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Peace Corps, the 50plus Initiative, and Volunteer Early Termination

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Abstract

Over the past twenty years, there has been a substantial increase in the number of older Americans committing their time to volunteer service programs. Peace Corps, a federal agency that places Volunteers in developing countries' neediest communities for two-year assignments, has embraced this trend. Starting in 2006, Peace Corps launched a targeted marketing campaign, termed the '50plus Initiative,' to recruit older Americans to serve as Peace Corps Volunteers. By 2008, Peace Corps applications from people aged 50 and over had risen by more than 40%. According to Peace Corps policy, there is a strong desire to recruit, process, and place applicants who profile to become Volunteers that will complete these two-year assignments. Volunteers that do not complete their two-year assignment reduce the agency's ability to contribute to the project goals and objectives that have been jointly established by the Peace Corps and the host country and may negatively affect the Peace Corps' relationship with the host country and/or host communities. This study explores the relationship between older Americans serving in the Peace Corps and their rate of early termination as well as their length of service.

Key Words: Peace Corps, volunteerism, older Americans

The Rise in Volunteerism among Older Americans

As members of the baby boomer generation continue to enter retirement age, there has been a substantial increase over the past twenty years in the number of these older Americans committing their time to volunteer and service programs (Tang, Morrow-Howell, & Hong 2009; Corporation for National and Community Service 2006). With many adults enjoying good health well into old age, a growing number of seniors have the stamina to commit to volunteer and service programs (Manton, Gu, & Lamb 2006). Additionally, personal resources of time, experience, skills, and knowledge allow these adults to seek novel and innovative opportunities to contribute to others' welfare (Gerencher 2007; Cheek, Piercy, & Grainger 2013). Researchers have presented many factors that may encourage older Americans to seek out volunteer opportunities during their retirement. These include feelings of altruism and empathy (Penner & Finkelstein 1998), a desire to establish, strengthen, and maintain relationships (Okun & Schultz 2003), a strong sense of community with others (Okun & Michel 2006), attitudes of concern for the next generation (McAdams & de St. Aubin 1992), and a search for variety and meaning in life (King 2000). Overall, improved health, available time, and a driving desire to positively contribute to society have led volunteer and service programs that recruit older Americans to respond by growing in number and scope (Morrow-Howell 2010).

The 50plus Initiative at Peace Corps

Peace Corps has long welcomed older Volunteers, but the agency concedes that the two-year overseas volunteer experience has traditionally been embraced by young, recent college graduates (Pope 2009, Peace Corps 2010). In 2006, as the commitment to volunteerism among older adults continued to rise, Peace Corps decided to embrace and capitalize on the trend. That year, Peace Corps launched the '50plus Initiative', a targeted marketing campaign to recruit

older adults to serve as Peace Corps Volunteers (Lough and Xiang 2014). Peace Corps reasoned that these older Americans had significant professional work experience and technical expertise, are often more mature than the traditional college-aged Volunteers, and bring a unique and desired technical skill set to the host country that enhances and complements the work of the more generalist Volunteers (Peace Corps 2010). The agency also developed a recruitment website marketed directly to older Americans interested in serving as Peace Corps Volunteers, complete with FAQs and the relevant facts about medical care, social security payments, and living situations (Peace Corps 2017b). The website stresses the flexibility that older Americans will have in choosing what country they are sent to, what job they will do, and when they will begin their service. This marketing, called 'role flexibility', highlights the amount of choice older Americans will have to set their own schedules and activities, and has been shown to be a key factor in successful volunteer programs for older Americans (Freedman 2001). To demonstrate their commitment to increasing the number of older Americans serving overseas, the agency adopted an indicator in their 2009-2011 Performance Plan to increase the number of applications from people aged 50 and over (Peace Corps 2009). Two years after the launch of the initiative, Peace Corps applications from people aged 50 and over had risen by more than 40% (Pope 2009).

