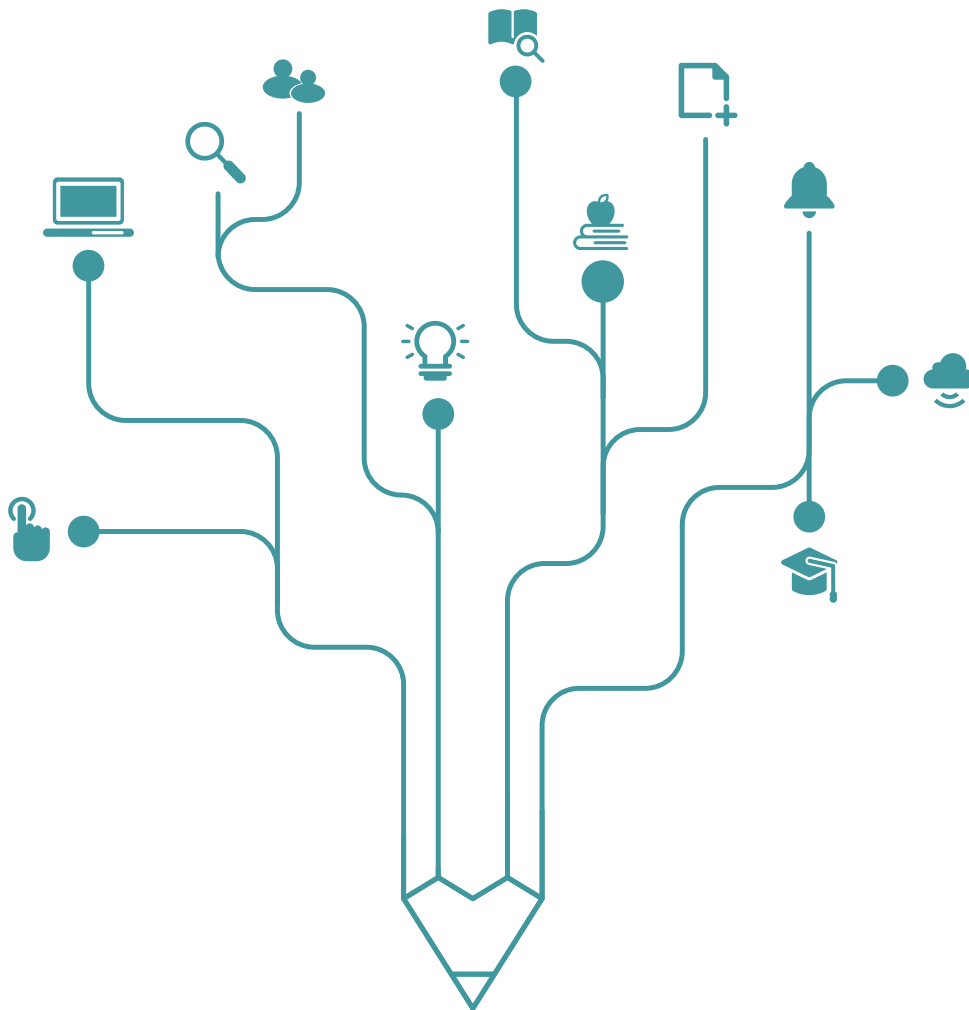


# Who were the US Peace Corps Volunteers and where did they serve?

*Dongil Lee (KDI School of Public Policy and Management)*



# Who were the US Peace Corps Volunteers and where did they serve?

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## **Abstract**

Who were the US Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs)? When, where, and how long did they serve in their missions? Despite public interest in the foreign aid agency, there are few studies providing answers to these fundamental questions. Using official government records on all volunteers—over 240,000—from 1961 through 2018, I explore how the agency evolved over the past six decades. During the period, the agency sent, on average, 4,000 PCVs abroad every year, reaching its pinnacle in the mid-1960s. Female and non-white volunteers became increasingly more common. Descriptive statistics suggest that country-level volunteer assignments were driven by multiple motives: economic need, U.S. diplomatic relations, and safety and security concerns with regard to host countries. Among them, concerns about safety and security are particularly important for volunteer assignments, unlike monetary forms of foreign aid. Taken together, the supply and demand side of the PCV assignment were shaped by both changes in American society and international politics.

