Experience Corps Baltimore: Exploring the Stressors and Rewards of High-intensity Civic Engagement

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Abstract

Purpose: Experience Corps (EC) represents a high-intensity, intergenerational civic engagement activity where older adults serve as mentors and tutors in elementary schools. Although high-intensity volunteer opportunities are designed to enhance the health and well being of older adult volunteers, little is known about the negative and positive aspects of volunteering unique to intergenerational programs from the volunteer’s perspective.

Design and Methods: Stressors and rewards associated with volunteering in EC were explored in 8 focus group discussions with 46 volunteers from EC Baltimore. Transcripts were coded for frequently expressed themes.

Results: Participants reported stressors and rewards within 5 key domains: intergenerational (children’s problem behavior, working with and helping children, observing/facilitating improvement or transformation in a child, and developing a special connection with a child); external to EC (poor parenting and children’s social stressors); interpersonal (challenges in working with teachers and bonding/making social connections); personal (enjoyment, self-enhancement/achievement, and being/feeling more active); and structural (satisfaction with the structural elements of the EC program).

Implications: Volunteers experienced unique intergenerational stressors related to children’s problem behavior and societal factors external to the EC program. Overall, intergenerational, interpersonal, and personal rewards from volunteering, as well as program structure may have balanced the stress associated with volunteering. A better understanding of stressors and rewards from high-intensity volunteer programs may enhance our understanding of how intergenerational civic engagement volunteering affects well
In 2012, over 60% of U.S. adults 60 years of age and older were retired (The United States of Aging, 2012). Between 2012 and 2050, the percentage of the population over the age of 65 years will more than double (Vafa, 2012), substantially increasing the number of retired adults. This trend indicates the importance of developing and sustaining programs that will increase disability-free years of life for older adults, many of who will be living over one third of their lives postretirement.

Civic engagement through intergenerational volunteering is a recognized activity that is associated with a number of personal health benefits including improvements in well being and generativity (Kinnevy & Morrow-Howell, 2008), life satisfaction (Seefeldt, 1989), life circumstances (Kaplan, 2001), physical function (Fried et al., 2004), and cognition (Carlson et al., 2009). Despite these benefits, research has also shown that some individuals engaged in high-intensity volunteering roles, including AIDS relief and hospice care, experience stress that can lead to burnout (i.e., emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment) and dropout in many volunteer organizations (Huynh, Winefield, Xanthopoulou, & Metzer, 2012). Experience Corps (EC) is a high-intensity intergenerational civic engagement program designed to simultaneously benefit older adult volunteers and elementary school children (Fried et al., 2004; Glass et al., 2004). This study extends prior research on intergenerational volunteering as well as research on EC specifically by exploring the stressors (negative experiences) and rewards (positive experiences) that may be unique to intergenerational civic engagement service.

### Experience Corps

EC currently operates in 20 cities across the country. The program was designed to offer intensive service in public schools by engaging older adults in a variety of school-based volunteer activities designed to have high impact on the success of children through individual and group tutoring in reading and math, library work, and resolving conflict and behavior issues (Fried et al., 2004). EC is also designed to enhance the physical, social, and cognitive engagement of volunteers (Figure 1) and thereby enhance their health and well being (Glass et al., 2004). In support of this theoretical model, participation in this intergenerational program has been linked to reduced depressive symptoms and functional limitations (Hong & Morrow-Howell, 2010), increased activity and improved mobility (Fried et al., 2004; Tan et al., 2009), and improved cognitive and brain function (Carlson et al., 2008, 2009).