Early Termination in Peace Corps

There is a strong desire at Peace Corps to recruit and place applicants who profile to become Volunteers that will complete two-year assignments. The Peace Corps Manual, Section 284 (Peace Corps 2017a), states the agency's expectation that once a person becomes a Peace Corps Volunteer, that person has committed themselves to two years of service:

> "Service in the Peace Corps is voluntary, but once the commitment to serve is made, expectations are created on the part of the Peace Corps, the host country, and cooperating agencies. By accepting an invitation, individuals commit themselves to serve the people of the host country to the best of their abilities for a specified period, usually about two years, within the framework and support systems established by the Peace Corps."

However, the Peace Corps Manual explains that there are circumstances under which a Volunteer cannot or should not remain in service until their planned completion date. The agency refers to these Volunteers as "early terminations" (Peace Corps 2017a). According to the agency's own internal assessment, Peace Corps has been concerned with and attentive to early termination rates since its inception (Peace Corps 2010). Indeed, the agency currently collects and analyzes early termination data using a variety of methods, publishes the data annually, and uses the information to discuss ways to improve Volunteer retention with its host countries (Peace Corps 2010). Explaining the reasons for tracking the early termination rates, the agency states that Volunteers that do not complete their two-year assignment reduce the agency's ability to achieve the project goals and objectives that have been jointly established by the Peace Corps and the host country, and may negatively affect the agency's relationship with the host country and its communities (Peace Corps 2016). Demonstrating their commitment to lowering early termination rates, the agency included an indicator in their 2003-2008 Strategic Plan using early termination rates as an indication of their performance (Peace Corps 2004). For the agency's 2009-2014 Strategic Plan, the performance indicator was changed to enhance the length of Volunteer service (Peace Corps 2009). In the agency's 2010 internal review of their policies, processes, and practices, agency leadership adopted recommendations to continue to collect and

analyze early termination rates, as well as to develop action items when these rates get too high in a particular country of service (Peace Corps 2010).

Summary and Importance

The literature agrees that the numbers of older Americans committing themselves to volunteer service programs has grown and will continue to grow. Peace Corps' 50plus Initiative indicates the agency's desire to capitalize on this trend. A review of Peace Corps publications also reveals that the agency is attentive to the early termination rates and lengths of service of its Volunteers, has a method for tracking them, and actively works to lower early termination rates and increase lengths of service.

Upon review of the Peace Corps' early termination and length of service data, it is clear that the data is entirely descriptive in nature, with no analysis of the relationship or reasons behind the relative differences in early termination rates for various demographic characteristics. Additionally, while a review of the literature indicated that much research has been completed on the rise of volunteerism among older Americans as well as the reasons behind this trend, no literature could be found on older Americans' ability to complete a service program or their level of commitment to a lengthy volunteer assignment. Indeed, Morrow-Howell (2010) suggests that the retention of older volunteers in service programs is a research area that is currently underdeveloped.

Therefore, the purpose of this quantitative study is to explore the relationship between older Americans serving in the Peace Corps and their rate of early termination, as well as their length of service. The importance of understanding this relationship is twofold: 1) As the goals and objectives of Peace Corps projects are jointly established by the agency and the host country, it is important to know if the influx of Volunteers aged 50 and over is augmenting or weakening

the Peace Corps' ability to achieve these goals and objectives, as measured by their ability to complete two years of service; and 2) As a federal agency that utilizes American taxpayer dollars to recruit, screen, and place its Volunteers, it is important to know if the Volunteers attributed to the 50plus Initiative provide a good return on investment, as measured by their ability to complete two-year assignments as Peace Corps Volunteers.

