

## **Volunteerism and the Olympic Games: From 1980 to 2024**

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*This paper provides a descriptive review of volunteering at the Olympic Games from 1980 to 2024. Through the compilation of secondary data, the intent is to: (1) compare the number of volunteers from 1980 to 2024 while identifying trends and directions of Olympic volunteerism, and (2) present the limited existing data on demographics to understand the make-up of volunteers. The results indicate that: (1) a significant growth in the number of Summer and Winter Olympic Games volunteers since Lake Placid 1980, (2) a growing trend to increasing volunteer reliance for both the Summer and the Winter Olympic Games when comparing volunteer numbers pre and post 2000, (3) more women volunteer at the Summer Olympic Games and slightly more men volunteer at the Winter Olympic Games, (4) the highest number of Olympic Games volunteers come from the 16-35 age cohort, and, (5) both the Summer and Winter Olympic Games rely primarily on domestic sport volunteers while the Summer Olympic Games attracts more sport volunteer tourists than the Winter Olympic Games.*

**Keywords:** *volunteerism, Olympic Games, sport volunteers, sport volunteer tourists*

### **Introduction**

The role of volunteers at the Olympic Games is not just significant, it's unique. Former International Olympic Committee [IOC] President Jacques Rouge aptly described Olympic Games volunteers as 'true Olympians' and 'the unsung heroes' (IOC 2011). The IOC itself has consistently underscored the pivotal role of volunteers, stating that volunteers are the ones who 'make the Games' (IOC n.d.).

At the most recent Summer Olympic Games held in Paris in 2024, just like in past Olympic Games, the host Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games (OCOG), was mandated to recruit, train, and coordinate the volunteers and the volunteer services provided. Indeed, the OCOG's of the host city of each respective Olympic Games, Summer and Winter, have the colossal task of planning, organizing, directing, and controlling the large number of volunteers to ascertain that not only are the necessary services being provided accordingly, but also by instilling a philosophy of Olympism in volunteers. As Olympic Games volunteers are the first contact of encounter for guests, spectators, athletes, coaches, officials, and media,

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sufficient recruitment and training of these volunteers is of utmost importance (Karlis 2006).

Volunteering is serious business, particularly at mega-sports events such as the Olympic Games. Not only are volunteers' unsung heroes, but volunteers are also the face of the Games. The successful implementation of the Olympic Games depends on the efforts of volunteers and the services that these volunteers provide. Interestingly, the Olympic Games volunteer movement as it appears today has not been around that long, first commencing during the Lake Placid Games in 1980 (Moreno, 1999). Thus, research on volunteerism at the Olympic Games is limited as this area of research is still quite young. Since 2000 however, researchers such as Karlis (2008) and Holmes et al., (2024) have called for more research to better understand volunteerism at the Olympic Games and its relevance and importance. This paper aims to contribute to the limited research on volunteerism at the Olympic Games.

Using a descriptive review this paper presents a comparative overview of volunteering at the Olympic Games from 1980 to 2024. Through the compilation of secondary data, the intent is to: (1) compare the number of volunteers from 1980 to 2024 while identifying trends and directions of Olympic volunteerism, and (2) present the limited existing data on demographics to understand the make-up of volunteers. Specifically, the objectives of this paper are to:

1. Compare the number of volunteers at the Summer and Winter Olympic Games from 1980 to 2024.
2. Depict trends of volunteers at the Summer and Winter Olympic Games from 1980 to 2024.
3. Look at the demographics of age and gender of Olympic Games volunteers at the Summer and Winter Olympic Games from 1980 to 2024.
4. Identify and compare the numbers of domestic sport volunteers and sport volunteer tourists at the Summer and Winter Olympic Games.
5. Provide suggestions for future research on volunteerism at the Olympics.

## **Literature Review**

### *Sport Volunteerism*

Volunteering has been a characteristic of human behavior since the earliest records of human communities (Mirsafian & Mohamadinejad 2012). The act of willingly giving up one's free time, resources, and effort through various endeavors has been observed over multiple decades of human history (Gaston & Alexander 2001). Mihajovic et al. (2010) describes volunteering as a means of fostering trust within communities, thereby strengthening the communities over time. This trust is essential for building strong, resilient communities capable of facing challenges.

Surujlal and Dhurp (2008) outline the three primary beneficiaries of volunteering: the volunteers themselves, the organizations they assist, and the communities in which the organizations are located. Volunteers gain personal satisfaction, new

skills, and a sense of purpose, while organizations benefit from additional assistance and fresh perspectives. Communities, in turn, are enriched through enhanced services and strengthened social bonds. Moreover, Mirsafian and Mohamadinejad (2012) highlight three essential features of volunteering. These features are that volunteering must be: (1) voluntary, (2) performed without payment, and (3) mutually beneficial for both the individual volunteering and the organization for which they are volunteering. These characteristics ensure that the essence of volunteering remains rooted in altruism and communal benefit, fostering a cycle of giving and receiving that enriches all parties involved.

Sport volunteerism is a distinct subsection of volunteering, involving support for organizations connected to sports. From international mega-sporting events to local activities, volunteers are crucial to their success (Mirsafian & Mohamadinejad 2012). Cuskley (1998) and Green and Chalip (1998) describe sport volunteers as integral and indispensable to the sport industry, providing essential support in event management, logistics, and participant services. Volunteers help sporting events worldwide by reducing expenses and contributing fresh ideas (Shin & Kleiner 2003). This cost-saving aspect is vital for non-profit and smaller-scale events with limited budgets. Additionally, sport volunteerism enhances community spirit, offering volunteers valuable experiences and skills while promoting inclusivity and engagement. By involving diverse groups, sport organizations create more inclusive and representative events that resonate with a wide range of participants and audiences.

