



Is volunteering a reward in itself?

Meier, S., and Stutzer, A., 2004, *Is volunteering a reward in itself?*, Forschungsinstitut zur Zukunft der Arbeit (Institute for the Study of Labor), IZA Discussion Paper No. 1045

Overview

This study by Meier and Stutzer investigates the links between volunteering and life satisfaction in volunteers.

Method

The study uses data from the German Socioeconomic Panel (GSOEP) for the period 1985-1999 which questioned over 22,000 individuals in Germany on various socioeconomic and demographic aspects, one of which was participation in volunteering, to determine their level of satisfaction with life.

Results

The period after the breakdown of the GDR represented a unique opportunity to investigate the causality between volunteering and happiness. A single exogenous event that was shared amongst the entirety of the East German population provides an ideal backdrop against which to determine how life satisfaction changed for those who stopped volunteering, often involuntarily, in comparison to those who continued voluntary work. The report claims that there was a 0.24 drop in life satisfaction among those who stopped volunteering, which is deemed a “substantial decrease”. The article shows that volunteering is an important part of happiness and that if volunteers are intrinsically motivated, that is to say they volunteer to help others rather than to gain any material reward, on average they report higher life satisfaction than those who volunteer for extrinsic reasons.

The article concludes that this evidence demonstrates a strong link between volunteering and a higher level of life satisfaction. Robust attempts are made to demonstrate causality between these two elements, considering that a multitude of factors other than volunteering are included in the analysis to determine to what extent change in satisfaction can be narrowly attributed to loss of volunteering. Furthermore, a large sample size was consulted which makes the results more reliable. However, the results only show that life satisfaction decreases after volunteering ends, but it cannot be proven that this is due to factors of intrinsic motivation, rather than material benefits. The report does briefly mention some other reasons for this decline but does not truly examine these to a full extent so as to prove that the reward of volunteering is solely intrinsic.