

Researchers Find Sustained Improvement In Health In Experience Corps Tutors Over 55

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Tutors over 55 who help young students on a regular basis experience positive physical and mental health outcomes, according to studies released by researchers at Washington University in St. Louis and Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. The tutors studied were members of Experience Corps, an award-winning organization that trains thousands of people over 55 to tutor children in urban public schools across the country.

Researchers at Washington University's Center for Social Development assessed the impact of the Experience Corps program on the lives of its members and found that, compared with adults of similar age, demographics and volunteer history, Experience Corps tutors reported improvements in mental health and physical functioning (including mobility, stamina and flexibility) and maintained overall health longer. In addition, Experience Corps members reported more physical activity, larger social networks and higher self-esteem as a result of their participation.

Other key findings:

- The comparison group's levels of depression and functional limitations increased over a two-year period, while Experience Corps members experienced a significant decrease in both of those categories.
- Both the comparison group and the Experience Corps group reported a decline in health over the two-year study period, but the Experience Corps members reported significantly less decline, suggesting that the program postpones age-related loss of health.
- After a year with Experience Corps, about two-thirds of the least active members reported that they became significantly more physically active and more engaged in social and community events.
- 84% of Experience Corps members report that their circle of friends a key measure of social well-being, particularly for aging adults increased as a result of their involvement in the program.
- 86% of Experience Corps members say their lives have improved because of their involvement with the program.

A separate study released in the March issue of the Journal of Gerontology by researchers at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine also found lasting, positive health impacts from participation in the program. The findings built on previous studies by the Hopkins researchers that have shown older adults who were physically inactive when they joined Experience Corps nearly doubled their activity level after just four to eight months of volunteering. The new Hopkins study found that for Experience Corps tutors in Baltimore primarily African-American women over 60 the women continued their increased level of activity for at least three years.

An earlier study, published by Johns Hopkins researchers in the Journal of Gerontology in January 2008, also found improvements in memory and executive function among Experience Corps tutors.

Lester Strong, CEO of Experience Corps, says the new research underscores the value of doing meaningful work in the second half of life. "Our members know that they are making a difference in the lives of students who desperately need academic help and encouragement. That keeps them going and healthy."

Experience Corps members are diverse in many ways.

-- Age: The average age of Experience Corps members is 65, but the age range of members in this study extends from 50 to 87.

-- Race: About half (53%) of Experience Corps members are African American; 39% are white.

-- Background: One-third of Experience Corps members have some higher education, and one in five is a retired educator (teacher, professor, administrator or classroom assistant).

-- Income: 20% of Experience Corps members earn less than \$15,000 per year, while 15% earn more than \$75,000 per year.

Washington University researchers also studied the impact of Experience Corps tutoring on students' reading ability. The results, which demonstrate significant, positive gains in student learning, will be made available in April.

About Experience Corps

Experience Corps (<http://www.experiencecorps.org>), an award-winning program, engages people over 55 in meeting their communities' greatest challenges. Today, in 23 cities across the country, 2,000 Experience Corps members tutor and mentor elementary school students struggling to learn to read. Independent research shows that Experience Corps boosts student academic performance, helps schools and youth-serving organizations become more successful, and enhances the well-being of the older adults in the process.

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About the Research

Nancy Morrow-Howell, the Ralph and Muriel Pumphrey Professor of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis, is the lead researcher for the studies of the impact of Experience Corps tutoring on students and members. For details, go to

<http://csd.wustl.edu/CivicEngagementService/SALC/Pages/OlderAdultService.aspx>. The Atlantic Philanthropies provided a two-year, \$2 million grant to Washington University in St. Louis to fund the studies of Experience Corps.

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