

## **Civic Participation and Employment**

### **How this domain relates to active ageing**

Engagement in life is positively linked to quality of life and is an essential component of active ageing (World Health Organisation, 2007). Two important arenas of engagement for older adults are civic participation and employment. Civic participation and employment impact several determinants of active ageing including “economic”, “health”, and “social” (World Health Organisation, 2002a).

An age-friendly city is an inclusive city of opportunities where older people have a range of meaningful civic and employment options available and accessible to them.

### **Civic Participation:**

Civic participation (also referred to as civic engagement) is described as citizen action that has public consequences for communities and the polity (Christiano, 1996). Based on findings from a survey of 254 retired people, Kaskie and Gerstner (2004) argue that when applied to older people, civic participation should be defined as a role that involves voluntary or paid participation in an activity that occurs within an organization that has a direct impact on the local community. There is a substantial body of literature examining the role and benefit of civic participation in the lives of older people. A review of this work illustrates the primarily positive influence of this form of engagement to the health and quality of life of older people.

Civic participation can take many forms including civic service, volunteerism and mutual aid. Researchers in this area have highlighted two key spheres of civic participation (McBride, Sherraden, & Pritzker, 2006):

- a) Social - actions that connect individuals to others and that relate to care or development (e.g., donating, contributing to, and volunteering for individual, group, association, or non-profit organizations)
- b) Political – behaviors that influence the legislative, electoral or judicial process

### Benefits of civic participation:

There has been a great deal of research attention focused on the benefits of civic participation and results suggest this form of engagement is advantageous for older people, others, and communities. In terms of individual benefits, civic participation has been positively associated with better physical and mental health in older adults (Fried et al., 2004; Kaskie, Imhof, Cavanaugh, & Culp, 2008). Research on volunteering specifically has reported reduced mortality (Musick, Herzog, & House, 1999), and higher

levels of well-being (measured by self-rated health, functional dependency and depressive symptomology) among older volunteers (Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Rozario, & Tang, 2003). In a longitudinal study of 300 women, Moen and colleagues (1992) found participating in community organizations was associated with better health. Results from intergenerational volunteer programs such as Experience Corps, illustrate positive health benefit (improved physical, cognitive and social activity) for older adult participants while simultaneously improving educational outcomes for children (Fried et al., 2004).

Studies on mutual aid indicate providing aid to friends and family is positively related to mortality and functional status, as well as positive well-being (Krause, Herzog, & Baker, 1992). In addition to physical health benefits, Hinterlong and Williamson (2006) report civic engagement has also been shown to enhance social support networks, increase ones social status, and reinforce personal knowledge and skills.

Civic participation by older people has also been shown to benefit others and communities. In a study of mutual aid Barker (2002) reports more than two thirds of older Americans (over 60 years of age) provide assistance to friends and neighbors, a service that reduces social isolation and delays the need for formal paid services for those supported. Children and youth also benefits (e.g., improved learning and attendance rates) from educational programs in which older adults are involved (Wheeler, Gorey, & Greenblatt, 1998). Civic participation by older adults also helps to build strong and supportive communities, indeed, "civic engagement is a vital element in the maintenance of healthy, livable communities" (Hinterlong & Williamson, 2006, p.14).

#### Motivation and predictors of civic participation:

People's motivations for civic participation vary although most reflect a sense of civic responsibility (Burr, Caro, & Moorhead, 2002). Research has shown that in several areas of civic participation (volunteering, giving to charities, and participation in civic associations) there is a core group of individuals who are responsible for the majority of contributory effort and the individuals in this core tend to be older (Reed & Selbee, 2001). Two common civic behaviors for older people are voting and volunteering (McBride, 2006). A significant number of older adults participate in politics through voting; according to the US Census Bureau (2006), 79% of citizens 55 years of age and older were registered to vote and 72% of them voted in the 2004 election. A considerable number of older Americans also spend their time volunteering. Based on data from the Current Population Survey (a survey of 60,000 American households conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics), volunteering rates for people over 65 years of age was 23.5% in 2005. These rates were similar to other age groups – teenagers and adults 45-64 years of age – however older adults are the most likely group to serve 100 hours or more a year (Corporation for National & Community Service, 2006). Other common forms of civic participation are mutual aid/care giving to friends, family and neighbors, and donations (time or monetary) to community groups and organizations including non-profit and religious groups.

Several key predictors of civic participation are identified in the literature. These can be divided into individual-level and community-level predictors. The most salient predictors at the individual level are health, age and socioeconomic status including education and income (Burr et al., 2002; Hendricks & Cutler, 2004). At the community-level, predictors of civic participation are reportedly linked to social cohesion and social capital. Social cohesion and social capital are similar community development concepts used to describe “the extent of connectedness and solidarity among groups in society” (Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 2000). The community characteristics that promote civic participation are: length of residence in the neighborhood and residential stability (Kang & Kwak, 2003). Many older adults are long-standing residents in their communities and maintain a strong desire to age in place; according to survey data from AARP (2006), 95% of American adults over the age of 75 expressed a desire to remain in their local community. Promoting and facilitating aging in place benefits the community by providing stability and enhancing social cohesion which, in turn, encourages civic participation among all community residents including the elderly.

