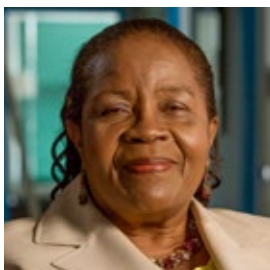


# Purpose in the Encore Years: Shaping Lives of Meaning and Contribution

## Six Key Findings: Applied Research Briefs



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 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.

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.

This series of applied research briefs highlights each of the the six major findings from Stanford's research, with a focus on what they might mean for practitioners. All six findings are listed on the next page. The first four findings are supported by the nationally representative survey data. The last two are based primarily on the interviews. Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative data give us a first-ever picture of how purpose beyond the self looks and functions among older adults. For more information and all six research briefs, visit [encore.org/research/purpose](https://encore.org/research/purpose).

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## The Six Findings

### **BRIEF #1: Help Wanted? Ask Someone 50+**

**Finding:** The majority of older adults exhibit high levels of prosocial values and behaviors, such as helping and caring for others, caring for nature and the environment, endorsing equal treatment for all, and seeking to understand people who are different from them.

### **BRIEF #2: Beyond the Self: 34 Million Older Adults Committed to Common Good**

**Finding:** 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.

### **BRIEF #3: Purpose is for Everyone**

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

### **BRIEF #4: Living with Purpose in the Encore Years: Not a Zero Sum Game**

**Finding:** Purposeful living is not a zero-sum game. Purposeful living does not crowd out other pleasures and personal goals. People who place a high priority on beyond-the-self goals often consider more self-oriented goals – travel, family, friends, learning – equally important in their lives.

### **BRIEF #5: Positive Outlook**

**Finding:** People who are purposeful have a positive outlook on life. The great majority (94 percent) of those interviewed who were unambiguously purposeful share a trait we call “positivity,” which refers to joy, hopefulness, optimism and other related emotions. Though many people in this group were dealing with serious life problems -- such as poverty, poor health, family difficulties and bereavement -- they emphasized the joy and satisfaction they experience in their lives, especially in their beyond-the-self engagements.

### **BRIEF #6: Freedom and Flexibility Matter**

**Finding:** Freedom is important to purposeful and non-purposeful people in different ways. In the interview analyses comparing purposeful and non-purposeful adults, half of each group said that a significant source of their well-being was their appreciation of the freedom they were experiencing at this time in their lives. The non-purposeful interviewees mostly described freedom from burdensome responsibilities like paid work and childrearing. The purposeful ones highlighted the ways they used their freedom for the benefit of all; they loved having the freedom to get more involved beyond the self.

# Help Wanted? Ask Someone 50+

## 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...

**The majority of older adults exhibit high levels of prosocial values and behaviors.** And, while many are already engaged in activities like volunteering, many more say they care about helping others. For example:

More than half of older adults place great value on **social equity and empathy**. Survey responses demonstrate that:

- 67 percent strongly believe in equal treatment for all;
- 60 percent find it very important to help and care for others;
- 53 percent strongly believe in caring for nature and the environment; and
- 60 percent believe it is very important to seek to understand people who are different from them.

**Many older adults behave in alignment with their prosocial values**, as indicated by activities like volunteering, trying to help others, and trying to take care of those in need. For example:

- 65 percent of older adults said it is “always true” that they try to help others.
- More than half (55%) of the survey respondents said they volunteered at least once or twice per year; 22 percent of respondents volunteer once a month or more. Among the interviewees, about half described being engaged in volunteering. The reason given most often for volunteering is that people feel it is important to help others.
- Nearly half of older adults (48 percent) say they “always” or “often” try to help young people achieve their potential.

More than half of older adults (55 percent) **consider their paid work to be highly personally meaningful**. Among that group, 87 percent had at least one beyond-the-self reason for this sense of meaning in their work, such as helping people (64 percent) or contributing to society or the community (46 percent).

## Prosocial Values

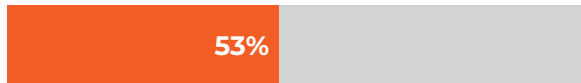
Very important to care for others



Strongly believe in equal treatment for all



Strongly believe in caring for nature and the environment



Believe it is very important to seek to understand people who are different from them

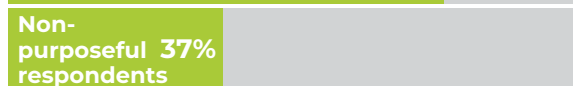


## Prosocial Behaviors

Strongly inclined to help, care for and console others



Often/always try to help young people achieve their full potential



### You can use these findings to:

- Make the case, particularly to youth-serving organizations, that older adults want to help and are ripe for recruiting into both paid and volunteer roles.
- Create more successful recruitment messages for people 50+ by including values like fairness, and by explaining specific ways that their role will help others.
- Include opportunities for volunteers and paid staff to learn more about people who come from different backgrounds, offer different perspectives, or hold different views.
- Recognize and retain people 50+ by making a point of thanking them for the ways they are helping colleagues or contributing to a larger mission.