The pivotal role that volunteers play in the world of sports can be easily discerned from a statistical perspective as well. In Canada, over one million individuals are considered sport volunteers (Cuskelly et al. 2006). This trend is mirrored in Australia, where the proportion of sport volunteers remains substantial. Meanwhile, in England, the figure is even more striking, with the number of sport volunteers reaching 4.5 million (Cuskelly et al. 2006). The prominence of sport volunteers as a proportion of total volunteers within these countries further emphasizes their impact: 18% of Canadian volunteers, 26% of Australian volunteers, and 26.5% of English volunteers are involved in sports (Cuskelly et al. 2006). These figures demonstrate the heavy reliance of the sports industry on volunteer support, showcasing the vital importance of sport volunteerism to the broader volunteer sector. As Doherty (2009) suggests, such data underlines the integral contribution of volunteers in sustaining the sports industry and the broader implications this has for volunteerism.

### *Sport Volunteer Tourism*

In the context of sport volunteerism, there are further distinctions within this sub-section of volunteering. Researchers have described volunteer tourism as one of the fastest-growing alternative travel experiences (Pompurová et al. 2018). The key difference between volunteer tourists and other volunteers is that volunteer tourists work outside of their place of residence (Pompurová et al. 2018). Traditional volunteer tourism or voluntourism projects are organized by NGOs, local groups, associations, or local authorities (Pompurová et al. 2018). Voluntourism can occur under various circumstances: long-term, short-term, episodic, or occasionally

(Pompurová et al 2018). Often, volunteer tourists, like domestic volunteers, contribute to the successful execution of a variety of events (Pompurová et al. 2018). Additionally, volunteer tourists may enhance the tourism potential of the locations where they volunteer (Pompurová et al. 2018).

Sport volunteer tourism primarily involves individuals traveling to volunteer for sporting events. Currently, there is limited research on examining the impact of sport volunteer tourists on the management of sporting events. Most research in this field focuses on understanding the motivational factors that drive people to participate in this form of volunteering (Jarvis & Blank 2011, Smith et al. 2016).

Perhaps one of the reasons why limited research exists on sport volunteer tourism is that the concept of “sport volunteer tourism” has been only scantily operationalized in literature. In 2006, Karlis delivered a Keynote address assessing the needs of “sport volunteer tourists” at the Olympic Games bringing focus on the newly conceptualized term of sport volunteer tourists. This Keynote address which was delivered at the 14<sup>th</sup> European of Sport Management Congress in Nicosia Cyprus brought to the forefront the importance of defining and examining sport volunteer tourism as a unique sub-group of sport volunteerism. The focus of Karlis’ (2006) research centered around the fact that not all sport volunteers are tourists, as some are domestic residents who dwell in the city hosting the sport event. Thus, the call was put forth by Karlis in 2006 for researchers to further work on conceptualizing this notion while also enhancing research on sport volunteer tourism.

In subsequent research conducted on sport volunteer tourism, Karlis et al (2020) provide a historical overview of the conceptualization of sport volunteer tourism in research, while setting a direction for future research. Commencing with a historical overview of conceptual research on sport volunteer tourism, Karlis et al (2020) present how sport volunteer tourism has now started to be recognized as a unique part of the sport tourism experience. Karlis et al., (2020) in calling for more research on sport volunteer tourism conclude by stating the following directions for future research: (1) identify the attributes of conceptualizing sport volunteer tourism, (2) discern the attributes of sport volunteer tourists, (3) recognize the distinct types of sport volunteer tourism, (4) distinguish the distinct types of sport volunteer tourists, and (5) distinguish the concepts “sport volunteer tourism” from the concepts of “sport tourism” and “volunteer tourism.”

In sum, it should be noted that the sport volunteer experience consists of two distinct and unique type of sport volunteers: (1) sport volunteers who are domestic, that is, reside in the host city in which the sport event is held, and (2) sport volunteer tourists who come from national or international places outside of the host city. Indeed, sport volunteer tourists, whether they are local residents or not, are a unique group, possessing an attribute to serve at a selected sport event, even if it costs them, as in the case of non-local residents, a large amount of money for travel and accommodation. Without a doubt, the need to serve and be a part of a specific mega sport event is what drives sport volunteer tourists to devote time, energy, money, and often their vacation to engage in this type of volunteer work (Karlis 2006).

*Volunteering and the Olympic Games*

The origin of contemporary volunteer movement of the Olympic Games dates to 1980 (Karlis 2008, Moreno 1999), when the organizing committee of the Lake Placid Winter Games pioneered a volunteer program to recruit and train around 6000 volunteers (Moreno, 1999). Since then, subsequent organizing committees have consistently utilized similar volunteer programs. Furthermore, the management of Olympic volunteers has progressed, adapting specific models to meet the diverse requirements of host cities over the years, including the recruitment of volunteers.

The most common model of recruiting volunteers for most mega-events is "program management" (Holmes et al. 2018). Organizing committees who used this model, such as during the London 2012 Games, focused on recruiting volunteers and placing them in respected volunteer positions, rather than focusing on the individual needs of each volunteer (Mejis & Hoogstad 2001, Mejis & Karr 2004). To enhance the volunteer experience and address hosting needs, numerous OCOG's have adjusted their volunteer program models over the years. For instance, the Sydney Summer Games in 2000 employed a pyramid approach, where organizers initially assigned specific volunteer roles before opening recruitment to the general population. This method ensured that critical positions were filled by individuals with the necessary skills and experience before expanding the search to include a broader pool of applicants (Holmes et al. 2018). In contrast, the 2008 Summer Games in Beijing adopted a targeted recruitment strategy, focusing on identifying the ideal volunteers for their program, with a particular emphasis on recruiting students. This approach aimed to leverage the enthusiasm and availability of younger volunteers (Zhuang & Girginov 2012). While there is no one-size-fits-all approach for recruiting volunteers for mega-events such as the Olympic Games, the necessity of these volunteers is vital to the successful running of sporting mega-events like the Olympics.

