volunteer. Socioemotional selectivity theory states that as individuals age, they are driven towards things that bring about personal growth and enjoyment. Consequently, they choose their activities based on their emotional response. When perceived contributions are high in volunteering, it fills a need of altruism and is associated with better mental health [14]. This value for altruism also contributes to the volunteer's sense of satisfaction in life. This is especially true for people of lower socioeconomic status who have been shown to benefit more from volunteering than those of higher status [14,29]. When looking at trends between younger and older volunteers, it was found that while both groups volunteer according to their values of altruism, younger people value their careers more than their value for altruism [20,30]. Some studies show that some elderly people leave volunteering due to other activities having a higher priority [14,30]. However, Wei et al. disagree with the previous studies, claiming seniors don't leave due to higher priorities but mainly due to deteriorating health (2012). However, it can be argued that connectedness created by the socialization involved in volunteering helps satisfy a social need, which has been attributed to better health outcomes for older adults [31]. Though there are varying views on socioemotional selectivity theory when it comes to seniors volunteering, there is more research to support positive mental and physical well-being for seniors.

Ultimately, most studies have shown volunteering positively affects elders in both physical and mental health outcomes. They have also demonstrated there is motivation for elders to participate in formal volunteering, leading to a better quality of life for both volunteers and those who receive the services. This research will fill in gaps by looking at the FGP in the High Country and examining quality of life changes. This research continues the investigation of previous literature in explaining the motivations behind volunteering and how volunteering can affect seniors. The aim of this study is to determine how volunteering in the Foster Grandparents Program impacts volunteers' quality of life and their satisfaction with the program.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This research will look at quantitative data in the form of surveys in order to see how volunteering has affected the lives of those who volunteer. Through this data, this research studies the relationship between demographics and the reported self-rating of volunteers' quality of life changes, and the recorded satisfaction with the organization's effects on their quality of life changes. The survey was intended to get a clear picture of how volunteers view their participation in the program, changes in their personal lives due to participation, and how they feel about volunteering. These indicators have been coded and sorted into quantitative data to get an overview of the impact

on the senior volunteers' lives. The surveys were designed with a Likert Scale, allowing for simple analysis of the impact of volunteering and distinguishing outside factors from the effects of volunteering through the organization. The drawback to this is that answers are limited to a certain scale, so the individual experience can be overlooked or misrepresented.

### *Sample*

This research uses secondary data collected by the FGP. The data collected from these surveys were originally used for a governmental program grant for FGP. Surveys were given to the volunteers of the FGP organization to gain a better understanding on the effects of the organization on the volunteers. The sample consisted of senior volunteers participating in the FGP who were at least 55 years or older. Ninety-three volunteers who were actively participating in the FGP were enrolled in the study. The surveys use a five-point Likert scale rating from "it's much worse" to "it's much better," asking them to self-rate their lives since they began participating in the program. Also, using the five-point Likert Scale, the survey asks participants how much they would associate this change with their time participating in the volunteering organization, ranging from "not responsible at all" to "fully responsible." The survey also focuses on volunteers' satisfaction with various areas of the program with responses from totally dissatisfied to totally satisfied. This research works within the framework of these FGP surveys not given by us, and thus we had no control over the demographics collected or questions asked.

### *Data Analysis*

For data analysis, this research will focus on using statistical analysis through SPSS. We analyzed these surveys by looking at how quality of life for the seniors correlates to demographics and satisfaction with experience. Through the analysis of this data, we will gain clearer insights as to how different aspects of an FGP volunteer's life is affected through their work as a volunteer. All examinations were run at a significance level of  $p < .05$  due to the size of the sample. Data analysis related to the demographic variables were age, gender, and years of service in the FGP. To examine the demographics, we first separated the age groups into 4 different categories: pre-old (55-64 years old), young-old (65-74 years old), middle-old (75-84 years old) and old-old (85+ years old) to get a better understanding of how volunteering effects these different stages of aging. Satisfaction with the program was measured by the FGP assignment, FGP staff, volunteer site supervisors, training, and overall satisfaction. Then using cross-tabulation and chi-square we looked at how answers to demographics corresponded with answers to quality-of-life changes. Next, in order to look at how satisfaction with the program changes quality of life measures, we ran a Pearson correlation to understand the relationship between these two variables. Finally, we looked at the frequency distribution of answers to the question "in general, to what extent do you credit any change to your quality of life to your participation in this program." This will inform us as to how much the seniors rate their changes in their quality of life to volunteering in the program.