EC Baltimore, established through a partnership between the Johns Hopkins University Center on Aging and Health and the Greater Homewood Community Corporation (GHCC), recruited, trained, and placed older adults into volunteer roles serving mostly lower income children in public elementary schools in Baltimore City. EC Baltimore was designed to require a minimum of 15 hr of volunteer service a week throughout the academic year. This high “dose” of engagement was intended to increase volunteer exposure to health-promoting physical, social, and cognitive activities, as well as benefit the educational outcomes of children and impact the social capital of the community.
Intergenerational civic engagement programs have great potential to impact both older adults and children through sustained and meaningful relationships that may accomplish a range of community and educational goals including increased social capital, reduction of poverty and violence, and a better school climate (Ayala, Hewson, Bray, Jones, & Hartley, 2007; Kaplan, 2001). Although the health benefits of programs such as EC have been well established over the last decade, one aspect of the volunteer experience that merits more focused attention is the potential stress and strain that might be experienced. As previously noted, research documents stress and strain associated with high-intensity volunteer activities. Older adult volunteers within intergenerational settings may experience additional stressors due to acclimation to an intergenerational environment, misbehaving or unmotivated children, and negative perceptions of older adults by children and staff (Ayala et al., 2007). These factors can lead to burnout, characterized by an imbalance of stressors (i.e., environmental constraints, expectations, and responsibilities) to rewards experienced in a given role. Burnout is linked to detrimental psychological and physical health outcomes, as well as termination of the volunteer role (Yiu, Au, & Tang, 2001). Research suggests that intra-individual (e.g., self-efficacy, motivation), interindividual (e.g., social support), and structural (e.g., organizational support, training) resources may mitigate the development or experience of burnout (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Although stressors and burnout have been explored among older adult volunteers, few studies have explored stressors as well as the rewards that may balance those stressors, within the context of an intergenerational civic engagement volunteer program.

This study seeks to understand the experience of older adult volunteers in the high-intensity EC Baltimore program. Using qualitative focus group data, we evaluated the stressors and rewards associated with intergenerational service in EC Baltimore. Our objective in exploring both stressors and rewards was to gain a better understanding of the characteristics of EC service that may hinder or promote the hypothesized health and well being outcomes of EC engagement, as well as to inform future program design modifications. Prior research on stress and the burnout process in high-intensity service roles and our conceptual model (Figure 1) of the potential physical, social, and cognitive pathways through which volunteers may benefit from EC service provided an overarching framework for our study design.

Methods

Focus Group Participants and Selection Criteria

Older adult volunteers were recruited from the intervention arm of the Baltimore Experience Corps Trial (BECT), a randomized controlled trial evaluating effects of program participation on older adults and the children they serve. Study design, recruitment, and participant characteristics have been described previously (Fried et al., 2013). For this study, active volunteers who had spent at least 4 months volunteering in EC schools were recruited through flyers distributed at participating elementary schools, as well as letters sent to volunteers’ homes. Focus groups were chosen over other qualitative data collection methods (e.g., one-on-one interviews) in order to broadly explore the EC experience with multiple volunteers and allow group interaction to enhance disclosure of experiences that individuals might otherwise be reluctant to share (e.g., concern of being the only volunteer with negative experiences). A total of 46 volunteers participated in one of eight focus groups comprised of five to eight participants each, with the exception of one focus group with two participants. Focus group participants did not differ significantly from other BECT intervention participants or the full BECT sample on any baseline sociodemographic, psychosocial, or health characteristics (Table 1).

Focus Group Procedures

Focus groups were conducted at a community center unaffiliated with the Johns Hopkins University (site of the BECT), or the GHCC, and led by a trained focus group facilitator. Prior to the start of each session, the facilitator discussed informed consent procedures to ensure that participants fully understood the study aims, how data would be used, and privacy protection, including the use of pseudonyms in all published findings and assurances that responses would not affect continued volunteering in EC. Each session lasted 1.5–2 hr and followed a semistructured script to capture personal reflections of the rewards and stressors associated with volunteering. Open-ended questions were asked in order to avoid biasing participant responses and were followed by probes, as needed.

All study protocols were approved by the Johns Hopkins Medicine Institutional Review Board, and participants provided written, informed consent.

Data Analyses

Focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti (Version 6.2. 2010; Berlin, Scientific Software Development) was utilized for coding of transcribed focus group sessions. A coding manual was developed through a hybrid approach of deductive thematic analysis followed by inductive analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Codes that represented general themes were first developed, a priori, based on previous research on volunteerism and burnout, as well as experience in working with EC volunteers. Based on review of the first few sessions, codes for common themes were
refined. Through an iterative process, trained coders independently reviewed each transcript, assigned multiple codes to discrete sections of text, compared discrepant codes and associated text, and then reached a consensus on the final codes. Concurrently, minor modifications were made to the coding manual (e.g., collapsing similar codes, adding/deleting codes) to better capture reoccurring themes. Overall, the process resulted in 49 independent codes/themes within five domains (see Table 2). The domains included the following: **Intergenerational**: stressors and rewards related to the intergenerational activities/goals of EC volunteers (helping students to improve academic and behavior regulation skills) and intergenerational interactions; **External to EC**: stressors and rewards related to factors unrelated to the EC program (e.g., problems with the education system or larger society); **Interpersonal**: stressors and rewards related to the interaction between volunteers and individuals in the school including children, teachers, parents, other volunteers, EC staff, and school staff/administrators; **Personal**: stressors and rewards related to the fulfillment of individual goals; and **Structural**: stressors and rewards related to the structure, organization, or rules/regulations of the EC program.

