2013 Annual Volunteer Survey Report

Voice of the Volunteer

Office of Strategic Information, Research, and Planning

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Introduction

From June 10 to August 16, 2013, the Peace Corps conducted its *Annual Volunteer Survey*, the eighteenth survey of currently serving Volunteers. Peace Corps Volunteers serve abroad for two years, working directly with communities in 68 countries to build local capacity in a variety of areas ranging from agriculture to education. Since 1975, the *Annual Volunteer Survey* has been a unique source of information about Volunteer experiences and opinions and the status of the Peace Corps' operations for the agency, Congress, researchers, the media, and the general public. This year's results are based on responses from 5,913 Volunteers (91.6% response rate).

About this Report

This publication focuses primarily on two topics: 1) Volunteer effectiveness, as it has a major influence on the implementation of Peace Corps goals; and, 2) the overall Volunteer experience, as it influences the continuity of Peace Corps service. The respondent demographic profile is also discussed. Volunteer effectiveness and overall experience are key components of the full range of topics covered in the *2013 Annual Volunteer Survey*. Complete survey results summarizing all quantitative survey responses are available in the *2013 Annual Volunteer Survey Global Tabular Report* that is published at peacecorps.gov/open.

Key Findings

- For the past five years, perceived Volunteer effectiveness has increased at a steady pace. On average, Peace Corps Volunteers surveyed in 2013 considered themselves seven percent more effective than those surveyed in 2009.

- The strongest stand-alone drivers of Volunteer effectiveness were: 1) the amount of gain in their theoretical and practical knowledge through Peace Corps training and field experience; and, 2) ongoing Peace Corps support of work-related functions provided to Volunteers.

- Volunteers who reported higher levels of preparedness upon their initial arrival in the country of service showed significantly larger gains in theoretical and practical learning during Peace Corps training and service than those with lower levels of initial preparedness.

- Most of the demographic characteristics of Volunteers, including education level, experience abroad, or the Peace Corps region where they served did not significantly affect their perceived effectiveness.

- The majority of Volunteers (78%) considered Peace Corps service considerably or exceptionally rewarding. Volunteers who perceived themselves as highly effective were significantly more likely to feel good about their Peace Corps service than those who saw themselves as less effective.

Peace Corps Mission and Goals

The Peace Corps mission is to promote world peace and friendship through community-based development and cross-cultural exchange.[1] The agency's three goals[2] are:

1. Building Local Capacity: Advance local development by strengthening the capacity of local communities and individuals through the service of trained Volunteers.

2. Sharing America with the World: Promote a better understanding of Americans through Volunteers who live and work within local communities.

3. Bringing the World Back Home: Increase Americans' awareness and knowledge of other cultures and global issues through Volunteers who share their Peace Corps experiences and continue to serve upon their return.

Method

The 2013 survey was conducted online using an anonymous self-administered questionnaire distributed to Volunteers through their posts. All Volunteers who had served for one month or longer at the time of survey administration were invited to participate. The findings presented in this report are based on responses from Volunteers who chose to participate and completed the online questionnaire.

Data for this publication were analyzed using specialized software packages for statistical analysis and for qualitative data analysis. Multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to identify the most important drivers of the studied outcomes (Volunteer effectiveness and the overall Volunteer experience); and factor analysis[3] was used to identify natural groupings of data based on the underlying relationships. All findings discussed in this report are statistically significant ($\alpha = 0.05$).

Year-to-year comparisons presented in this report are based on data from recurring cross-sectional surveys (with different respondents each year) rather than longitudinal surveys (same respondents each year).

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[1] Peace Corps. "Strategic Plan FY 2014–2018 and Annual Performance Plan FY 2014–2015," 2014. http://files.peacecorps.gov/multimedia/pdf/policies/pc_strategic_plan_2014-2018.pdf (accessed March 21, 2014).

[2] These goals are consistent with the Peace Corps Act (1961) which articulates three core goals that contribute to the Peace Corps mission of world peace and friendship: (1) To help the people of interested countries in meeting their need for training men and women; (2) To help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served; and (3) To help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans. These three core goals continue to serve as the foundation for Peace Corps' approach to development.

[3] Principal component analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation.

Peace Corps Volunteers: Respondent Profile

For more than 50 years, Americans with a variety of backgrounds and skills have chosen to become Peace Corps Volunteers. Their physical, intellectual, and experiential diversity reflects the rich multicultural heritage of the United States and contributes to achieving Peace Corps goals, especially with regard to promoting a better understanding of Americans in the countries where Volunteers live and work.

In 2013, the typical Volunteer who responded to the survey was 25 years old, held a bachelor's degree, and had served for fourteen months. By age, respondents represented four generations, from Traditionalists to Millennials (Figure 1.1), bringing their unique characteristics and values to Peace Corps service.

Figure 1.1. Volunteer Generational Groups[4]
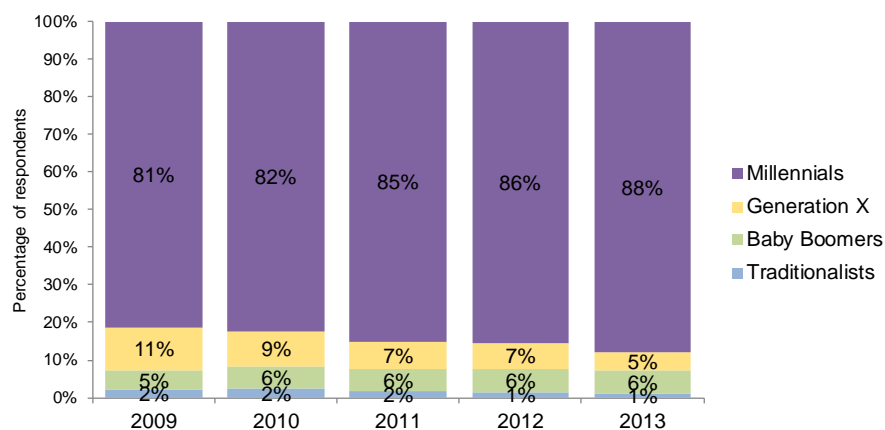
This chart shows the distribution of responses to the question "What is your age in years?" Notably, there is a continuously growing proportion of Millennials and a diminishing proportion of Generation X.

Base: 2009 (n = 4,652); 2010 (n = 5,166); 2011 (n = 6,808); 2012 (n = 6,318); 2013 (n = 5,477).

Survey respondents reflected the Peace Corp Volunteers' overall composition by gender—63 percent female and 37 percent male (Figure 1.2). Since the majority of Volunteers are recent college graduates, many demographic trends mirror those of college graduates. For example, through the 1980s, the Peace Corps had a predominantly male Volunteer population until a higher proportion of females began to enter service in the 1990s and 2000s. This shift reflected the growing percentage of females among U.S. college graduates during the same time frame.

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[4] Traditionalists born in 1900–1945 (age in 2013: >68 years); Baby Boomers born in 1946–1964 (age 49–67); Generation X born in 1965–1980 (age 33–48); Millennials born in 1981–2000 (32 years of age or younger).

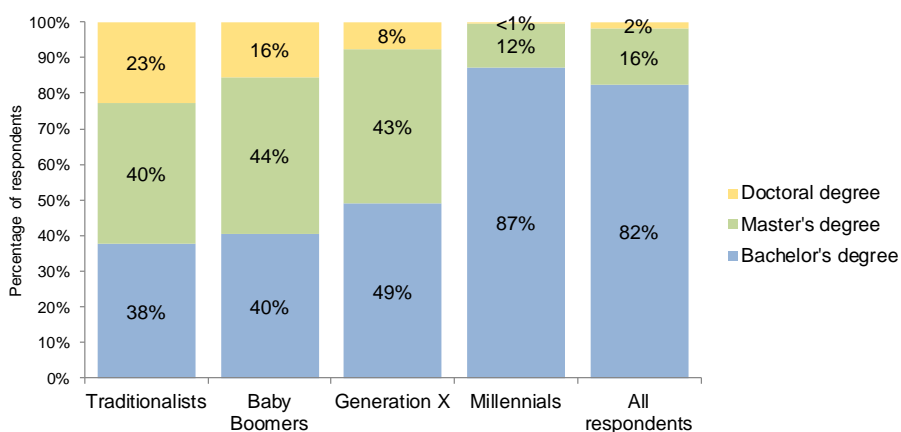## Figure 1.2. Volunteer Gender by Generational Group
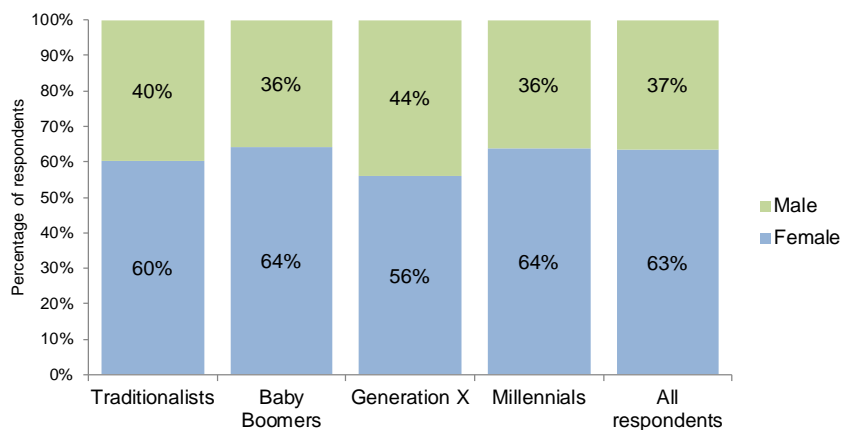
This chart shows the distribution of responses to the question "Are you female or male?" based on data from the 2013 survey. Respondents who selected "Prefer not to say" (n = 128) are not included. Notably, the proportion of males is the highest among Gen X Volunteers.

Base: n = 5,423.

It is not surprising that older generations of Volunteers have achieved higher educational levels. For example, more than half of older generations (51% or more) reported having attained post-graduate degrees compared with only 13 percent of Millennials (Figure 1.3).

## Figure 1.3. Volunteer Education by Generational Group

This chart shows the distribution of responses to the question "What is the highest level of education you completed to date?" based on data from the 2013 survey. Thirty respondents with less than a bachelor's degree and 26 respondents who selected "other" are excluded. The older the generation, the higher the level of education attained.

Base: n = 5,428.

While survey respondents were comprised of predominantly white non-Hispanic Volunteers (77%, Figure 1.4), the proportion of racial and ethnic minorities, at 23 percent in 2013, has increased over the past decades reflecting similar trends in the diversity of U.S. college graduates.

Figure 1.4. Volunteer Race by Generational Group
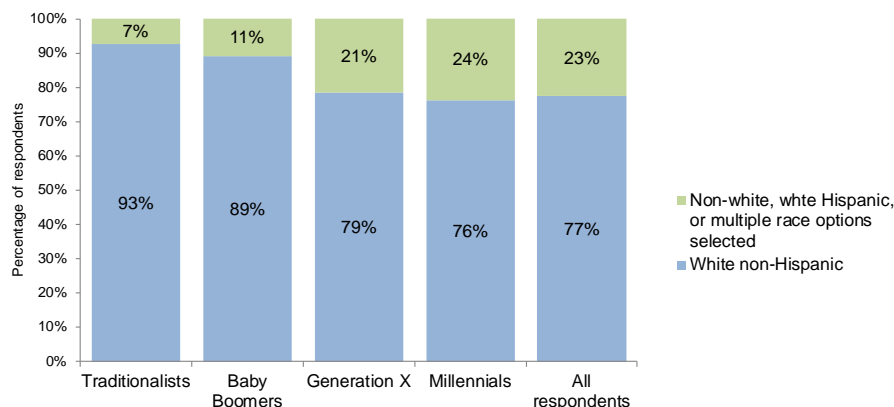
This chart shows a combined distribution of responses to the questions "What is your race?" and "Are you Hispanic or Latino?" based on data from the 2013 survey. Respondents who replied "Prefer not to answer" (n = 424) are excluded. The younger the generation, the more diverse the Volunteers.

Base: n = 5,252.

Previous Experience

Each generation brings unique perspectives, experience, and skills to their service. Overall, three in four Volunteers (76%) lived or studied overseas prior to Peace Corps service (Figure 1.5). One in three Volunteers (32%) felt that they were considerably or exceptionally prepared for service before they began training (Figure 1.6).

