

Beyond the Self: 34 Million Older Adults Committed to Common Good

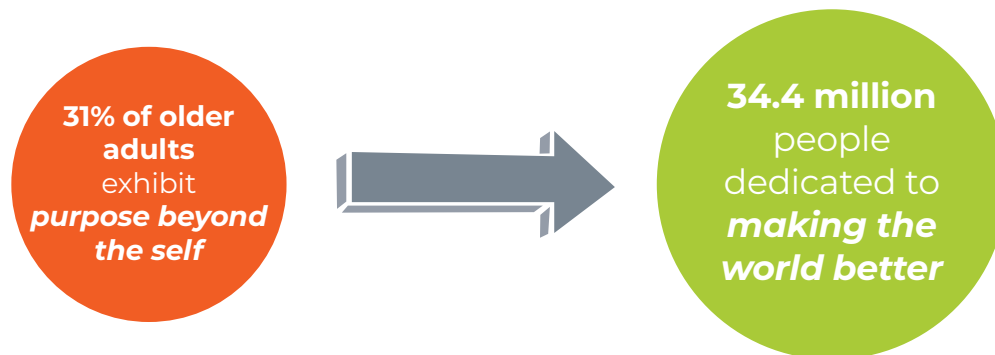
An Applied Research Brief

The Pathways to Encore Purpose Project is a collaboration between the Stanford Graduate School of Education's Center on Adolescence and Encore.org to deepen understanding of purpose in the encore years.

The research says...

Nearly a third of older adults in the United States (31 percent) exhibit purpose beyond the self – that is, they identify, prioritize, adopt and actively pursue goals that are both personally meaningful and contribute to the greater good. These commitments are central to these older adults' identity and sense of meaning in life.

Extrapolating to the population as a whole, that's more than 34 million people dedicating themselves to making their corner of the world a better place.



For example, purposeful older adults say they are doing one or more of these things:

- Working on something that improves the lives of others
- Working on something that contributes to the world
- Teaching what I've learned in life to others
- Contributing to building a good community
- Pursuing my spiritual goals¹

¹ Spirituality can function as a beyond-the-self and a self-oriented goal. Participants were defined as "purposeful" only if they also ranked one of the other listed items among their top three goals.

Another **21 percent** say that one or more of these “beyond the self” goals is important to them; however, they may not say the goal is central to who they are, they may not know how to pursue the goal, or they may not say they pursue it regularly.

You can use these findings to:

- Demonstrate to funders and other stakeholders that the commitment to purposeful activities is already strong among people in their encore years.
- Reach out to people who may value purpose, but who aren't yet engaged, by recruiting for your cause through faith communities, neighborhood associations, and other groups that help people connect with something larger than themselves.
- When recruiting volunteers, be specific about how people can improve the lives of others, make an important contribution, or teach others what they've learned.
- Talk about how your organization helps volunteers find a way to pursue their sense of purpose.
- Encourage your board members or other volunteers to tell their stories about how their engagement with your cause helped strengthen their sense of who they are.

The Pathways to Encore Purpose (PEP) project is a collaboration between the Stanford Graduate School of Education's Center on Adolescence and Encore.org. The Stanford University research team conducted a nationally representative survey of nearly 1,200 adults, ages 50-90, followed by 102 in-depth interviews to determine what role “purpose” plays in their lives. The study's authors define **purpose as a sustained commitment to goals that are meaningful to the self** and that also **contribute in some way to the common good**, to something larger than or beyond the self.

The research examined older adults' life goals, prosocial values and behaviors, perspectives on the progression to later life, and prevalence of purpose in their post-midlife, or encore, years. This series of applied research briefs highlights each of the the six major findings from the Stanford University study, with a focus on what they might mean for practitioners. All six findings can be found at encore.org/research/purpose.