### Results

All coded stressors and rewards are listed in Table 2. Frequently expressed (≥75% of group discussions) stressors and rewards are highlighted in the table and discussed within the following domains.
Intergenerational stressors and rewards were related to intergenerational activities/goals and intergenerational interactions. Stressors within this domain included children's problem behavior (cross-listed with “external to EC domain”); rewards included working with and helping children, observing/facilitating improvement or transformation in a child, and developing a special relationship/

Table 2. Frequency of Expression of Stressors (Negative Experiences) and Rewards (Positive Experiences) Across the Eight Focus Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stressors</th>
<th>Percentage of groups (%)</th>
<th>Rewards</th>
<th>Percentage of groups (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intergenerational</td>
<td></td>
<td>Intergenerational</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children's problem behavior(^a)</td>
<td>87.5</td>
<td>Working with and helping children</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separating from children/breaking social bonds(^b)</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>Observing/facilitating improvement or</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty with a specific student</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>transformation in a child</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges in working with children (general)</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>Developing a special relationship/</td>
<td>87.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not observing improvements in children</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>connection with a child(^b)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External to EC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor parenting</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children's social stressors</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children's attitudes regarding learning</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systemic problems (e.g., school, community)</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observing mental health problems in the children</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear for children's future</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children's lack of respect for authority</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges in working with teachers</td>
<td>87.5</td>
<td>Bonding/making social connections</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges in working with EC program or others in EC (e.g., program staff)</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>Feeling a sense of reciprocity with others</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not feeling valued or feeling that EC is not valued</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical demands of volunteering</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling hopeless</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unable to utilize skills</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prohibition of physical contact with children</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constraints on teachers</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disciplinary constraints on volunteer</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not otherwise categorized</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other constraints on volunteer</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acclimating to volunteer demands or school environment</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Notes: Themes highlighted in gray were mentioned by at least 75% of focus groups and specifically described in the Results section. Frequency refers to the percent of focus groups (out of eight) that mentioned the theme. EC = Experience Corps. \(^a\)Theme cross-listed with “Intergenerational” and “External to EC” categories. \(^b\)Theme cross-listed with “Intergenerational” and “Interpersonal” categories.
connection with a child (cross-listed with “interpersonal” domain).

**Children’s Problem Behavior (Stressor)**

Volunteers frequently reported that children’s behavioral problems at times impeded their ability to assist children with academic development. Behavioral problems ranged from children having difficulty focusing and attending to instruction to overt physical aggression:

What’s most challenging for me was that most of the students in my class had some sort of behavior problems. And... it was so hard for the teacher to... try to get a lesson done. They’re fighting with each other... screaming and hollering at each other... It was very stressful for me because some days we never got to a lesson.

Volunteers also cited physical aggression by children as a stressor:

... when I go back in September, I know I’m going to have to break up some fights... these are not little love taps, they’re serious.

Some volunteers reported that one of their special duties as a volunteer was to work with specific children with behavior problems. Volunteers would often provide more focused attention and direction to such students, whereas teachers would attend to instruction of the larger classroom group. One volunteer described this process of working with students who needed more direct attention:

“Why are you under the desk? [child is lying on the floor under his desk] Where is that beautiful work? I love to see you write.” I say, “Take your time because I want... to see it. I’m not goin’ home today until I see that fabulous work.” I might take a paper, right or wrong, and make a big deal out of it... to encourage him to do his work.