**Employment:**

There is a great deal of diversity of employment experience among older adults including work that is part time, contract or consulting, self employment, flexible hours and job-sharing, and full-time. According to a report from the Retirement Policy Center at The Urban Institute in Washington D.C., a significant number of older Americans participate in the labor force (Johnson, 2007):

<b>Age</b>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>	
	<b>65-69</b>	<b>70-74</b>	<b>65-69</b>	<b>70-74</b>
<b>Employed</b>	37.8%	25.8%	27.8%	16.3%
<b>Self-employed</b>	34.8%	45.3%	21.3%	25.2%
<b>Worked part-time</b>	42.3%	62.2%	58.6%	73.1%
<b>Worked part year</b>	29.7%	37.1%	30.7%	34.0%

Based on data from the 2004 Health and Retirement Study (HRS)

Between 1977 and 2007 employment of workers 65 and over increased 101 percent. Between 1995 and 2007 the number of full-time workers nearly doubled while part-time rose 19%. Currently 56% of older workers are employed full-time (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008).

A review of the literature on aging in the workplace reveals several key areas of research – benefits of labor force participation, motivation for employment, and retirement.

### Benefits of employment:

It has been reported that there are financial benefits for older people who continue to participate in the workforce as working longer increases lifetime earnings and shortens the period over which retirement savings must be spread (Johnson, 2007). Research exploring the benefit of employment indicates working in old age also has psychological advantages. In particular prolonged employment can be helpful in maintaining meaning and sense of purpose as well as preserving identity for older people (Calvo, 2005; Hao, 2008). Findings from studies examining social roles and aging report occupying multiple social roles, including employment, is beneficial to the health of older people and in particular reduces risk of depression (Adelmann, 1994; Moen et al., 1992). Volunteering has been found to complement formal employment and research has shown that together they support positive life satisfaction (Van Willigen, 2000) and protect mental health (Hao, 2008). There has also been some research to indicate that individual benefits of employment are associated with type of job and that “undesireable” jobs (those that have excessive demands or otherwise cause dissatisfaction such as work that is physically exhausting, stressful and tedious) can negatively affect health and in particular psychological health (Luoh & Herzog, 2002).

Continued workforce participation by older populations is also seen to benefit others. There is concern that skills and knowledge are being lost as older workers retire and through continued employment older workers serve as mentors and trainers transferring skills and knowledge to younger employees. It has also been suggested that putting off retirement will benefit society as boosting labor supply at older ages increases government tax revenue and may help to ensure workers will not have to pay higher taxes to support more retirees, employers will not face labor shortages, and retirement benefits will not be cut – common concerns as the baby boomers begin to retire (Johnson, Mermin, & Resseger, 2007).

### Motivation:

Some older workers *want* to continue working and others *need* to do so for financial reasons. Several studies have examined the motivational factors associated with employment among older adults and findings reveal older adults are likely to have different objectives and motivations for participating in the labor force than their younger counterparts (Loi & Shultz, 2007; Rau & Adams, 2005). In a survey of 254 retired Californians, Kaskie and Gerstner (2004) found that among those who had returned to work or had bridge jobs, 70% indicated they did so because they want to remain active, be engaged with others, and make a contribution to their local community. Research by Dendinger and colleagues (2005) supports findings from earlier research (Mor-Barak, 1995) to indicate older workers want to remain working for reasons that include but extend beyond providing financial means including social status, social interaction, personal achievement, generativity, daily structure and a sense of productivity. Concerns regarding personal finances and health benefits are motivational factors for continuing employment; some older people are financially unable to consider retirement (Deninger et al., 2005). Indeed, Kaskie and Gerstners (2004) study reports 30% of older adults who returned to work did so for financial reasons alone.

### Retirement:

Research exploring paid work among older adults has focused on the impact of retirement and involuntary job loss (Hao, 2008). Retirement is a milestone and a major life transition for older persons (Kim & Moen, 2002). However, the experience of retirement is variable – promoting a sense of well-being in some and leading to diminished well-being among others (Kim & Moen, 2002). The transition to retirement is not a homogeneous experience and the literature demonstrates a continuing trend towards what Hansson et al., (1997) described as “blurred” retirements – uncertain starts, reentries, bridges, phase-ins, and unemployment turning to retirement.

Research on retirement illustrates it is a complex process affected by an assortment of variables including prior psychological resources, financial circumstances, and gender (Kim & Moen, 2002).

Retirement is not a common experience and retirement policies that are based on labour market experience favor men; a majority of women currently receiving pensions will have experienced either part-time or disrupted paid employment, and received lower incomes than men (Bond & Corner, 2004).

