

# Return on Investment

An in-depth report commissioned by NPCA provides empirical data on the benefits of Peace Corps.

BY RICHARD PYLE

## EDITOR'S NOTE

As federal funding for international aid and cultural exchange programs continues to shrink, policymakers are increasingly asking whether these initiatives deliver tangible benefits to Americans. In 2021, National Peace Corps Association commissioned a major study to mark the Peace Corps' 60th anniversary. The result—*The Domestic Dividend of Peace Corps*—was published in 2023 and stands as the most comprehensive analysis to date that demonstrates how Peace Corps service benefits communities back home. What follows is an executive summary, as written by the task force. The full report is available at [www.WorldViewMagazine.org](http://www.WorldViewMagazine.org).

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## PREFACE

In August of 2019, two of my 1960s PCV friends, Art Flanagan, and Randy Adams, and I met on my back patio to discuss the upcoming 60th anniversary of Peace Corps. We thought the time was ripe to explore the extent to which President Kennedy's idea in 1961 had been realized—that the Peace Corps would have a domestic benefit.

The implication was clear that President Kennedy expected Peace Corps to show a return on the investment in Peace Corps Volunteers' work abroad. We worked up a proposal to the NPCA to study the "dividends" that have been paid. It was soon approved, and NPCA formed a task force of RPCVs and former Peace Corps staff to study the question. After four years and over a hundred meetings of the Task Force working diligently in a volunteer capacity, we are pleased to share the resulting report, *The Domestic Dividend of Peace Corps*.

We dedicate this survey to the American people who have supported this idea called Peace Corps. They have done so with their treasure and their sons, daughters, mothers, fathers, and grandparents, resulting in over 250,000 PCVs, who represent every ethnicity, gender, and age, in service to over 120 developing nations.

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It is estimated that RPCV businesses have contributed around \$1.3 billion to the U.S. economy since the founding of Peace Corps more than 60 years ago.

## 1. Introduction

From its inception, Peace Corps has sought to achieve three goals. The first two goals define the mission of the Volunteers' work abroad. The third goal sets up the aspirations for RPCVs' contributions upon returning home.

- **Goal One** | Help the peoples of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women.
- **Goal Two** | Help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served.
- **Goal Three** | Help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans.

These three goals of Peace Corps have proven to be powerful guidelines in the agency's efforts to create true and lasting peace, and are the framework for the questions in this study.

President Kennedy envisioned both global and domestic benefits when Peace Corps was founded in 1961. The goal of the study was to assess more specifically the degree to which the United States has received domestic benefits from the RPCVs' service overseas.

The study focused on two specific questions.

- **One** | How have the Volunteers benefited professionally from what they learned during their Peace Corps service?
- **Two** | What benefits has American society reaped as a result of the RPCVs' experiences?

Task Force members assumed, based on anecdotal evidence and earlier studies, that service as a Peace Corps Volunteer is a transformative experience which changed RPCVs in positive ways and supported their ability to give back to their own country. The Task Force members designed a survey to assess this assumption. A second expectation was that the study would identify the breadth and depth, where possible given the limitations of the survey, of the domestic benefits of RPCVs' domestic contributions. The study distinguished between Goal Three activities promoting a better understanding of other countries and cultures on the part of Americans, and other possible domestic benefits. The team hypothesized that Goal Three activities are but one of many domestic benefits.

This report builds on a small body of academic and policy literature about the impact of PCVs in host countries and the impact of Peace Corps service on Volunteers. Some studies reviewed RPCVs' individual career paths, but few focused on the larger scope of the domestic benefits.

In comparison to the work done over the past 60 years, this study is the largest, broadest, and most comprehensive endeavor to evaluate the domestic benefits of the Peace Corps experience.

This does not devalue historic work on PCV's and RPCV's experiences, impacts, and skill development; this study helps to further clarify the effects of Peace Corps on RPCVs and the American public.