Other volunteers similarly echoed their efforts in working with children to curb problematic behavior to facilitate the children’s own learning as well as that of the larger group by minimizing instructional time spent addressing behavioral problems. As illustrated previously, this aspect of volunteering was not necessarily always viewed as a stressor, and such efforts reflect core dimensions of conflict resolution and behavior regulation skills development that are a focus of EC training.

**Working With and Helping Children (Reward)**

The opportunity to have contact with or to work with children was cited as a rewarding aspect of volunteer service in every focus group discussion. This positive aspect of volunteering was often (over 50% of coded segments) coreported with the reward of being able to help or provide meaningful assistance to children and/or the classroom teacher.

Volunteers also often reported that this assistance facilitated the teacher’s ability to accomplish core instructional goals:

And they [teachers] seemed to be very receptive of me being in the classroom... Because if she’s busy then I can go... and help them [children]... And it just makes you feel good that you can really... work with the children... it’s very rewarding for me... And the teacher cannot be everything to everybody all the time. So that’s when we take those children who need one-on-one the most...

Volunteers also expressed that helping the children benefitted them:

I found that volunteering... to help others helps me. Because some days when I might... just have a... down feeling or a feeling of not being... just dead... One little child would need my help... or they walk to me [to] give me hug... ‘Hi Ms. X!’ All up and down the street and I would meet them in stores... ‘There’s Ms. X!’ I know it made me feel happy.

**Observing/Facilitating Improvement or Transformation in a Child (Reward)**

A related benefit of working with and helping children that was also reported in every focus group was the reward of observing and/or facilitating an improvement or transformation in a child:

And... when you see some progress, when you see that you’re making a connection, then that’s where the reward comes.

Because if he was slow, he was slow. And he was behind in his class so the teacher allowed me to take him aside and that was my job... And he got it! And since- I was excited.

And to me it’s always been about the light. That shined in their eye, once they get what the teacher is talking about... It’s a beauty in knowing that I had something to do with that.

As reflected in the volunteers’ words, observing improvement and believing that one played a direct role in such growth was very rewarding for many volunteers and a motivator for continued engagement.

**Developing a Special Relationship/Connection With a Child (Reward)**

In every focus group, one or more volunteers recounted developing a special bond with a particular child:

... I had one little boy when I started in January in the kindergarten. And he couldn’t hold a pencil... he had no motor skills... So for him to write his name was very hard and it upset him because the other kids in the classroom could write their names and he couldn’t... to see him grow from January and progress to May...
could write his name and he was so thrilled . . . he would hit me and say, “Come here. Come here. I got something to show you” . . . I became a great mentor for him because I took time with him, I didn’t criticize him and when he did things wrong, I’ll say, “You know, there’s a better way to do this.” And to me that was rewarding because here we have a little boy, five years old in the kindergarten that couldn’t write his name . . . And within a matter of months . . . he could do these things. And to me that was really rewarding . . .

In almost all cases where developing a special connection with a particular child was reported (78% of coded text), volunteers also observed improvements or transformations in the child (as described previously). The co-occurrence of these rewards may indicate the importance of the consistent daily/weekly presence of volunteers over the school year in order to develop the bonds necessary to facilitate improvement in children.

External to EC

Stressors and rewards external to EC were related to systemic and community factors not directly related to the EC program. Stressors within this domain included poor parenting and children’s social stressors; participants did not mention rewards in this category.

Poor Parenting (Stressor)

Volunteers reported that negligent and ineffective parenting contributed to children’s problem behavior in the classroom. They reported that some parents were not “paying attention” to children and were not giving them “love” and “discipline” at home. By observing children throughout the school day, volunteers would get a sense of “what was going on” in their homes. One volunteer reported that a child would “walk several blocks to school by himself,” and another described her frustration with parents who would send their children to school sick:

They don’t want to be bothered with him . . . And some parents send them kids to school. They have a cold, coughing all over everything. The parents send them to school get rid of them.

Despite showing the children “love” and telling them they are “needed,” volunteers were frustrated, reporting that there was “nothing you can really do” and the issue was “out of your hands.” Many volunteers considered the problem a “deeper” issue with few solutions.

But the problem is, some of the grandparents are thirty years old. So the parents don’t know anything and the grandparents don’t know [anything].

And it bothered me that there was nothing, even if I thought of something, there was nothing that you can do.