Figure 1.5. Living Abroad by Generational Group
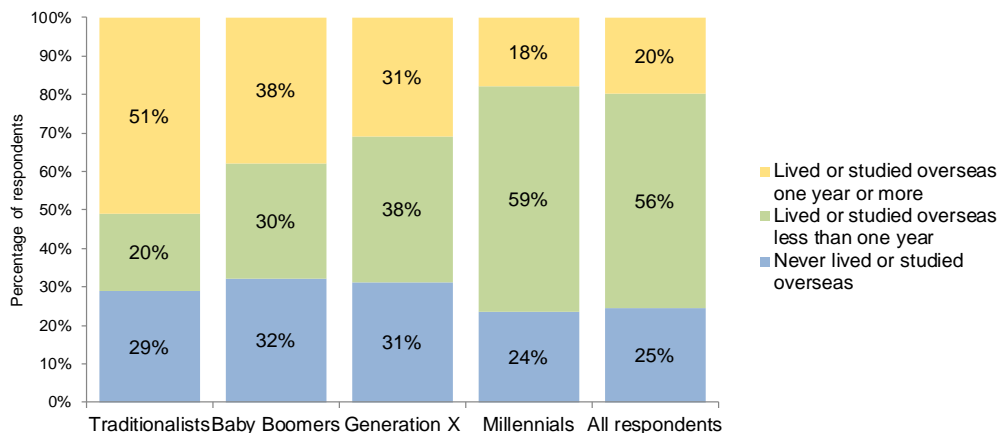
This chart shows the distribution of responses to the question "Prior to your Peace Corps service, how long did you live or study in another country?" based on data from the 2013 survey. Although Millennials were more likely to study or live overseas, older generations who lived or studied overseas spent a longer period of time abroad.

Base: n = 5,463.

Figure 1.6. Level of Preparedness by Generational Group

Figure 1.6. Level of Preparedness by Generational Group
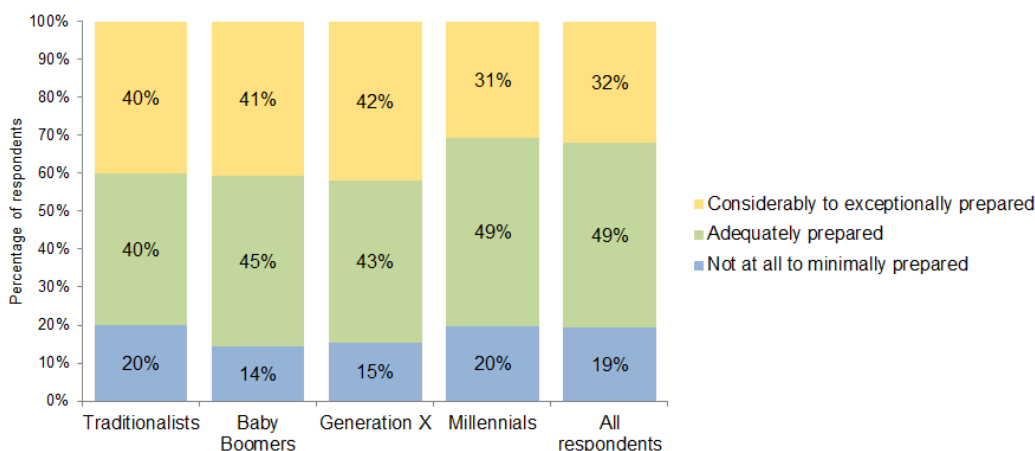
This chart shows the distribution of responses to the question "How prepared for Peace Corps service did you feel when you arrived in country?" based on data from the 2013 survey. Baby Boomers felt most prepared and Millennials felt least prepared among generational groups.

Base: n = 5,464.

Living Conditions

In the Peace Corps, Volunteers live in a variety of communities, from remote islands to capital cities, with varied levels of urbanization (Figure 1.7). As expected, respondents' accommodations and residential amenities varied depending on the level of urbanization in the community to which they were assigned (Figure 1.8).
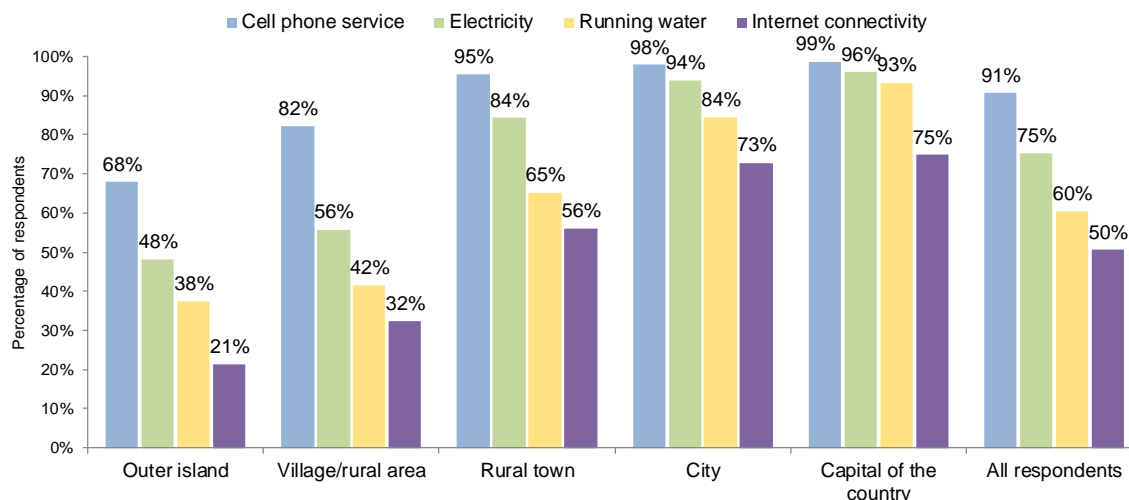
Figure 1.7. Site Urbanization
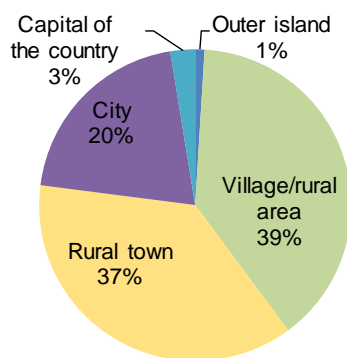
This chart shows the distribution of responses to the question "Please choose the best description of your assigned site" based on data from the 2013 survey. Most respondents lived and worked in rural areas, either in a village or in a rural town.

Base: n = 5,899.

Figure 1.8. Daily Access to Amenities at Residence by Level of Site Urbanization

This chart shows the distribution of responses to the question "How often do you have access to the following services at your residence? (electricity, running water, internet connectivity, cell phone service)" based on data from the 2013 survey. Regardless of their location, Volunteers were most likely to have daily access to cell phone service and least likely to have daily access to Internet at their residence.

Base: Cell phone service (n = 5,786); electricity (n = 5,803); running water (n = 5,785); Internet connectivity (n = 5,773).

Work

In partnership with local governments, nongovernmental organizations, and community leaders, Volunteers work in six major sectors: education, health, community economic development, environment, youth in development, and agriculture. In addition to their primary project work, many Volunteers are involved in secondary projects or community service activities. In 2013, survey respondents worked on average 33 hours per week with approximately 70 percent of that time dedicated to primary project work and 30 percent to secondary activities or community service (Figure 1.9). While there was little difference in the average number of work hours between Volunteers who were based in rural areas and those who were based in urban areas, the small share of respondents who lived in country capitals (3%, Figure 1.7) worked significantly more hours than Volunteers at other types of sites.

Figure 1.9. Average Hours of Work per Week, by Site Urbanization
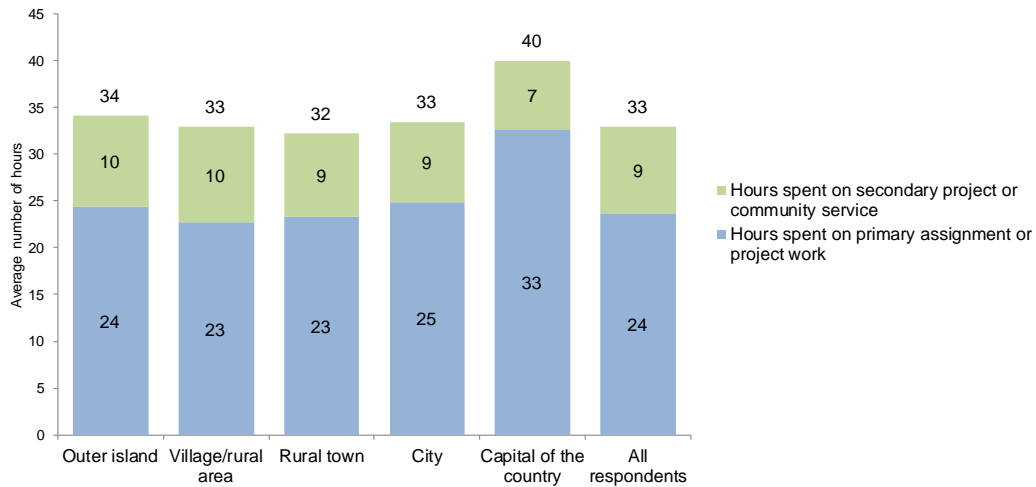
This chart shows the distribution of responses to the questions "How many hours do you spend on your primary assignment/project work during an average work week?" and "How many hours do you spend on your secondary project or community service during an average work week" based on data from the 2013 survey.

Base: n = 5,836.

Key Takeaways

1. Survey respondents represented four generations of Americans, but were primarily Millennials. Most demographic characteristics varied by generational group.

2. Overall demographic trends of the Volunteer population reflected those of recent U.S. college graduates.

3. Respondents worked on average 33 hours per week, with approximately 70 percent of their time dedicated to primary project work.

4. Respondents lived in a variety of communities, from remote islands to capital cities, with varied levels of urbanization. Most Volunteers had cell phone service.

Volunteer Effectiveness

The work of the Volunteers advances the Peace Corps mission of promoting world peace and friendship through community-based development and cross-cultural understanding.[5] These individuals dedicate two or more years of their lives to serving in some of the most underdeveloped parts of the world, and the success of the program in each country depends largely on how well these Volunteers perform their jobs and the results they achieve.

The first of the three goals articulated in the Peace Corps Act of 1961—helping the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women[6]—broadly defines the scope of Volunteer work as transferring knowledge and skills to host country individuals and organizations. Volunteers primarily accomplish this goal through project work in six major sectors: agriculture, environment, health, education, community economic development, and youth in development. As in any workplace where more effective employees achieve better results, more effective Volunteers in the field should make a greater contribution to the realization of Peace Corps goals.

Measuring Effectiveness

Volunteer effectiveness is measured here as the combination of Volunteer perceptions regarding how well they transfer knowledge and skills to four groups of host country beneficiaries: counterparts, host organizations, other groups with which Volunteers work closely, and members of host communities. If Volunteers reported they were not at all effective in transferring knowledge and skills to all four groups, they are assigned the lowest rating on the combined effectiveness scale. Conversely, if Volunteers reported being exceptionally effective in transferring knowledge and skills to all four groups, they are assigned the highest value on the combined effectiveness measure (Figure 2.1). Self-assessment of effectiveness is only an approximate measure of actual effectiveness because it reflects respondents' perception of reality, as well as their point of reference when they respond to the survey—short-term versus long-term reflection.

For the purposes of this report, Volunteers are categorized into four groups by their perceived effectiveness scores: approximately one-fourth of Volunteers with the highest scores will be referred to as high or top performers, and one-fourth of those with the lowest perceived effectiveness scores will be referred to as low performers.[7] On average, the perceived effectiveness of top performers was more than double that of the low performers.

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[5] Peace Corps. "Strategic Pan FY 2014–2018 and Annual Performance Plan FY 2014–2015," 2014.
http://files.peacecorps.gov/multimedia/pdf/policies/pc_strategic_plan_2014-2018.pdf (accessed March 21, 2014).
[6] Peace Corps Act of 1961, Public Law 87-293, 75 Stat. 612.
http://research.archives.gov/description/299874 (accessed January 10, 2014).
[7] The terms "top performers" and "low performers" used throughout this publication do not necessarily mean that self-rated effectiveness is highly correlated with actual effectiveness (which could be measured by knowledge gained or behavioral changes of beneficiaries) as analysis of that relationship was outside of the scope of this study.