A unique contribution of this study is evaluating the domestic benefits from RPCVs who span all six decades (1962–2021), enabling us to examine the paths of the earliest Volunteers over six decades as well as the contributions of those who have served recently.



A member of the Northern California Peace Corps Association participates in a beach clean up project. RPCVs volunteer at a rate three times the average American.

The full report (available on the *WorldView* website at [www.WorldViewMagazine.org](http://www.WorldViewMagazine.org)) contains three main chapters and two annexes (Bibliography and Methodology). The main themes by chapter follow below.

**Chapter One:** Learning from service—What is the impact of Peace Corps service on Volunteers' personal growth and development?

**Chapter Two:** Bringing the Peace Corps back home—What activities have RPCVs undertaken related to their learning during service? How do they contribute to the US in terms of social and economic benefits?

**Chapter Three:** National dividend—What are the benefits to the U.S. of Peace Corps? How have RPCVs' activities led to domestic benefits, and what are the unique features of the Peace Corps experience that explain these domestic impacts?

In this summary report, we highlight the key findings and insights from each chapter to demonstrate the influence of the Peace Corps experience on RPCVs and the subsequent benefits to the American public upon their return.

The Task Force designed and completed a survey instrument in September 2021 and sent the questionnaire by email to 60,000

RPCVs. The questionnaire contained 43 questions to measure RPCVs' skills gained from service and the numerous ways in which they used these skills to achieve domestic impacts. We received 4,090 responses with 90 of those who responded completing the survey in its entirety. The data were collected using Qualtrics software and analyzed with Stata. The methodology and the demographic data for survey respondents are described in Annex B of the full report.

## 2. Learning From Service: What Volunteers Bring Home

### *Personal growth and development*

■ A majority of RPCVs reported greater intercultural awareness (96 percent), more confidence (92 percent), being more accepting of diversity (87 percent), a greater interest in service (86 percent), more awareness of the value of community (86 percent), and greater awareness of professional goals (67 percent) following their service.

■ The majority of RPCVs credited the Peace Corps experience with helping them develop a newfound confidence in their own abilities, establish the foundation to learn a different language and culture, develop leadership and critical thinking skills, weather uncertainty, and adapt to life and work in different social environments.

The overall experience led individuals to reevaluate their goals and decisions for their post-service lives.

### **Skills Development and Life Skills**

■ A majority of RPCVs reported that their Peace Corps experience enhanced their intercultural awareness (84 percent), resiliency (74 percent), problem-solving (53 percent), and communication skills (52 percent).

■ A smaller minority of RPCVs reported their Peace Corps experience enhanced their leadership (42 percent), teamwork (39 percent), and coalition-building skills (33 percent).

■ A majority of RPCVs reported that their Peace Corps experience directly influenced their interest in understanding global issues (83 percent), desire to have influence in the lives of others (71 percent), interest in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in their community (58 percent), and volunteering in their community (52 percent).

■ A minority of RPCVs reported that their Peace Corps experience directly influenced their career paths (46 percent), and entrepreneurial skills (23 percent).



### Voices of RPCVs on the influence of Peace Corps on their personal development

“The Peace Corps [experience] helped me gain the confidence to succeed in tasks I am unfamiliar with and the humility to ask for help when needed. Along with confidence, I have more patience for myself as I overcome challenges and learn new skills (thank you, foreign languages). I also have more patience with my colleagues/friends and place more emphasis on teamwork than individual responsibility in the workplace.”

“Serving in the Peace Corps helped me understand the depth of my own strength and capabilities. I became more confident and assertive. I enhanced my communication skills and became practiced in setting honest expectations while conveying determination and hope.”

“My Peace Corps experience provided an opportunity to live and work within another culture and learn a language. Both culture and language informed me of how different perspectives on life result in different values and actions. And that local socio-economic environment, resources and leadership are crucial elements in understanding how people organize to identify and solve their challenges to meet their needs for a healthy, educated, and meaningful life.”