Children’s Social Stressors (Stressor)

Children’s problem behavior in the classroom was tied to social stressors broadly, as well as those related to the home. Volunteers described children as “angry” and “disruptive” due to “dysfunctional” homes and “negative environments.” Many volunteers described students coming to school “hungry”:

They would come to me say, “I am so hungry. I got to school late [and] I ain’t get no breakfast. Can you please get me something to eat?”

Other volunteers described negative reinforcement at home as well as responsibilities children had to take on at home.

Too many of our children are hearing, “You’re stupid, you’re dumb, you’re just like your father, you’ll never be nothing, you never know nothing.” But they’re surrounded by negativity. So . . . they just resolved that, I’m doomed.

These children are impacted with raising siblings . . . and they’re six and seven.

Volunteers also described systemic issues including the negative effect of “medication” and “attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.” One volunteer commented:

Some of the kids apparently have been born into being under the influence of drugs and some of them are labeled ADHD and . . . having to give kids a lot of medication.

Volunteers described these issues as “stressful” and “frustrating.” One volunteer mentioned,

... being inner city kids . . . your heart goes out to them . . . Sometimes they will make you want to cry.

Interpersonal

Interpersonal stressors and rewards were related to interactions between volunteers and teachers, children, and other individuals in the schools. Stressors within this domain included challenges in working with teachers; rewards included bonding/making social connections.

Challenges in Working With Teachers (Stressor)

Although volunteers generally reported favorable relationships with teachers, challenges related to working with teachers in the classroom were also reported in almost all focus groups. Frequently noted challenges in this domain included volunteers’ frustrations with what they perceived were teachers’ lack of willingness or understanding of how to effectively utilize volunteers, interpersonal tensions arising from volunteers’ perceptions that teachers were resentful or distrustful of their presence, and disagreements in philosophy regarding how to interact with children, particularly in situations where children behaved in a disruptive or rebellious manner.
Some volunteers reported frustration with what they felt was an underutilization or less than ideal application of their skills and resources. Having received training to work with children on literacy, math, and other skills to promote academic growth, some volunteers were upset when they perceived that their tasks in the classroom did not effectively utilize their skills:

Finally I came in one morning, I said: “You know what, I love being here, but you have to give me something to do ... because if you don’t, then I’m going to go back and go in somebody else’s classroom ...” I don’t want to sit here and do nothing. I can sit at home and do nothing.

Another volunteer commented, “It’s just that they [teachers] underestimated our value.”

In some instances, volunteers who noted they initially felt this way realized that teachers sometimes called on them less in the beginning of the volunteer period to allow them time to acclimate to the school setting:

But the teachers ... feel threatened because she didn’t give me nothing at first. I just made myself do something. She only gave me one [student], but she was teaching me how to cope with the children with problems.

In most cases, it appeared that such feelings of frustration regarding being underutilized resolved over time either through an active process on the part of the volunteer, as illustrated previously, or as teachers and volunteers developed more effective working relationships.

Another concern raised by volunteers was discomfort in working with teachers who reacted to children’s disruptive behavior with a raised voice (“screaming” and “yelling”), and a response a number of volunteers felt was ineffective:

[The teacher was] screaming and yelling at them ... kids don’t listen ... they listen to that stuff at home. ... so what you think your screaming and yelling, getting a sore throat, raising your blood pressure going to do?

Challenges also arose with volunteers acclimating to a subordinate position in the classroom, especially when working with a particularly young teacher whom they felt lacked the wisdom and experience that they possessed as older adults. One volunteer, who had previous experience working in schools, commented:

I guess I was kind of comparing what she did to what I would do. And then I would get really frustrated with her ... she was only in her twenties. Her first year teaching ... after I realized it was her first year, and my first year volunteering, I said, I got to work with this girl ... . And believe it or not, she taught me a lot because she finished college ... my challenge was letting go and letting the teacher teach.

Other volunteers echoed similar challenges of adjusting to the interpersonal dynamics of working with their partner teacher in the classroom. In most cases, volunteers reported that the adjustment periods were followed by the development of productive working relationships:

“I’m on the same page as her and I’ve been on the same page since.”

**Bonding/Making Social Connections (Reward)**

Many volunteers reported that they developed close, family-like bonds (“belonging to a club”) with the children, teachers, and other volunteers they worked with:

... they showed me how much they really did care for me, and how much they loved me ... and I was beginning to feel the same way. Just like they were my grandchildren ...