### **Barriers to civic participation and employment:**

Social and physical barriers can limit civic participation and employment opportunities for older adults. In an examination of the effects of civic engagement on older adults, Hinterlong and Williamson (2006) report the talents and capabilities of older people are often systematically discounted – a societal attitude that can negatively impact individual choices for participation. Research has demonstrated many examples of age discrimination in the labor force which impact employment experiences and opportunities for older people. For example it has been noted that dismissal without cause occurs more often among older employees (Gunderson, 2003), that older workers are more likely to be laid off (Reynolds et al., 2005), and employers are less likely to call back older job applicants for interviews (Lahey, 2005). Some argue mandatory retirement policies are a form of age discrimination; mandatory retirement is particularly problematic for some groups, notably women and new immigrants because it can prevent them from accumulating seniority-based service credits and wage increases that can augment pension benefits. Recent reports suggest age discrimination in employment is not uncommon; the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission reported 19,103 charges filed under the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) in 2007 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008).

Physical barriers can also limit civic participation and employment opportunities. For example, among registered voters who do not vote, older people are the most likely to report they were unable to do so because voting was inaccessible to them. The key barriers reported were illness or disability (46%), transportation problems (5%), and bad weather conditions (1%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

## **Cautions and concerns regarding civic participation and employment:**

There has been some scholarly writing from a critical perspective on the topic of civic engagement that cautions us to be aware of the potentially negative consequences of promoting a healthy and productive aging agenda in which civic participation is necessary (Martinson, 2006; Martinson & Minkler, 2006). Authors argue that the dynamics of civic engagement can be exclusive, i.e., may only be applicable to those of privilege with 'free time', those who are 'healthy', etc. (McBride, 2006, p.67). There is additional concern that this agenda implicitly suggests that older people may be of lesser value if they are not able to contribute to the market economy through employment, volunteerism or other forms of civic engagement (S. Katz, 2000; Martinson & Minkler, 2006). The work from this perspective highlights the way in which structural factors – social, economic and institutional – impact individual choices such that poverty, education, cultural norms, mental or physical disabilities, family obligations, and other factors will influence whether or not an older adult engages in volunteerism (Martinson, 2006).

Critical social researchers also report on the way in which certain kinds of volunteering, such as advocacy and social justice work, are often underrepresented in conventional notions of civic engagement for older people. They argue there is a need to expand our frameworks of civic participation to include the work of organizations such as the Gray Panthers and other grassroots movements led by older adults that focus on broad social change objectives (Martinson & Minkler, 2006, p. 323).

To summarize, there is extensive evidence that civic participation promotes life satisfaction and well being among older people (Hao, 2008) and is important for the overall vitality of American life (Burr et al., 2002). However, initiatives and strategies to promote civic participation must be cognizant of the particular ways in which engagement is conceptualized, and the implicit meanings associated with how it is promoted among older populations. Participation must be meaningful to an individual to be health-benefiting. The goal for age-friendly cities is, therefore, not to be prescriptive in their message, but rather to promote, support, and facilitate a wide range of opportunities for meaningful civic participation among older residents.

## **Civic participation and employment from a NYC and older New Yorkers perspective**

New York City has an average annual volunteer rate of 17.1%, with 2.5 million volunteers serving 314.8 million hours per year. New York is ranked 48<sup>th</sup> within the 50 largest cities in the U.S. in terms of volunteer rates (Corporation for National & Community Service, 2006).

A recent report by the New York Community Trust and the United Neighborhood Houses of New York found New York offers a range of opportunities for the civic

engagement of older people, particularly for volunteering (United Neighborhood Houses, 2007).

The unemployment rate in New York City (5.9%) (August 2008) is lower than in the rest of the country (6.1% August 2008) (U.S. Department of Labor, 2008). According to the New York State Department of Labor, the 2007 statewide Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR) for those aged 45 to 54 years was 80 percent, for those aged 55 to 64 years was 62.4 percent and for those aged 65+ years was 15.5 percent. For New York City, the LFPR was 59.1 percent, compared with 74.4 percent for those aged 45 to 54; 58.2 percent for those aged 55+ to 64; and 15.1% for those aged 65 and over. Employment rates and opportunities for older New Yorkers will be, in part, a product of income insecurity for this population. According to data collected by the New York Citizens' Committee on Aging (2006), a significant number (34%) of older New Yorkers are pessimistic about having the financial resources necessary to live comfortably in retirement.

New York State Human Rights Law prohibits age discrimination and applies to any employer with four or more employees. "Age" is not defined under the law. According to the Annual Reports from the New York State Division of Human Rights, in FY 05-06, 17% of their cases were age discrimination cases. This is up slightly from FY 04-05, where 16.2% of cases were age discrimination. New York City prohibits discrimination under the City's Human Rights Law. The City law applies to employers with four or more employees and does not define "Age." City-level data on age discrimination complaints is not immediately available.

**Objective for Action:** To protect and expand opportunities for civic participation and employment for all older residents of New York.  
The challenge is to develop ways of leveraging engagement by all older adults who have the interest. Age-friendly cities concerned with expanding opportunities for civic participation and employment will need both individual and structural-level (i.e., build institutional capacity for engagement) initiatives.

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