Hypothesis

As the literature offers no insight into older Americans' ability to complete a service program nor their level of commitment to a lengthy volunteer assignment, an initial hypothesis for this study is difficult to generate. Older Americans may have higher completion rates and longer lengths of service than their younger colleagues due to their more advanced skill sets and higher sense of utility and productivity due to these skills. Additionally, host countries in Peace Corps typically have a high appreciation for the experience and wisdom that older Volunteers bring, which may increase completion rates and length of service (Pope 2009). However, given that older adults are more likely than younger people to experience chronic conditions that limit their ability to perform certain activities, the extent to which Peace Corps is able to accommodate the changing capacities and health of older adults may negatively affect their ability to complete their service (Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Sherraden, et al., 2003).

Therefore, the hypotheses for the chi-square test, which will test the relationship between the early termination rates between Peace Corps Volunteers aged 50 and over and those below the age of 50 will be represented as follows:

H_0: There is no relationship between early termination rates and age group

H_a: There is a relationship between early termination and age group

The hypotheses for the independent samples t-test, which will compare the mean lengths of service between Peace Corps Volunteers aged 50 and over and those below the age of 50 will be represented as follows:

H_0: $\mu_{50plus} = \mu_{Under\ 50}$

H_a: $\mu_{50plus} \neq \mu_{Under\ 50}$

METHODS

As the Peace Corps launched its 50plus Initiative in 2006, a dataset that contained all Peace Corps Volunteers that served during the five-year timeframe from 2007 to 2011 was utilized. The dataset was obtained using a SQL database query which was executed by the author during his employment at Peace Corps Headquarters. Setting a start date for the dataset of January 1, 2007 allowed one year for those older Americans recruited in 2006 to clear the application process and begin Peace Corps service in their host country. Setting an end date for the dataset of December 31, 2011 provided a robust dataset that allowed this study to explore Volunteers' early termination rates and lengths of service during the first five years of the 50plus Initiative.

The dataset was cleaned in a variety of ways. First, there are two ways that a Volunteer may begin their Peace Corps service. They may be transferred from another Peace Corps country due to conditions in that country beyond Peace Corps' control, or they may begin their service as a new Peace Corps Volunteer. In order to not inflate length of service numbers, this study was limited to Volunteers that began their service as new Peace Corps Volunteers. Therefore, transferred Volunteers were removed from the dataset. Second, there are three ways that a Volunteer may conclude their Peace Corps service: 1) they may complete their service as scheduled; 2) they may be separated from their service prior to the planned completion date; or

3) they may pass away during their service. This study was limited to Volunteers that completed service or were separated from service. Therefore, Volunteers that had died during their service during this timeframe were removed from the dataset.

The final dataset contained records for 15,521 Peace Corps Volunteers that served during the 2007 to 2011 timeframe. The primary variables utilized in this study are described in Table 1.

Table 1

Description of Variable

TABLE 1. Description of Variables

Variable Number	Variable Name	Variable Data Type	Variable Description
1	Birth Date	Continuous	Indicates the full birth date of the Volunteer
2	Start Date	Continuous	Indicates the first day of a Peace Corps Volunteer's service, including their training
3	Age	Continuous	Calculated from the Volunteer's birth date and start date. The variable is therefore the age at which the Volunteer started their service
4	End Date	Continuous	Indicates the final day of a Peace Corp Volunteers' service, and includes those that both successfully completed their service and terminated their service early
5	End Code	Categorical, Binary	Indicates whether the Peace Corps Volunteer successfully completed their service or terminated their service early
6	Age Group	Categorical, Binary	Recoded from the age variable. It is a binary variable that places all Volunteers into one of two groups: 'Under 50' or '50 plus'
7	Length of Service	Continuous	Calculated from the Volunteer's start date to their end date, and represents the length of their Peace Cops service in days