And everyone was nice, it was like a family. You know I hadn’t been in Baltimore long, I didn’t know a lot of people so they were like my family, or my friends, you know, the teachers, everybody was nice.

Volunteers also acknowledged that EC service strengthened their connection to the larger community. This was reinforced when volunteers were recognized and complemented for their EC work by children, and relatives of children, in community settings outside of school. The reward of recognition in the broader community is well captured by one volunteer who met a grandmother of one of the students she worked with while out shopping:

She said, “They love you.” Made my night ... “They love you, they talk about you all the time.” And I’ve had parents tell me that now, too.

**Personal**

Personal stressors and rewards were related to the fulfillment of individual goals. Stressors within this domain ranged from not feeling valued or feeling that EC is not valued to being unable to utilize skills; overall, these stressors were reported fairly infrequently (none met our 75% threshold). Rewards included enjoyment, self-enhancement/achievement, and being/feeling more active.

**Enjoyment (Reward)**

Overall, volunteers described EC as a source of enjoyment and positive feelings. They described the rewards of EC as something that made them feel “happy,” and something they “enjoyed.” As one participant stated, “... This is something great. It makes me feel good, every day. I couldn’t wait to get there [school].”

Often feelings of joy and happiness were coreported with other rewards as described under Self-enhancement/Achievement. However, the hedonic rewards (feeling good, happy, enjoying the work) also stood alone as a unique benefit of EC service.
Self-enhancement/Achievement (Reward)
Themes of self-enhancement and achievement also emerged as important benefits of volunteering. Volunteers described feeling “helpful” and enjoying the feeling of accomplishment associated with helping children “achieve.” One volunteer said:

When I left at the end of the day I felt like I had accomplished . . . a lot and given back by serving and helping these children . . . I enjoyed it.

Another volunteer said “it made a better person out of me,” whereas other volunteers described the rewards of feeling “worthwhile,” “accepted,” and having “something to offer again.” Trying to lead children down a “different” path was often cited as an important source of personal achievement:

... I felt like I was actually accomplishing something by trying to lead all these boys and girls down the right path rather than have them go . . . haphazardly into something that they would regret, like standing on the corner . . . idolizing drug dealers.

Being/Feeling More Active (Reward)
Volunteers reported that the rewards of volunteering included “getting out of the house,” having “something to do” and “someplace to go.” One volunteer described her lifestyle before and after joining EC:

I was sitting there watching TV again, getting into them soaps . . . [Experience Corps] has gotten me more involved. I used to have to hold on the rail to go up the steps and come down the steps. Now I can walk up the steps and walk right down the steps. I’ve lost quite a few pounds.

Many volunteers described feeling more “alert,” “lively,” and having more “energy.” One participant mentioned specifically how EC increased her physical activity:

I’ve noticed that you feel more lively . . . [with] those four year-olds there’s no time for laid back . . . they think you are four, so . . . I’m down on the floor, rolling on the carpet with them.

Structural
Structural stressors and rewards were related to the EC program structure, organization, and rules/regulations. Stressors within this domain ranged from the prohibition of physical contact with children and disciplinary constraints on volunteers; these stressors were infrequently mentioned (none met our 75% threshold). Rewards included satisfaction with the structural elements of the volunteer experience.

Satisfaction With the Structural Elements of the Volunteer Experience (Reward)
Volunteers reported that the EC structure, including training and meetings as well as the structure of the school setting and administrative support, were positive aspects of volunteering. Before volunteers started in the schools, they completed 30 hr of training in order to develop skills needed in the school environment and increase self-efficacy and confidence (Fried et al., 2004). Volunteers found the training “helpful” and “useful.”

I’m . . . thankful for the training that we got, because of all of the issues that I walked into, in my class. If I hadn’t had the training, I would not have known how to react to some of the things that actually took place in this classroom.

One volunteer additionally described the benefits of EC meetings co-ordinated by the team leader at the schools:

With the Experience Corps members themselves, we have our little monthly meetings and everybody got along fine and you learned something new . . . every day.

In the school setting, support from administrators was also often cited as a positive aspect of volunteering and a critical part of experiencing the rewards from volunteering.