### **3. Results**

Study data was separated into three categories - demographics, quality of life, and satisfaction with the program. This research uses cross-tabulation and correlation to look at the relationship between these three categories. It will focus on how demographics and satisfaction with the program relate to the changes in quality of life for the volunteers. The three different categories are shown below.

**Table 1.** Data Categories.

Demographics	Quality of Life	Satisfaction with volunteer experience
1. Age categories 2. Gender 3. Years of service	1. Feeling of Accomplishment 2. Feeling of purpose in life 3. Physical Health 4. Sense of well being 5. Pleasure in performing everyday activities 6. Sense of self-esteem 7. Feeling you can make a positive difference in another's life 8. Feeling that someone is looking out for your welfare 9. Looking forward to each new day 10. Ability to make ends meet 11. Overall quality of life	1. FGP Assignment 2. FGP Staff 3. Volunteer site supervisors 4. Training received 5. Overall experience

### 3.1. Demographics and Quality of Life

The demographic data categories used were age, gender, and years of service and were tabulated by frequencies. Quality of life was measured by looking at the following survey self-reported frequencies for the answer yes to the questions above in the column "Quality of Life." When using cross-tabulation to determine the relationship between demographics and quality of life, it was shown that neither age categories nor years of service were significant with any quality of life factors. The survey question "feeling someone is looking out for your welfare" revealed a significant relationship in regards to gender. The test showed a chi-square of .002. The relationship between gender and "feeling someone is looking out for your welfare" was showed to be significant at  $p < .01$ . Although, this may be unreliable as the sample size for males was only 3 out of 93 volunteers.

**Table 2.** Gender rate of change in your feeling someone is looking out for your welfare.

	Somewhat worse	Neither worse nor better	Somewhat better	It's a lot better	total
Female	1	13	45	30	89
Male	1	0	1	1	3
Total	2	13	46	31	92

Satisfaction with volunteer experience was tested with the quality of life changes using a Pearson's Correlations test. Significance for this test was ran at a significance of  $p < .05$ .

### 3.2. Satisfaction with FGP Assignment

The test indicated that satisfaction with one's assignment was correlated with many changes in quality of life. Satisfaction in assignment revealed to correlate a weak positive relationship with "feeling you have purpose in life" and "physical health" at a significance of  $p < .05$ , and "feeling you can make a positive difference in another's life" and "the amount of pleasure you gain from daily activities" at a significance of  $p < .01$ . It was also shown to have a medium positive relationship with "sense of well-being" and "overall quality of life changes" at a significance of  $p < .01$ .

### 3.3. Satisfaction with FGP Staff

The second correlation ran was between FGP staff and quality of life changes which showed that satisfaction with the staff was correlated with 10 of the quality-of-life factors. It showed to correlate at a weak positive relationship with "sense of accomplishment" "feeling you have purpose in life," "feeling you can make a positive difference in another's life," "sense of well-being," "physical health" and "overall quality of life" changes at a significance of  $p < .05$ , and "your feeling someone is looking out for your welfare" and "your sense of self-esteem" at a significance of  $p < .01$ . It was also shown to have a medium positive relationship with "looking forward to each new day" and "the amount of pleasure gained from daily activities" at a significance of  $p < .01$ .

### 3.4. Satisfaction with Volunteer Site Supervisors

Satisfaction with volunteer site supervisors only revealed four correlations with the quality of life changes in the volunteers. It showed that satisfaction with volunteer supervisors had a weak positive relationship with "feeling you can make a difference in another's life," "feeling someone is looking out for your welfare" and "your physical health" at a significance of  $p < .05$ , and sense of well-being at a significance of  $p < .01$ . Finally, satisfaction with volunteer site supervisors did not to correlate with "overall changes in quality of life" running a significance level of  $p = 0.128$ .