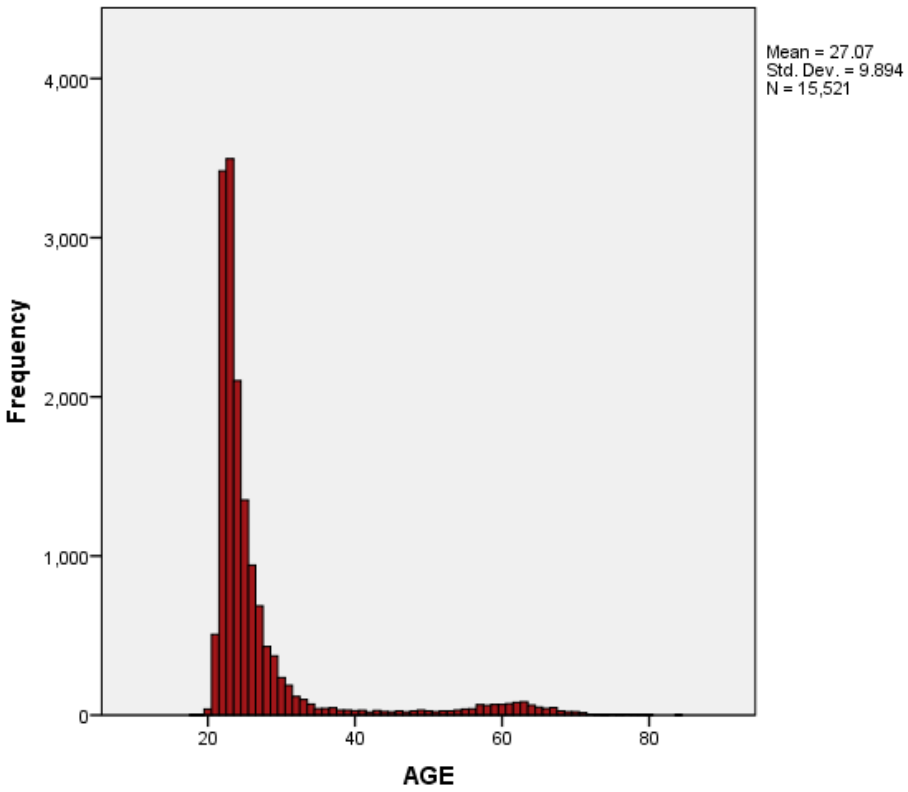
This study utilized SPSS to look at the relationship between Volunteers in the 'Under 50' and '50 plus' age groups. More specifically, the study utilized a chi-square test to analyze the relationship between the two age group categories and the 'End Code' categorical variable. The study then utilized an independent samples t-test to compare the mean lengths of service of the two age groups.

ANALYSIS and DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics

To set a foundation for the analysis, Figure 1 presents a histogram of the ages of all Volunteers in the dataset (n=15,521). The average age of Volunteers is 27.07 years, with the majority of Volunteers in their early-to-mid 20s and a noticeable group of Volunteers in their late 50s to early 60s, which increases the overall mean.

Figure 1. Age at Start of Peace Corps Service (2007-2011)



For the purposes of this study, the data was then recoded into two age groups: Volunteers under the age of 50 (Under 50) and Volunteers aged 50 and over (50 Plus). Presented in Table 2 and Figure 2, the Under 50 age group comprises 93% of the new variable (n=14,495), and the 50 Plus age group comprises 6.6% of the variable (n=1,024). While these two age groups are

substantially different in size, both still contain a large enough number of cases on which to run statistical tests.

Table 2. Binary Age Groups

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Under 50	14495	93.4	93.4	93.4
	50 Plus	1024	6.6	6.6	100.0
	Total	15519	100.0	100.0	
Missing	System	2	.0		
Total		15521	100.0		