Discussion
This qualitative investigation indicates that older adult volunteers in EC Baltimore, an intergenerational civic engagement program, experienced stressors (negative experiences) and rewards (positive experiences) in five key domains in their volunteer roles: intergenerational stressors and rewards unique to working with children; external stressors and rewards related to societal and community issues specific to children; interpersonal stressors and rewards related to interactions with teachers, children, and other individuals in the schools; personal stressors and rewards related to fulfilling individual goals; and structural stressors and rewards related to EC program rules and regulations. Overall, the wide array of experienced rewards may have balanced some of the significant stressors the volunteers experienced. This research may inform future intergenerational program design and modification to ensure the successful retention of volunteers in high-intensity health promotion activities.

Understanding the stressors and rewards older adults experience that may be unique to intergenerational programs, such as EC, is critical to maximizing benefits and reducing stress and burnout. Stressors and rewards within the “intergenerational” category were specific to volunteering with children. One of the primary activities of EC volunteers is resolving conflict and behavior issues in the classroom. Volunteers described children’s behavior problems, including physical aggression and a general lack of attention to instruction, as a significant source of stress and an impediment to classroom instruction. This may have led to a loss of personal accomplishment, one of the primary dimensions of burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). However, participants generally described helping
and working with children, including those with behavior problems, as a key component of rewards from the EC program. This unique intergenerational reward seemed to stem from observing and facilitating improvement in a child, which often co-occurred with the development of a special connection with a particular child over time. The benefits of developing close social bonds with children—created through one-on-one mentoring, tutoring, and emotional support—extended beyond the classroom to other spaces within the school as well as to the broader neighborhood/community. This reflects the process of building social capital at the individual, school, and community level that is hypothesized to be a primary vehicle through which the EC program may enhance both individual and public health (Glass et al., 2004), and reinforces one of the primary psychosocial pathways hypothesized to promote health benefits of EC participation (Figure 1). Critical to the development of close social bonds with children and experiencing psychosocial rewards seemed to be a consistent and substantial commitment of time (EC Baltimore requires 15 hr per week of service).

Stressors within the “external to EC” category were also unique to volunteering with children. Many volunteers connected children’s problem behavior to issues ranging from systemic problems in the community to children’s mental health problems. Poor parenting and negative social environments were also frequently mentioned as significant external stressors. Although certain negative experiences may result from a lack of organizational resources to alleviate stressors (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), EC volunteers recognized that certain issues were beyond their or the schools’ ability to change. However, a feeling of hopelessness in connection with these challenges was an important source of frustration and stress.

Interpersonal interactions can lead to stressors and rewards across volunteer programs. Specific to programs in school settings, some volunteers described their interaction with teachers as challenging. At times, some volunteers felt that they were underutilized in the classroom and an inconvenience to teachers who did not view volunteers as important to addressing unmet needs in the classroom. Role ambiguity and a lack of support are risk factors for burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Perhaps unique to intergenerational settings, this experience was particularly stressful because many volunteers felt that they could help with student issues, including behavior problems, because of their age, experience, and cultural background. Tensions and conflict between volunteers and teachers may have at times prevented volunteers from experiencing short-term rewards. However, most volunteers reported that over time, their relationship with teachers became productive and effective. This again may support the importance of a high “dose” of regular exposure to volunteering in order to allow volunteers and teachers to acclimate to each other. Although volunteers described interpersonal challenges, they generally described their interactions within the school setting, including those with teachers, children, parents, other volunteers, EC staff, and school staff/administrators, as rewarding.

Volunteers also experienced personal stressors and rewards in their volunteer role. The stressors in this category, including not feeling valued or feeling that EC is not valued, were often related to challenges with teachers described previously. Personal psychological rewards, including self-enhancement and self-achievement rewards, were frequently mentioned and were often connected to observing improvements in children. These rewards may contribute to psychological and other intra-individual resources that can serve to balance stressors and help buffer burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). Participants additionally described increased physical activity as an important personal reward of volunteering. This is in accordance with the design and hypothesized causal model of increased activity leading to better functioning and health (Figure 1) (Fried et al., 2004). Physical activity associated with volunteering in EC included getting to the schools (e.g., waking up in the morning and getting dressed) as well as activity within the schools (e.g., working and playing with children). The reported benefits of increased physical activity included feeling more alert, having more energy, and improved mobility and function. Participants also reported perceived beneficial effects of increased cognitive activity, noting that volunteering “helped my brain.” These observations are in line with findings from three previous studies (Carlson et al., 2008, 2009; Tan, Xue, Li, Carlson, & Fried, 2006).