Those who volunteer at the Olympic Games commit their time not only during the Games but also in some cases before and after the Olympic Games take place. This commitment often includes participating in interviews, undergoing training sessions, and preparing for various roles that support the Games' operations. Leading up to the 2004 Summer Games in Athens, prospective volunteers were required to participate in a personal interview and comprehensive training sessions before the Games commenced (Karlis 2006). These sessions ensured that volunteers were well-prepared and understood their roles, contributing to a smoother execution of the event. While each National Olympic Committee operates uniquely, volunteer training typically includes sessions on Olympic history, hosting and customer service techniques, cultural awareness and sensitivity, and international relations (Karlis 2006). These training programs are designed to equip volunteers with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively interact with athletes, officials, and spectators from around the world. As an incentive for their dedication, volunteers often receive various benefits, including free uniforms, meals, refreshments, tickets to events during the Games, and ground transportation to the Olympic venues (Karlis 2006). These incentives help to recognize the volunteers' contributions and enhance their overall experience, making their time and effort feel valued and appreciated.

Existing research on volunteerism at the Olympic Games focuses on two broad categories: (1) the socio-psychological dimension of the volunteers, and (2) the management of volunteers. Research on the socio-psychological dimension of the volunteers focuses largely on motivations to volunteer, volunteer sustainability, satisfaction, and the impact of the volunteer experience (Kim et al. 2019, Teixeira et al. 2023, Chaplin and Harris 2014)). Whereas research that exists on the management of Olympic volunteers primarily looks at recruitment and management techniques employed, legacies, and challenges in management (Holmes et al. 2024, Wicker 2017). This paper aims to contribute to the development of a third broad category of research on volunteerism at the Olympic Games – a research category that focuses on examining the state of condition of Olympic volunteerism. That is, an examination of trends and directions of volunteerism at the Olympic Games as well as the demographic composition of Olympic Games volunteers with an emphasis on domestic sport volunteers and sport volunteer tourists.

## **Methods**

This study employed a descriptive review approach to understand what has already occurred. Data came from existing papers and reports on Olympic volunteerism gathered through an extensive literature review, including information from the hosting OCOG's, to analyze trends and directions of Olympic volunteerism from 1980 to the present as well as available demographic information of Olympic volunteers on age, gender, and sport volunteerism. Data such as nationality and regional origin of volunteers was not presented as it was not available in a substantial amount to compose a meaningful descriptive review. The data used in this review has been summarized to provide a visualization of what has taken place using averages, percentages, and frequencies. The averages, percentages, and frequencies of the tables presented below help to identify trends, patterns, and relationships in a collective examination for all past Olympic Games since the commencement of the Olympic Games volunteer movement of Lake Placid 1980.

## **Results**

The results below present descriptive findings on Olympic Games volunteers from 1980 to 2024, beginning with frequency counts of volunteers of each of the Summer and Winter Olympic Games, as well as averages to summarize trends, patterns, and relationships. Basic demographics that were found for gender, age, and sport volunteerism are also presented. Data on domestic sport volunteers versus sport volunteer tourists in the form of frequencies and percentages are presented to better understand these two distinct groups of sport volunteers and their involvement in the Summer and Winter Olympic Games. It should be noted that every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the numbers presented below, yet no standardized instrumentation has been used collectively by all past OCOG's to present Olympic volunteerism thus posing accuracy limitations. The numbers that appear in the

results below come from an attempt to put together in comparative format existing information made available by the respective OCOG's. Numbers, in some cases, have been rounded to present whole numbers for statistical, analytical and presentation purposes.

*Number of Volunteers at the Summer and Winter Olympic Games from 1980 to 2024*

In Table 1, the total number of volunteers at the Summer and Winter Olympic Games since Lake Placid 1980 is depicted. Both the Summer and Winter Olympic Games indicate a significant growth in the number of volunteers since the inauguration years of the Olympic volunteer movement, that is Lake Placid 1980 and Los Angeles 1984. Indeed, as Lake Placid 1980 utilized the least number of volunteers at 6,703, Nagano 1998 employed the highest number of Winter Olympic Games volunteers at 32,000. Since Nagano 1998, the range of Winter Olympic volunteers extends from the lowest recorded amount of 14,000 volunteers at Pyeongchang in 2018 to 25,000 volunteers relied on at both the Turin 2006 and Sochi 2014 Games.

For the Summer Olympic Games, the highest number of volunteers was recorded by Tokyo 2020 in which 70,900 volunteered their services. Indeed, since Atlanta 1996, the number of volunteers employed at the Summer Games has not dropped below 45,000. With the exception of Paris 2024, Athens, 2004, and Sydney 2000, the number of Summer Olympic Games volunteers has not dropped below 50,000, while Tokyo 2020, London 2010, and Beijing 2008 indicated 70,000 or more volunteers employed.