### 3.5. Satisfaction with Volunteer Site Supervisors

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### 3.6. Satisfaction with Training

When training received tested through a Pearson's Correlation with changes in quality of life changes. it showed significant correlation with eight variables. It showed a weak positive relationship with "sense of well-being," "your feeling someone is looking out for your welfare," "your physical health" and "overall quality of life changes" at a significance of  $p < .05$ . and "your feeling you can make a difference in another's life" at a significance of  $p < .01$ . It was also shown to have a medium positive relationship with the "amount of pleasure you gain from daily activities," "sense of self-esteem" and "ability to make end meet" at a significance of  $p < .01$

### 3.7. Satisfaction with Overall Experience

The final Pearson correlation was between satisfaction in overall experience and quality of life changes, which showed a correlation with 10 different variables. It was shown to have a weak positive relationship with volunteers' "sense of accomplishment" at a significance of  $p < .05$  and "looking forward to each new day" at a significance of  $p < .01$ . It was also shown to have a relationship with "feeling you have purpose in life," "feeling you can make a difference in another's life," "the amount of pleasure gained from daily activities," "sense of self-esteem," "ability to make ends meet," "sense of well-being," "your feeling someone is looking out for your welfare" and "overall quality of life changes" with medium positive relationship at a significance of  $p < .01$ .

### 3.8. FGP Participation and Perceived Change in Quality of Life

Finally, to consider influences on changes in quality of life from outside factors, frequencies were run on the question "in general, to what extent do you credit any change to your quality of your life to your participation in this program." Frequencies showed that 44.1% said that the program was almost fully responsible, while another 40.9% said the program was fully responsible for their

changes in quality of life. These findings reveal that most of the volunteers for the program say it is responsible for the changes in quality of life since they joined the program.

#### 4. Discussion

The results are consistent with the previous literature on activity theory, self-determination theory, and socioemotional selectivity theory. This research demonstrates a correlation with satisfaction in volunteering and volunteers' perception of their changes in quality of life. The volunteer impact scales evaluate this relationship within the Foster Grandparents Program (FGP) of the High Country and examine factors that appear to lead to these changes. The research found a strong relationship between volunteers' experience with the program and an increase in quality of life, while showing that demographics had a weak relationship with quality-of-life changes.

##### 4.1. Demographics and Quality of Life

This research illustrated that demographics did not correlate well with any factors of quality-of-life changes. This is unsurprising as many studies have come to the same conclusion that quality-of-life changes occur at the same rate no matter the demographics of the volunteer [17,32]. This also brings to attention the gender disparities within the FGP where only three volunteers were men out of 93. This could be due to volunteering being strongly associated with altruism, which is more associated with women than men [35]. Another factor could be socioemotional selectivity theory in that women have a higher priority for altruism while men hold higher priorities in other activities, such as careers [20,30]. While years of service did not correlate with any quality-of-life factors, it has been demonstrated that the changes in quality of life can increase the longevity of the volunteers. In future research, more demographics on the volunteer, such as socioeconomic status and level of education, may help gain a better picture of the relationship between demographics of the volunteer and changes in quality of life. Although this research could go further in-depth on demographics, it is vital in demonstrating the impact of volunteer experience satisfaction on older adult volunteers.

##### 4.2. Satisfaction with Assignments

Satisfaction with program assignments illustrates a connection with various quality of life changes. The association between a sense of purpose in life, the amount of pleasure you gain from daily activities, their physical health, and sense of well-being, all show that satisfaction in assignment can be a determinate for better mental health and lower symptoms of depression. When you are satisfied with where you are assigned, this creates less stress which leads to a more positive experience for volunteers [14]. Being able to feel like you can make a positive difference in another's life shows that volunteer assignments can create a feeling of altruism. Satisfaction with volunteer assignments were shown to be highly significant with overall changes in quality of life.

##### 4.3. Satisfaction with FGP Staff

According to the correlation test, satisfaction in FGP staff is directly related to ten of the eleven quality of life factors. Some of the most significant factors are feeling someone is looking out for your welfare, your sense of self-esteem, physical health, feelings of accomplishment and feeling you have purpose in life. When satisfied with FGP staffing, an individual's sense of identity and community increased. When satisfaction with FGP staff is high, it can positively affect how individuals feel about themselves and the work they are doing. The "feeling that someone is looking out for your welfare" shows the volunteers' sense of worth to the staff. This is important as isolation and loneliness are common among seniors and feeling someone cares about them can reduce these actions and feelings. It has been shown organizational support can have a positive impact on socioemotional and health benefits for volunteers [14]. Research correlates isolation and feelings of uselessness to higher rates of depression in seniors and having a community you feel a part of can counteract these emotions [33,34]. The FGP staff provides training to the volunteer seniors once a month teaching different skills, thus giving the seniors a sense of accomplishment and purpose in life. By positively influencing a

volunteer's overall changes in quality of life, this confirms just how important satisfaction with the FGP staff is in influencing the feeling of belonging to the senior volunteer community. This sense of community created by the FGP staff carries over into volunteers training they receive.

