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Volunteering in Organisations by People in the Second Half of Life during the Covid-19 Pandemic

11

Julia Simonson and Nadiya Kelle

11.1 Key Messages

In the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, the proportion of volunteers remained largely stable compared to pre-pandemic times; the amount of time spent volunteering also remained unchanged. This also applied by gender, age and education—no statistically significant trend differences in volunteering participation or time spent volunteering were found for any of these groups.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, differences in volunteer participation by age, gender and education remained. People between the ages of 76 and 90 continued to have the lowest participation in volunteering. Nevertheless, it should be noted that almost every fifth person in this age group was active as a volunteer. Gender and educational group differences in volunteer participation also persisted during the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic: women were involved in volunteering in lower proportions than men. Highly educated people continued to volunteer at higher rates than people with low and medium educational levels in 2020/21.

The amount of time spent volunteering during the Covid-19 pandemic continued to differ by age and gender. The 66–75 age group participated in the most time-intensive voluntary work. There were also significant differences in the amount of time spent volunteering between women and men in the winter of

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2020/21, with higher time investment by men. Individuals with high educational level did not differ in their time investment from those with low or medium educational levels—as was the case before the Covid-19 pandemic in 2017.

11.2 Introduction

Volunteering is an important form of social participation and is significant for integration into society (Alscher et al. 2021; Roth 2010). Particularly in old age, when the option to participate in society through gainful employment recedes into the background, doing voluntary work offers opportunities for participation that can help people to establish and maintain social contacts and acquire new skills and knowledge (Simonson and Vogel 2020; Vogel and Romeu Gordo 2019). Studies also show that participation in volunteering is positively related to health and life satisfaction (Li and Ferraro 2005; Müller and Tesch-Römer 2017).

Older people today engage in volunteering in significantly larger proportions than members of earlier birth cohorts did when they were at the same age (Burkhardt and Schupp 2019; Şaka 2018). However, participation in volunteering is unevenly distributed—that is, not all population groups are involved in equal proportions. This was already the case before the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, in 2019, older people were still less involved than younger people, and people with a low educational level were less involved than people with a high educational level (Simonson et al. 2021).

To date, there is limited evidence on how access to volunteering changed for individual populations in the second half of life in the Covid-19 pandemic and to what extent the pandemic was linked to increases in inequality in volunteering. It is well known that the Covid-19 pandemic led to far-reaching social changes that also affected organised civil society (Burkhardt and Liebig 2021; Gross et al. 2020). Some associations and organisations faced pandemic-related resignations by members and financial losses; at the same time, their expenses increased, because they had to implement Covid-19-prevention strategies (Tahmaz 2021). Due to the measures to contain the pandemic and especially the social distancing measures during the first and second lockdowns, many people were unable to participate in their voluntary activities as usual. The partial closure of schools and day-care centres also increased the amount of private care required for children and grandchildren (Bünning et al. 2020; Zinn and Bayer 2020), with grandparents still providing reliable care to their grandchildren (see chapter “Grandchild care during the Covid-19 pandemic”). The resulting changes in time availability could presumably also have affected participation in voluntary work. On the other hand,

the Covid-19 pandemic gave rise to new commitments, for example, due to the increased demand for and willingness to provide neighbourly help, such as support for people in quarantine (Bölting et al. 2020; Spear et al. 2020).