**Table 1.** *Total Number of Volunteers at the Summer and Winter Olympic Games from 1980-2024*

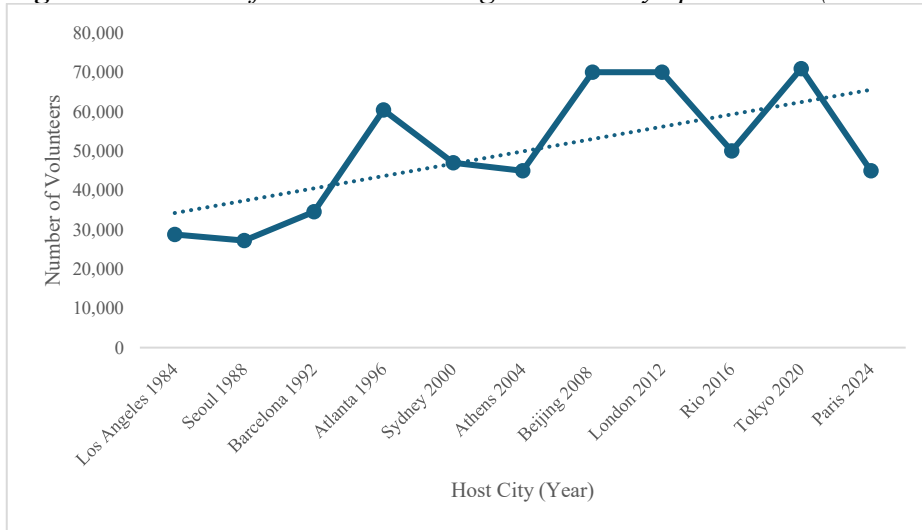
Summer	Number of Volunteers	Winter	Number of Volunteers
Los Angeles 1984	28,742	Lake Placid 1980	6,703
Seoul 1988	27,221	Sarajevo 1984	10,450
Barcelona 1992	34,548	Calgary 1988	9,498
Atlanta 1996	60,422	Albertville 1992	8,647
Sydney 2000	47,000	Lillehammer 1994	9,054
Athens 2004	45,000	Nagano 1998	32,000
Beijing 2008	70,000	Salt Lake City 2002	22,000
London 2012	70,000	Turin 2006	25,000
Rio 2016	50,000	Vancouver 2010	18,500
Tokyo 2020	70,970	Sochi 2014	25,000
Paris 2024	45,000	Pyeongchang 2018	14,000
		Beijing 2022	19,000

- Numbers indicated for Summer and Olympic Games from 2000 onwards are approximations.

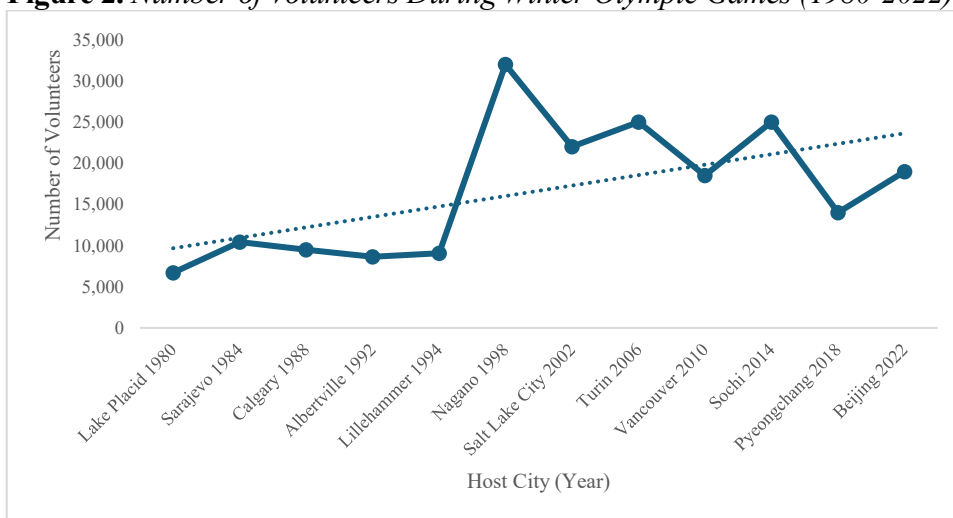
To help visualize the patterns of volunteer involvement in the Winter and Summer Olympic Games from 1984 to 2024, Figures 1 and 2 have been created. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate that although the Summer and Winter Olympic Games

continue to rely on a high number of volunteers the peak number reached in the past did not become the standard norm for Summer and Winter Olympic Games that followed. That is, subsequent Olympic Games after Tokyo 2020 and Nagano 1998 have not exceeded or matched the record setting numbers of volunteers employed at Tokyo 2020 and Nagano 1998.

**Figure 1.** Number of Volunteers During Summer Olympic Games (1984-2024)



**Figure 2.** Number of Volunteers During Winter Olympic Games (1980-2022)



### Trends in Volunteering at the Summer and Winter Olympic Games

The increase in the number of volunteers relied on for the delivery of services at both the Winter and Summer Games is identified in Table 2. For the six Winter Olympic Games that took place from 1980 to 1998, an average of 12,725 volunteers were called on to provide their services. From the first Games of the new millennium hosted by Salt Lake City in 2002 up until the recent Games of Beijing 2022, an average of 20,583 volunteers were employed. Yet, since the start of the volunteer

movement in Lake placid in 1980, an average number of 16,654 volunteers have been called on to provide services at the Winter Games.

By contrast, the average numbers of volunteers employed at the Summer Olympic Games (51,809) are larger than the Winter Olympic Games (16,654). Similarly to the Winter Olympic Games, the average number of volunteers employed at the Summer Olympic Games has increased post millennium. Indeed, the average number of volunteers (56,852) of the last seven Olympic Games since Sydney 2000 greatly surpasses the average number of volunteers of the previous four Olympic Games (37,733) from Atlanta 1996 and prior.