Figure 2. Binary Age Groups

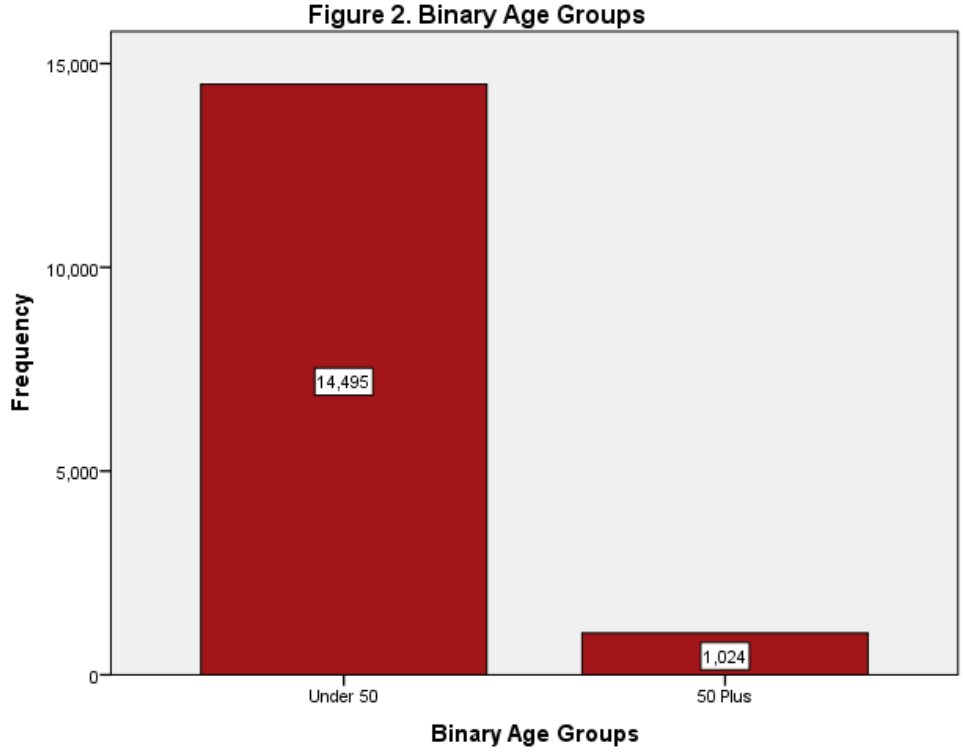


Table 3 and Figure 3 present the descriptive frequencies for each Volunteers' end code. The end code variable is binary, consisting of Volunteers that completed a full two years of

Peace Corps service (76.1%, n=11,818) and those that were separated from Peace Corps prior to completing the full two years of service (23.9%, n=3,703). Again, these two groups are substantially different in size, but both still contain a large enough number of cases on which to run statistical tests.

Table 3. Peace Corps Service End Code

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Completed Service	11818	76.1	76.1	76.1
	Separated from Service	3703	23.9	23.9	100.0
	Total	15521	100.0	100.0	

