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Volunteering as a public health issue: Barriers to participation

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Introduction

Volunteering is associated with positive individual and community health outcomes.

However, in England and Wales only 27% of adults take part in regular formal volunteering¹.

The key research question was:
'What helps and hinders people – especially those at risk of social exclusion – taking part in volunteering?'

What we did

Rapid scoping review of published and grey literature; key literature on health inequalities and volunteering with a particular focus on barriers to volunteering.

'Protected characteristics' from Equality Act 2010 used as a framework – to examine multitude of exclusionary forces acting upon potential volunteers.

98 papers reviewed. 24 focused on the UK.

Data from Citizenship Survey: Community Spirit Topic Report (2009-2010) and Community Life Survey (2014-2015) of volunteering patterns in England and Wales.

Conclusions

An inverse care law – those with the greatest need are least likely to be able to take part in volunteering.

Range of barriers – these vary across the life course and for different groups.

Broader exclusionary factors – barriers passed on intergenerationally.

Need to address...

Exclusionary processes – foster human, economic and social capital – rather than 'target' groups.

Access issues – provide supportive enabling environments for volunteers, especially those at risk of social exclusion.

Impact - Ensure people are enabled to volunteer within diverse organisations and communities, in order to maximise the potential health and wellbeing benefits of volunteering.

Future research...

- barriers to volunteering – those experienced by different demographic groups, in a UK context
- comprehensive population-level data about volunteering

Key identified barriers to volunteering for different demographic groups

	Socialisation		Institutional factors			Personal Resources				View of volunteering		Caring responsibilities			Employment								
	Parental/peer support	Social justice/pro-social values	Volunteer management	Access to opportunities	Stigmatising/exclusionary context	Lack of appropriate support	Skills, qualifications	Time	Financial cost	Health/physical functioning	Transportation	Social connections	Poor perception	Knowledge volunteering/roles	Different conceptualisation	Domestic responsibilities	Caring roles	Not having children	Not being married	F/T employment	Not in F/T employment	Employer support	
Age (young people)	X	X		X	X		X	X	X				X										
Age (older people)			X	X	X		X	X	X	X				X									
Disability			X	X	X	X	X						X										
Gender (Men)		X						X					X					X			X		
Gender (women)				X			X	X			X				X	X				X		X	
Ethnicity				X	X	X	X		X				X	X									
Relationship status																		X					
Religion					X																		
Sexual orientation																							
Pregnancy/ Maternity (paternity)																		X					

Volunteering changes across the life course².

Men and women have different motivations and the relationship with volunteering is complex³. Women may be more likely to volunteer despite having free time constrained by housework/caring responsibilities (as reported).

No literature concerning transgender/gender reassignment

(heterosexual) marriage associated with volunteering...but what about changing family structures⁴?

Sexual orientation: no literature identified – surprising??
In the UK, a greater proportion of those identifying not as 'heterosexual' take part informal volunteering⁵.

People with a disability may encounter disablist attitudes and stigma; viewed as recipients not potential volunteers. May experience a relative lack of skills or concerns outside of 'safe' spaces⁶.

Different cultures think about volunteering differently and may experience less positive outcomes from volunteering⁷. A recent trend is for volunteering to increase among people from minority ethnic groups in England and Wales.

Being religious is associated with volunteering⁸. Attending church may create larger social networks but may form exclusionary boundaries.

No research about pregnancy/maternity (paternity) identified. People with children may be more exposed to volunteering opportunities (i.e. through school).

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