The developments outlined above have likely not had the same effect on volunteering for all individuals. With regard to voluntary participation by people of different ages, we might expect older people to have withdrawn more from public life than younger people and thus also from volunteering because Covid-19 was riskier for them (Robert Koch Institute 2021). Furthermore, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, older adults were often portrayed in public discourse as a homogeneous group of people who were frail and helpless and who should adhere to particularly strict measures of social distancing (Ayalon et al. 2020). This discourse may have contributed to a withdrawal from voluntary activities by older people. Yet, empirical evidence shows that older people themselves did not perceive the pandemic as more threatening as well as temporary closures of outpatient care services, which prompted people, especially women, to spend increased time giving care and nursing (Bünning et al. 2020; see also chapter “Covid-19 crisis = care crisis? Changes in care provision and care-givers’ well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic”). This in turn may have had a particularly negative impact on women’s volunteer participation and their time investments in volunteering. Furthermore, the impact of the pandemic differed for people with different educational statuses. People with lower educational levels were more affected by job furlough schemes or job loss during the first wave of the pandemic; they also had fewer opportunities to work from home than people with higher educational levels (Von Gaudecker et al. 2020; Möhring et al. 2020). Additional stresses, such as fear of contracting the virus, worries about their livelihood or job search could have contributed to the fact that people with low educational levels increasingly withdrew from voluntary work or reduced their commitment to it. Furthermore, we can assume that many voluntary activities shifted to the digital space. Overall, there was a widespread shift of social communication to the digital space in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, although internet use is not equally distributed across all population groups—people with low educational level used and continue to use the internet less frequently than people with high educational levels, and older people use it less frequently than younger people (see chapter “Internet use by people in the second half of life during the Covid-19 pandemic: social inequalities persist”). We would expect to find a greater decline in volunteering among groups of people who use the internet less frequently than others, such as people with low educational levels and the elderly, than among those with high internet use, such as the more highly educated and younger people.

In the following, we will trace how participation and time spent in volunteering by people in the second half of life changed between 2017 and 2020/21. In addition, the analyses will show how the development of voluntary participation and time intensity differed between population groups and identify which groups may have reduced their voluntary work more than others—for instance, because they were not able to use digital communication tools. The differentiation criteria used are age, gender and educational status.

Specifically, we will address the following questions:

- 1) To what extent did the proportions of those engaged in volunteering change over time between 2017 and 2020/21? How did the possible changes in volunteering participation differ by population groups (age, gender or educational groups)?
- 2) How did the time intensity of voluntary activities change? How did possible changes in time intensity differ by population groups (age, gender or educational groups)?

The results of this chapter are based on analyses of the 2017 and 2020/21 survey waves of the German Ageing Survey (DEAS).¹ Our analysis of these two survey waves using a trend design allows us to compare the pre-Covid-19 period (2017) and the period during the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in winter 2020/21. People aged between 46 and 90 years with valid information on the practice of voluntary work were included at both survey points. The 2017 sample on which the analysis is based consisted of 6455 people; in 2020/21, the analytical sample consisted of 5352 people. We present weighted percentage values for engagement in voluntary work (voluntary work rate) and weighted arithmetic mean values for the time spent on voluntary work. The reported contents were collected as follows:

Organisation-bound voluntary commitment Those who stated that they were a member of at least one group or organisation and subsequently stated that they held a function or honorary office in that organisation were included in the analyses as organisation-bound volunteers. In 2017, people aged 50 and over were additionally asked whether they participated in groups that were particularly aimed at older people who had retired or were transitioning to retirement.

¹The DEAS paper-pencil-survey conducted in summer 2020 did not collect any information on participation in volunteering. It is therefore not included in the analyses.

Respondents could indicate up to five groups each in the general and retirement-oriented categories. In 2020/21, the survey was slightly adapted and the separate query of retirement-oriented groups was eliminated.

Time spent on organisation-bound volunteering For each volunteering activity indicated, people were asked about the time they spent on it. The information could be given in hours per day, hours per week, hours per month or days per year. This was converted into hours per week and combined for all a person's volunteering activities.² The upper threshold of time spent per week on voluntary work was set at 60 h per week (top coding of higher values).

Age, gender and education Self-reports were used to determine age, gender and education. In some cases, this information was already on record due to the respondent's previous participation in the German Ageing Survey. Four age groups were used to examine the role of age: 46–55-year-olds (2017: n=1020, 2020/21: n=638), 56–65-year-olds (2017: n=1887, 2020/21: n=1579), 66–75-year-olds (2017: n=1886, 2020/21: n=1584) and 76–90-year-olds (2017: n=1662, 2020/21: n=1551). The analyses compared women (2017: n=3203, 2020/21: n=2724) and men (2017: n=3252, 2020/21: n=2628). Education was divided into two groups: individuals with low and medium educational levels³ (2017: n=3597, 2020/21: n=2746) and individuals with high educational levels (2017: n=2828, 2020/21: n=2605).