“Serving in the Peace Corps helped me understand the depth of my own strength and capabilities. I became more confident and assertive. I enhanced my communication skills and became practiced in setting honest expectations while conveying determination and hope. I gained substantial experience working with a spectrum of diverse people, in terms of race, religion, socioeconomic status, and positions of power. I learned how to assert myself and my opinions and take the lead to accomplish tasks. I improved my facilitative skills. I expanded my knowledge in the health field, in engineering, in agriculture, in youth work, in gender relations, and in education.”

## 3. RPCVs as Professionals: Applying the Lessons of Peace Corps

*Sharing the Peace Corps experience with the U.S. public*

■ A majority of RPCVs (90 percent) shared their Peace Corps journey with the U.S. public. A third of the RPCVs (30 percent) shared their Peace Corps experiences through teaching and training/coaching. These activities also included formal presentations about Peace Corps, writing, and using social media to share their stories.

### Links between service and career choices

■ The 4,056 RPCVs worked in eleven technical areas during their project assignments. Over a third worked in education (37 percent). A smaller number worked in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries (13 percent), health and nutrition/sanitation (14 percent), and community development (11 percent).

■ The RPCVs worked in 14 different career fields after service. The top five fields were social services (16 percent), other (14 percent), youth (13 percent), public service, government, law, and policy (11 percent), and community development and outreach (11 percent).

■ Half of the RPCVs across multiple sectors pursued a career field either related to or associated with their Peace Corps project assignment. A majority of RPCVs who had served in the following sectors continued to work in that sector upon return to the U.S.: business (55 percent), education (63 percent), environment (54 percent), and government and/or public service (68 percent).

### Application of new knowledge to careers

A majority of RPCVs reported that they have used their knowledge in their professional work (74 percent) either daily, weekly, monthly, less than monthly, or in the past. These included languages (67 percent), cultural knowledge (86 percent), political system knowledge (72 percent), and economic system knowledge (70 percent).

Overwhelmingly, RPCVs indicate that the soft skills they honed during Peace Corps were more significant than specific content areas.

### Summary of the major areas of influence of Peace Corps on RPCVs' careers

■ Most of the respondents noted that the opportunity to confront new and unique challenges and cultures was clearly the most rewarding aspect of their Peace Corps work.

## Voices of RPCVs on the influence of Peace Corps in their professional life

“During my 30 years working as a staff member for committees of the U.S. House of Representatives, the values and understanding of other cultures gained during my Peace Corps days helped me in developing government policy aimed at serving the best needs of our country and the world.”

“My Peace Corps experience set me on the path to spending my entire professional life in various aspects of public service: education, state government, federal government, nonprofit organizations, and service on a variety of nonprofit boards.”

“My Peace Corps experience enhanced my ability to represent poor people and increased my ability to see both sides of a case as a judge and as a law clerk.”

■ RPCVs reported that their Peace Corps assignments gave them access to situations that enhanced their career development. This was due in large measure to their unique status in a developing country, often in remote areas where their skills were needed.

■ The RPCVs said they were better able to fully use their talents and take on unique roles and leadership opportunities at an early stage in their career, opportunities that would not have been possible within the U.S.

### Special Case: Entrepreneurship

■ Twenty-four percent of the respondents (933 of the 4,090 respondents) reported that they started a single or multiple successful ventures (e.g., for-profit and/or nonprofit).

■ Individuals who founded a business venture fall into two groups in terms of the type of influence Peace Corps contributed to their decision.

- The first group of RPCVs reported that their Peace Corps experience directly influenced their decision to create a business or nonprofit in the locations they served or in their home communities in the US. The impetus for these ventures came from a basis of service, such as addressing a social or economic problem, rather than simply being created for financial gain.
- The second group found the skills and knowledge they gained through their Peace Corps experience were instrumental in creating their nonprofit and/or for-profit. In this case, social networking and other on-the-ground knowledge from their Peace Corps service provided key resources for starting their venture.