Figure 3. Peace Corps Service End Code

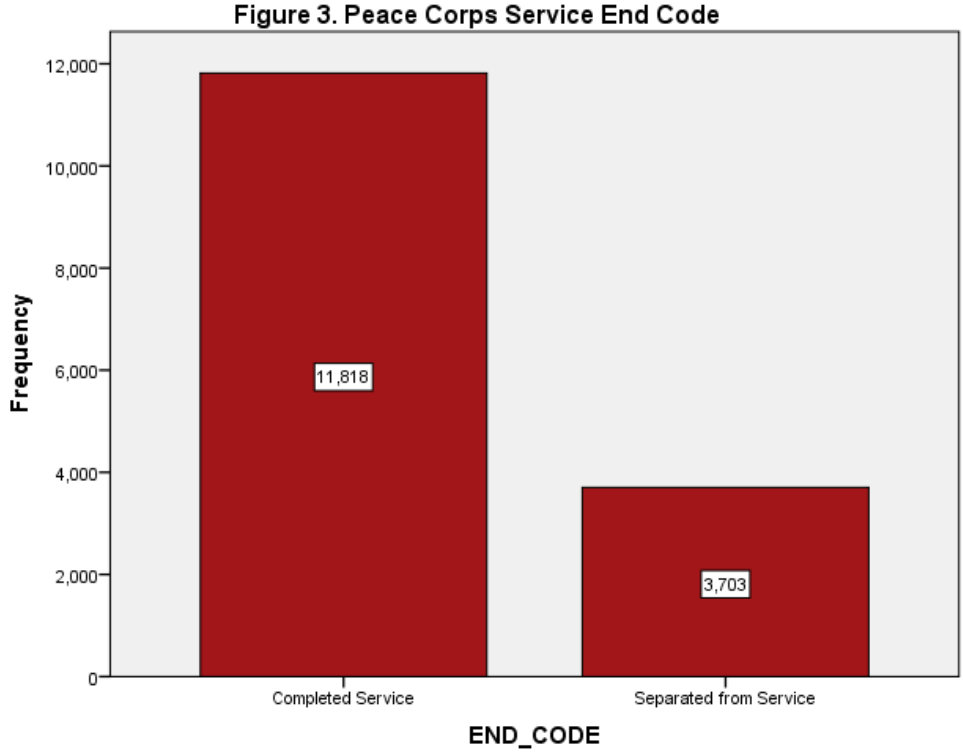


Table 4 and Figure 4 present the descriptive statistics for each Volunteers' length of service. In Figure 4, the histogram shows the wide range of time served in Peace Corps. The data in Table 4 shows us that the minimum number of days served was zero and the maximum was

2072, indicating that some Volunteers quit as soon as they stepped foot off the plane in their country of service and some Volunteers extended their service for a third, fourth, or even fifth year. The high standard deviation (s=262.2) reflects this wide range of time served. The mean number of days served is 703.6, which is approximately 26 days short of a full two years of service.

Figure 4. Length of Service

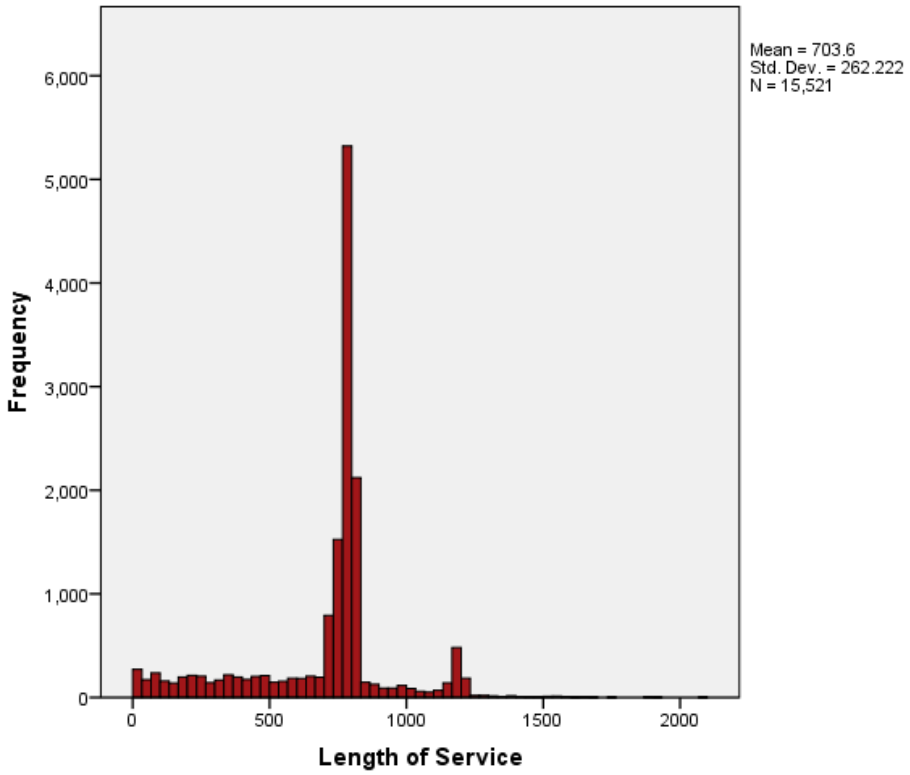


Table 4. Descriptive Statistics - Length of Service

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Length of Service	15521	0	2072	703.60	262.222
Valid N (listwise)	15521				

