

January 14, 2025

## The Peace Corps

The Peace Corps is an independent agency that sends American volunteers to serve at the grassroots level in developing countries in order to advance three goals:

- promote world peace and friendship by improving the lives of the communities where volunteers serve,
- help others understand American culture, and
- share volunteers' experiences with Americans at home.

President John F. Kennedy proposed the Peace Corps as part of his broader initiative to promote national service—a proposal Congress endorsed in enacting the Peace Corps Act of 1961 (P.L. 87-293, as amended). More than 240,000 volunteers have served in 144 countries since the agency's founding. (Unless noted, data are as of September 2024. For further information, including underlying sources, see CRS Report RS21168, *The Peace Corps: Overview and Issues*.)

### Ways to Serve

Most volunteers (96%) serve in the traditional 27-month program, which comprises three months of language and technical training followed by two years of service embedded in a host community. Volunteers work in a partner institution, such as a nonprofit organization, a municipal program, or a school, with a designated counterpart—a community member who is the volunteer's conduit to the local community. Host communities are typically remote; 82% of volunteers serve in a rural town, village, or outer island, generally placing Peace Corps volunteers at the farthest reach of U.S. foreign assistance.

The Peace Corps has two other volunteering models. A small share (4%) serve in Peace Corps Response, a more flexible, short-term program for professionals with specialized skills and some work experience. Since 2020, the Peace Corps has also provided remote volunteers through an ongoing Virtual Service Pilot, which has facilitated 831 engagements across 48 countries through February 2024, including in countries where the Peace Corps historically had large programs but no longer can due to safety issues (e.g., Ukraine and Ethiopia).

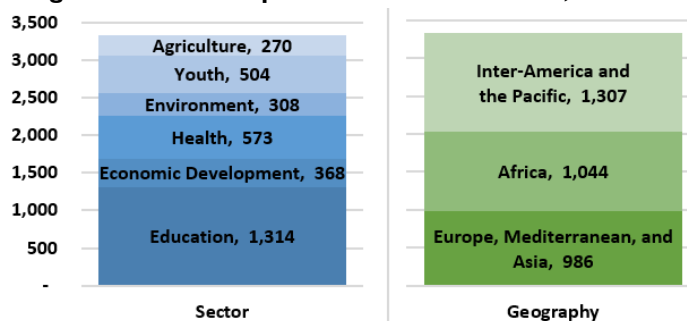
### Geography and Sectors

The Peace Corps operates in 61 countries (**Figure 1**) and plans to expand to 65 countries in FY2025. The largest region by number of volunteers is the Inter-America and Pacific region, which comprises the Americas and the Pacific Islands. This is a change from years before the COVID-19 pandemic, when sub-Saharan Africa hosted the most volunteers. Sub-Saharan Africa continues to have the most country programs (35) and the largest budget.

Volunteers serve across six sectors: agriculture, community economic development, education, environment, health,

and youth in development. Education is and has been the largest sector (39%) for decades.

**Figure 1. Peace Corps Volunteer Distribution, 2024**



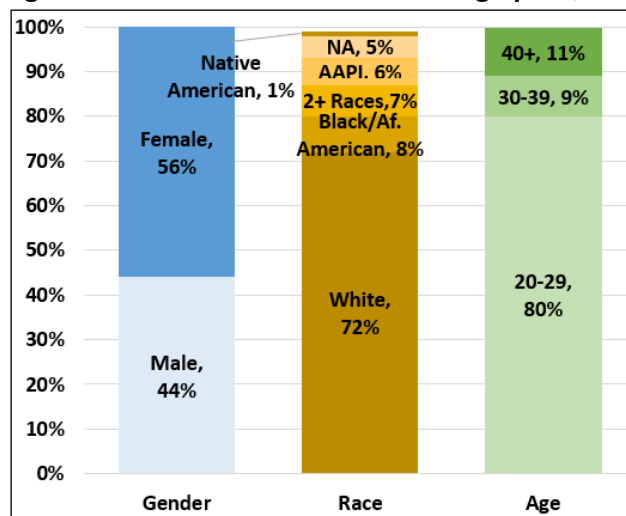
**Source:** Peace Corps, *Agency Financial Report, FY2024*.

**Note:** Includes two-year and Peace Corps Response volunteers.

### Who the Volunteers Are

Volunteers come from every state, motivated (according to annual volunteer surveys) by travel, cultural exposure, personal growth, and a wish to help others. In 2023, around 80% of volunteers were under age 30 (**Figure 2**), and 98% held a college degree. Ethnic and racial minority identification has grown steadily, from 15% of the volunteer force in 2001 to 34% in 2023. The share of female volunteers, 56% in 2023, is below the 63% average in the decade before the COVID-19 pandemic. About three-quarters of volunteers would recommend the Peace Corps to others.

**Figure 2. Volunteer Force: Select Demographics, 2023**



**Source:** Peace Corps, *FY2025 Congressional Budget Justification*.

**Notes:** AAPI: Asian American and Pacific Islander; NA: no race chosen. The Peace Corps tracks Hispanic identity (15% of volunteers) separately from race.