Figure 2.1. Volunteer Self-Rated Effectiveness Distribution

Raw values
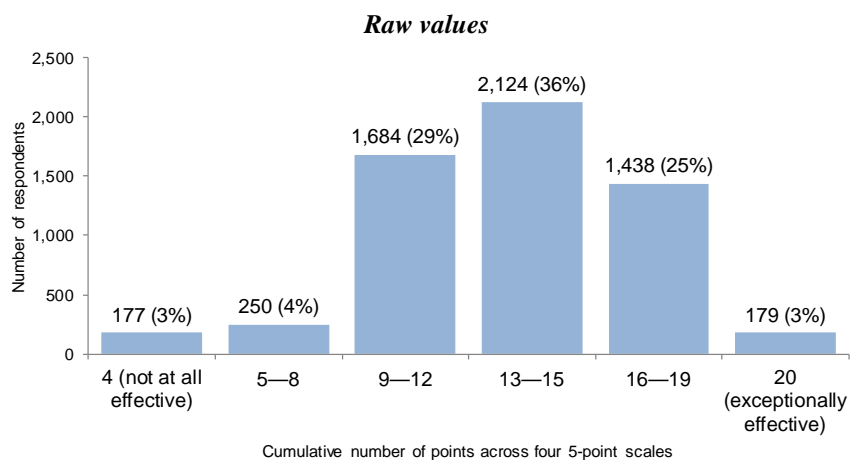
Raw score: mean = 13.6; standard deviation = 2.3; median = 14.0.

Indexed values (0–100)
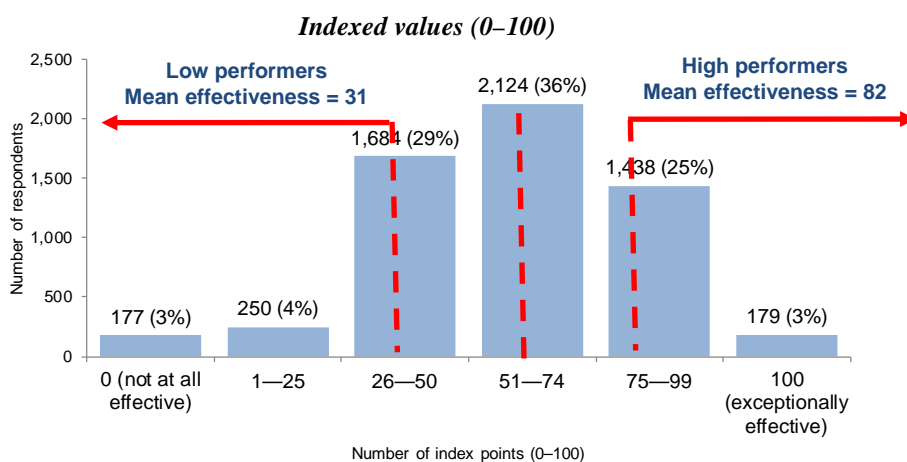
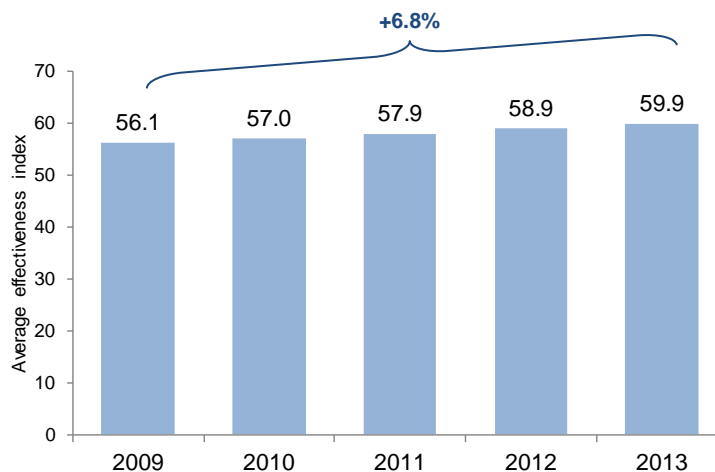Indexed score: mean = 59.9; standard deviation = 20.2; median = 62.5

This chart shows a composite scale distribution based on the following four questions related to Goal One "Overall, in all of your activities and interactions, how effective are you in transferring knowledge and skills to help the following individuals and organizations build their capacities? (Your counterpart/community partner; Your host institution/organization; Members of your host community; and, The group with which you work most closely)" based on data from the 2013 survey. The composite scale has high reliability (Chronbach's alpha = 0.83).

Base: n = 5,852.

For the past five years, Volunteer self-rated effectiveness has increased at a steady pace (Figure 2.2). On average, Volunteers surveyed in 2013 perceived themselves as seven percent more effective than those surveyed in 2009.
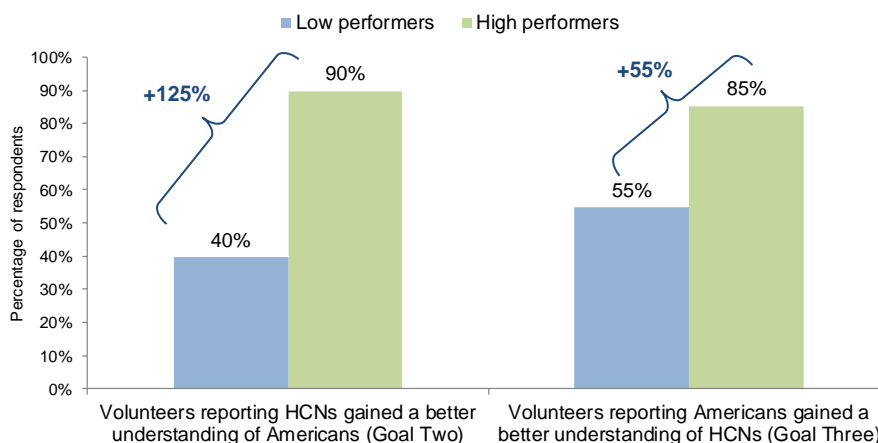
Figure 2.2. Average Volunteer Self-Rated Effectiveness, 2009–2013

Figure 2.2. Average Volunteer Self-Rated Effectiveness, 2009–2013

+6.8%

(bar chart showing average effectiveness index by year: 2009 = 56.1; 2010 = 57.0; 2011 = 57.9; 2012 = 58.9; 2013 = 59.9. Y-axis labeled "Average effectiveness index" from 0 to 70.)

This chart shows the average effectiveness index score. Perceived Volunteer effectiveness has increased at a steady pace since 2009.

Base: 2009 (n = 4,656); 2010 (n = 5,041); 2011 (n = 6,752); 2012 (n = 6,263); 2013 (n = 5,852).

Effective Volunteers were better equipped to advance all three Peace Corps goals. Although Volunteer effectiveness was measured directly only in relation to Goal One (Building Local Capacity), highly effective Volunteers also reported that they successfully advanced Goals Two (Sharing America with the World) and Three (Bringing the World Back Home). A significant increase in the likelihood of achieving Peace Corps goals is a clear benefit of improving Volunteer effectiveness (Figure 2.3).

Figure 2.3. Peace Corps Goal Implementation by Volunteer Effectiveness Group

■ Low performers ■ High performers

(bar chart with Y-axis "Percentage of respondents" from 0% to 100%. Volunteers reporting HCNs gained a better understanding of Americans (Goal Two): Low performers = 40%, High performers = 90%, +125%. Volunteers reporting Americans gained a better understanding of HCNs (Goal Three): Low performers = 55%, High performers = 85%, +55%.)

This chart shows the distribution of responses to the following two questions based on data from the 2013 survey: "Based on all of your activities and interactions with host country nationals, to what extent have host country individuals gained a better understanding of Americans?"; and "Based on your activities and interactions with Americans during your Peace Corps services, to what extent have these Americans gained a better understanding of the people of your host country?" It should be noted that high effectiveness of Volunteers in achieving Goal One is closely associated with Volunteers' perceptions of their results in implementing Goals Two and Three.

While all three measures related to Goals One, Two, and Three are closely associated, the reader should note that this could be based on two possibilities. On the one hand, greater success in achieving one of the goals may influence the other two. On the other hand, respondents may have a general propensity to provide consistently positive or negative responses regardless of the subject area. For example: Volunteers who are successful in accomplishing Goal One may be able to accomplish Goals Two and Three well because their communities consider them valuable members; or, the close association between three self-assessments (Goal One, Two, and Three) may reflect respondents' tendency to think highly about all aspects of their work and life.

Theoretical Model of Volunteer Effectiveness

If higher Volunteer effectiveness results in a higher level of achievement of Peace Corps goals, it is important to identify specific areas for improvement, which are likely to yield the greatest increases in effectiveness. Based on existing knowledge and understanding of the Peace Corps experience, a theoretical model of potential factors that may impact Volunteer effectiveness was developed (Figure 2.4).

In keeping with the model, this section examines how three groups of factors influence Volunteer effectiveness. These factors include: 1) demographics, including certain personal demographics and experience as well as organizational characteristics and resources; 2) ongoing support from the Peace Corps, including training; and, 3) external factors, such as country development rankings or site safety. Throughout this section, the group of Volunteers with high self-rated effectiveness levels (high performers) is compared to the group of Volunteers with low self-rated effectiveness levels (low performers). A larger difference between the groups would determine potentially strong drivers of Volunteer effectiveness, while a smaller or no difference would identify weak drivers or those that do not matter.

Lastly, all potentially strong drivers of Volunteer effectiveness are included in the empirical model to determine their relative importance while accounting for the interaction among the drivers.

Figure 2.4. Volunteer Effectiveness Model

This chart shows a theoretical relationship between inputs that could potentially influence Volunteer effectiveness (certain personal and institutional characteristics, Peace Corps support, and external environmental factors [political, economic, and social]) and the main result influenced by Volunteer effectiveness—achieving Peace Corps goals. This model was empirically tested using the survey data.
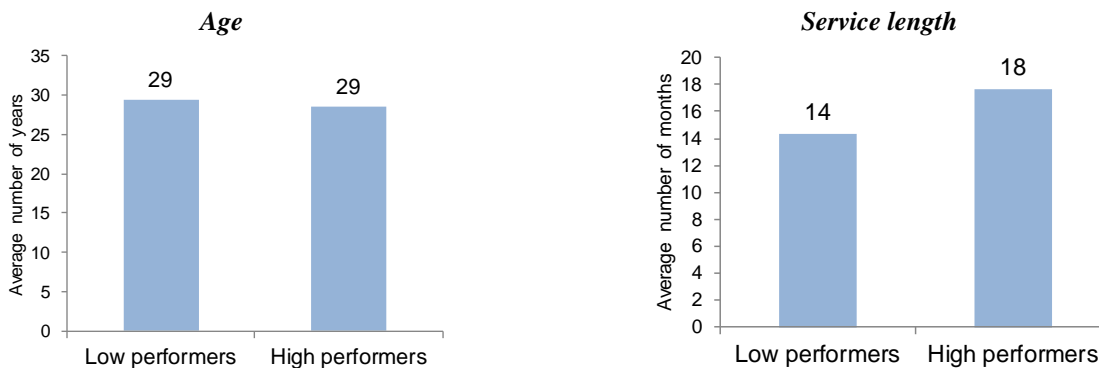
Effective Volunteers

The survey results show that personal demographic characteristics, such as age or gender, have almost no influence on how effective Volunteers feel about the way in which they are performing their Peace Corps job (Figure 2.5). No difference in effectiveness was observed in terms of the education level (bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degrees), prior experience abroad (length of living or studying in another country), or the Peace Corps region where Volunteers served. As expected, the longer Volunteers are at their site, the more effective they feel. However, the magnitude of this difference between high and low performers—four months on average—is moderate.

