

Non-Participation Trends in Village Membership

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INTRODUCTION

Villages are a relatively new, consumer-directed model that brings together older adults in a community who have a mutual interest in aging in place. Villages use a combination of volunteer services, referral services, and social engagement to help their members live in the community and avoid unwanted relocations (Scharlach, Graham, Lehning, 2012; Gross, 2006). These membership

KEY TERMS

- **NON-PARTICIPANTS:** Include former members and non-joiners
- **FORMER MEMBERS:** people who have dropped out of Village membership
- **NON-JOINERS:** people who inquired about Village membership but never joined

organizations are unique because of their high level of consumer direction—they are typically developed and governed by older adults themselves. However, as with other membership organizations, recruitment and retention are ongoing challenges, and members failing to renew can be a major challenge to many Villages' long-term sustainability.

The primary purpose of this “non-participant” study was to examine more closely the reasons why people drop out of Villages or decide against joining in the first place. Researchers conducted a total of 248 surveys with Village non-participants, including 135 former Village members and 113 people who inquired into a Village but had not yet joined (“non-joiners”). Results of this study identify ways that Villages can improve to appeal to a wider variety of older adults.

KEY FINDINGS

- Demographically, Village non-participants are different from Village members in several ways. Compared to a 2015 study of current members
 - Those who expressed interest in a Village but did not join tended to be younger and in better health.
 - Those who joined but later dropped out were more likely to be female, single, and living alone, and less likely to have someone to count on for routine assistance.
 - Those who did not join or joined and then dropped out tended to be lower income.
- **Non-Joiners.** Primary reasons given by people who inquired about but did not join Villages include
 - **Need of services.** This includes people who
 - don't currently need services and are only seeking protection against possible future service needs
 - need more intensive services than are available through the Village
 - **Need for connections/support.** Many prospective members don't join because
 - They are well-connected and supported socially outside the Village.
 - They have too many time commitments.
 - They are engaged with other organizations that would make Village membership redundant.
 - **Cost of membership.** This was the key reason given for not joining a Village or for dropping out.
 - Nationally, Village membership fees average \$431 per year for an individual.
 - This cost is one reason why low-income individuals are underrepresented among Village members.
- **Drop-Outs.** Primary reasons given by people who joined Villages but later dropped out include
 - **Value.**
 - feeling that the cost isn't worth the services provided
 - feeling that the Village did not do a good job describing the services provided and the services did not match expectations
 - **Social engagement.** A desire for more or different social engagement is a primary reason people become Village members.
 - Dissatisfaction with the social activities provided by the Village was a major reason for dropping out.
 - The feeling that they didn't "fit in" with the Village social group was commonly expressed among former members.
 - **Operational aspects.** Villages often run on small budgets with over-extended staff or rely on volunteers as the primary service providers.
 - Some former members mentioned that their calls went unanswered or that the Village didn't follow through with promised services.
 - **Liked the idea more than the reality.**
 - The concept of aging in place is very appealing, and supporting the concept of the Village is a reason commonly given for joining. However, these members often don't participate in activities or use the support services, which is a common reason for dropping out.

BACKGROUND

The Village model has proliferated rapidly in the United States, expanding from 35 operational Villages in 2010 to about 217 in 2018, with many more in development (Village to Village Network). Though there can be great variation in structure and service provision among Villages, the primary goals of most Villages are to promote members' independence and prevent undesired relocations (Scharlach et al 2012; Gross, 2006; Gross, 2007). To accomplish this, Villages typically provide a combination of services such as Village-sponsored social and educational events, volunteer support services, transportation, and information and referral to vetted support services in the region. Most charge yearly dues that range from \$10 to \$900 (average of \$431). To encourage membership among people who don't yet need all services offered, about half of Villages offer tiered memberships such as social-only or limited services options. Village services are offered by both Village staff and volunteers, many of whom are Village members (Graham, Scharlach, Stark, 2017). The average size of US Villages is 140 members, and members are typically asked to renew their membership on a yearly basis. Although in 2015 38% of Villages reported renewal rates of over 90%, 42% of Villages faced renewal rates between 81 and 90% and a further 20% of Villages had renewal rates below 80%. (Graham, Nicholson, Scharlach, O'Brien, 2017).