■ A majority of the 933 ventures were small businesses with less than \$500k in profit (64 percent).

■ A minority of the 933 ventures were large businesses or transnational businesses (36 percent) and reported between \$500k to over \$10 million in profit.

■ Of the 933 who reported founding a business, 724 remained in business as of 2021.

■ Based on a rudimentary estimate, the economic impact of entrepreneurial RPCVs during the collective height of their ventures were somewhere between \$752 million and \$1.1 billion.

### Special Case: International Work

■ Twenty percent of the RPCVs went on to a career in international work (1,385 RPCVs).

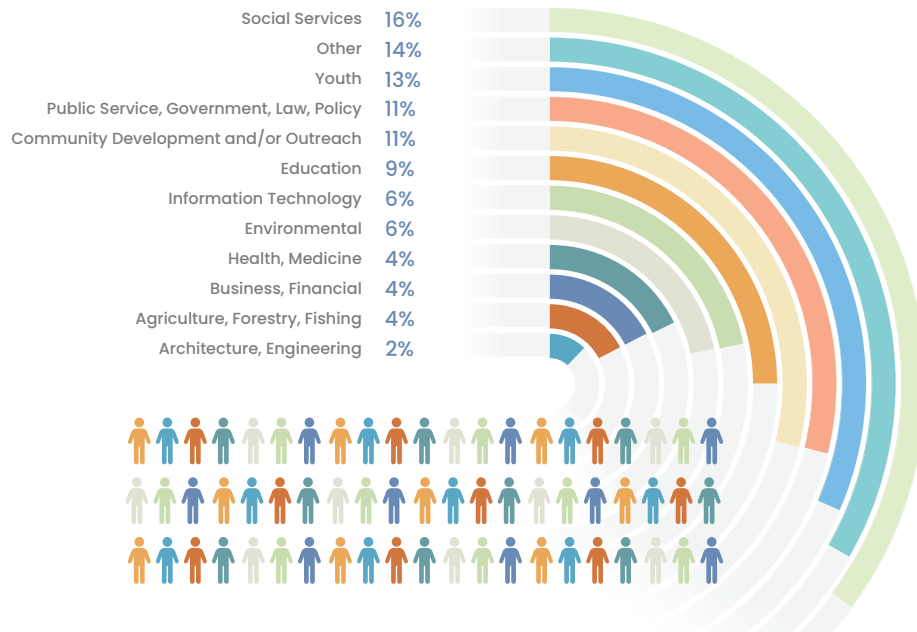
■ The top three types of international work were (a) international development/assistance as a federal employee (25 percent), (b) government implementing partner (18 percent), and (c) work outside the U.S. with a multinational organization (14 percent).

■ A majority worked in two or more areas (51 percent).