**Table 2.** *Average Number of Volunteers at Summer and Winter Olympic Games during Specific Time Periods*

Time Period	Average Number of Volunteers
Summer Olympic Games (1984-2024)	51,809
Summer Olympic Games (1984-1996)	37,733
Summer Olympic Games (2000-2024)	56,852
Winter Olympic Games (1980-2022)	16,654
Winter Olympic Games (1980-1998)	12,725
Winter Olympic Games (2002-2022)	20,583

### Demographics of Volunteers at the Summer and Winter Olympic Games

Very little secondary research is available that presents the demographic composition of volunteers at the Olympic Games. From the little content that is available on volunteering at the Olympic Games, demographic information has been found for Olympic Games held post 2000 that present figures for gender, age, as well as place of permanent residence of volunteers, that is, domestic sport volunteers and sport volunteer tourists.

#### Gender

Table 3 shows that, on average, the number of women surpasses men when it comes to volunteering at the Summer Olympic Games. Since the Games of Athens of 2004, more women have volunteered at all the Summer Games than men, with the two exceptions being the Athens 2004 Games that featured more men volunteers than women, and the Paris 2024 Games which had an even split in the number of men and women volunteers. In fact, at the London 2012 Games and at Tokyo 2020, for every 10 volunteers, approximately 6 were women and 4 were men.

**Table 3.** *Gender of Summer Olympic Games Volunteers from 2004-2020*

Host city (year)	Men	Women
Athens (2004)	53.5%	46.5%
Beijing (2008)	N/A	N/A
London (2012)	41%	59%
Rio (2016)	46%	54%
Tokyo (2020)	40.5%	59.5%
Paris (2024)	50.0%	50.0%
Average (All Games)	46.0%	54.0%

Unlike the Summer Olympic Games, the Winter Olympic Games in Table 4 indicates slightly higher levels of average volunteer involvement by men (51%) in comparison to women (49%). Yet it should be noted that in two of the three Winter Olympic Games reported in the findings of Table 4, the number of women volunteers surpassed the number of men volunteers by over 8%. Indeed, the percentage of women volunteer involvement was found to be consistent at Vancouver 2010 (54.5%) and Pyeongchang 2018 (54%).

**Table 4.** *Gender of Winter Olympic Games Volunteers from 2006-2022*

Host city (year)	Men	Women
Turin (2006)	61%	39%
Vancouver (2010)	45.5%	54.5%
Sochi (2014)	N/A	N/A
Pyeongchang (2018)	46%	54%
Beijing (2022)	N/A	N/A
Average (All Games)	51%	49%

### Age

Table 5 indicates that in Athens 2004 and Rio 2016 less than 10% of the volunteers were aged 55 and older. Conversely, in London 28% and in Tokyo 36% of the volunteers were 55 years of age and older. Most Summer Olympic Games volunteers tend to be between the ages of 16 – 35 (47%). The high number of volunteers in the younger age cohort was also substantiated in the most recent Games of Paris 2024. Although statistics available for the Paris Games do not use the same age range categories as the other Summer Olympic Games that appear in Table 5, 83% of the Paris 2024 volunteers were between the ages of 15 – 44 years of age, with only 17% of volunteers aged 45 and older. Please note that Paris 2024 is not included in Table 5 as the age range categories were not consistent with those of the previous Summer Olympic Games.

**Table 5.** *Age of Summer Olympic Game Volunteers from 2004-2020*

Host city (year)	Aged 16-35	Aged 36-55	Aged 56+
Athens (2004)	63%	30%	7 %
Beijing (2008)	N/A	N/A	N/A
London (2012)	35%	37%	28%
Rio (2016)	63%	29%	8%
Tokyo (2020)	27%	37%	36%
Average (All Games)	47%	33%	20%

Similarly, to the Summer Olympic Games, most volunteers at the Winter Olympic Games are 55 years of age and under, with 46% between the ages of 16-35 years of age and 29% between the ages of 36-55 (see Table 6). From available statistics on the number of volunteers aged 55 and older, it was found that at the Winter Olympic Games the number of volunteers surpassed the number of volunteers at the Summer Olympic Games by 5%. It should be noted that although Beijing 2022 reported that 93% of its volunteers were between the ages of 16-35,

these numbers were not factored in Table 6 as statistics on the number of volunteers in the other two age categories were not found. Nonetheless, just like Turin 2006 and Pyeongchang 2018, Beijing 2022 identifies the age group of 16-35 to consist of the greatest number of volunteers at the Winter Olympic Games.

**Table 6.** *Age of Winter Olympic Game Volunteers from 2006-2022*

Host city (year)	Aged 16-35	Aged 36-55	Aged 56+
Turin (2006)	47%	20%	33%
Vancouver (2010)	30%	37%	33%
Sochi (2014)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Pyeongchang (2018)	62%	31%	7%
Average (All Games)	46%	29%	25%

#### *Domestic Sport Volunteers and Sport Volunteer Tourists*

Although very little information is available on place of permanent residence of Olympic volunteers, information that is available shows that the bulk of volunteers at the Summer Olympic Games are domestic residents, that is domestic sport volunteers (see Table 7). International residents, that is, sport volunteer tourists, accounted for less than 10% of the total number of volunteers at London 2012 and Rio 2016. However, at the most recent Summer Olympic Games held in Paris 2024, a significant increase took place, with 20% of volunteers recognized as sport volunteer tourists