Past longitudinal research found that certain groups were more likely to drop out of Villages, including those who were older when they joined; those with a history of nursing home stays; those with more functional impairment; those with mobility barriers;

those experiencing delays in access to medical care; and those who did not volunteer for the Village (Graham, Scharlach, Kurtovich, 2016; Scharlach, Graham, Stark, Hu, Rodbro, 2017).

Characteristics of current Village members: According to results from UC Berkeley's 2015 survey of over 1,700 Village members in the US (Graham et al 2017), Village members are quite homogenous, with only 6% identifying as racial minorities. The majority of members are also highly educated and well-resourced financially, with only 6% receiving membership discounts. About half of Village members lived alone and almost two-thirds are female. Village members are quite healthy, with 85% reporting good or excellent health. Most have social support networks, with 93% reporting that they have someone they can count on for help with routine activities. Village members are also highly socially and civically engaged, with 70% reporting they get together socially with friends or neighbors about once a week or more; and over half (54%) attending meetings of organized groups at least once a week. Furthermore, on average 45% of Village members volunteered for the Village, though this can vary considerably from Village to Village. As is consistent with the mission of most Villages, 66% of members hoped to continue living in their current residence for the rest of their lives; and 91% reported being "very" or "somewhat" confident that they could get the help they needed to do that. Members also report high satisfaction with Village services, with 84% extremely or very satisfied and 95% reporting they would "definitely" or "probably" recommend the Village.

¹ The 2015 Village Organizational survey identified 18 operating Villages that charged no membership dues. They were excluded from the present study because the focus was on the decision to purchase a paid Village membership.

² Data did not allow researchers to distinguish between those who were lost to follow-up because they chose not to renew their membership and those who died or relocated.

METHODOLOGY

Researchers worked with 19 Villages across the US to survey both former members (members who did not renew) and non-joiners (those who inquired into the Villages but had not joined). Respondents were recruited through a variety of methods, including letters, emails, and phone calls. The majority of respondents took the survey online (89%), while some chose to take the survey over the phone administered by a member of the research team (11%). The final sample of 248 non-participants included 135 former Village members and 113 non-joiners. Bivariate statistics were performed to assess statistically significant differences between the two groups. The final response rate was 15% for former members and 14% for non-joiners.