## Budget and Volunteer Force Trends

The Peace Corps' annual regular funding remained at approximately \$410 million from 2015 to 2022 (**Table 1**). Congress rescinded supplemental funds in FY2021 and FY2022 that were previously appropriated to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Biden Administration requested \$479 million for FY2025, with the increase directed toward expanding Peace Corps programs overseas, particularly in the Pacific Islands; paying for higher costs; and improving recruitment. In the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress, a Senate-proposed measure (S. 4797) would have matched the Administration's request, whereas a House-passed version (H.R. 8771) would have returned the agency to FY2022 levels. Final FY2025 funding has not been enacted.

**Table 1. Peace Corps Funding**

(in millions U.S. \$)

	FY2021	FY2022	FY2023	FY2024	FY2025
Request	401.2	410.5	430.5	495.0	479.0
Enacted	410.5	410.5	430.5	430.5	NA
Rescissions	-\$30	-\$70	—	—	NA

**Source:** Budget requests and public laws.

**Notes:** Rescissions generally apply to prior-year appropriations.

NA: not enacted.

Peace Corps volunteer levels have not fully recovered since volunteers were evacuated from their posts in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In September 2024, there were 3,337 Peace Corps volunteers, about 1,000 more than in 2023 but half of pre-pandemic levels. The Peace Corps' geographic footprint is back to pre-pandemic levels, but the agency is filling 45% of volunteer slots, down from 94% in 2019. Prior to the pandemic, volunteer levels had stabilized at around 7,000 from 2013 to the 2020, down from an all-time peak of 9,000 in 2011. The Peace Corps has never met a statutory goal, set in 1985, of 10,000 volunteers.

## Recent Developments

The agency's FY2022-FY2026 strategic plan sets three strategic objectives: (1) return volunteers to service and expand service models; (2) build a workforce and volunteer force reflective of U.S. and host country diversity; and (3) meet health, safety, and service commitments to host countries, volunteers, and staff. In its FY2023 performance report, the agency reported having met most of its targets.

A Peace Corps reauthorization measure has been introduced in each of the past three Congresses, with the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress seeing a Senate bill (S. 1203) reported out of committee and no action taken on a House companion (H.R. 1273). S. 1203 would have authorized funding at \$410.5 million for FY2024-FY2028. H.R. 1273 omitted an authorization of specific funding levels. Both bills would have, among other provisions, increased volunteer readjustment allowances, protected volunteer whistleblowers, and restructured a long-defunct Peace Corps National Advisory Council. They would also have set several priorities, including expanding programs in Oceania, improving pre- and post-service health care, coordinating security with the State Department, and

revisiting malaria medication options. The bills also would have extended some health and safety reforms, including for sexual assault, enacted in 2011 (P.L. 112-57) and 2018 (P.L. 115-256).

## Selected Issues

As the 119<sup>th</sup> Congress weighs Peace Corps funding, reauthorization, oversight, and nominees, the topics below may be areas of focus.

**Role of the Peace Corps.** The Peace Corps' three goals are unchanged since the agency's founding. Some Members have reflected on how the Peace Corps advances its mission and whether the mission fits a changed world. Some Members have raised concerns that sending recent college graduates with little work experience to poor countries reflects Western paternalism. The Peace Corps determined in 2011 that "energetic, well-rounded generalists" are well-suited to the agency's goals, noting strong demand for volunteers from host countries. Some Members applauded closure of the Peace Corps program in China, but others argued that the program facilitated mutual cultural understanding during a time of high diplomatic tensions. Proposed Pacific Islands expansion may hinge on Members' views on growing U.S. and Chinese diplomatic interests there.

**Volunteer Numbers.** The agency contends that a more competitive job market and a decline in U.S. volunteerism have contributed to lower volunteer levels. In an effort to return the volunteer force to pre-pandemic levels, the Peace Corps is piloting three new models to attract applicants: a 15-month service term, a 15-day leave period at mid-service, and a larger readjustment allowance. Members may reexamine the 10,000-volunteer goal in light of low unemployment, assess elevated recruitment expenses given structural recruiting constraints, and weigh in on a purported U.S. trend against volunteerism. Such deliberations may include findings of a 2019 report on public service commissioned by Congress.

**Volunteer Force Diversity.** The Peace Corps has steadily grown the share of minority-identifying volunteers and promoted greater sensitivity to diversity issues. Host sites' cultural norms, including bias against racial, religious, or gender groups, may affect those efforts. Members may assess the Peace Corps' work in this area, complications from host country norms, and whether to prioritize other diversity factors, such as economic or regional background.

**Safety and Security.** The Peace Corps has faced criticism over its handling of sexual abuse complaints, volunteer health care, and volunteer deaths, prompting congressional attention and reform legislation. Recent watchdog reports indicate the Peace Corps has implemented reforms effectively and that most volunteers feel safe, but one in three volunteers in 2019 reportedly experienced sexual assault during service, double the rate in 2015. Volunteers' medical care and physical safety are a persistent challenge considering the agency's operating environment.

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