Figure 2.5. Selected Volunteer Demographic Characteristics by Volunteer Effectiveness Group
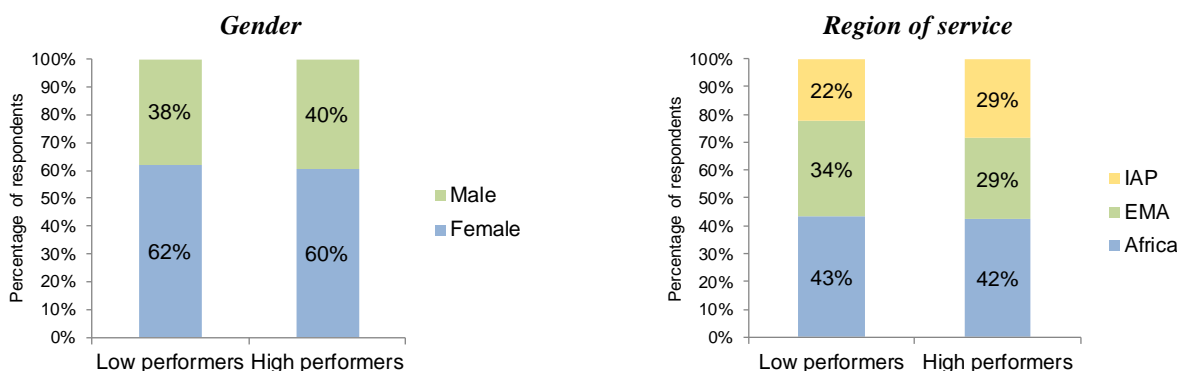
Gender

This chart shows the distribution of Volunteers by gender between low and high effectiveness groups. The proportion of males and females is comparable between the two groups.
Base: low performers (n = 1,221); high performers (n = 1,595).

Region of service

This chart shows the distribution of Volunteers by Peace Corps region between low and high effectiveness groups. The regional distribution is comparable between the two groups.
Base: low performers (n = 1,221); high performers (n = 1,595).

Age

This chart shows that the average age of Volunteers in the low and high effectiveness groups is the same.
Base: low performers (n = 1,113); high performers (n = 1,480).

Service length

This chart shows the average number of months served for low and high effectiveness groups. High performers have served four months longer, on average.
Base: low performers (n = 1,221); high performers (n = 1,595).

Volunteer perceptions regarding their level of preparedness for Peace Corps service, on the other hand, does differentiate between low and high performers. Two in five top-performing Volunteers (40%) reported that they were considerably or exceptionally prepared for service when they arrived in their host country, compared with a quarter (26%) of low-performing Volunteers (Figure 2.6). Furthermore, Volunteers with

higher levels of initial preparedness showed significantly larger gains in theoretical and practical learning as demonstrated by their reported level of preparedness at the time they responded to the survey. Whereas the proportion of low-performing Volunteers who felt considerably or exceptionally prepared for service increased by 69% from the initial level (from 26% to 44%), that same proportion more than doubled for high-performing Volunteers (from 40% to 87%). In brief, Volunteers who felt somewhat more prepared when they arrived in their host country learned more from their training and field experience and saw themselves as significantly more effective than those Volunteers who arrived feeling less prepared.

Figure 2.6. Level of Service Preparedness by Volunteer Effectiveness Group
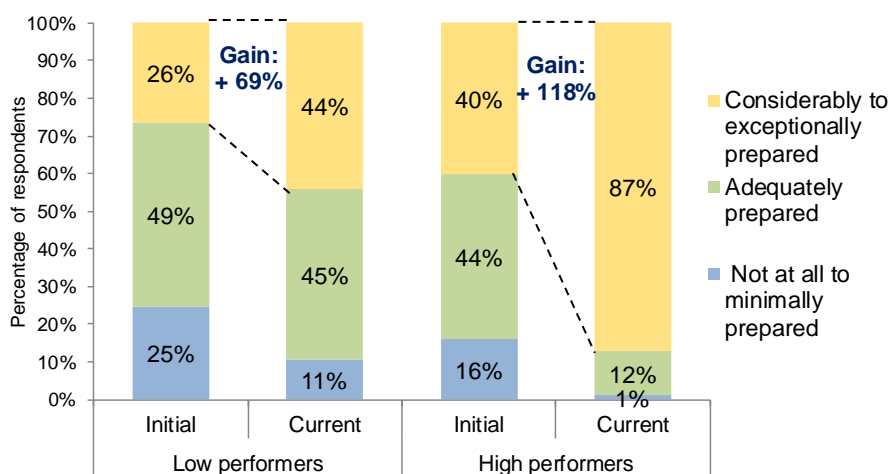
This chart shows the distribution of responses to questions "How prepared for Peace Corps service did you feel when you arrived in country?" and "In general, how prepared do you feel today to meet the challenges of Peace Corps service?" for low and top performers based on data from the 2013 survey. Respondents in the top-performing group felt more prepared initially and reported a significantly larger gain in theoretical and practical learning compared to the low-performing group.

Base: low performers (n = 1,218); high performers (n = 1,591).

The level of Volunteer preparedness upon arrival in the country of service could be driven by multiple factors, ranging from innate self-confidence to Peace Corps pre-departure resources (including information and training materials). A better understanding of why some Volunteers feel more prepared initially and the larger implications of the level of preparedness (on the applicant selection process, for example) are subjects for future research.

## Organizational Resources and External Environment

Organizational-level factors such as post size, program funds, and operational maturity (as measured by the number of years of continuous post operations in the host country) had a very small impact on Volunteer effectiveness. For example, there was a less than 10 percent difference (8%) in available program funds between high- and low-performing Volunteers' posts (Figure 2.7). External environments of host countries,

as measured by the United Nation's Human Development Index,[8] were comparable for high and low performers.

Figure 2.7. Selected Post Demographic Characteristics by Volunteer Effectiveness Group

Size
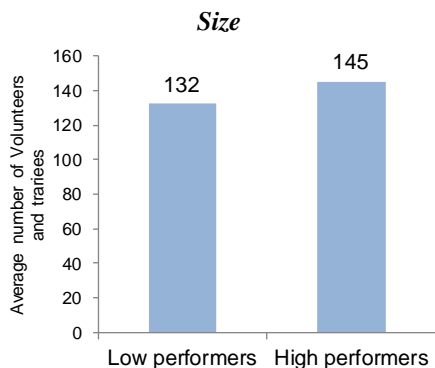
This chart shows the average number of Volunteers and trainees at posts where low- and high-performing Volunteers served. On average, post where high performers served were 10% larger in terms of the Volunteer population.
Source: Peace Corps Congressional Budget Justification Fiscal Year 2014.

Length of continuous operations
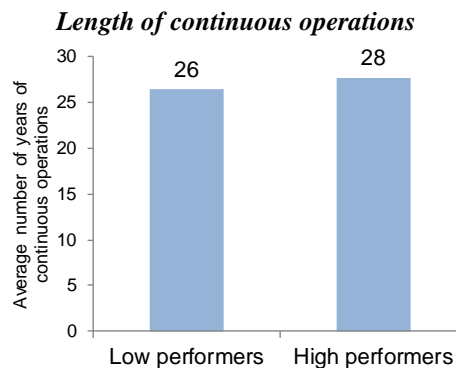
This chart shows the average number of years of continuous operations at posts where low- and high-performing Volunteers served. On average, post where high performers served had been in operation two years longer.
Source: Peace Corps Congressional Budget Justificatoin Fiscal Year 2014.
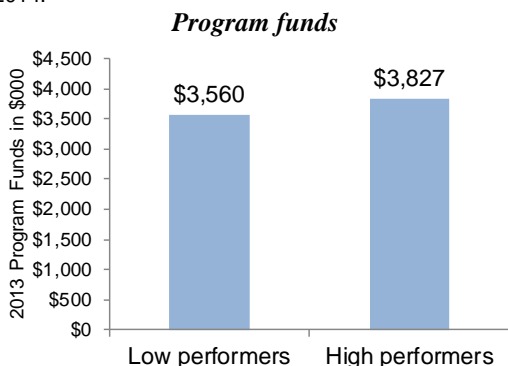
Program funds

This chart shows the average amount of program funds available at posts where low- and high-perfoming respondents served. On average, posts where high performing respondents were located had 8% more funds available.
Source: Peace Corps Congressional Budget Justification Fiscal Year 2014.

Country human development rank
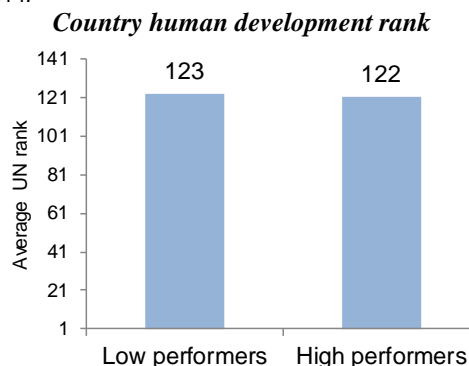
This chart shows the average human development rank of countries where low- and high-perfoming respondents served based on the UN's 2012 Human Development Index. The rankings are comparable between the two groups.
Source: 2013 Human Development Report, United Nations, http://hdr.undp.org/en/data.

Base: low performers (n = 1,221); high performers (n = 1,595); posts (n = 63).

Peace Corps Drivers of Effectiveness

To ensure that Volunteers effectively perform their jobs, the Peace Corps provides them with extensive training and ongoing work support in a variety of areas, in addition to pre-departure training materials. Additionally, the Peace Corps helps Volunteers maintain their safety, security, and physical and emotional

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[8] United Nations Development Programme. "Human Development Report 2013. The Rise of the South: Human Progress in a Diverse World," March 2013.
http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/hdr/human-development-report-2013 (accessed January 10, 2014).

health. Understanding which factors have the greatest influence on Volunteers' perceptions of their effectiveness can be used to inform the allocation of resources in order to strengthen the impact of Volunteers' work in host countries.

Training

Peace Corps training is typically conducted in two stages: upon Volunteers' arrival in the host country (pre-service training) and after several months of service at their assigned site (in-service training). Training covers four broad areas: language learning, cultural adjustment, technical skills, and maintaining well-being (including health and safety and security). Across the four broad subject areas, Volunteers consistently rated training to maintain their well-being as the most effective and technical skills training as least effective over the past five years, on average (Figure 2.8). Technical training, which includes technical aspects of work, conducting a community needs assessment, working on project goals and objectives, and monitoring and evaluating project goals and outcomes, showed the least gain in training effectiveness ratings as reflected in Volunteer assessments from 2009 to 2013.

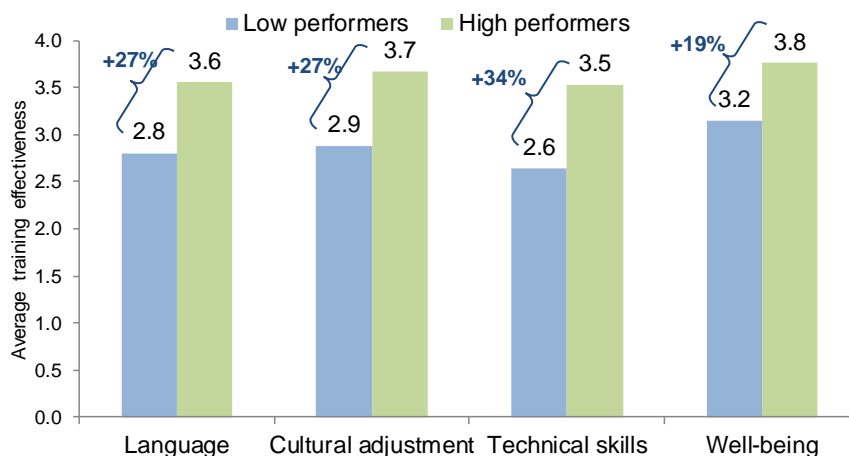Figure 2.8. Average Training Effectiveness by Broad Subject Area, 2009–2013
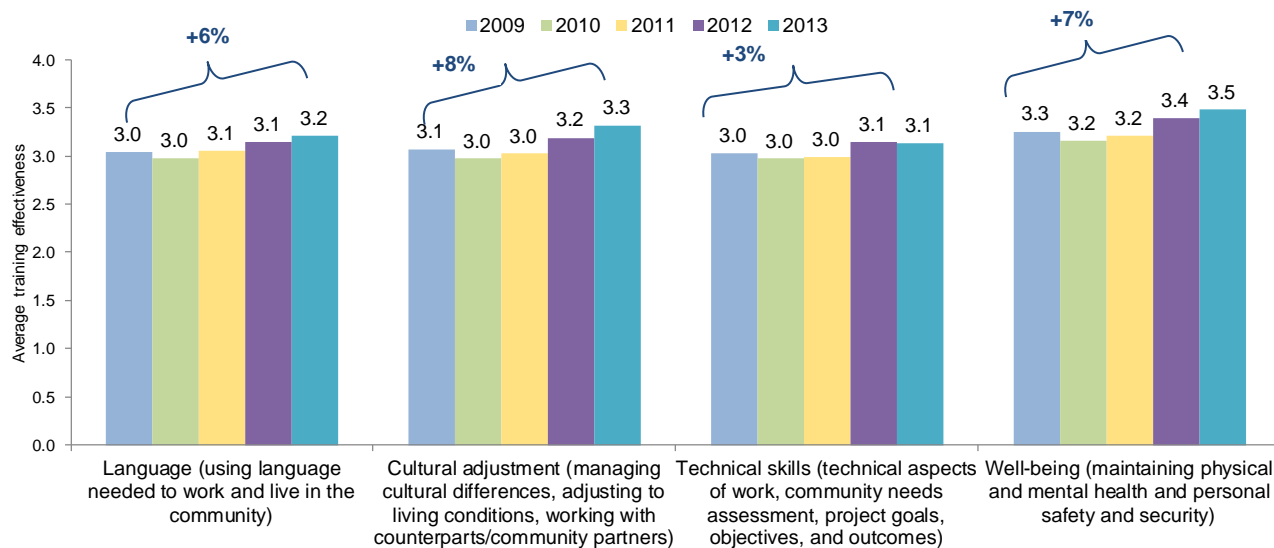
This chart shows average ratings (1 = not effective; 5 = very effective; 0 = no training or no response) based on responses to questions "Please evaluate the effectiveness of your Pre-Service Training/In-Service Training in preparing you to adjust to your host country" and "Please evaluate the effectiveness of your Pre-Service Training /In-Service Training in preparing you for your project/primary assignment work." For this analysis, a Volunteer is considered fully trained after having completed all training modules in both pre-service and in-service training. Individuals who may not have taken one of the training types or did not remember it well enough to provide an assessment were assigned zero values.