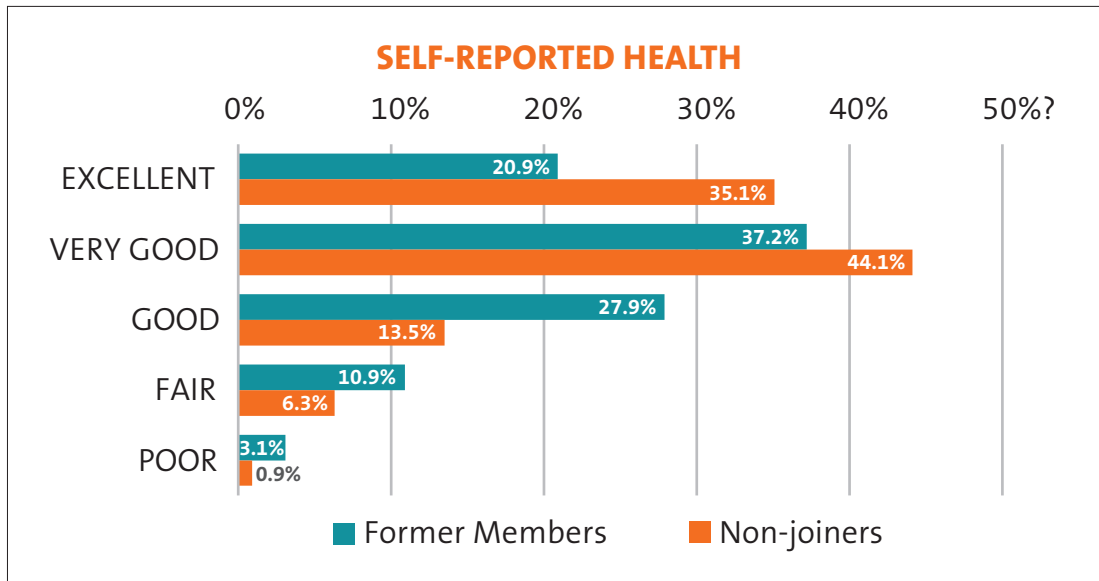
RESULTS

Participant Characteristics

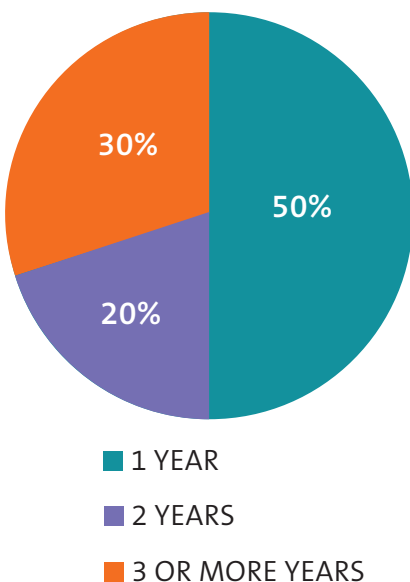
Demographics: Females were more likely than males to respond to the survey (81% of former members and 86% of non-joiners). The average age of former members was 77 years, and 72 years for non-joiners. Only 29% of former members were married or living with a partner, compared to 42% of non-joiners, and significantly more former members (39%) as compared to non-joiners (17%) were widowed. Both groups were highly educated, with 89% of former members and 88% of non-joiners having attained a bachelor's or graduate degree. Most of the respondents were white, with only 5% of the former members and 8% of non-joiners identifying as a racial or ethnic minority. Work status varied across groups, with 78% of former members retired, compared to 61% of non-joiners. Close to 70% of both groups had an annual household income above \$50,000, with about 40% of both groups having a household income above \$100,000. Only 8% of former members had had a discounted Village membership.

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS	FORMER MEMBERS	NON-JOINERS
GENDER		
Male	19.5%	14.5%
Female	80.5%	85.5%
AVERAGE AGE		
	76.7	71.9
MARITAL STATUS		
Married or living with a partner	32.0%	42.7%
Widowed	38.5%	17.3%
Divorced or separated	22.1%	25.5%
Never married	7.4%	14.5%
EDUCATION		
Less than bachelor's degree	11.0%	11.7%
Bachelor's degree or higher	89.0%	88.3%
RACE		
White	95.1%	92.1%
Non-White	4.9%	7.9%
WORK STATUS		
Working full-time	4.8%	13.2%
Working part-time	16.8%	19.8%
Not currently working, but looking for work	0%	5.7%
Retired	78.4%	61.3%
ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME		
Less than \$15,000	3.3%	0%
\$15,000 - \$24,999	5.4%	8.6%
\$25,000 - \$49,999	18.5%	22.6%
\$50,000 - \$99,999	32.6%	31.2%

Health: The sample of non-joiners was healthier than the former members, with only 7% reporting fair or poor health, compared to 14% of former members. On a 5-point scale (1 = poor to 5 = excellent), non-joiners' ratings of self-reported health averaged 4.1, significantly higher than the average score of 3.6 among former members. About one-third (32%) of non-joiners and 41% of former members reported some functional impairment in activities of daily living (ADL) or independent activities of daily living (IADL), while about one-third of both groups had fallen to the ground at least once in the prior year, and 7 to 8% of both groups reported difficulty with mobility. Thirteen percent of former members and 10% of non-joiners had stayed overnight in a hospital in the year prior to the survey, and only 1 to 2% of either group had stayed in a nursing home, assisted living, rehabilitation center, or similar care facility. About 10% of both groups reported experiencing a delay or failure to receive needed medical care in the past year.



DURATION OF FORMER MEMBERS' VILLAGE MEMBERSHIP



VILLAGE TENURE

Current living situation:

- Most participants (88% of former members and 94% of non-joiners) lived in single-family homes or apartments at the time of the survey.
- Only 11% of former members and 7% of non-joiners lived in a senior community or assisted living.
- Over half of all participants (58% of former members and 51% of non-joiners) lived alone.

Social support and civic engagement:

- Of former members, 79% reported that there was someone they could count on for help with routine activities.
- Of non-joiners, 91% reported that there was someone they could count on for help with routine activities.
- About 60% of both groups typically get together socially with friends or neighbors more than once a week.
- About two-thirds of both former members and non-joiners reported attending meetings of organized groups at least once a week.