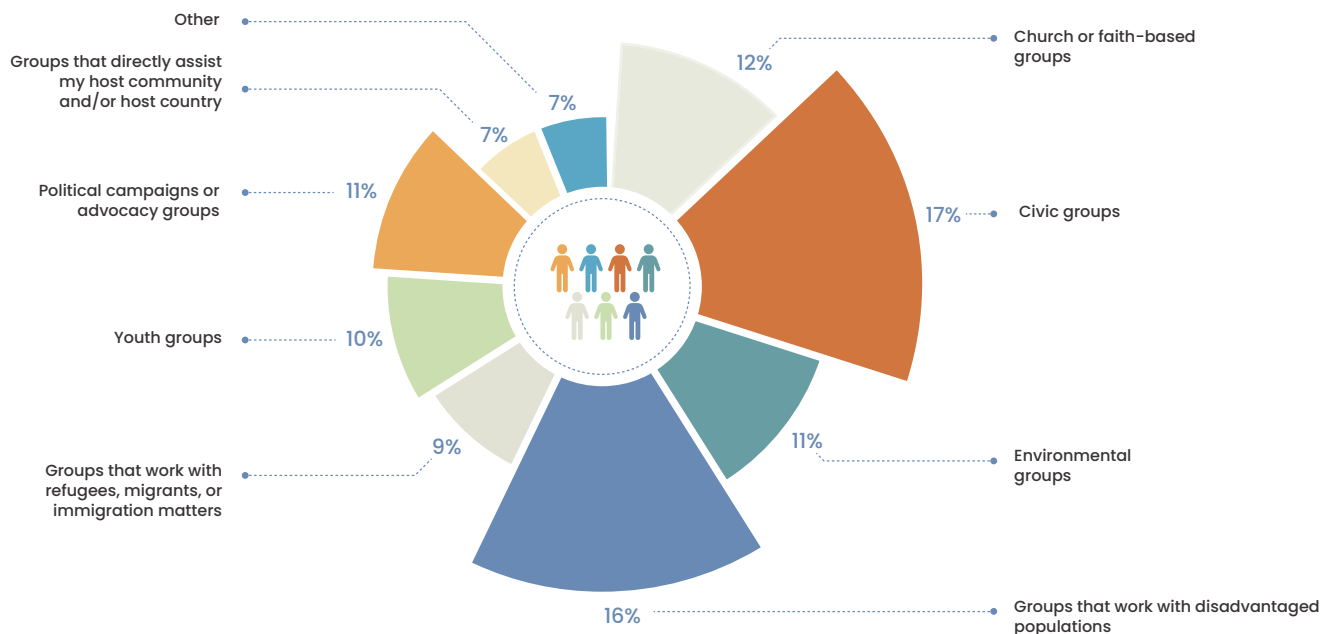
■ The range and depth of international work activities listed by respondents in the ‘Other International Work’ category is truly extensive. Those who listed ‘Other International Work’ activities include a considerable number (211) of RPCVs who worked with international NGOs.

The RPCVs international work highlights the continued international connections or new international connections created because of their service. The RPCVs integrated their interest in remaining active in global affairs with a career choice that contributes to cross-cultural understanding.

### Different Post-Service Career Fields



### Different Types of Volunteer Work



## 4. Volunteerism as a Domestic Benefit

### Bringing service home

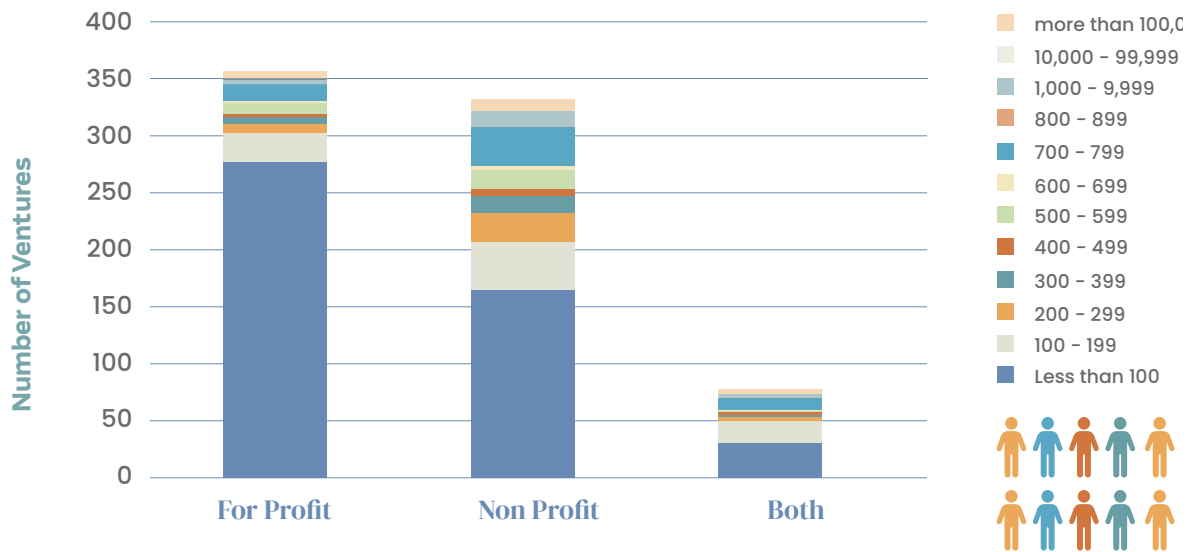
- Volunteering upon returning from service is a hallmark activity reported by both younger and older RPCVs.
- Eighty-six percent of the RPCVs (3,510) reported that they continued to volunteer, participating in nine distinct types of volunteer work.