Base: 2009 (n = 4,851); 2010 (n = 5,239); 2011 (n = 6,898); 2012 (n = 6,402); 2013 (n = 5,913).

Compared to the other types of training studied, however, technical skills training was the principal differentiator between the low- and high-performing Volunteers (Figure 2.9).

Figure 2.9. Training Effectiveness by Volunteer Effectiveness Group

This chart shows average training effectiveness ratings (1 = not effective; 5 = very effective; 0 = no training or no response) for low- and high-performing respondents based on data from the 2013 survey. The magnitude of difference in the average ratings is the largest for training components related to technical skills, and the smallest for training components related to skills in the maintenance of well-being. While all training types show a difference in self-rated effectiveness, the well-being training seems to differentiate less than other types of training.

Base: n = 5,913.

Ongoing Staff Support

At the time of the 2013 survey, the Peace Corps conducted overseas operations in 68 countries managed by 64 posts. Staff members at each post ranged from a country director, who managed all aspects of post operations, to employees in administrative and maintenance support functions. On average, 50 employees worked at an overseas post in 2013.

Overall, of the nine types of support surveyed, Volunteers were most satisfied with Peace Corps safety and security and medical support and least satisfied with support related to their work, (Figure 2.10). However, the largest difference in the average satisfaction with Peace Corps support between top performers and low performers was in the area of job assignment support (36% difference), followed by site selection and preparation support (32% difference). The smallest difference was observed in Volunteer average satisfaction levels with medical (8%) and safety and security (9%) support, which may be explained by the fact that almost everyone is satisfied with this type of support.

Figure 2.10. Satisfaction with Peace Corps Support Functions by Volunteer Effectiveness Group

Individual functions
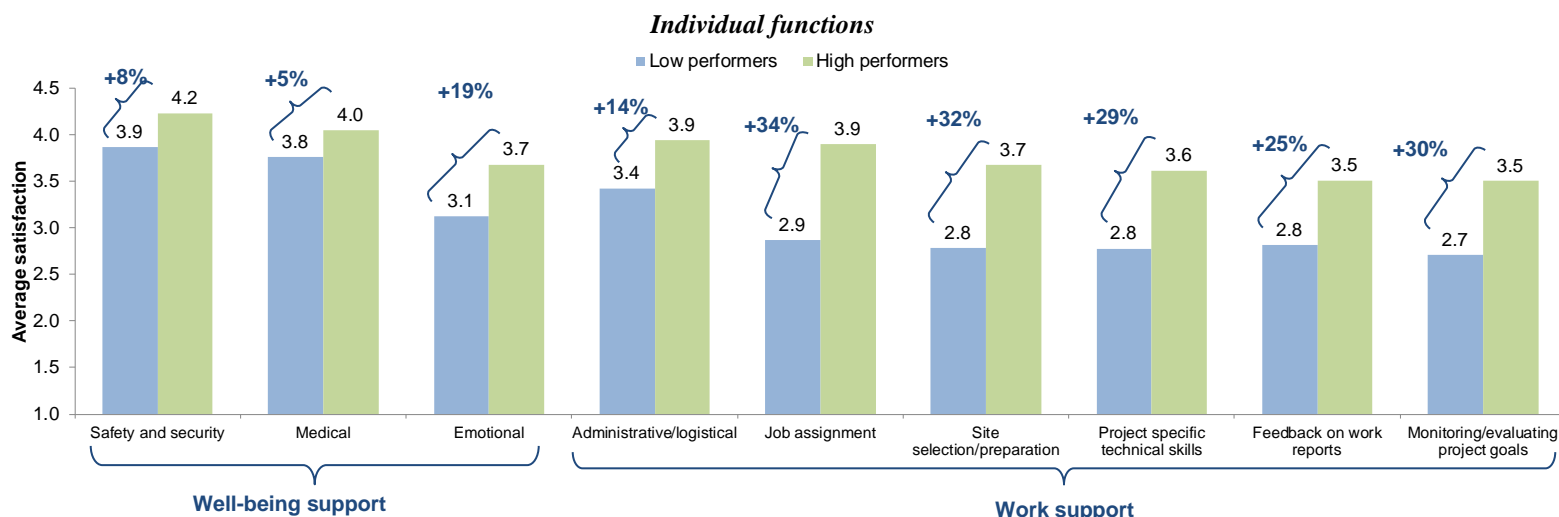
This chart shows average satisfaction ratings (1 = minimally satisfied; 5 = exceptionally satisfied) for low- and high-performing respondents based on data from the 2013 survey. The magnitude of difference in average ratings is the largest for support functions related to work, and the smallest for functions related to well-being.

Groups of functions
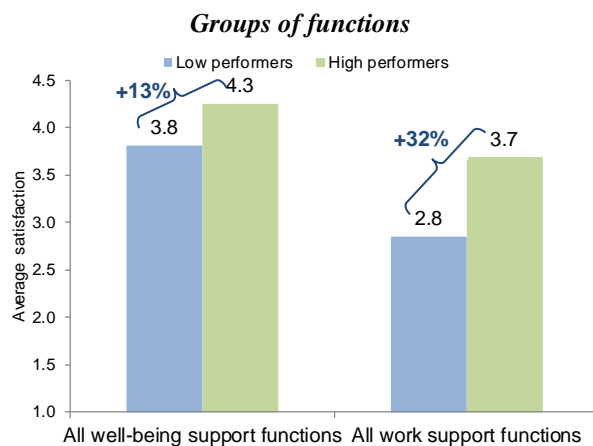
This chart shows average combined satisfaction ratings (1 = minimally satisfied; 5 = exceptionally satisfied) for low- and high-performing respondents based on data from the 2013 survey. The magnitude of difference in average ratings for combined well-being support functions is smaller than that for combined work support functions.

Base: n = 5,913.

Site Readiness

The Peace Corps works with host country governments and local communities to select potential sites for Volunteer assignments. Post staff members ensure that each site meets certain safety and security, medical, housing, and communications criteria. The Peace Corps' role in site selection and preparation also includes choosing appropriate work counterparts for Volunteers, identifying work assignments, and preparing the local community or partner organizations for the arrival of a Volunteer.

Whereas Volunteer perceptions of safety and likelihood of crime experience have little to no impact on their self-rated effectiveness, perceptions of work-related aspects of their service differ significantly between high and low performers (Figure 2.11). For example, high performers worked eight hours more per week, on average, than low performers. Additionally, the former group of Volunteers reported significantly lower stress levels related to their projects than the latter group.

Figure 2.11. Selected Site Readiness Characteristics by Volunteer Effectiveness Group

Home safety perception
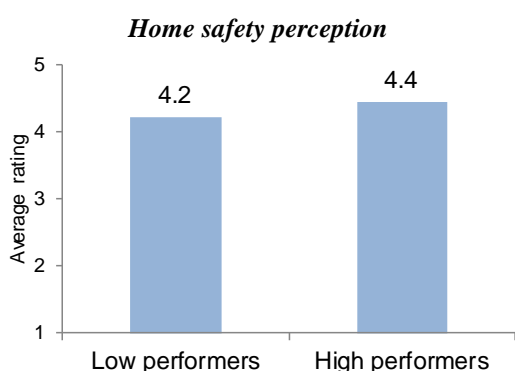
This chart shows the average safety rating (1 = very unsafe; 5 = very safe) reported by low and high performers. These ratings differ little between the two groups.
Base: low performers (n = 1,218); high performers (n = 1,593).

Weekly work hours
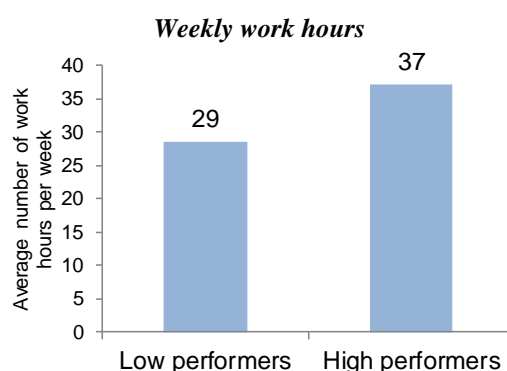
This chart shows the average number of hours respondents worked per week. High performers worked eight hours more, on average, than low performers.
Base: low performers (n = 1,187); high performers (n = 1,586).
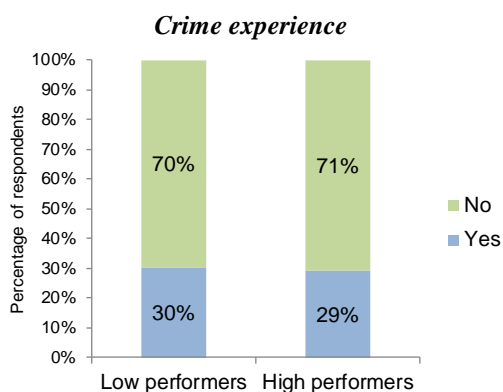
Crime experience

This chart shows the distribution of responses to the question "Have you experienced a crime in your host country in the past 12 months?" The two groups have similar response distributions.
Base: low performers (n = 1,217); high performers (n = 1,595).
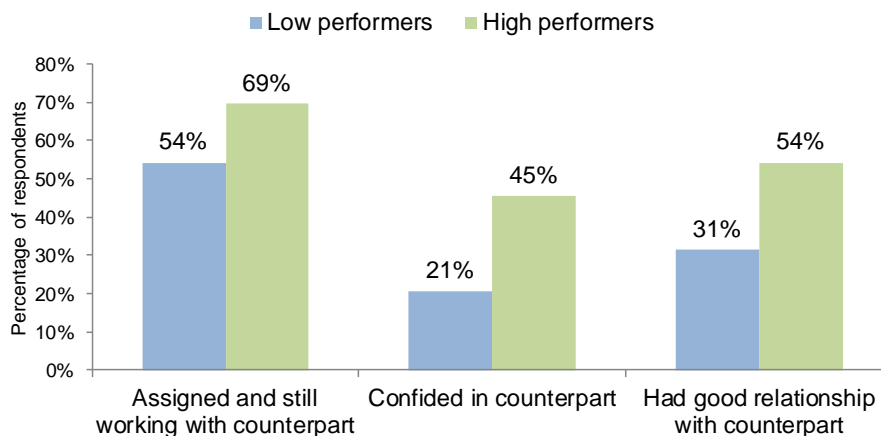
Project stress level
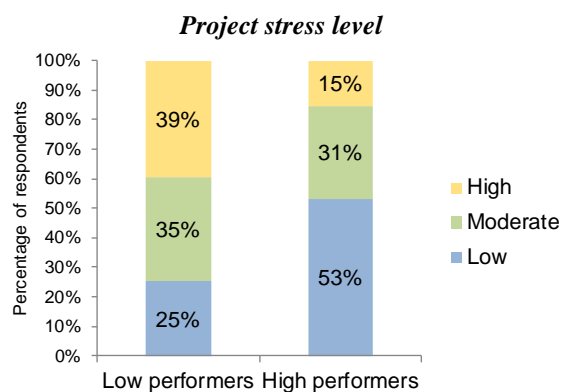
This chart shows the distribution of responses to the question "To what extent do you experience stress or emotional health issues from project/primary assignment activities?" High performers reported significantly lower stress levels than low performers.
Base: low performers (n = 1,198); high performers (n = 1,586).