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

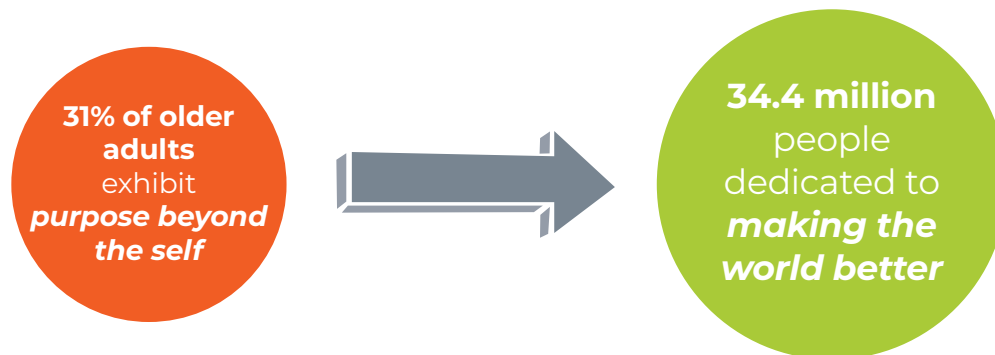
## An Applied Research Brief

*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 goals<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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# 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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# Living With Purpose in the Encore Years: Not a Zero Sum Game