Participants described structural stressors related to EC rules and regulations, particularly the prohibition against physical contact with the children, however, volunteers also generally reported that they were satisfied with the organizational and interpersonal support provided by EC and the schools, and felt they had the knowledge and skills to serve effectively as a volunteer. This is likely attributed to a number of EC design characteristics, including training (initial 30-hr training plus booster trainings) designed to provide volunteers with the skills and resources needed to work with teachers and students in the school environment, weekly/biweekly team meetings that encourage collaboration and social support among EC volunteers, and school and EC program administrative support. Volunteers are also deployed in teams of 7–10 per school in order to constitute a “critical mass” of social capital to improve the success of children and to provide support and reinforcement for each other (Glass et al., 2004). Considering the importance of organizational support to promoting health benefits, particularly among low-income and minority volunteers (Tang, Choi, & Morrow-Howell, 2010), as well as previous research on how training resources, interpersonal support, and praise from administrators may reduce the psychological and physiological costs of volunteering (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), the core support elements of EC may have balanced some of the stressors experienced by volunteers.
Limitations of this study include moderate interrater reliability due to the complexity of data collected that led to multiple codes often assigned to discrete sections of text (and minimized the probability of “exact matches” for each coded segment) to capture the dominant themes expressed by participants. Additionally, the restriction to active volunteers in EC Baltimore may have resulted in a bias toward reporting more favorable volunteer experiences and volunteers with less favorable experiences may have dropped out early in the EC service period. Although the focus group sample had similar baseline characteristics compared with the larger BECT, and stressors were consistently reported across all focus groups, the selection of active volunteers may have nonetheless biased results. Future analyses will explore the experiences of EC volunteers who dropped out in order to better understand how an imbalance of rewards and stressors may lead to burnout, and investigate coping mechanisms within active volunteers to inform program strategies to better support volunteers.

**Conclusion**

EC Baltimore is an intergenerational civic engagement program that has been successful in recruiting diverse older adults not usually targeted as volunteers. In order to ensure the success of high-intensity intergenerational programs like EC, researchers need to understand and recognize stressors that may be experienced by volunteers and the potential for burnout, as well as the rewards, design elements, and pathways of benefit that may lead to enhanced health and well being in volunteers. Although we observed a favorable balance between stressors and rewards in focus group participants, volunteers identified a number of stressors that may be unique to intergenerational civic engagement volunteering and can be addressed through project modifications and continued volunteer adaptation to the classroom climate.

Intergenerational issues related to children’s problem behavior and societal factors external to the EC program resulted in significant volunteer stress. Addressing the negative impact of issues that may be beyond the reach of the volunteer and organization (i.e., school) is essential. Including segments into booster trainings that role play these situations (e.g., a child misbehaving due to parental issues), helping volunteers learn positive coping skills, and developing peer support through sharing experiences during team meetings may help volunteers cope with stressors related to systemic concerns that may be difficult to change.

Interpersonal issues between school staff and the volunteer was considered a singular stressor theme within the category “Interpersonal” (see Table 2). Developing a close working relationship between the volunteer and teacher, and reducing the adjustment period may be a critical part of reducing interpersonal volunteer stress, as well as stress related to children’s problem behavior. EC and other intergenerational volunteer organizations may want to consider matching teachers with volunteers based on factors that may alleviate stressors identified in this study. This can include considering years of teaching experience for the volunteer and teacher, styles of classroom behavior management, personality, and flexibility.

Volunteers identified a range of rewards, including those related to playing a critical role in facilitating academic growth and behavioral well being in children, as well as rewards related to the key pathways (physical, social, and cognitive) through which EC engagement is hypothesized to benefit the health and well being of older volunteers. Our exploration of both the stressors and rewards associated with intergenerational civic engagement volunteering will enhance our understanding of how volunteers may or may not experience health and well being benefits and inform project modifications to ensure and enhance such benefits for future older adult volunteers and those they serve.

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