■ The top three types of groups were civic organizations (17 percent), groups that work with disadvantaged populations (16 percent), and faith-based groups (12 percent).

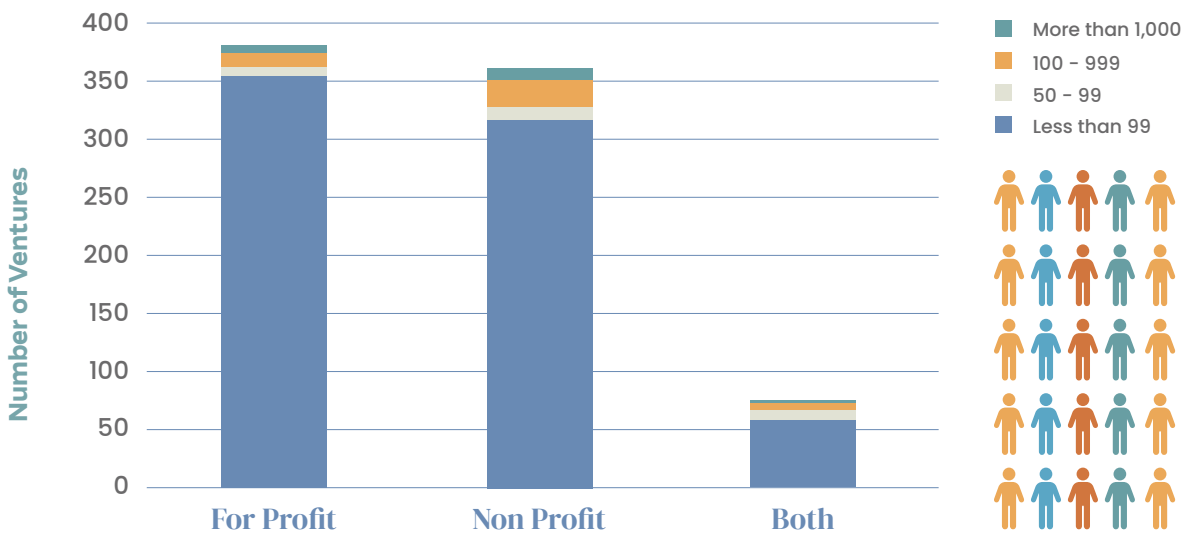
- Approximately 88 percent of RPCVs who reported volunteering participated in two or more types of volunteer work after their service.

■ Regardless of RPCVs' decade of service, most have similar rates of volunteerism in terms of average weekly hours.

Number of Customers Served Daily at Height of Venture



Number of Employees at Height of Venture



■ RPCVs provide significant unpaid work to organizations, and the social and economic impact of this work is high, given the amount of volunteer hours served by RPCVs. Even when considering the more conservative estimates of each bracket of volunteer hours, the reported volunteer work is worth over \$1 million each year.

■ The rate of volunteerism among RPCVs has increased over time, based on a comparison with the rate of volunteerism reported in the three previous major impact studies of RPCVs.

- In 1969, Harris reported that 27 percent of the vol-

unteers who responded to her survey continued their volunteer activities upon returning. In 1996, the number had nearly doubled, to 47 percent. A bibliography of all the resources cited in this summary can be found in the final report on [www.WorldViewMagazine.org](http://www.WorldViewMagazine.org).