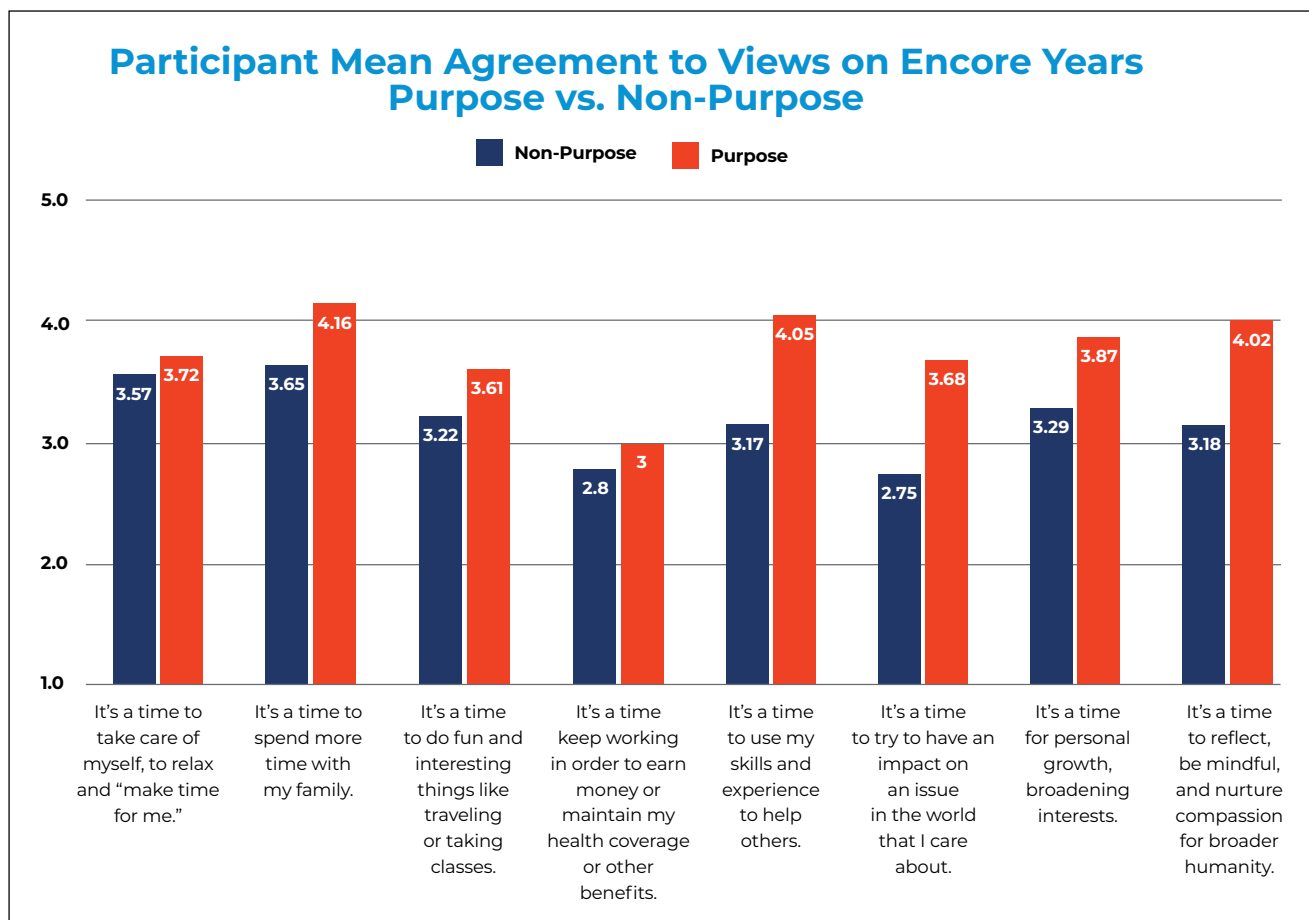
## An Applied Research Brief

*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...

**Purposeful living is not a zero-sum game.** Purposeful living does not crowd out other pleasures and personal goals. Interviews of purposeful respondents provided many examples of satisfying engagement with personal as well as beyond-the-self goals.

This picture of purposeful living is backed up by the survey data, which showed that purposeful respondents strongly endorsed not only beyond-the-self visions for later life but also more self-oriented visions – for example, having time for travel, family, friends, learning. Theirs are not lives of self-sacrifice.



When asked to indicate how well they felt different perspectives of later life corresponded to their own, purposeful respondents in this study rated *all* of the perspectives (both beyond-the-self and self-oriented) more highly as characteristic of later adulthood for them than did non-purposeful respondents. For example, a greater percentage of purposeful respondents (58 percent) than non-purposeful respondents (43 percent) saw later adulthood as a time to do self-oriented activities like traveling or taking classes.

**You can use these findings to:**

- Recruit potential volunteers with messages that emphasize opportunities to learn, make friends, and have fun while making an impact on a cause.
- Help purposeful people choose your cause among all the things they could be doing by highlighting the opportunity's multiple benefits to them and to those they would serve.
- Welcome people with already-full lives into your organization by including messages about flexible, part-time (or part-year) scheduling.
- Engage your most committed or consistent volunteers as ambassadors to recruit others.

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# Positive Outlook

## 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...

**People who are purposeful have a positive outlook on life.** The survey results show that higher levels of life satisfaction are associated with purpose.

**People who are purposeful beyond the self display greater:**

Life satisfaction  
Personal growth  
Generativity  
Wisdom  
Gratitude  
Empathy

**“The best way to have real joy in life is to give, to help others, whether you give yourself, or give financially.**

**Try to do what you can to help each other.”**

Interview Respondent:  
*a Native American social entrepreneur*

In the interviews, the great majority (94 percent) of those interviewed who were unambiguously purposeful share a trait we call “positivity,” which refers to joy, hopefulness, optimism and other related emotions. Though many people in this group were dealing with serious life problems, such as poverty, poor health, family difficulties and bereavement — they emphasized the joy and satisfaction they experience in their lives, especially in their beyond-the-self engagements.

**You can use these findings to:**

- Encourage volunteer recruiters to reach out to older adults in a wide range of life circumstances, including people in poverty, people who may be living with chronic illness, or people who have recently lost a friend or a spouse.
- Frame opportunities to give time or money as sources of joy and satisfaction.
- Utilize images in recruiting, branding, or fundraising materials that show positive emotions.
- Ask enthusiastic volunteers to tell others how getting involved with your cause or organization has enhanced their lives.

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# Freedom and Flexibility Matter

## An Applied Research Brief

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### The research says...

**Freedom is important to purposeful and non-purposeful people in different ways.** In the interview analyses comparing purposeful and non-purposeful adults:

- Half of each group said that a significant source of their well-being was their appreciation of the freedom they were experiencing at this time in their lives.
- The non-purposeful interviewees mostly meant freedom from burdensome responsibilities like paid work and childrearing. The purposeful interviewees highlighted the ways they used their freedom for the benefit of all; they loved having the freedom to get more involved beyond the self.

**“You still have lots of days that you’re able to give to other people and you have so much more freedom than you have any other time in your life. It’s a gift and I try to use that gift the best I can every day. “**

Interview Respondent:

*A 68-year-old woman who became the director of a food pantry where she had been volunteering*

**You can use these findings to:**

- Remain aware that older adults are very conscious of time commitments when they make choices about their activities.
- Build questions about flexibility/time commitment into initial interviews, volunteer screening, and role descriptions.
- Offer opportunities that vary in duration and in how, where, and when a project gets done.
- For example, allow people to “job share” a volunteer commitment or work assignment; craft shorter-term, high-impact projects that might be needed each month or each quarter; allow for some work to be done remotely; or offer one-day or half-day opportunities such as clean-up or organizing projects that can lead to longer-term involvement over time.

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