Interest in Village Membership

Reasons for interest in joining a Village:

Former members were asked in an open-ended question to report some of the reasons they joined a Village:

- 51% mentioned a general interest in social engagement.
- 42% joined because they wanted to support the Village movement.
- 31% joined to get volunteer support/general support.
- 19% joined anticipating future needs.
- 16% mentioned that they were interested in specific Village-sponsored social or education events.
- 14% joined due to family or friend referrals.
- About 13% mentioned they were interested in the transportation provided by Villages, and specifically “escorts to events” and rides to appointments.
- 11% were interested in volunteering opportunities/civic engagement.
- 10% joined through an information referral service.

Non-joiners’ reasons for initial interest in Village membership:

Non-joiners also were asked an open-ended question about some reasons they were initially interested in a Village:

- 51% said they were interested in expanding their social circles.
- 51% mentioned they were interested in supporting the Village movement.
- 25% said they anticipated the need for future care and potential future needs.
- 15% had an interest in volunteering opportunities.
- 11% needed volunteer support/general support.
- 11% were referred by friends/family members.

Services of interest to non-joiners:

- 66% – Village-sponsored social or educational events
- 30% – home repair/handyman/home safety
- 26% – assistance with technology
- 22% – transportation
- 21% – information and referral
- 15% – assistance with shopping
- 12% – gardening/yard care
- 12% – companionship

Non-joiners’ type of Village inquiry:

- 47% had attended a Village social or educational event or activity.
- 46% had attended a Village recruitment or development meeting.
- 36% had spoken to someone at the Village by either phone or email.

Friends in the Village:

The majority of non-participants knew a Village member or affiliate prior to making inquiry with the Village, including

- 54% of non-joiners
- 64% of former members

Experience with Village Services

VILLAGE SERVICES USED:

FORMER MEMBERS SERVICE USAGE

Social or educational events	54%
No services used	27%
Information referral	22%
Transportation	17%
Home repair/safety assessment	15%

Knowledge of Village services:

Respondents were asked how confident they were that they understood the full range of services offered by the Village.

- Of former members:
 - 63% said very confident.
 - 31% said somewhat confident.
 - 6% said not confident.
- Those who had never joined expressed less confidence in their familiarity with the full range of Village offerings:
 - 36% said very confident.
 - 43% said somewhat confident.
 - 20% said not confident.

Former members' satisfaction with services used:

- Over half who used transportation, home repair/handyman/home safety, or technology assistance reported being "very satisfied" with the service.
- 42% were very satisfied with Village information/referral.
- 27% were very satisfied with Village-sponsored social/education events.

Use of non-Village services:

Former members who previously had used a particular Village service were asked whether or not they were currently getting that service from other sources:

- Of former members who had taken advantage of Village-sponsored social or educational events while members, roughly 70% reported they were getting that service elsewhere since terminating Village membership.
- For non-joiners, the percentage varied by area of interest:
 - 69% of those who were interested in Village social events were getting that type of service elsewhere.
 - 71% of those who were interested in technology were getting that type of service elsewhere.
 - 59% of those who were interested in handyman services were getting that type of service elsewhere.
 - 35% of those who were interested in information and referral services were getting that type of service elsewhere.
 - 27% of those who were interested in transportation were getting that type of service elsewhere.

Staying involved:

- Among former members, 30% still got together with members of the Village after they dropped out.
- 70% of non-joiners reported they planned to continue to attend Village events that are open to non-members.
- 16% of non-joiners said they planned to volunteer for the Village.

Overall Satisfaction

Satisfaction with Village:

- Among former members:
 - 9% reported that they had been extremely satisfied with the Village.
 - 22% were very satisfied.
 - 43% were somewhat satisfied.
 - 25% were not at all satisfied.
 - 49% said they would definitely or probably recommend the Village to a friend.
 - 52% said they would consider rejoining this or another Village.
- Among non-joiners:
 - 56% said they would definitely or probably recommend it.
 - 27% said they are still considering joining.
 - 41% said they were not sure.
- When former members were asked an open-ended question on the best thing about the Village:
 - 40% mentioned social engagement.
 - 28% said they joined primarily to support the “concept” of aging in place.
 - 21% mentioned the volunteer support.
 - 14% said a specific social or educational event.