# 1 Introduction

Since U.S. President John F. Kennedy founded the Peace Corps in 1961, few federal institutions have attracted as much attention from young American college graduates. This government agency under the State Department has sent thousands of Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) to developing countries every year. Since the 1960s, Returned PCVs (RPCVs) have published book-length memoirs sharing their real-life stories of service in every corner of the globe (Jarmul, 2020; Peace Corps, 2005; LaTorre, 2020; Lloyd, 2017; Wesson, 2021; Barnes, 2023; Meisler, 2012). Despite public interest in the foreign aid agency, we know surprisingly little about the impact of the program on either host country nationals (HCNs) or the American volunteers. Did the agency promote economic and social development in host countries? Did the agency facilitate mutual understanding among HCNs and Americans across the U.S. and developing countries? How did sustained cultural exchange among HCNs and American volunteers impact and shape their lives, sociopolitical attitudes, and behaviors? These important questions merit academic interest but have never been systematically explored.<sup>1</sup>

In this article, I aim to build a foundation for academic studies of the Peace Corps program by answering the following important questions regarding PCVs: who they were, when and where they served, and how long they served in their missions. While the agency published the descriptive statistics about their PCVs from time to time in the form of government report,<sup>2</sup> to my knowledge, there has been no systematic analysis of the American volunteers during the entire period of the government program.<sup>3</sup> Using the records on every volunteer from 1961 through 2018, I explore how the agency evolved in terms of the number of volunteers, their gender and racial characteristics, and how it placed volunteers across developing countries over the past six decades. During

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<sup>1</sup>Due to the recent emphasis on the “impact evaluation,” the Peace Corps has started collecting measurable development outcomes. That said, to my knowledge, there has been no field experiment (i.e., randomized controlled trial) or natural experiment on the impact of the Peace Corps programs or the PCVs on their host countries and/or HCNs.

<sup>2</sup>See <https://www.peacecorps.gov/about/open-government/reports> for those government publications.

<sup>3</sup>Their recent reports include surveys among host country staff and PCVs (Peace Corps, 2019, 2020). While they have rich information about those group members, these surveys are limited to those who worked for the agency recently.

the period, female and non-white volunteers had become increasingly more common. Descriptive statistics suggest that volunteer assignments were driven by multiple motives: economic needs, diplomatic relations, and safety and security concerns. The agency argues that their activities are *apolitical*, but the evidence I present implies that the number of volunteers and the destinations where they are can be *political*, which confirms established literature on foreign aid. However, unlike the flow of monetary forms of aid, the placement of volunteers appears to be very sensitive to civil wars, political turmoil, and epidemics in host countries. Taken together, both the supply and demand sides of PCV assignments are shaped by changes in American society and international politics.

## **2 Data**

### **2.1 Description**

I draw upon Peace Corps records of all volunteer missions from 1961 to 2018 to analyze who the PVCs were and where and when they served. The dataset obtained through my Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request 18-0077 includes volunteers' first names, last names, host countries, and starting and ending dates of their service. It does not have their gender, race, or sector and subnational location of their site within the host country.

### **2.2 Estimation of Gender and Race**

While it is imprecise, I estimate an individual volunteer's gender and race using their names. More specifically, I use the `gender` package in R that predicts gender from first names and birth dates using historical records. Assuming that volunteers are in their 20s when starting their service, I estimate their likelihood of being female or male based on their first names and starting date of

service and then construe their gender using the probabilities. To estimate their race, I use the `wru` package in R that computes Bayesian posterior probabilities of race and ethnicity using last name, address, and gender. Among those inputs, I use only volunteers' last names since address information is missing and gender is estimated using the other package. Again, I populate the race and ethnicity row using the predicted probabilities from the package.

### **3 The Demographics of Volunteers**

In this section, I examine the gender and racial characteristics of Peace Corps Volunteers that I estimated from their names and the year they started their mission. To summarize, I make two findings regarding the demographics of volunteers: (1) The gender composition of volunteers has dramatically changed from less than 40% females in the 1960s to more than 60% females in the 2010s. (2) The racial background of volunteers has gradually become more diverse over the past 30 years, although whites have been the dominant group throughout the agency's history.

#### **3.1 Number**

Before reviewing gender and race, I begin with discussing the total size of the Peace Corps program by year, which will form the basis for understanding changes in the proportion of subgroups in the following sections. To date, the Peace Corps has dispatched 239,290 American volunteers abroad since 1961. Figure 1 shows the number of volunteers by the starting year of their service. One striking pattern is the sudden increase during the early years of the agency; it began in 1961 with only 881 volunteers growing quickly in number until reaching its peak of 10,189 in 1966. This echoes the moment when 1,000 college students at the University of Michigan signed a petition in response to the proposal by Senator John F. Kennedy for an overseas volunteer agency made

during his presidential campaign speech in 1960.<sup>4</sup>

An unexpected downturn followed the dramatic increase in volunteers in the second half of the 1960s: the number plummeted to 4,339 in 1970, which is comparable to 4,262 in 1962. Though it is difficult to name a single cause, one strong candidate is the resentment and disappointment of college students, expressed in large-scale anti-war protests against the Johnson administration's heavy involvement in the Vietnam War. Nevertheless, the golden era of the Peace Corps program was undoubtedly the 1960s; in 1966, the record high—10,189 volunteers sent overseas in a single year—was 246% greater than the average. Figure 2 offers substantiation: The total number of volunteers beginning their service during the 1960s is 56,232 (see the left panel), comprising 23.5% of the total volunteer population across decades (see the right panel). On average, the agency sent 4,126 volunteers abroad every year.