**Table 7.** *Domestic Sport Volunteers and Sport Volunteer Tourism at the Summer Olympic Games Volunteers from 2004-2020*

Host city (year)	Domestic Sport Volunteers	Sport Volunteer Tourists
Athens (2004)	N/A	N/A
Beijing (2008)	N/A	N/A
London (2012)	97%	3%
Rio (2016)	90%	10%
Tokyo (2020)	N/A	N/A
Paris (2024)	80%	20%
Average (All Games)	89%	11%

Statistics presented in Table 8 for the Winter Olympic Games are approximate numbers made available by the respected OCOG's. Yet, from these estimated numbers, comparisons can be made with the figures presented for the Summer Olympic Games. Specifically, the Summer Olympic Games indicate in Table 7 a less reliance on domestic sport volunteers than the Winter Olympic Games. Whereas, the number of sport volunteer tourists, are reported to be greater on average in the Summer Olympic Games (11%) than in the Winter Olympic Games (6%).

**Table 8.** *Domestic and International Winter Olympic Games Volunteers from 2006-2022*

Host city (year)	Domestic Sport Volunteers	Sport Volunteer Tourists
Turin (2006)	N/A	N/A
Vancouver (2010)	95%	5%
Sochi (2014)	92%	8%
Pyeongchang (2018)	95%	5%
Beijing (2022)	N/A	N/A
Average (All Games)	94%	6%

## **Discussion**

To fulfill the objectives of this paper, existing data on Olympic volunteerism was gathered through an extensive literature review as well as from information of host OCOG’s to derive an analysis of trends and directions of Olympic volunteerism from 1980 to the present. The data gathered was summarized by averages, percentages, and frequencies and several key findings were identified that could lead to stimulate further research.

### *Number of Volunteers*

Mega sport events rely on sport volunteers to assist in implementing day-to-day functions and operations of the Games. The Summer and Winter Olympic Games are no exception. Indeed, the rich history of the Olympic Games has made this mega sport event perhaps the highest profiled mega sport event globally. Research indicates that attracting and recruiting volunteers for the Summer and Winter Olympic Games has not been difficult, as many apply to volunteer, yet only not all are chosen for limited volunteer positions (Noordegraaf/Celibi 2015).

As the number of volunteer positions available depend on the OCAG’s, it needs to be pointed out that the increasing number of volunteers at the Summer and Winter Olympic Games is probably a reflection of: (1) a greater reliance on volunteers to provide services, (2) the growth and expansion of the Olympic Games, and (3) the need to provide a growing number of services to spectators (Karlis, 2006). It appears that with each passing Olympic Games, the volunteer movement becomes stronger with many lasting benefits.

The smallest number of volunteers at the Summer Olympic Games was in Los Angeles (28,742), whereas the largest number of volunteers at the Summer Olympic Games was Tokyo 2020 (70,970). Similarly, the smallest number of volunteers at the Winter Olympic Games was in Lake Placid 1980 (6,703), whereas the largest number of volunteers at the Winter Olympic Games was Nagano 1998 (32,000). Although the most recent Summer Olympic Games, Paris 2024, employed less volunteers 26,470 than Tokyo 2020, it is highly unlikely that less than 45,000 volunteers will be relied on for future Summer Olympic Games as all Summer Olympic Games since Atlanta 1996 have employed 45,000 or more volunteers. The same can be said for the number of volunteers for future Winter Olympic Games.

The most recent Winter Olympic Games, Beijing 2022, relied on 13,000 less volunteers than Nagano 1998, but since Nagano 1998, except for Pyeongchang (14,000), all Winter Olympic Games have been assisted with the service of no less than 18,000 volunteers.

### *Trends in Volunteering*

According to Essex and Chalkley (2007) the Summer Olympic Games are widely perceived as the more popular of the Winter Olympic Games because of a larger audience both in person and on television, as well as a greater number of nations participating in the events leading to more athlete involvement. Not only do the number of volunteers historically reflect the popularity of the Summer Olympic Games, the trend indicating a greater growth in volunteer participation at the Summer Olympic Games in comparison to the Winter Olympic Games also ascertains this higher popularity of the Summer Olympic Games.

The findings of this paper revealed that from 1980-2024, the average number of volunteers for the Summer Olympic Games (51,809) greatly surpasses the average number of volunteers for the Winter Olympic Games (16,654). For the Summer Olympic Games, the average number of volunteers for 1984-1996 was 37,733 whereas for the Summer Olympic Games held from 2000-2024 the average number of volunteers increased significantly to 56,852. This was an increase of almost 20,000 volunteers. For the Winter Olympic Games on the other hand, the average number of volunteers for 1980-1998 was 12,725 whereas from 2002-2022 the average number of volunteers increased significantly to 20,583, yet the increase of approximately 8,000 volunteers is much less than the increase of almost 20,000 volunteers experienced by the Summer Olympic Games.

A growing trend to increasing volunteer use is evident for both the Summer and the Winter Olympic Games. This trend should come as no surprise as the staging of the Summer and Winter Olympic Games has become bigger, and the interest to serve as a sport volunteer has become more popular in recent years (Karlis, 2006). The fact that the Summer and Winter Olympic Games offer an elite level of competition also helps in stimulating a greater interest for people to serve as sport volunteers at these mega sport events.