#### *4.4. Satisfaction with Training*

Experience with training received again exposes a relationship of satisfaction to sense of belonging. These four-hour sessions are taught by the FGP staff and teach volunteers life skills alongside skills for their assignments. This provides the volunteer a mentor in which to learn from and grow their skills as a volunteer. This is also likely the reason this satisfaction correlated with a volunteer's feeling they can make a positive difference in another's life. These training sessions offer educational information for the volunteers, challenging them and creating growth. According to self-determination theory this, challenge and growth, is likely to retain volunteers. These training session help create a motivation in volunteers of values for volunteering, understanding through education, and social justice through action in the community, all of which are important for the feeling of growth [28]. Other studies have also shown that volunteer training can be a strong factor and can facilitate in maintaining volunteers [14]. When volunteers feel they can succeed, this increases volunteers' sense of self-esteem and allows them to take more enjoyment in their activities, thus showing satisfaction with received training. While the above satisfactions have been shown to have high correlation rates, one of the low-ranking correlations is satisfaction with volunteer site supervisors.

#### *4.5. Satisfaction with Volunteer Site Supervisors*

Satisfaction with volunteer site supervisors was found to correlate with the least amount of quality-of-life changes correlating with only four factors. Many of these factors have been referred to above and conclude that site supervisors may play a role in community, their sense of altruism and mental and physical health of the volunteers. While supervisors play minimum role compared to the FGP staff, the data displays many of the same characteristics when it comes to changes in quality of life. Due to these similarities and only correlating with four factors, this research has concluded that satisfaction with the volunteer site supervisor is not a good indicator for changes in quality of life and does not correlate with overall changes in quality of life for the volunteers.

#### *4.6. Satisfaction with Overall Experience*

The volunteers' overall experience satisfaction was shown to correlate with all quality-of-life factors except for physical health. Overall experience satisfaction of the volunteers showed improvement in depression symptoms, a sense of belonging with the program, their feeling of being supported and that they're given the tools necessary to succeed. Thus, overall satisfaction with volunteer experience was shown to be the best indicator of changes in quality of life. This is supported by research that shows volunteer programs can be changed to maximize the benefits to the volunteers [9]. This suggests satisfaction with the program increases overall changes in quality of life and suggests overall experience is vitally important in predicting outcomes of volunteers.

In conclusion, this paper has substantiated the idea that overall satisfaction with the program influences volunteers' quality of life. Based on the research, satisfaction in volunteers' assignments, FGP staff, and training received proved to decrease symptoms of depression, create a sense of community, and build the identity of the volunteers. This research supports previous studies showing volunteering as having a positive impact on the seniors who volunteer. The study's generalizability is a significant limitation due to the small sample size. Moreover, this research focuses only on one FGP program in the U.S., thus it was a single site of data collection. In addition, this study did not include a control group to compare the pre-post effects of volunteers' experiences. More in-depth research should be conducted as there are limitations to this research due to the survey used and its use of limited demographics. The Foster Grandparents Program of the High Country

has been shown to increase the overall quality of life for seniors through high satisfaction ratings with its volunteers and should be further supported.

**Supplementary Materials:** The following supporting information can be downloaded at the website of this paper posted on Preprints.org, Table S1: Data Codes; Table S2: Gender Rate of change in your feeling someone is looking out for your welfare.; Table S3: Satisfaction with FGP assignment\*quality of life changes, Table S4: Satisfaction with FGP staff\*quality of life changes, Table S5: Satisfaction with volunteer site supervisors\*quality of life changes, Table S6: Satisfaction with training received\*quality of life changes, Table S7: Satisfaction with overall experience\*quality of life changes, Table S8: Quality of life changers to participation in program

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, A. S. and A.D.; methodology, A.D.; software, A.D.; validation, A.S. and A.D.; formal analysis, A.D.; investigation, A.S.; resources, A.S.; data curation, A.S. and A.D.; writing—original draft preparation, A.D.; writing—review and editing, A.S.; visualization, A.S. and A.D.; supervision, A.S.; project administration, A.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [A.S.], upon reasonable request.

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