In contrast, the size of the program was at its nadir during the 1980s. As Figure 2 shows, the number of volunteers sent overseas in the 80s was only half (12.65%) of that in the 60s. Interest in and expectation toward the agency gradually faded away as people grew increasingly dismayed by their own government and lost their confidence in it due to the failure in the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal in the 1970s. A lack of government funding was another cause of fewer recruitment during the 80s. As the Soviet Union collapsed and the door to Eastern Europe opened in the 1990s, the popularity of the Peace Corps was restored and the number of volunteers rose over the 1990s and the 2000s.<sup>5</sup>

Figure 3 shows that the volunteers were sent to three dominant regions throughout the history of the agency: Africa, the Americas, and Asia. As shown in Figure 4, the top three areas hosted 88.93% of the total population of volunteers with 93,002 sent to Africa alone. Throughout the 1960s, the numbers in the three cohorts experienced the same highs and lows. However, the group of volunteers in Africa became the largest during the 1970s, while the numbers in the other groups

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<sup>4</sup>Source: <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/jfk-in-history/peace-corps>

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

declined slowly. The Peace Corps began sending hundreds of volunteers to Eastern Europe after the end of the Cold War in 1990. That area joined the top three in the number of volunteers from 1991 to 1998 before ceding its place to Oceania in 1999.

