This paper investigates voluntary work among older people. The beginning of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century is marked by some inspiring years in the gerontological sphere. Firstly, the demographical displacement of people, implies that more and more individuals live longer. Globally, this ‘greying population’, or the number of citizens aged 60 years or above, is increasing rapidly. Currently, there are 650 million older people (60 years or more). The World Health Organisation estimates that in 2050 that number will have increased to 2 billion people. This global ageing trend has major economical, health related, and social implications. Nowadays more older people have an active lifestyle due to increased autonomy, well-being, mobility, and participation. The increasing life expectancy has implemented a new image of older people and ageing in society. The traditional negative image of dependency, decline, and decrepitude has been fading into the background. Volunteer activities are considered to have benefits for both the community and for individual volunteers.

While there is a substantial literature on voluntary work, there is only limited research concerning volunteerism in later life. The question whether and why older people involve in voluntary work deserves further research. Moreover, there has been relatively little analysis of the profile of those who don’t volunteer. Information about obstacles like the influence of different sources of vulnerability and environmental factors or thresholds remains underresearched and poorly understood. Understanding the barriers that people face in deciding to volunteer, could help reverse this trend. Consequently, this study aims to explore the extent and nature of older people’s volunteerism. The main purpose is to investigate what key factors determine voluntary work among older people. In particular, the research looks at the relative impact of socio-demographic variables, income, physical health, transport modes, neighbourhood attachment and components of meaning of life (the purpose of self-realization and self-transcendence).

In the present research a sample of 57,977 Belgian elders (aged sixty and over), living in 127 municipalities and cities in Belgium is used. Through a highly structured questionnaire, especially developed for older adults, numerous aspects of their daily life containing demographic characteristics, physical health, participation in social life, neighbourhood features, meaning of life, voluntary work, mobility … were interviewed. The implementation of the interview design took place in cooperation with the provincial government, local authorities and members of the local senior organizations. Working with a peer-research system (elders interviewing elders) enriched the research-design, resulting in more complete questionnaires and a high response rate (between 65 and 85%).

Finally, we applied a binary logistic regression to analyse the key factors that determine whether one is a volunteer or a non-volunteer. The regression analysis indicates that components of meaning of life, and in particular the purpose of self-transcendence, is the most important predictor of participation in voluntary work, followed by neighbourhood attachment. In addition, the results highlight the importance of financial resources. Contrary to our expectations the physical vulnerability appears to be unimportant. Furthermore, the findings reveal no gender differences between both groups.

In the conclusion, the most important findings are formulated. The findings stress the need for recognizing the various multidimensional factors that affect voluntary work. Regarding the components of meaning of life, self-transcendent purposes like altruistic, religious, and civic motivations are the most important determinants for being and remaining a volunteer.

Thresholds like low neighbourhood attachment and financial vulnerability give more information about the reasons for being a non-volunteer and can be crucial for voluntary organisations and policy. Furthermore, a fundamental research agenda is crucial. Therefore, future research should maintain a contextual perspective on volunteering and incorporate environmental factors, such as the neighbourhood. Next, implications for social policy are offered. Support policies and programs can be designed to encourage older citizens to make use of their productive potential for the benefit of themselves and society.