Counterparts

Counterparts—host country nationals who are typically assigned to each Volunteer by their post as primary work or community partners—are perhaps the most important individuals with whom Volunteers will interact during their service. There is a substantial difference between high and low performers with regard to their experience in working with counterparts (Figure 2.12).

Figure 2.12. Experience Working with Counterpart by Volunteer Effectiveness Group

This chart shows the distribution of responses to the following three questions based on data from the 2013 survey: "If you were initially assigned a counterpart/community partner at your current site, are you still working with him or her at this time?" "I cope with stress by communicating with counterpart/community partners" (labeled as "Confided in counterpart" in the chart) and "To what extent do you experience stress or emotional health issues from counterparts/community partners" (low stress levels, labeled as "had good relationship" in the chart). High performers consistently reported more positive feedback about their counterparts than low performers.

Empirical Model of Volunteer Effectiveness

To determine the relative importance of the key drivers of effectiveness, all demographic factors, Peace Corps-controlled factors, and external environmental factors that had a large impact on Volunteers' perceptions of their effectiveness were examined together as part of the Volunteer effectiveness model presented in Figure 2.13.

Empirical results demonstrate that demographic and external environmental factors mattered least, and Peace Corps support factors mattered most in influencing the level of Volunteer self-ratings of effectiveness. When individual effectiveness drivers are grouped thematically, Peace Corps support—the combination of training and ongoing support and site management presented in Figure 2.13—accounted for nearly all Volunteer effectiveness explained by the model. Overall, personal and institutional characteristics contribute 12%, training 40%, and ongoing support and site management 48% to fostering Volunteer effectiveness. The strongest stand-alone drivers are: 1) the amount of gain in theoretical and practical knowledge (16%); and, 2) Peace Corps support for work-related functions (15%). For example, a change in the learning gain or in Volunteer satisfaction with Peace Corps work support functions have a three times greater impact on how Volunteers feel about their effectiveness than a similar change in how well Volunteers can communicate in the local language.

The causal direction in the relationship between perceived Volunteer effectiveness (dependent variable) and its 15 drivers (independent variables) was hypothesized as part of the theoretical model. However, the causality between dependent and independent variables was not statistically or experimentally tested. Hence, while the relationship exists, its direction could potentially be reversed. For example, a model-based conclusion that the better Volunteers can communicate in the local language, the more effective they

perceived themselves in the field, could be formulated the other way around: the more effective the Volunteers perceive themselves, the better they communicate in the local language.

Figure 2.13. Key Drivers of Volunteer Effectiveness
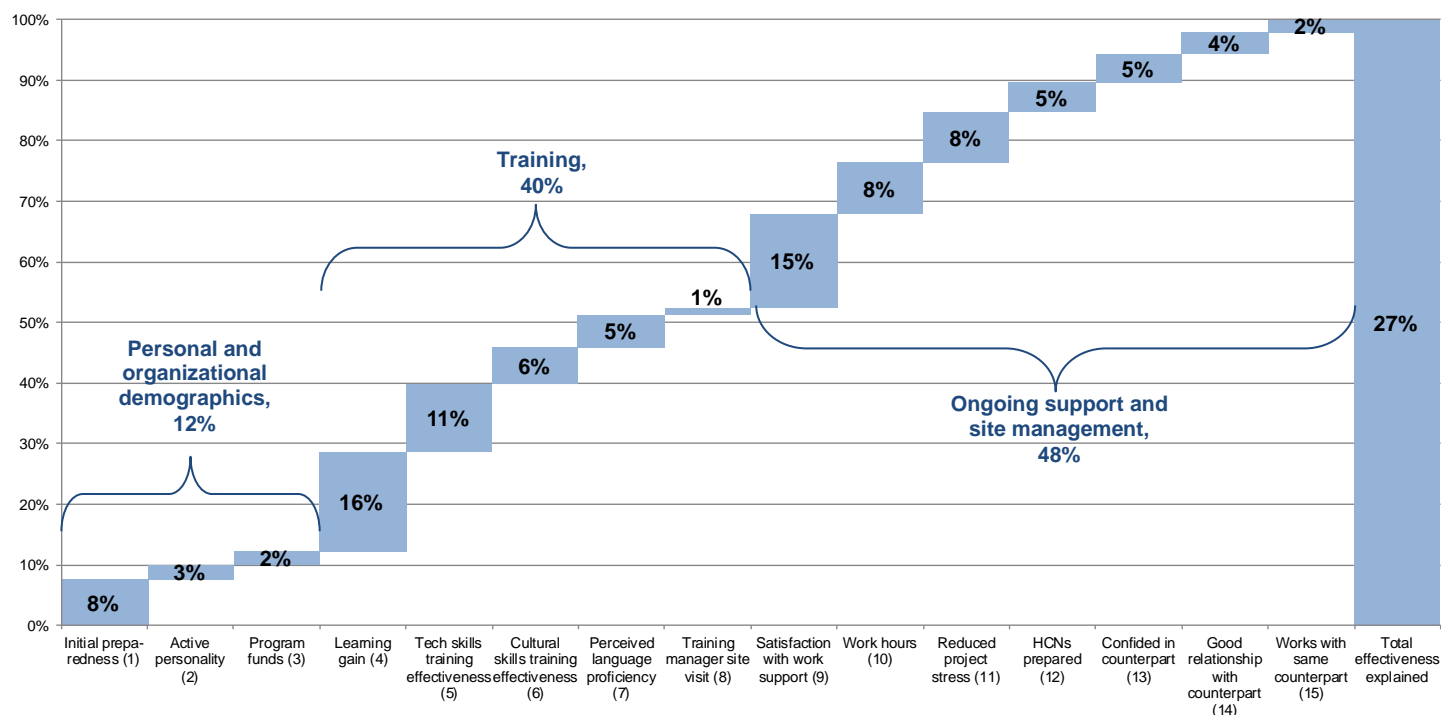
This chart presents Pratt Index scores that express multiple linear regression coefficients, where the dependent variable is the Volunteer effectiveness measure, and 15 independent variables covering Volunteer personal and post organizational characteristics, training, and ongoing staff support and site management, as a percentage of total variance explained by the model (standardized equation: $y = .184x_1 + .058x_2 + .075x_3 + .220x_4 + .090x_5 + .052x_6 + .075x_7 + .040x_8 + .116x_9 + .113x_{10} + .089x_{11} + .053x_{12} + .074x_{13} + .048x_{14} + .042x_{15}$; $R^2 = .27$, Multiple R=.52, all coefficients are statistically significant, $a < 0.01$). The chart shows that a change in the learning gain (a difference between the initial level of preparedness upon arrival and the level of preparedness at the time of the survey, 16%) followed by satisfaction with work support functions (15%) have a three times greater impact on how Volunteers feel about their effectiveness than a similar change in how well Volunteers can communicate in the local language (5%).

Key Takeaways

1. Highly effective Volunteers contributed to a higher level of achievement of Peace Corps goals.

2. The strongest stand-alone drivers of self-rated effectiveness were the amount of gain in theoretical and practical knowledge and Peace Corps support for work-related functions.

3. A combination of Peace Corps training and ongoing work support accounted for nearly all Volunteer self-rated effectiveness explained by the model.

4. Most of Volunteers' demographic characteristics, including education level, experience abroad, or the Peace Corps region where Volunteers served, did not have a major influence on their perceived effectiveness.

5. While support for Volunteer well-being was the most highly ranked type of support, it has little to no impact on self-rated effectiveness.

Overall Volunteer Experience

Positive Volunteer experiences help to ensure Volunteer retention and the continuity of the Peace Corps program. Generally, the ability of an organization to meet or exceed expectations is a foundation of a positive experience for its members. The reasons why Volunteers choose to serve help to explain their overall expectations about service, as well as how the agency meets those expectations. The Peace Corps' unique approach to international development—building local capacity through immersion into underserved local communities—attracts Americans who want to make a positive change in the world. The ability to help others, international experience, different cultures, and personal growth were the top reasons why the vast majority of Volunteers accepted their assignment.[9] Peace Corps service provides Volunteers with ample opportunities directly related to their motivations and expectations, which translates into positive sentiments about their service. In the past five years, nearly all Volunteers (94%–96%) considered their service rewarding, including seven in ten or more Volunteers (70%–78%) who considered it considerably or exceptionally rewarding (Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1. Overall Peace Corps Service Assessment, 2009–2013
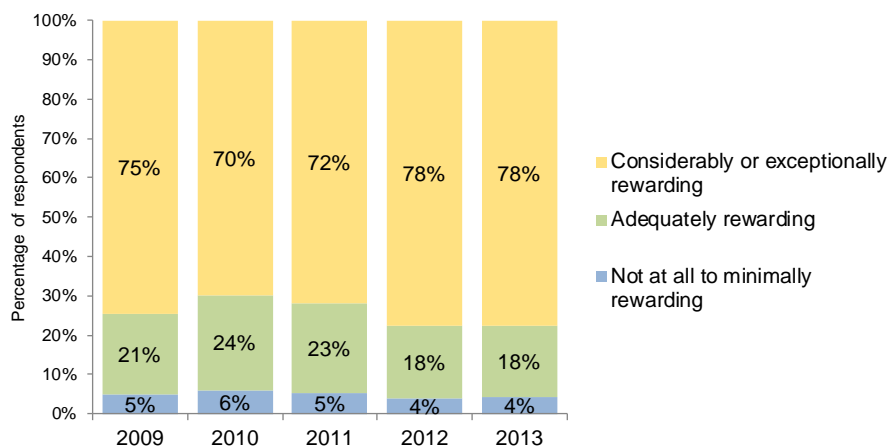
This chart shows the distribution of responses to the question "How personally rewarding do you find your overall Peace Corps service?"

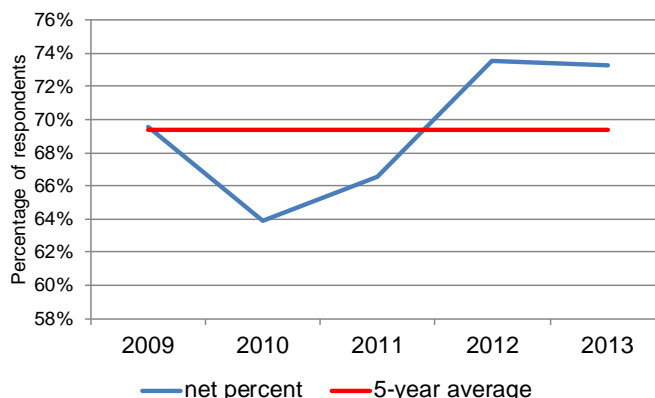Base: 2009 (n = 4,718); 2010 (n = 5,210); 2011 (n = 6,870); 2012 (n = 6,337); 2013 (n = 5,865).

After noteworthy increases in the percentage of Volunteers who had a considerably or exceptionally rewarding experience with Peace Corps service in 2011–2012, the trend appeared to level off in 2013. This change is illustrated by the net trend that accounts for both the proportion of Volunteers reporting a positive experience and the proportion of Volunteers reporting a negative experience (Figure 3.2). A net percentage shows how many more Volunteers have a positive experience than a negative experience.

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[9] Volunteers were last asked about their motivations for accepting their Peace Corps assignment in 2011.
Peace Corps. "Peace Corps 2011 Annual Volunteer Survey Results," October 2011.
http://files.peacecorps.gov/multimedia/pdf/policies/2011_Annual_Volunteer_Survey.pdf (accessed January 10, 2014).

Figure 3.2. Net Trend in Volunteer Service Perception, 2009–2013

This view is enlarged. The net trend presented in this chart is calculated as the percentage of Volunteers reporting a positive experience (considerably or exceptionally rewarding) minus the percentage of Volunteers reporting a negative experience (not at all to minimally rewarding). For a detailed distribution of responses, refer to Figure 3.1.

Base: 2009 (n = 4,718); 2010 (n = 5,210); 2011 (n = 6,870); 2012 (n = 6,337); 2013 (n = 5,865).

To better understand Volunteers' emotional response to their entire service experience, they were asked to share how personally rewarding they find their work, their experiences with other individuals, and their community involvement. On average, Volunteers rated their experience with fellow Volunteers and host country individuals the highest (Figure 3.3). Notably, the ratings of Peace Corps service overall exceeded those of any of its individual components.