Chi-Square Test

Using the age group and end code variables, a chi-square test assessed the relationship between age group and early termination. A chi-square test is appropriate for these variables as there is a simple random sample of Peace Corps Volunteers, all individual expected counts are one or more, and no expected counts are less than five. Additionally, the variables are mutually exclusive and are categorical, making the chi-square test ideal for testing this relationship. As a reminder, the following hypotheses are being tested:

H_0: There is no relationship between early termination rates and age group

H_a: There is a relationship between early termination and age group

In Table 5, we see that there is a difference in the expected count from the observed count of early terminations of 164.8. At 1 degree of freedom, this difference leads to a high Pearson's x^2 statistic of 156.349, as seen in Table 6. The x^2 statistic gives us a p-value of <.001 at the α=0.05 level. This finding means we must reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternate hypothesis that there is a statistically significant relationship between age group and early termination.

Table 5. Binary Age Groups * END_CODE Crosstabulation

			END_CODE		
			Completed Service	Separated from Service	Total
Binary Age Groups	Under 50	Count	11203	3292	14495
		Expected Count	11038.2	3456.8	14495.0
		Residual	164.8	-164.8	
	Over 50	Count	615	409	1024
		Expected Count	779.8	244.2	1024.0
		Residual	-164.8	164.8	
Total		Count	11818	3701	15519
		Expected Count	11818.0	3701.0	15519.0

Table 6. Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	156.349[a]	1	.000		
Continuity Correction[b]	155.402	1	.000		
Likelihood Ratio	140.267	1	.000		
Fisher's Exact Test				.000	.000
N of Valid Cases	15519				

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 244.21.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

As the chi-square test only shows the probability of an existence of a relationship between age group and early termination from Peace Corps, further measures of association are necessary to measure the magnitude of this relationship. For the purposes of this study, the lambda measure was used, as we are interested in the affect that the nominal variable 'age group' has on the likelihood of the nominal variable 'early termination'. Table 7 shows us that the value of lambda is .000. Since lambda uses the scale 0-1, this indicates that there is no relationship between the two variables. This is surprising, as the x^2 statistic was quite high. However, the lambda measure is quite conservative, as it fears making a Type I error. The lambda measure shows that there is no improvement in predicting the dependent variable (end code) when we know the independent variable (age group). This makes sense, as even though the observed count of early terminations among the 50 plus age group was higher than the under 50 age group, there was still a large number in the 50 plus age group that completed their service. So predicting the end code from the age group will prove difficult or even impossible.

Table 7. Directional Measures

			Value	Asymptotic Standard Error[a]	Approximate T	Approximate Significance
Nominal by Nominal	Lambda	Symmetric	.000	.000	.[b]	.[b]
		Binary Age Groups Dependent	.000	.000	.[b]	.[b]
		END_CODE Dependent	.000	.000	.[b]	.[b]
	Goodman and Kruskal tau	Binary Age Groups Dependent	.010	.002		.000[c]
		END_CODE Dependent	.010	.002		.000[c]

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.

b. Cannot be computed because the asymptotic standard error equals zero.

c. Based on chi-square approximation

Since the lambda measure is so conservative, the Phi and Cramer's V values were calculated as well. These measures will not allow us to draw any directional conclusions about the two variables, but they will tell us the extent to which the two variables 'hang around together'. Table 8 shows us that the Phi and Cramer's V values are both .100. Again, this indicates that no relationship could be found between the two variables, and confirms the original findings from the lambda measure.

Table 8. Symmetric Measures[c]

		Value	Approximate Significance
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	.100	.000
	Cramer's V	.100	.000
N of Valid Cases		15519	

c. Correlation statistics are available for numeric data only.

