

A Wide Range of Older Adults Value and Pursue Purpose

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...

Purpose is an equal-opportunity pursuit. The prevalence of purposeful living does not vary significantly across age, income, health status or geography. The one meaningful difference is that the prevalence of purpose was higher among people of color than among whites.¹ Overall, however, what stands out is that purpose is available to all.

From the survey:

- People who are purposeful beyond the self come from the full range of educational backgrounds, socio-economic circumstances, ages, genders and regions of the country.
- The oldest respondents were as likely to be purposeful as younger ones.
- Rates of purpose were higher among people of color. This was a statistically and practically significant finding that the authors believe merits further study, and may have important implications for practice.
- Health status was not associated with differences in prevalence of purpose. Those who rated their health as fair or poor are as likely to be purposeful as those who rated their health as good or excellent.
People who are still working for pay and those who are retired are about equally likely to be purposeful beyond the self.

The finding that a substantial share of older adults across the range of demographic categories are purposeful beyond the self is good news — for those individuals, their communities and society more generally.

¹ While there are also statistically significant differences with respect to gender and education, the effect sizes are small enough that these differences are not practically significant. See Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences* (2nd ed). Hillsdale, NJ: Earlbaum.

Purposeful by Income

\$0 - \$49,999

33%

\$50,000 - \$175,000

28%

Purposeful by Health

Poor-Fair

29%

Good-Excellent

32%

Purposeful by Race-Ethnicity

White

27%

African American

43%

Hispanic

46%

Asian

33%

Native American

43%

Multiracial

46%

You can use these findings to:

- Hone recruiting messages that appeal to specific audiences you might not already be reaching: communities of color, people managing chronic health conditions, people with limited physical mobility, people with limited economic means, or people who are still working full- or part- time.
- Highlight the experience of volunteers from many walks of life: e.g. people of color, lower-income people, people with disabilities, full-time workers. Engage people from these groups to recruit others to volunteer.
- Consider whether your organization can design volunteer and work opportunities that can offer virtual or flexible options to people whose access might be limited by mobility, transportation costs, or other barriers.
- Encourage funders to support research that enables practitioners and policymakers to better understand how race and ethnicity play a role in the development of purpose beyond the self at different points in the lifespan.
- Advocate for public and private funding streams that allow for expense reimbursement, transit passes, stipends, or other modest compensation — all strategies that make it easier for lower-income people to volunteer.

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.