11.3 Findings

The proportion of volunteers in organisations remained stable overall in the Covid-19 pandemic

At 22.2 per cent, a good fifth of those aged 46 to 90 were engaged in a voluntary activity in an organisation or group in winter 2020/21 (Fig. 11.1). There was no statistically significant change in the overall proportion of 46–90-year-olds engaged in such activities between 2017 and 2020/21; in 2017, it was 22.6 percent.

²For the conversion from daily to weekly hours, a six-day week was assumed. When converting annual to weekly data, it was assumed that people volunteer for an average of five hours per day, spread over 48 weeks per year.

³Low and medium educational level were combined due to small case numbers among those with low educational level.

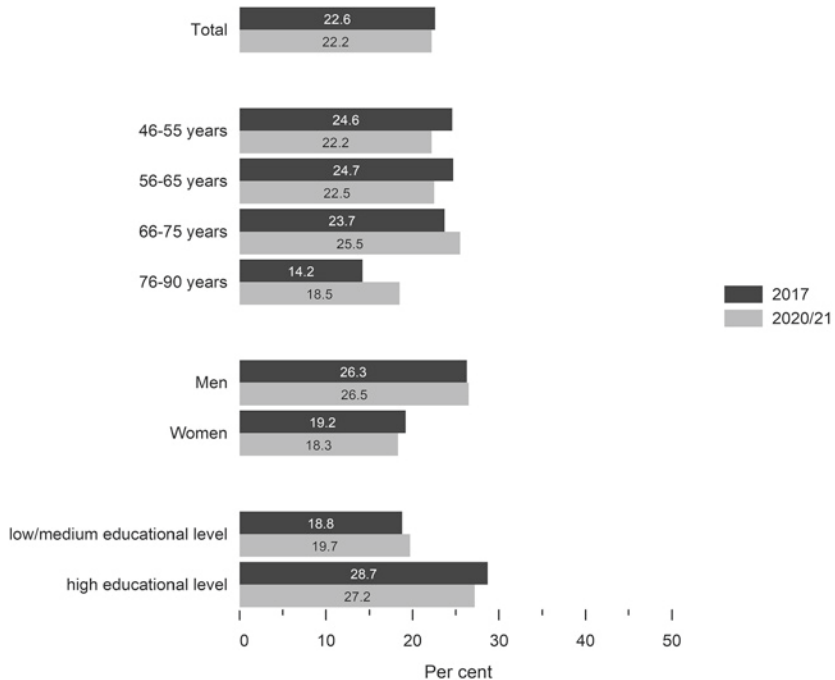


Fig. 11.1 Proportion of volunteers in organisations in 2017 and 2020/21 in total and by age, gender and education (in per cent). *Source* DEAS 2017 ($n=6455$), DEAS 2020/21 ($n=5351-5352$), weighted analyses, rounded estimates. Difference between 2017 and 2020/21 in total and in all groups not statistically significant. Group differences: difference between age group 76–90 years and all other age groups statistically significant in 2017 ($p<0.05$), difference between age group 76–90 years and age group 66–75 years statistically significant in 2020/21 ($p<0.05$). Differences between men and women and between education groups in both waves statistically significant ($p<0.05$)

Even when we differentiated by age group, we found no statistically significant changes over time. Volunteer participation was less common among those aged 76 and older than at younger ages at both points in time, but up to the age of 75, participation rates did not differ significantly between age groups. This finding is in line with results from other studies, which have also found declining participation rate from the middle of the eighth decade of life but not before. (Burkhardt and Schupp 2019; Simonson et al. 2021).

Women are generally less likely to volunteer in organisations than men—and this did not change in the Covid-19 pandemic

Even when we differentiated by gender, we did not find any statistically significant changes in the trend: volunteering rates remained stable for both women and men. The proportion of women who engaged in voluntary work in an organisation or group in the second half of life was clearly and statistically significantly below that of men at both points in time. Contrary to the German Survey on Volunteering (Simonson et al. 2021), we found no convergence or equalisation of the volunteering rates between women and men. This may in part be due to the different age ranges used by the surveys but it may also be because of the underlying definitions of volunteering. While the German Survey on Volunteering also considers activities that are carried out in an informal setting, the German Ageing Survey focuses on formal voluntary work carried out in organisations or groups. Here, women and men seem to face even more unequal access opportunities.