Future Plans

Plans for future need:

All respondents were asked what their plans were if they were ever in the position of needing more assistance with activities of daily living:

- Assistance with transportation or shopping:
 - 95% of former members had a contingency plan in mind.
 - 80% of non-joiners had a plan.
- Assistance with cooking or light housework
 - 90% of former members had a plan in place.
 - 80% of non-joiners had a plan.
- Assistance with personal care (i.e., bathing, dressing, taking medications, home nursing care):
 - 80% of both former and non-joiners reported having a plan in mind.

Aging in place:

- 18% of former members had moved to a different residence since they dropped out of the Village.
- 70% of former members reported that they wanted to continue living in their current residence for the rest of their lives.
- 47% of non-joiners expressed the same wish.
- 37% of non-joiners reporting that they plan to move in the next 10 years.
- 87% of former members and 89% of non-joiners were very or somewhat confident they could get the help they needed to stay in their current residence as long as desired.

How can the Village improve?

- Former members were asked how the Village could improve to better meet their needs:
 - 24% mentioned that the Village programming or operations could improve if the Village staff were more engaged with members to assess what is working and not working.
 - 19% suggested the Village could offer different types of social activities.
 - 17% said suggested the Village could offer different types of education events.
- Non-joiners were also asked to share any suggestions for how the Village could improve to make them more likely to join:
 - 30% gave some suggestions regarding Village communication to prospective members, including following up more and doing a better job explaining what services they provide.
 - 27% suggested lowering the cost of membership, offering tiered membership fees to reflect those who only use one or two services, or discounted memberships to improve the affordability for low-income seniors.

Who is the Village for?

In an open-ended question, non-joiners were asked to indicate the type of person for whom the Village would be a good fit:

- 27% mentioned people who need more social engagement.
- 27% said people who are isolated because they don't have family nearby.
- 25% said those who need more assistance, either with their own personal care or with the upkeep of their home.
- 16% said people who are older (16%).
- 13% said those in a higher social class/income.
- 12% said those with poor health/disability.
- Another 12% said those who lived closer to the Village.

Implications for Practice

In light of the above findings, there are a number of steps that Villages could pursue to better attract and retain members. Recommended practices include

- **Use more consumer-driven approaches in the development of Village social events, educational events, and other activities.**
 - ✓ Follow up with Village members to assess how they like the services they receive.
 - ✓ Solicit regular input from members about changes to programming or other activities they would like to see provided by the Village.
 - ✓ Ensure that programming meets members' ever-changing needs and tastes.
- **Identify members who are not involved in Village activities.**
 - ✓ Increase outreach to encourage them to participate.
 - ✓ Encourage those who join “to support the movement” or “as insurance for future need” to get more involved as volunteers, group leaders, or other roles.
- **Use staff and volunteer trainings and technology to increase professionalism and improve record-keeping.**
 - ✓ Ensure that staff and volunteers are responsive to member requests and improve follow-through.
 - ✓ Pay attention to staff/volunteer to member ratios, to avoid staff and volunteer overload.
- **Offer more ways to help with financial barriers to joining or remaining in Villages.**
 - ✓ Offer discounted and sliding-scale memberships for lower-income members,
 - ✓ Create tiers such as social-only memberships, for those who may not currently need the complete array of Village services.
 - ✓ Find a funding model that allows the Village to charge its members lower dues, through either keeping costs low (by having no or minimal paid staff, for example).
 - ✓ Find sources of revenue other than dues.
- **Increase efforts to recruit diverse members.**
 - ✓ Include racial minorities, males, and those with disabilities.
 - ✓ Engage Village members who identify with an under-represented group to assist in outreach to new members and give feedback on Village programming.
- **Stay in contact with former members and non-joiners.**
 - ✓ Give them detailed and clear descriptions of what the Village provides.
 - ✓ Reach out to assess their ongoing needs.
 - ✓ Informing them of new Village developments.
 - ✓ Invite them to Village social events, as many are still open to joining or re-joining.

CONCLUSION

Village sustainability and growth depend on the ability of Villages to attract and retain members. While many Villages have member renewal rates of more than 80 or 90% and report high member satisfaction, paying attention to the opinions and experiences of non-joiners and former members provides valuable insights into potential areas for improvement. By looking outside current Village membership, this study is intended to assist Villages in becoming a more attractive option for supporting aging in community for potential and current members.

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