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Does retirement make us kinder?

When people retire, they often take up activities like volunteering. But is this simply because they have more spare time on their hands or is something deeper happening? Drawing on novel research, Alina Velias, Sotiris Georganas and Ioannis Laliotis find evidence that retirement fosters greater kindness in people.

How do you think you'll feel when you retire? After adjusting to the change, will you find yourself doing something you did less during your working years – like being a better citizen, taking better care of public resources or contributing to the greater good in ways big or small?

When people retire, they often take up activities like volunteering. Is this simply because they have more time on their hands, or does something deeper happen? Do retirees become more inclined to do good for society as they transition into a new stage of life, one that looks vastly different from their working years?

Measuring prosocial behaviours

To explore this, we analysed a large dataset covering 22 European countries, tracking individuals over time. Crucially, we used differences in the formal “early retirement age” between countries to disentangle whether it's ageing itself or retirement that influences prosocial behaviours.

Consider Adrian and Bjorn. Both are 63 years old. Adrian lives in Sweden, where the early retirement age is 61, and has been retired for two years. He volunteers three hours a week. Bjorn, who lives in Norway, is still working – Norway's early retirement age is 67 – and volunteers just one hour a week.

This natural variation in retirement thresholds allowed us to compare behaviours at the same age. Our analysis showed that once people cross their country's retirement threshold, they tend to engage in more prosocial activities, such as volunteering, regardless of their age.

But does this mean that retirees are becoming kinder, or are they simply finding ways to fill their newfound free time? Bjorn might want to volunteer as much as Adrian but doesn't yet have the hours to spare. To investigate further, we designed a study that went beyond identifying the link between retirement and volunteering.

To understand the driving force behind this behaviour, we used an approach called an incentive-compatible experiment. In short, this means we measured retirees' and soon-to-be retirees' actions in real time as they made decisions.

Participants could choose to donate not only their labour but also money (gained in the experiment) to real charities (such as supporting cancer research, environmental causes or refugees).

Alternatively, they could keep the money for themselves or give it to a friend or family member – just as we tend to use money in real life. This allowed us to pinpoint the mechanism behind their choices.

Retirement and kindness

Here's what we found: retirees don't just give more of their time – they also give more money, even though retirement often reduces one's financial resources. This suggests that retirement brings about a genuine increase in prosociality, not just an abundance of free time.

If retirement makes people kinder, what does this mean for governments raising the retirement age? While extending working life might boost tax revenues, it could come at the cost of lost prosocial contributions – volunteering, donations and acts of kindness that benefit society as a whole.

Our study is among the few to combine survey data with experimental evidence to measure prosociality in retirees directly. As populations age, these findings are increasingly relevant. Prosocial behaviours, while often hard to track, contribute significantly to society. Policymakers should carefully consider the broader welfare implications when reforming retirement ages. Balancing the tangible economic value of taxes with the less measurable, yet far-reaching societal impact of kindness is essential for informed decision-making.

For more information, see the authors' accompanying paper in the [Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization](#).

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Halfpoint](#) / [Shutterstock.com](#)



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