This growing trend to increasing volunteer reliance for both the Summer and Winter Olympic Games has significant practical implications for future OCOGs. The consistent reliance on volunteers in high numbers exceeding 45,000 for Summer Olympic Games and 18,000 for Winter Olympic Games means that organizing committees must continue to place a high importance on volunteers and the services they provide. Practically, this requires host cities to dedicate substantial resources and years of advance planning to recruitment, training, scheduling, and logistics—such as transport, uniforms, etc. —to support these high numbers of volunteers. As the Olympic Games continue to grow, the capacity of an OCOG to effectively manage this high number of volunteers will be a critical factor in the overall operational success of future Olympic Games.

## *Demographics*

### Gender

The results of this paper found that on average, more women (57%) volunteer at the Summer Olympic Games than men (46%). Yet, at the most recent Summer Olympic Games, 50% of the volunteers were women and 50% were men. Although slightly more men (51% than women (49%) participate on average at the Winter Olympic Games, in two of the most recent Winter Olympic Games it was found that women had a much greater volunteer involvement than men, at Vancouver 2010 (54.5%) and Pyeongchang 2018 (54%).

The gender difference in volunteering at the Summer and Winter Olympic Games may reflect potential gender differences in the motivations for volunteering (Alexander et al 2015, Hallman et al 2020, Khoo et al 2011). Downward and Ralston (2005) for example identify significant differences in men and women volunteers with personal interest and skill acquisition. Further research by Skirstad and Hanstad (2013) mentioned different motivating factors for men and women in volunteering at mega sport events, with women more than men using the mega sport event to raise their personal and social capital. Whereas Dorsch et al., (2002) identify a sense of obligation as being a key factor that drives men to volunteer whereas social interaction and helping others were attributes motivating women to volunteer.

### Age

The findings of this study revealed that adults over 55 years of age volunteer less, on average, at the Summer and Winter Olympic Games than the other age cohorts. Turin 2006 however, was the only Olympic Games to have reported a higher number of senior adult volunteers over 55 years of age as compared to adult volunteers aged 36-55. The highest number of volunteers however is identified in the 16-35 age cohorts for both the Summer Olympic Games (47%) and the Winter Olympic Games (46%). Perhaps this is reflection of a greater interest in sport by the younger adults as compared to older adults.

The findings of this study also revealed that Tokyo 2020 (36%) reported the highest number of volunteers over 55 years of age of all Summer Olympic Games, whereas Vancouver 2010 (33%) and Turin (33%) indicated the greatest volunteer involvement of the Winter Olympic Games for the same age cohort. That is, at least for these three Olympic Games, older adult volunteer participation was at a high level. This high level could reflect a senior volunteer ethic of the people of Japan, Canada, and Italy.

Research identified several different factors related to age difference and volunteering at the Olympics. Fyffe and Wister (2014) found in a study of volunteers following the Vancouver 2010 Games, that for middle aged adults, self-esteem and meaning of life were outcomes of the volunteer experience whereas for older adults the outcomes were sense of belonging and meaning in life. Further research by Dorsch et al (2002) revealed social interaction, recognition, and career advancement as influencing factors to motivate younger adults to volunteer at mega sport events, whereas for older adults a motivating factor to volunteer was helping the community.

The consistent dominance of the 16–35 age cohort suggests that this group of volunteers will bring assets unique to this age cohort such as advanced technological skills to the volunteer experience. Conversely, the high participation of older adults in past Olympic Games like Tokyo 2020 and Vancouver 2010 highlights a senior volunteer ethic that OCOGs can tap into for roles requiring mentorship, local historical knowledge, and long-term community stability. The practical takeaway for administrators is the need for intergenerational volunteer management strategies that pair the cohort specific assets of younger volunteers with the cohort specific assets of older participants.

#### *Domestic Sport Tourists and Sport Volunteer Tourists*

This research study found that most volunteers at the Summer and Winter Olympic Games are domestic sport volunteers. This is not surprising as countries receive hosting the Summer and Winter Olympic Games with excitement and enthusiasm and attempt to pass this enthusiasm and excitement on to the citizens of their countries.

The results of this study found that sport volunteer tourists offer their services more at the Summer Olympic Games (11%) as compared to the Winter Olympic Games (6%). On the other hand, the Winter Olympic Games tend to rely more on domestic sport volunteer than the Summer Olympic Games. This may be a result of seasonality as the summer months tend to be more popular for travelling and vacationing for those seeking the sport volunteer experience.

As sport volunteer tourism continues to increase in popularity, (Pompurová et al. 2018), it is beneficial for researchers and administrators to recognize that sport volunteers consist of two groups – sport volunteers that are domestic and sport volunteer tourists that are international. Although the outcome of the volunteer experience of enrichment, community contribution, and positive life experience may be the same for domestic sport volunteers and sport volunteer tourists (Doherty 2009), these are two distinct groups of sport volunteers who are likely to have distinct needs and unique interests as well.

The growing presence of sport volunteer tourists, particularly in the Summer Olympic Games, signals the emergence of a highly mobile group of individuals who travel internationally to provide sport volunteer tourism services. While host cities benefit from this specialized experience and the associated tourism spending, the high reliance on domestic sport tourists in Winter Olympic Games suggests a more localized cultural need for volunteers. For future host committees, the challenge lies in leveraging the expertise of sport volunteer tourists without overlooking to recruit domestic sport tourists. Managing these two distinct groups requires tailored logistics, as sport volunteer tourists may require more intensive support regarding housing and accreditation, whereas domestic sport tourists offer a ethno-cultural attachment of sport engagement within their host nation.

