



The 77 million “baby boom” babies born from 1946 to 1964 have been a tidal-like force, reshaping social institutions as they have wended through their life stages. Their sheer numbers overwhelmed school districts and swelled the ranks of PTAs. Boomers “created their own distinctive youth markets for music, clothes and other consumer goods as soon as they could spend their parents’ money. And they ... aggressively acted out against their elders’ social norms around sex, race, gender, and civil authority as they struggled through adolescence. They ... announced to the world that they trusted no one over 30.”<sup>1</sup>

# THE BOOMERS ARE COMING! THE BOOMERS ARE COMING!

BY THOMAS H. SANDER

Now at retirement's doorstep — in 2011 the leading edge of this demographic bulge hits 65 — they may well reinvent retirement. For sure they will swell the ranks of retirees: The Conference Board predicts that 40 percent of America's work force will reach retirement age by 2010. But it is unclear whether most boomers will immediately retire. For boomers with weak retirement finances, continued work will be a necessity, but others who want "active retirement" or for whom life's meaning is entwined with work, may also soldier on.

But if 10 or 20 percent of boomers decide to volunteer more in retirement, it could transform and shake the social and civic landscape.

But will they volunteer?

## LIFECYCLE VS. GENERATIONAL

For those who have lived through the last generation, it's natural to assume that retirement and volunteering must axiomatically go hand-in-hand.

For anyone like you involved in civic groups in America generally, or Chicago more specifically, a visual inspection almost always reveals dependence on these hard-working and graying seniors, whether on nonprofit boards, in associations, in houses of worship, or in neighborhood associations. But is this immemorial truth? Have elderly Americans always been the backbone of our civic life, and will this trend continue?

At any one point in time, one can't discern *lifecycle patterns* (how much of an activity people do at one age vs. another) from *generational patterns* (people born in different eras doing more of less of something).<sup>2</sup> Some behaviors like attendance at pop/rock concerts since the 1960s is almost purely lifecycle (done in adolescence and early adulthood), while others, like jogging, are more generational (everyone started doing this more in the 1970s).

As Robert Putnam points out in *Bowling Alone*, whether some activity is primarily lifecycle or generational has stark implications for future predictions. In purely lifecycle phenomena, individuals change as they age through the lifecycle, but society does not because individuals' movements in and out of peak years cancel each other out. Generational activities have the reverse dynamic: Individuals don't change but society does. If, as is true, Americans born after 1945 are more tolerant racially, then even if individual Americans don't become any more racially tolerant over time, America will, as the less tolerant Americans born pre-1945 die off and are replaced by more tolerant younger cohorts of Americans.

Lifecycle behaviors are usually driven by one of the following: energy levels and health; family demands or family activities that connect individuals into communities; available time; or one's career stage or skill/knowledge levels. Thus, involvement in PTAs centers around child-rearing ages. X-treme skiers tend to be younger because younger Americans in general have higher energy levels and less fear.

A graph of volunteering in America in 2000 by age shows high rates of volunteering by older Americans. The temptation is to assume that as boomers near retirement, volunteering rates will soar.

But if retirement age is always associated with high rates of volunteering (a lifecycle phenomenon) this should have been true in 1975. And in 1975, American retirees didn't volunteer at significant rates.

These factoids are consistent with what journalist and author Tom Brokaw calls the *Greatest Generation*, centered around those born in 1925-1930. This Greatest Generation has been off-scale in their social and civic engagement over their entire lives and boomers haven't. Boomers have done less by virtually every measure of civic engagement, from voting, to giving blood, to being philanthropic, to joining community groups.

Put another way, the civic declines witnessed in America and chronicled in *Bowling Alone* are less about individuals changing their civic attitudes and habits and more about generational replacement (i.e., American society becoming increasingly composed of generations on average less civic than earlier generations). This type of change is harder to overcome, since it is less about individuals resuming *prior* civic habits, and more about teaching old dogs *new* civic tricks. Putnam calls this "walking up a down civic escalator": As older cohorts die off, the replacement of these civic cohorts with younger less civic cohorts automatically depresses average levels of civic engagement and individuals will have to work harder to overcome this downward momentum.

For sure, retirement will bring with it more free time for boomers, but this free time could just as easily be consumed by reading, taking courses, playing golf or watching TV. And the boomers (who have never been especially strong volunteers) will have to suddenly develop new stripes if we are to see record levels of volunteerism as they retire.

## THE GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY

On average, boomers can expect to live to be 83 and many will continue well into their 90s. Moreover, boomers are America's most educated generation ever to hit retirement and thus bring with them far more skills (although less civic experience) than the Greatest Generation ever did.

But even if we shouldn't *expect* increased boomer volunteering, wouldn't it be terrific if we could unleash this? Given the huge numbers of boomers, even a small change in those volunteering could have big ripples for associations and other civic organizations.

Moreover, not only is organizational and association life and vitality at stake, but the health care costs we will need to pay for boomers' care. If boomers can be engaged more in their communities, it will lead to greater self-sufficiency and actuarially less spent on nursing homes and other especially expensive assisted living.<sup>3</sup>

1 Reinventing Aging: Baby Boomers and Civic Engagement (Harvard School of Public Health–MetLife Foundation Initiative on Retirement and Civic Engagement, 2004) at <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/chc/reinventingaging/Report.pdf>

2 A fuller discussion of this can be found in Thomas Sander, "Social capital and civic engagement of individuals over age 50 in the United States" (with Robert D. Putnam) in *Civic Engagement and the Baby Boomer Generation*, Laura B. Wilson, and Sharon Simson, eds. (Haworth Press, 2006).