Independent Samples t-test

Using the age group and length of service variables, an independent samples t-test was utilized to compare the mean lengths of service of the two age groups. An independent samples t-test is appropriate for these variables because there is a simple random sample of two distinct populations of Peace Corps Volunteers and the length of service variable is a continuous

variable. This makes the independent samples t-test ideal for comparing the two means. As a reminder, the following hypotheses are being tested:

H_0: $\mu_{50plus} = \mu_{Under\ 50}$

H_a: $\mu_{50plus} \neq \mu_{Under\ 50}$

As seen in Table 9, the mean length of service for Volunteers under 50 years of age is 708.3 days. This is actually five days longer than the mean for all Volunteers in the dataset, which Table 4 told us was 703.6 days. The mean length of service for Volunteers aged 50 and over is 637.7 days. This tells us that the Volunteers aged 50 and over served, on average, 70 fewer days than Volunteers under the age of 50.

Table 9. Group Statistics

	Binary Age Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Length of Service	Under 50	14495	708.34	257.246	2.137
	50 Plus	1024	637.68	316.625	9.895

To see if this difference in the means is significant, we look at the independent samples test table in Table 10. First, the significance value for Levene's test is less than 0.05, so we can not assume equal variances. Therefore, we use the second row of the table to answer our hypothesis. The p-value for our test is .000, indicating that the difference in the means is statistically significant. We can therefore reject the null hypothesis, and accept the alternate hypothesis that the mean lengths of service between the two age groups are not equal. This conclusion is strengthened by the 95% confidence interval of the differences, which ranges from a lower limit of 50.8 days to an upper limit of 90.5 days.

Table 10. Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Length of Service	Equal variances assumed	173.342	.000	8.353	15517	.000	70.652	8.458	54.073	87.231
	Equal variances not assumed			6.980	1120.463	.000	70.652	10.123	50.791	90.513

Conclusion

The purpose of this quantitative study was to explore the relationship between older Americans serving in the Peace Corps and their rate of early termination as well as their length of service. From the chi-square test, it was initially found that there is a statistically significant probability of the existence of a relationship between the Peace Corps service end code and the 50 plus and Under 50 age groups ($x^2 = 15.349$, p-value<.001). However, the lambda, Phi, and Cramer's V measures of association told us that no relationship existed. From this data, it can be concluded that Peace Corps is unable to predict a Volunteer's end code simply by looking at their age group. From the independent samples t-test, it was found that the difference between the mean lengths of service between the two age groups is statistically significant (mean difference = 70 days, p-value<.001). From this data, it can be concluded that Volunteers in the 50 plus age group will serve for 70 less days on average than Volunteers under the age of 50, and this difference is statistically significant.

For Peace Corps leadership, these findings indicate that they should continue to recruit older Americans that have shown an interest in sharing their experience and expertise as overseas Peace Corps Volunteers. However, the agency should also be prepared for these older Volunteers to not serve as long as their younger colleagues. This will affect progress towards the goals and objectives of each Peace Corps project, and may affect the relationship between Peace Corps and

the host communities in which these older Volunteers serve, as the community expects each Volunteer to serve a full two years.

It must be stated that this study has limitations. While a low early termination rate may be a good indicator of Volunteers' resiliency, the measure is not a direct indicator of the impact that Volunteers have on their communities. It is possible that ambitious, highly-skilled, productive, and effective older Peace Corps Volunteers may complete significant projects but still leave their service early. On the other hand, younger, less-skilled, less effective Volunteers may provide just adequate value to their communities, yet stay for the full two years of service. This study does not measure the quality of each age groups' contribution to their host community. This is an area that future researchers, particularly at Peace Corps, will want to pursue. Additionally, future studies should research the qualitative reasons why older Volunteers serve less than two years on average, so that Peace Corps leadership may use this information to inform their decisions on ways to better support older Volunteers during their service.

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