People with low or medium educational levels remained less likely to volunteer in organisations than people with high educational levels during the Covid-19 pandemic

For people with low and medium educational levels, just as for people with high educational levels, there were no statistically significant changes in the volunteering rate between 2017 and 2020/21. At both points in time, people with high educational levels were significantly more involved in volunteering than people with low or medium educational levels. This finding is consistent with the results based on other data collected before the pandemic (e.g. Erlinghagen and Hank 2006; Tesch-Römer and Huxhold 2021), but also with previous findings based on the German Ageing Survey (e.g. Naumann and Romeu Gordo 2010; Wetzel and Simonson 2017). This may reflect the unequal access and participation opportunities depending on the educational background.

Volunteers did not change the time they devote to their voluntary work in the Covid-19 pandemic

The amount of time people in the second half of life spent on volunteering remained stable between 2017 and 2020/21 (Fig. 11.2). On average, volunteers aged between 46 and 90 spent slightly more than four hours per week on their volunteer work, which is about half a full working day.

Even when we differentiated by age group, we did not find any statistically significant changes between 2017 and 2020/21 in the amount of time invested in volunteering. Contrary to what we assumed, older people spent as much time

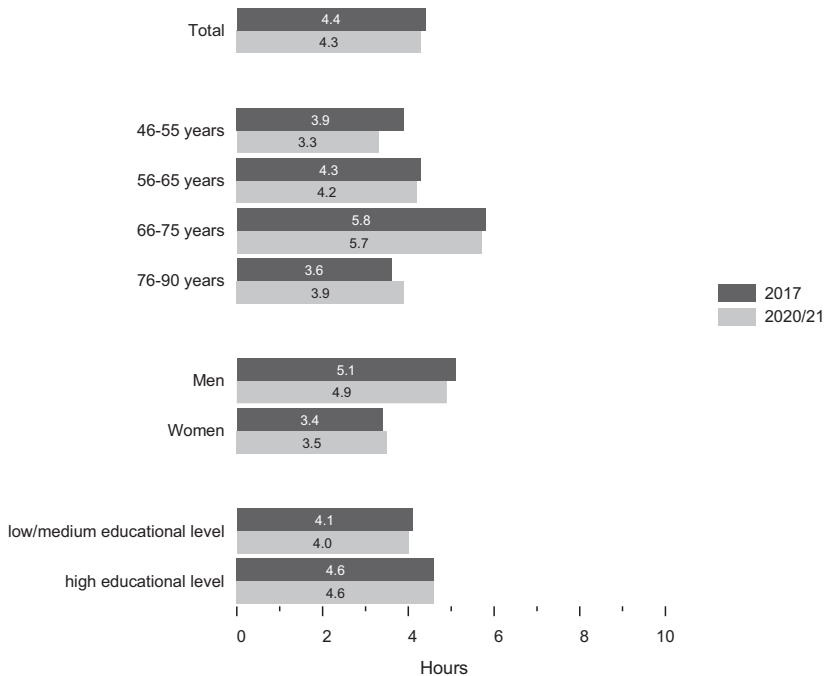


Fig. 11.2 Amount of time spent on volunteering in 2017 and 2020/21 in total and by age group, gender and education (hours per week, mean values). *Source* DEAS 2017 (n=1499), DEAS 2020/21 (n=1270), weighted analyses, rounded estimates. Difference between 2017 and 2020/21 in total and in all groups not statistically significant. Group differences: difference between age group 66–75 years and all other age groups statistically significant in 2017 ($p < 0.05$), difference between age group 66–75 years and age group 46–55 years statistically significant in 2020/21 ($p < 0.05$). Differences between women and men in both waves statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Differences between education groups in both waves not statistically significant

volunteering as before the Covid-19 pandemic despite having a greater risk of severe Covid-19. People who were in the early stage of retirement (aged 66 to 75 years) devoted a particularly large amount of time to their volunteer activities. This was quite plausible given that people in this age range have time resources that become available after retirement and often enjoy comparatively good health (Spuling et al. 2019).