Figure 3.3. Rewarding Feeling with Various Aspects of Peace Corps Service
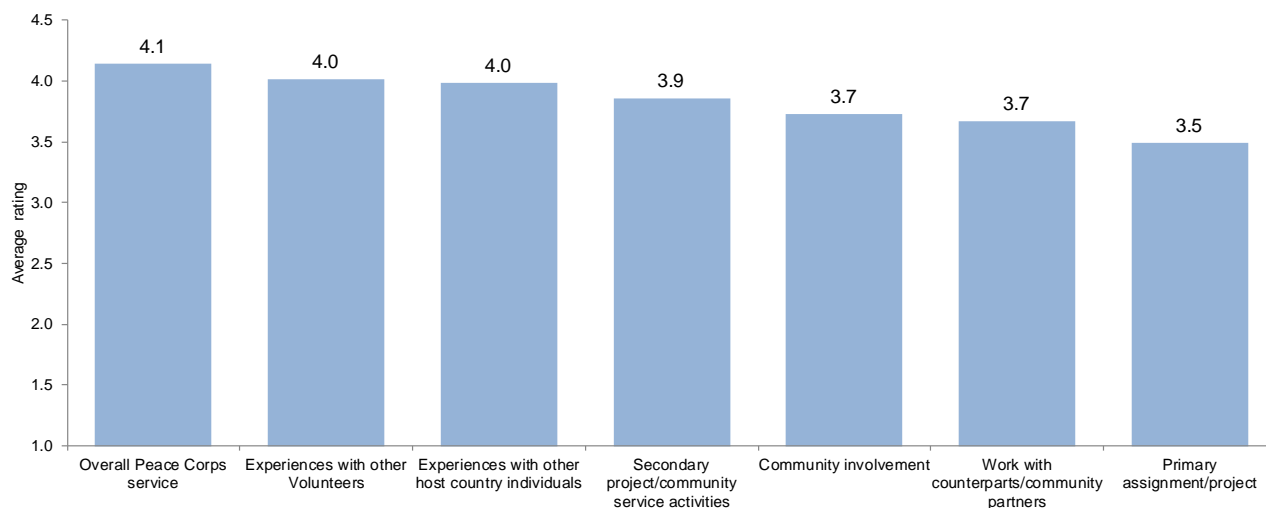
In addition to the overall Peace Corps service assessment, respondents were asked six additional questions "How personally rewarding do you find your: 1) primary assignment/project; 2) secondary project/community service activities; 3) experiences with other Volunteers; 4) work with counterparts/community partners; 5) experiences with other host country individuals; and, 6) community involvement." Respondents were asked to provide their assessment on a five-point scale, where 1 means not at all rewarding and 5 means exceptionally rewarding. Average ratings presented in this chart are based on respondents who rated all seven items.

Although Volunteers rated their primary project the lowest, on average, there is a positive change in the 2011–2013 net trend. This demonstrates a growing percentage of Volunteers reporting a positive experience over those reporting a negative experience (Figure 3.4).

Figure 3.4. Net Trend in Volunteer Rewarding Feeling about Primary Project, 2011–2013
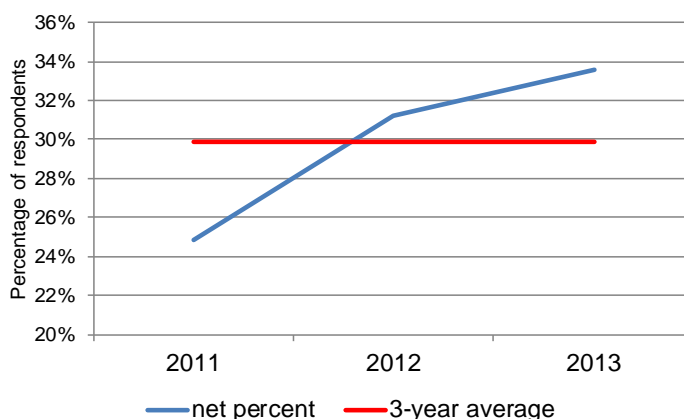

This view is enlarged. The net trend presented in this chart is calculated as the percentage of Volunteers reporting a positive experience with the primary assignment/project (considerably or exceptionally rewarding) minus the percentage of Volunteers reporting a negative experience (not at all to minimally rewarding). For a detailed description of the question presented to respondents, see the endnote to Figure 3.3.

Base: 2011 (n = 6,863); 2012 (n = 6,263); 2013 (n = 5,902).

As expected, there is a strong relationship between each of the aspects of service assessed and the rating of Peace Corps service overall. Although respondents rated their experience with fellow Volunteers highly (Figure 3.3), this experience contributed the least to understanding how Volunteers feel about their Peace Corps service overall (Figure 3.5). It was the extent to which Volunteers felt that their primary project was rewarding that most influenced their overall assessment of Peace Corps service. For example, a change in the Volunteer perception of their primary project experience had a five times greater impact on how they felt about their overall service than a similar change in their perception of their experience with other Volunteers. This is the case despite the fact that primary projects had the lowest ratings of all individual aspects of service evaluated (Figure 3.3).

Figure 3.5. Drivers of the Overall Sentiment Towards Peace Corps Service
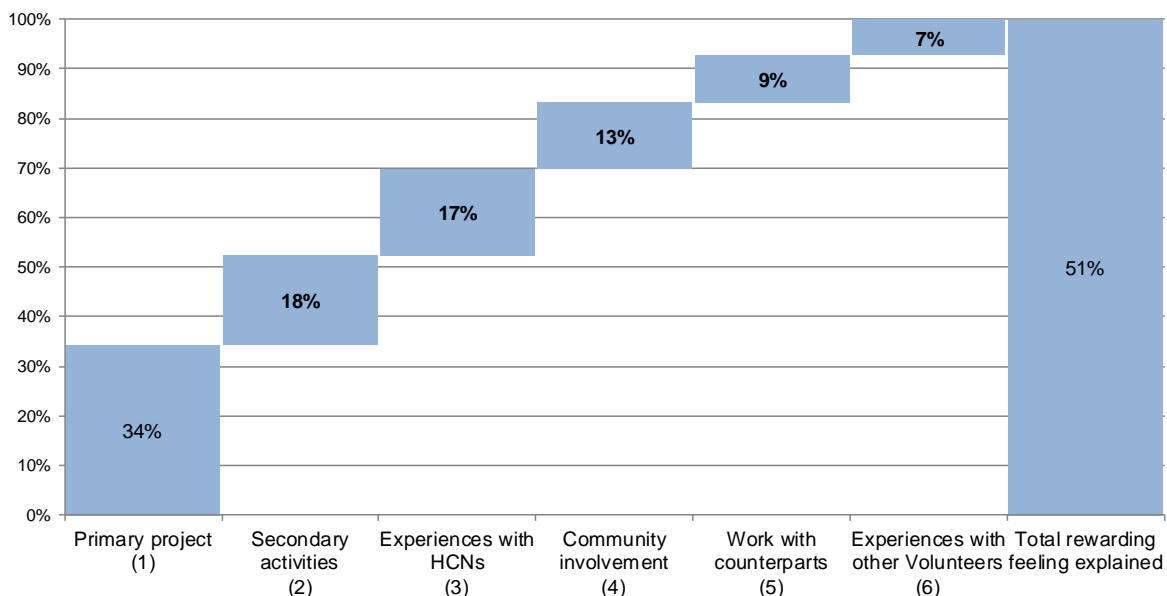
This chart presents Pratt Index scores that express multiple linear regression coefficients, where the dependent variable is the overall experience with Peace Corps service, and six independent variables which are six aspects of service, as a percentage of total variance explained by the model (standardized equation: $y = .308x_1 + .189x_2 + .115x_3 + .095x_4 + .177x_5 + .129x_6$; $R^2 = .51$, Multiple R=.71, all coefficients are statistically significant, $a < 0.01$). The chart shows that a change in the Volunteer perception of their primary project experience (34%) has a five times greater impact on how they feel about their overall service than a similar change in their perception of experience with other Volunteers (7%).

Work-related factors are, therefore, the most critical single element to understanding the emotional response of Volunteers (compared with community-related factors, such as experiences with other individuals). Thus, not only could improvements in work support for Volunteers contribute to fostering higher levels of effectiveness, they also have a great potential for influencing how Volunteers feel about their overall experience. In comparison, similar levels of improvement in other areas would not yield the same magnitude of change in Volunteer perceptions.

Best Service Aspect

In response to an open-ended question about the best aspect of Peace Corps service, the majority of Volunteers (84%) provided feedback that yielded three broad themes (Figure 3.6):

- Interaction with other people and building lasting personal relationships

  - "A few 'aha' moments when I feel I have truly empowered someone, developed a trusting relationship with someone, or given them the encouragement or boost to uplift themselves."

  - "Getting to know and love the people and their home is absolutely my favorite part."

- Cultural immersion and discovery

  - "Being able to immerse myself in a new culture and really absorb the experience of what it's like to live in this country."

  - "Seeing the realities of communities in other parts of the world has given me a perspective that I didn't have before."

- Work and accomplishments

  - "Definitely the work I've been able to accomplish so far, with the help of enthusiastic, open-minded and motivated work partners."

  - "Flexibility and freedom to start new projects. Being able to focus on many different parts of the community."

Figure 3.6. Best Service Aspect Themes

This chart schematically presents results of the qualitative data analysis in response to the open-ended question "What has been the best aspect of your Peace Corps service?" The three circles represent three major themes that emerge and their intersection represents the overlap in respondents' feedback. Words mentioned with the highest frequency within the themes are listed in the circles.

Clearly, work-related factors contribute greatly to understanding how Volunteers feel about their overall Peace Corps service. Although perception of effectiveness does not by itself explain Volunteers' overall sentiment about their Peace Corps service, a perception of higher effectiveness does lead to a more positive Volunteer perception of their overall service experience: Volunteers who perceive themselves as highly effective are significantly more likely to feel good about their Peace Corps service than Volunteers who perceive themselves as less effective (Figure 3.7).

Figure 3.7. Overall Peace Corps Service Sentiment, by Volunteer Effectiveness Group
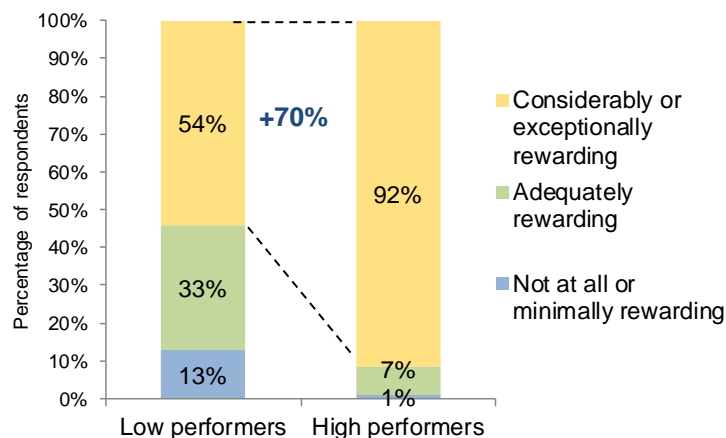
This chart shows the distribution of responses to the question "How personally rewarding do you find your overall Peace Corps service?" for two groups of Volunteers defined by their effectiveness. For a detailed definition of the effectiveness groups, refer to Figure 2.1. Respondents were asked to provide their assessment on a five-point scale, where 1 means not at all rewarding and 5 means exceptionally rewarding.

Base: low performers (n = 1,190); high performers (n = 1,589).