3 All of the dramatic gains in American longevity came from ridding the U.S. of major infectious diseases in the early part of the 20th c. plus spending on medical technology, boosted by the impressive social connectedness of the Long Civic Generation. But by 2000 our gains in longevity have more recently slowed, despite aggressive investments in medical technology. The standard suspects for these slowing declines are obesity and especially resistant viral diseases, but a less explored alternative explanation are declines in social capital. A decline in social capital is underexplored as an explanation for what has happened. Boomers face a treble social capital penalty: they have fewer friends than their parents, have fewer children than their parents and are more likely to be single or divorced than their parents. Fewer friends, fewer children and fewer spouses all translate into shriveled social support networks — fewer people to bring one chicken soup when one is ill. Based on other research on the connections between social capital and health, Boomers' weaker social capital should, along with obesity and viral diseases, likely portend weakened health prospects for the coming ranks of seniors. Left unchecked, as Boomers replace the Long Civics in retirement, it will require dramatically greater medical spending if Boomers get sick more often and recuperate more slowly. None of the medical forecasts we have seen account for these social generational differences between The Long Civics and the Boomers.



**GIVEN BOOMERS' SELF-PREOCCUPATION AND THE STRONG CONNECTIONS BETWEEN CIVIC AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT AND PUBLIC HEALTH, MAYBE VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT SHOULD BE MARKETED TO BOOMERS AS THE BEST STRATEGY FOR SUCCESSFUL RETIREMENT, A SORT OF HEALTH CLUB FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM.**

teams so boomers can know that volunteering will afford great chances to meet friends<sup>8</sup>;

- Making sure they are recognized for their contributions and that their work has measurable impact;
- Maybe creating hybrids of work and volunteering that pay minimal stipends. Boomers may need to be offered shorter one-time volunteer opportunities (to whet their interest) rather than assuming that they will automatically sign up for longer-term stints from the outset.
- Agencies should be honest with boomers who crave results; episodic volunteering is very unlikely to transform the lives of those served and “starter” experiences should be used to convert boomers into more regular volunteers.<sup>9</sup>
- Surprisingly, transportation may be an obstacle for some boomers. Some Experience Corps affiliates provide bus passes as incentives!
- Using personal networks to recruit boomers. All Americans volunteer more frequently when they are asked, and a friend asking is better than a stranger.

In short, the Long Civic Generation volunteered out of a sense of duty to community that drives relatively few of the Boomers; so associations will have to think about how to make the opportunities appeal to the boomers and have the request come from a personal “ask” rather than expecting the boomers will beat a path to their door.

Given boomers’ self-preoccupation and the strong connections between civic and social engagement and public health<sup>10</sup>, maybe volunteer engagement should be marketed to boomers as the best strategy for successful retirement, a sort of health club for the new millennium. Consistent with this, a few San Francisco social entrepreneurs are working to persuade doctors at Kaiser Permanente to “prescribe” volunteer service to older patients in need of greater activity.

In conclusion, we should all dedicate ourselves to the task of engaging these boomers since it offers a triple payoff: 1) keeping the boomers healthy and engaged; 2) strengthening our civil society and association and community life, so our nation’s future is intertwined with getting boomers engaged; and 3) setting an example that we hope will be infectious to the younger generation, the children and grandchildren of the boomers. With all of our help, creativity and encouragement, maybe the ultimate epitaph of the boomers will be “To a Generation that Helped Rebuild America Civicly.” ■

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## HOW CAN WE ENGAGE THE BOOMERS?

Smart organizations are working on this issue and committed to engaging boomers more fully in their retirement years. There is no ready-made solution to engage boomers, but here are some initial thoughts:

Civic Ventures<sup>4</sup> (in the Bay Area) has done significant research on boomers’ desires, and launched Experience Corps<sup>5</sup> to involve seniors more actively in communities. In addition, The Next Chapter<sup>6</sup> gives boomers ideas about how to make a deep contribution to communities in their retirement.

The Harvard School of Public Health and MetLife teamed together to develop a report on the issue of engaging Boomers called “Reinventing Aging.”<sup>7</sup> The project has launched advertising campaigns featuring “leading edge” boomers near retirement. The goal is to enlist the boomers’ mentors (older Americans who reinvented their lives in pioneering and community-friendly ways) to pattern the boomers’ retirement. The government’s Corporation for National and Community Service will initiate print and television advertising featuring leading-edge boomers with the message that boomers changed the world in their teens and are now needed to change the world again.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

Those knowledgeable about boomers believe that organizations receiving them will have to repackage volunteering in ways that suit boomers’ needs more. This might include:

- Ensuring that the volunteer work fully uses the skills of the boomers and provides room for their professional or educational advancement and training;
- Giving boomers social outlets and letting them work in

4 <http://www.civicventures.org/> The author is grateful to Marc Freedman of Civic Ventures for his help and ideas based on research and experience for how best to engage the Boomers.

5 [http://www.civicventures.org/experience\\_corps.cfm](http://www.civicventures.org/experience_corps.cfm)

6 <http://www.civicventures.org/nextchapter/overview.cfm>

7 <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/chc/reinventingaging/Report.pdf>

8 Volunteering may even be an effective mechanism for single Boomers to meet others for romance or just friendship.

9 Experience Corps requires 2 hours/week minimal commitment over a full semester, since less than this rarely makes a difference with a child.

10 The National Institutes on Aging recently awarded Johns Hopkins researchers a \$5 million grant to continue their research on the health impact of participation in Experience Corps.