There were no statistically significant changes between the two observation points with regard to the hours spent on voluntary work by women and men. On average, men spent significantly more time on voluntary work than women—at both observation points. While men spent an average of 4.9 h per week on their voluntary activities in 2020/21, the figure for women was only 3.5 h per week, which is almost one and a half hours less. Women in the second half of life not only volunteered less frequently than men, but they also spent less time on their voluntary work. This could be because women have less time available due to other tasks—care work, for instance—but it could also be related to the type of voluntary work they do.

Even the analysis of differences according to educational level found no significant changes between the two observation points with regard to the hours spent on voluntary work. Likewise, the educational groups did not differ statistically significantly from each other with regard to the time spent on voluntary work. The results of the German Survey on Volunteering (FWS) point in a similar direction, showing that although people with a low educational level are generally less involved in volunteering, when they do volunteer, they spend even more time on volunteering than people with high educational levels (Kelle et al. 2021).

11.4 Summary and discussion

Participation in organisation-bound volunteering by people in the second half of life remained stable even under pandemic conditions. In the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in winter 2020/21, a similar number of people engaged in volunteering as in 2017, and the amount of time they spent volunteering also remained unchanged. This also applies across gender, age and educational groups—no statistically significant trend differences in volunteering participation or time spent volunteering were evident for any of these groups.

Even though the Covid-19 pandemic and the measures to contain it severely restricted people's lives, at least temporarily, many volunteers seem to have found a way to continue their voluntary work—and to spend similar numbers of hours as before the pandemic. This interpretation is at least suggested by the findings of this chapter. There is a parallel that can be drawn here to grandchild care provided by grandparents, which was also highly stable during the pandemic (see chapter “Grandchild care during the Covid-19 pandemic”).

It remains unclear whether the data we used capture continued voluntary activities or new and modified activities. Longitudinal analyses would be necessary for this. It is also unclear to what extent the increased use of the internet during the

Covid-19 pandemic (see chapter “Internet use by people in the second half of life during the Covid-19 pandemic: social inequalities persist”) contributed to the fact that people in the second half of life were able to continue doing voluntary work, since the data did not allow us to determine whether the internet was used more frequently in voluntary work.

Differences in volunteering participation by age, gender and education remained almost unchanged in the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in winter 2020/21 compared to before the pandemic. Individuals aged between 76 and 90 years still volunteered the least of all age groups, whereas individuals in the early years of retirement, between 66 and 75 years, were particularly frequently involved. Women continued to be less involved in volunteering than men and spent fewer hours doing so. People with low or medium educational levels volunteered at lower rates than people with higher educational levels. The Covid-19 pandemic did not, as occasionally postulated, proved to be a “magnifying glass” in terms of inequalities in voluntary participation (e.g. Butterwegge 2021). Indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic in general was not a magnifying glass in the sense of amplifying social inequalities, as is sometimes postulated, but it did not help reduce these inequalities either.

The question remains open as to how volunteering participation by people in the second half of life continued to develop during and in the aftermath of the pandemic. This question will have to be discussed in future studies. In any case, the results of this chapter point to the resilience of voluntary work in the face of a crisis. This is particularly positive news when one considers the potential of voluntary work by older people, especially since people at the earlier stages of retirement invest a great deal of time in their voluntary work when they do volunteer. Nevertheless, despite largely stable volunteering rates and unchanged time investment in volunteering, individual shifts may have occurred between different volunteering activities that need to be investigated in future research.

Against the backdrop of the inequalities in the practice of voluntary work, which are proving to be stable, the question arises as to how access opportunities to voluntary work can be shaped in such a way that the participation function of voluntary work potentially benefits all people in the second half of life. It is possible that the Covid-19 pandemic, by making “old inequalities” more visible, may have opened up opportunities to counteract these inequalities more strongly.

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