Commitment to Serve

Volunteers serve in underdeveloped communities of the developing world where the infrastructure and living conditions are often significantly more difficult than in the United States. These challenges, however, pale in comparison with the cultural and psychological challenges Volunteers may experience during service. Despite the adversities of the external environment, Volunteers are strongly committed to completing their service as has been demonstrated consistently over time. For example, over the last five years the vast majority of Volunteers have reported that they intend to complete their service (95%–96%, Figures 3.8 and 3.9).
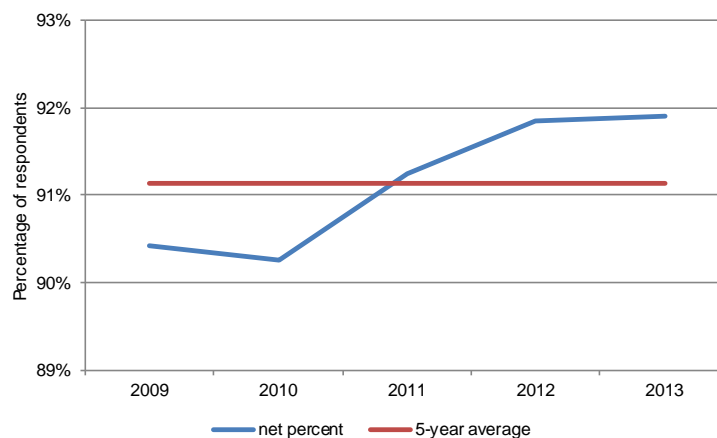
Figure 3.8. Intent to Complete Peace Corps Service, 2009–2013
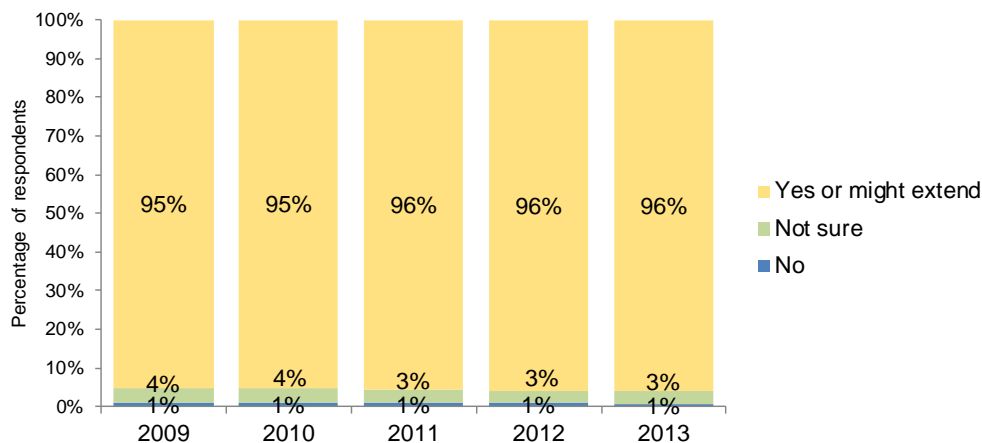
This chart shows the distribution of responses to the question "Do you intend to complete your Peace Corps service?"

Base: 2009 (n = 4,723); 2010 (n = 5,213); 2011 (n = 6,876); 2012 (n = 6,382); 2013 (n = 5,899).

Figure 3.9. Net Trend in Intent to Complete Peace Corps Service, 2009–2013
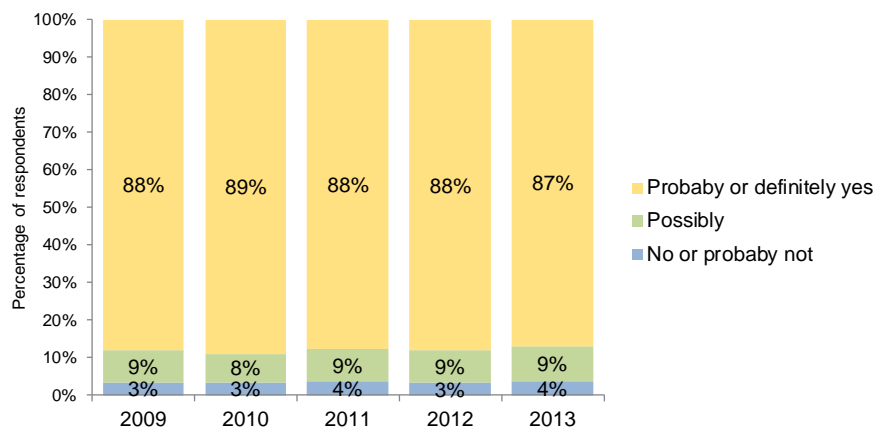

This view is enlarged. The net trend presented in this chart is calculated as the percentage of Volunteers reporting that they will probably or definitely complete Peace Corps service minus the percentage of Volunteers reporting that they will not or probably will not complete their service. For the complete question, see the endnote to Figure 3.8.

Base: 2009 (n = 4,723); 2010 (n = 5,213); 2011 (n = 6,876); 2012 (n = 6,382); 2013 (n = 5,899).

Whereas Volunteers' intent to complete service is firm, the proportion of those who are convinced they made the right decision by joining the Peace Corps (Figure 3.10) is slightly smaller than the proportion of Volunteers who intend to complete service (Figure 3.8). Furthermore, the 2009–2013 net trend demonstrates that reconfirmation of that decision has declined slightly in the past five years (Figure 3.11).
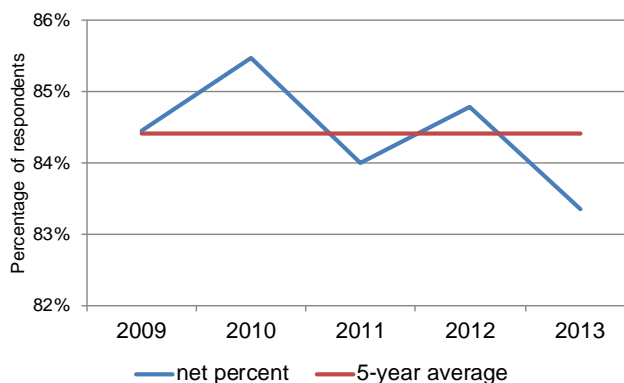
Figure 3.10. Decision Reconfirmation, 2009–2013

This chart shows the distribution of responses to the question "Today, would you still make the same decision to serve with the Peace Corps?"

Base: 2009 (n = 4,713); 2010 (n = 5,210); 2011 (n = 6,871); 2012 (n = 6,376); 2013 (n = 5,877).

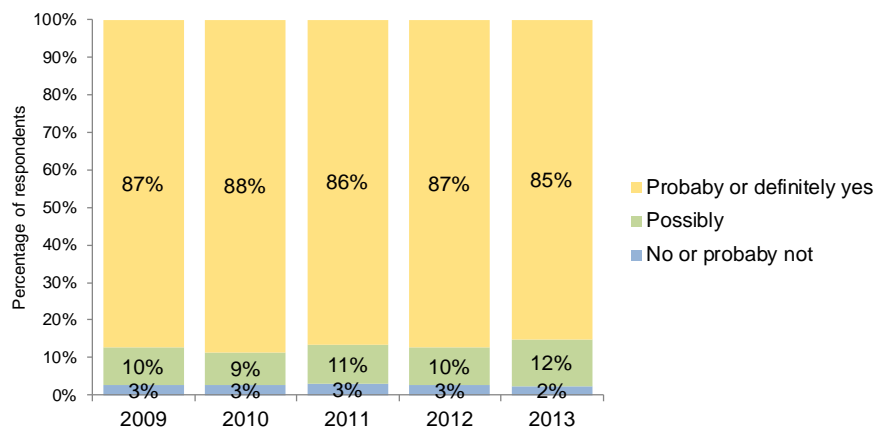Figure 3.11. Net Trend in Decision Reconfirmation, 2009–2013

This view is enlarged. The net trend presented in this chart is calculated as the percentage of Volunteers reporting that they would probably or definitely make the same decision to serve with the Peace Corps minus the percentage of Volunteers reporting that they would not or probably would not make the same decision. For the complete question, see the endnote to Figure 3.10.

Base: 2009 (n = 4,713); 2010 (n = 5,210); 2011 (n = 6,871); 2012 (n = 6,376); 2013 (n = 5,877).

Survey data show a similar pattern in Volunteers' propensity to recommend Peace Corps service to other qualified candidates. The proportion of those who would recommend Peace Corps service to others (Figure 3.12) is smaller than the proportion of Volunteers who intend to complete service themselves (Figure 3.8). There is also a slight downward trend in the propensity of Volunteers to recommend the Peace Corps over the past five years (Figure 3.13).
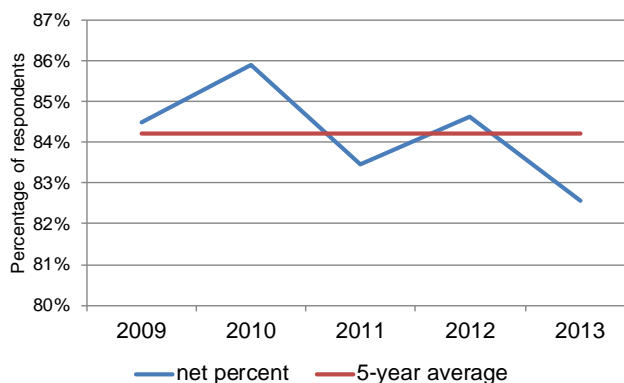
Figure 3.12. Propensity to Recommend Peace Corps Service

This chart shows the distribution of responses to the question "Would you recommend Peace Corps service to others you think are qualified?"

Base: 2009 (n = 4,723); 2010 (n = 5,213); 2011 (n = 6,876); 2012 (n = 6,382); 2013 (n = 5,899).

Figure 3.13. Net Trend in Propensity to Recommend Peace Corps Service

This view is enlarged. The net trend presented in this chart is calculated as the percentage of Volunteers reporting that they would probably or definitely recommend Peace Corps service to others minus the percentage of Volunteers reporting that they would not or probably would not recommend Peace Corps service. For the complete question, see the endnote to Figure 3.12.

Base: 2009 (n = 4,723); 2010 (n = 5,213); 2011 (n = 6,876); 2012 (n = 6,382); 2013 (n = 5,899).

This subtle downward trend in attitudes may have affected the number of Volunteers willing to promote Peace Corps service. As one of the agency's strategic priorities for fiscal years 2014–2018 is to position the Peace Corps as the service opportunity of choice for talented Americans,[10] it will be important to examine

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[10] Peace Corps. "Strategic Plan FY 2014–2018 and Annual Performance Plan FY 2014–2015," 2014.
  http://files.peacecorps.gov/multimedia/pdf/policies/pc_strategic_plan_2014-2018.pdf (accessed March 21, 2014).

this finding in more detail in order to ensure that returned Volunteers remain the greatest champions for Peace Corps service.

Key Takeaways

1. The majority of Volunteers considered Peace Corps service considerably or exceptionally rewarding.

2. Volunteers who perceived themselves as highly effective were significantly more likely to feel good about their Peace Corps service than Volunteers who perceived themselves as less effective.

3. The three major themes that emerged in Volunteer responses about the best aspect of Peace Corps service are: interaction with other people and building lasting personal relationships; cultural immersion and discovery; and, work and accomplishments.

Concluding Note

The Peace Corps extends its sincere appreciation to all Volunteers for their service and for contributing their time and reflections to the 2013 *Annual Volunteer Survey*. Their participation in this research ensures that the Voice of the Volunteer is heard by the agency, Congress, other U.S. government agencies, and the general public.

Contact Information

For questions or comments regarding the survey findings, methodology, or data, please contact Peace Corps Office of Strategic Information, Research, and Planning (OSRIP) at osirp@peacecorps.gov.

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About the Peace Corps

The Peace Corps traces its roots and mission to 1960, when then Senator John F. Kennedy challenged students at the University of Michigan to serve their country in the cause of peace by living and working in developing countries. From that inspiration grew an agency of the federal government devoted to world peace and friendship.

About the Office of Strategic Information, Research, and Planning

It is the mission of OSIRP to advance evidence-based management at the Peace Corps by guiding agency strategic planning; monitoring and evaluating agency-level performance and programs; conducting research to generate new insights in the fields of international development, cultural exchange, and Volunteer service; enhancing the stewardship and governance of agency data; and, helping to shape agency engagement on high-level, governmentwide initiatives.

Other Publications in this Series

The survey findings presented in this report are based on the analysis of data reported in the 2013 *Annual Volunteer Survey Global Tabular Report* available at peacecorps.gov/open. The 2013 *Annual Volunteer Survey Global Tabular Report* contains detailed data tables summarizing all quantitative responses.

What has been the best aspect of your Peace Corps service?

In the Voice of the Volunteer:

"Breaking stereotypes."

"Fluency in a second language—finally!"

"Breaking barriers and surpassing imaginary limits."

"I believe PCVs are the greatest diplomats the U.S.A. has today."

"The Peace Corps experience has made me proud to be an American in ways I didn't realize before."

"This is no longer my 'Peace Corps life' —this is just my life."

Responses from the 2013 Annual Volunteer Survey

Paul D. Coverdell Peace Corps Headquarters
1111 20th Street NW | Washington, DC 20526