● Eighty-six percent of the RPCVs continue to volunteer, nearly double the amount from the 1990s.

■ Of the 3,702 who reported that they volunteer, 67 percent have served in a leadership capacity on either a single or multiple boards.

## 5. Summary: The National Dividend

### *America needs the Peace Corps*

Knowing that RPCVs have and continue to benefit from the Peace Corps experience leads to the essential question of the study, initially posed by Sargent Shriver. What does the U.S. “get out of the investment in Peace Corps” upon the Volunteers’ return? We know from this study and its predecessors that we “get” U.S. citizens who are more globally aware and committed to service.

The results of this study demonstrate that the overwhelming majority of the RPCVs were led by their changed perspective to solve problems in the U.S. and globally in their professional careers and public service.

■ The benefits U.S. society reaps are multifaceted and have a monetary value. For example, the estimated value of RPCV businesses is substantial as is the imputed value of volunteer service. However, the salient outcome of our study is that domestic benefits are both social and economic, and persist over the lifetime of RPCVs

■ The benefits are real in terms of civic engagement. RPCVs continue their mission to serve after leaving their host countries. RPCVs volunteer at a higher rate than that of a comparable segment of the U.S. population, and the potential monetary value of this work, as well as the social impact of this work throughout the diverse communities they serve, is high.

■ The benefits are real in terms of intangible effects. Often, the entrepreneurs built businesses to solve social and economic problems they first encountered as Peace Corps Volunteers. RPCVs acknowledge that their service as Peace Corps Volunteers had a direct influence on their lifelong commitment to volunteer at home, and the diversity and scope of their work, as reported in their written stories, are far ranging throughout American society. And it is based on the value of serving others and giving back, as described by one of these extraordinary RPCVs. “My Peace Corps experience had embedded volunteerism into my daily life while doing ordinary things. Our experiences show society the value of volunteer service for a community and for the individual.”

■ The benefits are real in terms of international influence. Thousands of RPCVs have dedicated their lives to working in the international arena, bringing a global perspective to their labor, while continuing to represent and serve the U.S.

While many RPCVs are exceptionally notable, the domestic impact of all RPCVs, as a collective, stretches far beyond this group. Thousands of less visible RPCVs are equally as remarkable and dedicated to serving throughout all aspects of U.S. social, political,

and economic life. Graul (1996) characterized RPCVs as cultural mediators, indeed an accurate descriptor and a critical role in much of the RPCVs’ activities, be it domestic work where their Peace Corps-acquired language skills bridge cultural divides, or internationally where cultural awareness opens communication among nations.

As an outcome of this study, we define RPCVs as catalysts who as facilitators and motivators, share the search for peace by serving



Eighty-six percent of RPCVs report that they continue to serve their communities upon their return.

## RPCVs are three times more likely to volunteer than the average American.

others and teaching those around them. They bring home the same respect for others learned in Peace Corps and achieve the same catalytic effect seen in the collaboration between Volunteers and host country nationals. It is this catalytic effect of 250,000 RPCVs serving in all walks of life that is quietly changing lives in the U.S.

The Peace Corps Volunteers’ impact upon return spans the local to the global, from serving their home communities in small but impactful projects, to leading federal agencies that improve our connections with the international community. They continue to uphold Peace Corps values throughout their lives, to the benefit of the American people.

This study builds on earlier RPCV studies by revisiting the impact of Peace Corps on its Volunteers. Yet it reaches beyond the well-documented individual benefits to demonstrate the link between RPCVs’ Peace Corps experience and subsequent professional and personal contributions to the larger community.

These are the domestic benefits of the investment made in the 60-year-old experiment in a genuine search for peace.

Task Force members: Richard Pyle, Chair; Glenn Blumhorst; Dan Baker, CEO, NPCA; Randolph Adams; Art Flanagan; Stephen Gastyer; Raymond A. Jussaume; Janet Kerley; Kayleigh Ward. ●