*Recommendations for Future Research on Volunteerism at the Olympics Games*

Research on volunteerism at the Olympics not only helps enhance the body of knowledge on sport volunteerism and the state of condition of Olympic volunteerism, it also may be of assistance to administrators of the Olympic Games, such as OCOG's or IOC administrators. Through enhanced research, administrators of the Olympic Games and others interested in the volunteer movement at the Olympic Games would be in a better position to overview and articulate past trends and directions of Olympic Games volunteerism. More research may also contribute to an enhanced knowledge base on the make-up and composition of Olympic Games volunteers. In addition, expanded research may also assist to better understand volunteerism at the Olympic Games in comparisons to other mega sport events. Below are suggestions for what type of research needs to be conducted to contribute to existing research on volunteering at the Olympic Games.

Recommendation 1: Conduct regular studies on the trend and direction of volunteerism at the Summer and Winter Olympic Games. Since the volunteer movement started in Lake Placid in 1980, little research has been done to identify and compare the number of volunteers of all Summer and Winter Olympic Games. Numbers say a lot. Numbers identify trends and directions. Numbers also identify growth and decline. By doing a regular overview of the changing number of volunteers at the Summer and Winter Olympic Games researchers will be able to recognize not only trends and directions during specific time periods, but also the value placed on volunteerism at the Olympics.

Recommendation 2: Enhance understanding of demographic composition of volunteers of past Olympic Games.

Demographics describe the big picture by providing statistical information on characteristics such as gender, age, income, and education. Currently, there is a lack of data on the demographic composition of volunteers at past Summer and Winter Games. Indeed, prior to 2000, it is difficult to find demographic information on volunteers. Little demographic information is available post 2000 that focuses on gender and age. Further, demographic information on education and income of volunteers would also be helpful in giving Olympic administrators a good overall picture as to who the volunteers are. To better understand trends in volunteering at the Olympics as well as identify patterns of volunteers, more demographics research is needed.

Recommendation 3: Enhance research on sport volunteerism and its relevance to the Olympic Games.

Research on sport volunteerism is still quite young. It was in the late 1990s that sport volunteer research started to emerge with the works of Auld (1997) and Cuskelly et al. (1998). Very little has been researched on sport volunteerism at the Olympics, as well as the impact the sport volunteer has on the Olympics and following the completion of the Olympic Games (Wang et al. 2019). More research is needed to better understand the significance and impact of the sport volunteer at the Summer and Winter Olympic Games.

Recommendation 4: Examine sport volunteer tourism and its impact on the Olympic Games.

Both the Summer and Winter Olympic Games are popular with a unique group of sport volunteers that come from international countries, these are sport volunteer tourists. Just like the concept of sport volunteerism, the concept of sport volunteer tourism is relatively new in research, having come to the forefront in research in the early 2000s (Karlis et al. 2020). Little research has been conducted on understanding sport volunteer tourism, with even less research placed on recognizing who the sport volunteer tourists are at the Olympic Games. As the number of sport volunteer tourists continue to increase at the Olympic Games, more research is needed that focuses on enhancing knowledge as to who these individuals are and what motivates them to become sport volunteer tourists at the Olympic Games.

Recommendation 5: Explore the uniqueness and significance of volunteering at the Olympics.

Volunteering at the Olympics is unique due to its global scale, prestigious nature, and the diverse roles available. Volunteers gain invaluable experiences and contribute significantly to the Olympic Games success and legacy. As the Olympic Games continue to evolve and change, so do people. By conducting more research on getting to know the “experience” and “outcomes” of volunteering at the Olympic Games, administrators of the Olympic Games would be in a better position to understand who today’s sport volunteers are and what expectations sport volunteers have from the volunteer experience offered by the Olympic Games.

## Conclusion

This paper used a descriptive review to provide a comparative overview of volunteering at the Olympic Games from 1980 to 2024. Using secondary data, this paper: (1) compared the number of volunteers from 1980 to 2024, and (2) presented existing data on demographics of volunteers. The results identified: (1) a significant growth in the number of Summer and Winter Olympic Games volunteers since 1980, (2) a growing trend to increasing volunteer reliance for both the Summer and the Winter Olympic Games when comparing volunteer numbers pre and post 2000, (3) more women volunteer at the Summer Olympic Games and slightly more men volunteer at the Winter Olympic Games, (4) the highest number of Olympic Games volunteers come from the 16-35 age cohort, and, (5) both the Summer and Winter Olympic Games rely primarily on domestic sport volunteers while the Summer Olympic Games attracts more sport volunteer tourists than the Winter Olympic Games.

Every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the numbers presented in this paper, yet the lack of available information and the lack of consistency in the categorical breakdown of these numbers in existing documentation should be mentioned as it may reflect the accuracy in the numbers presented. Indeed, it would be helpful for comparative purposes that future OCOG’s utilize a consistent and standardized process to measure the number of volunteers and demographics. Nonetheless, the limited numbers and information available on Olympic volunteerism have been put together in this paper to make a case of the importance of Olympic volunteerism and its trends and directions.

Olympic volunteerism is indeed essential to the organization and execution of the Olympic Games. Since the Lake Placid Games, the number of volunteers has consistently increased. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has repeatedly emphasized volunteers' crucial role in the Games' success (IOC, n.d.). The findings of this study have been put together to contribute to a better understanding of trends and directions of volunteering at the Summer and Winter Olympic Games. The paper concluded with suggestions for future research that have also been put forth to help administrators of Olympic Games better understand and recognize not only trends and directions of volunteerism at the Olympic Games, but also the demographic composition of volunteers from the limited data available. The sport volunteer has also been distinguished from the sport volunteer tourist and emphasis has been placed on the need for more research to better understand Olympic Games volunteers. To enhance our understanding of Olympic volunteerism, future research should focus on identifying the various characteristics of Olympic volunteers, such as their demographics and trends as little research exists that does this.

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