Figure 1: Number of Volunteers by Year

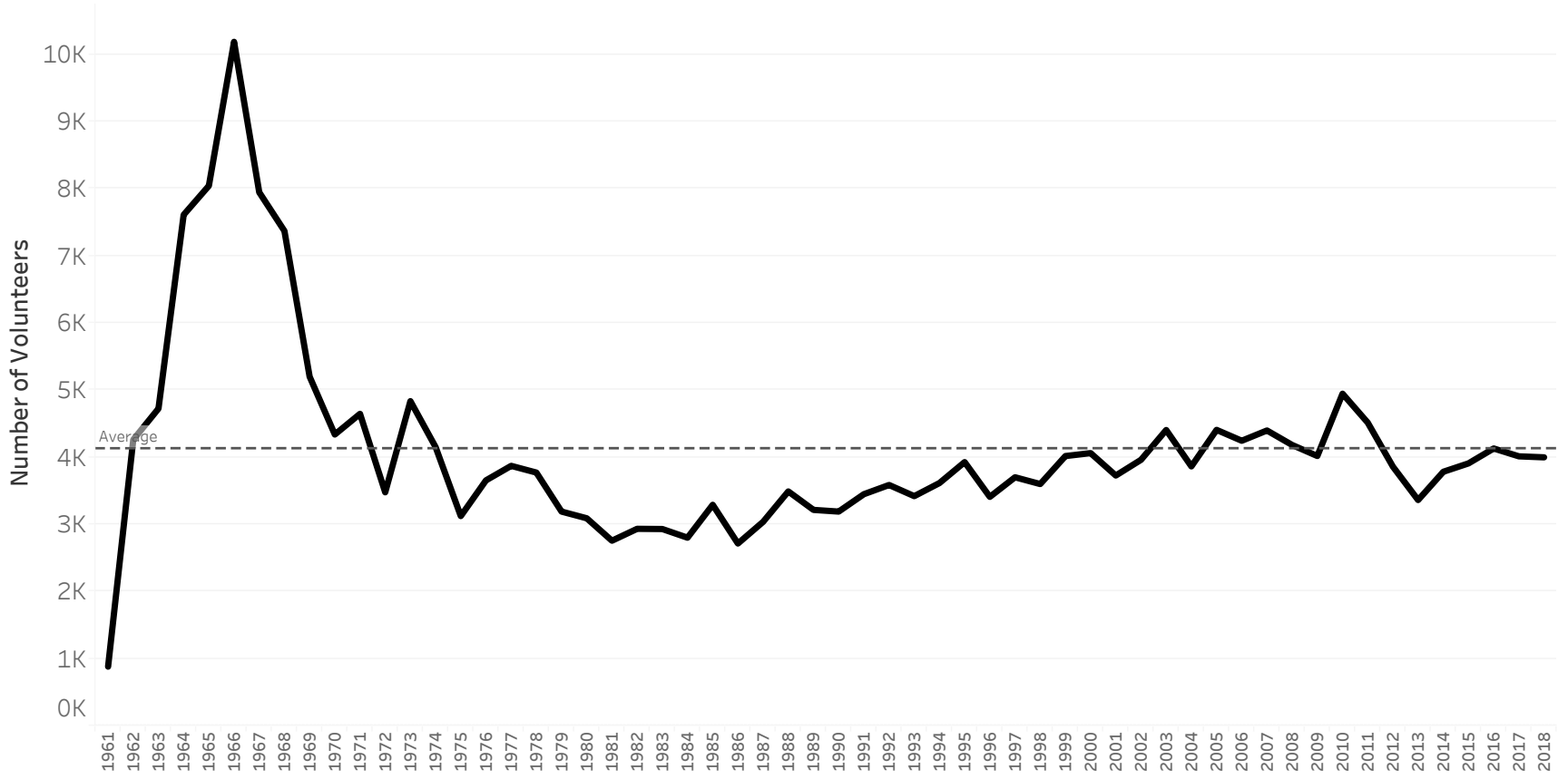




Figure 2: Number and Proportion of Volunteers by Decade

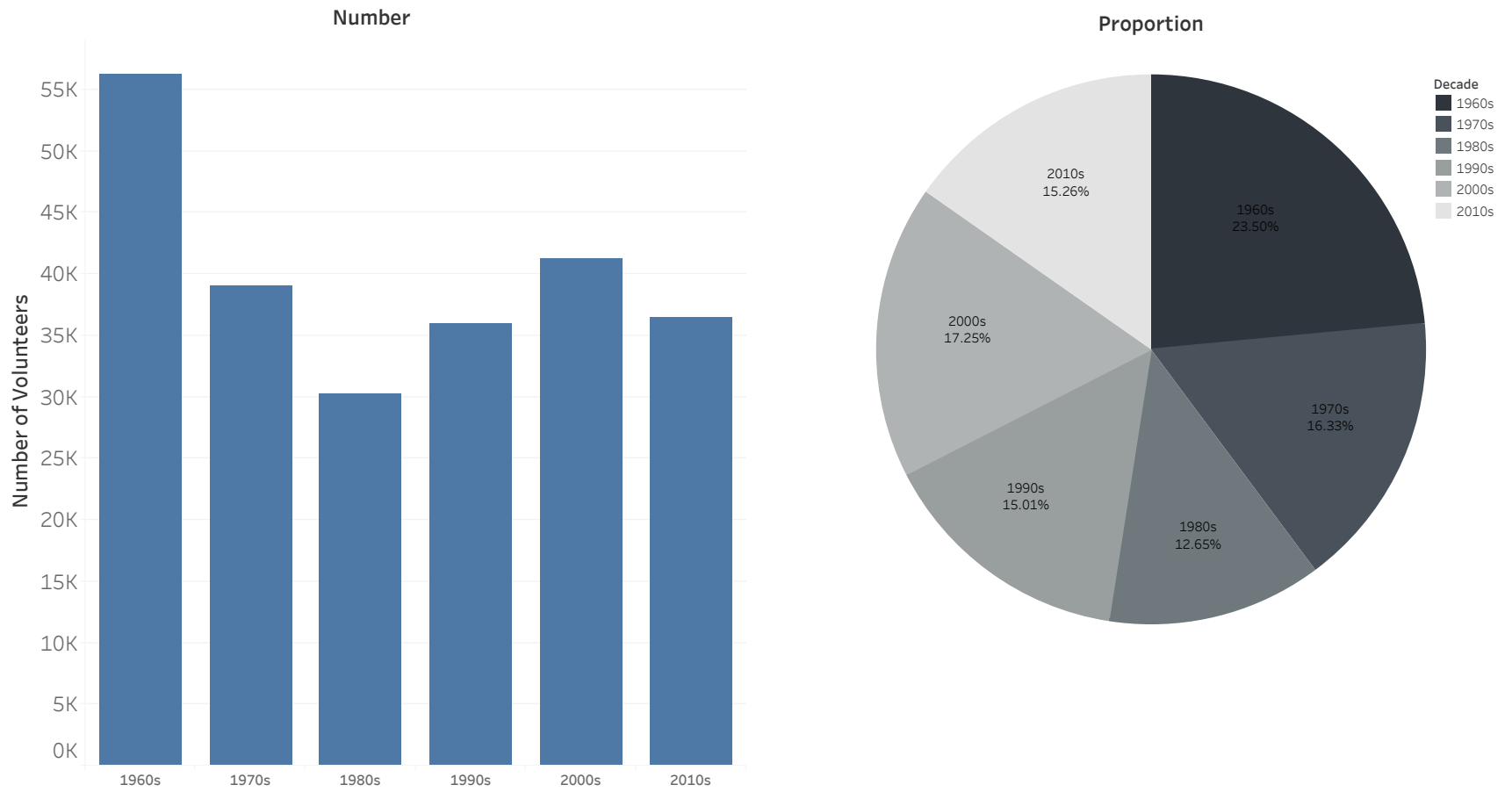


Figure 3: Number of Volunteers by Year and Region

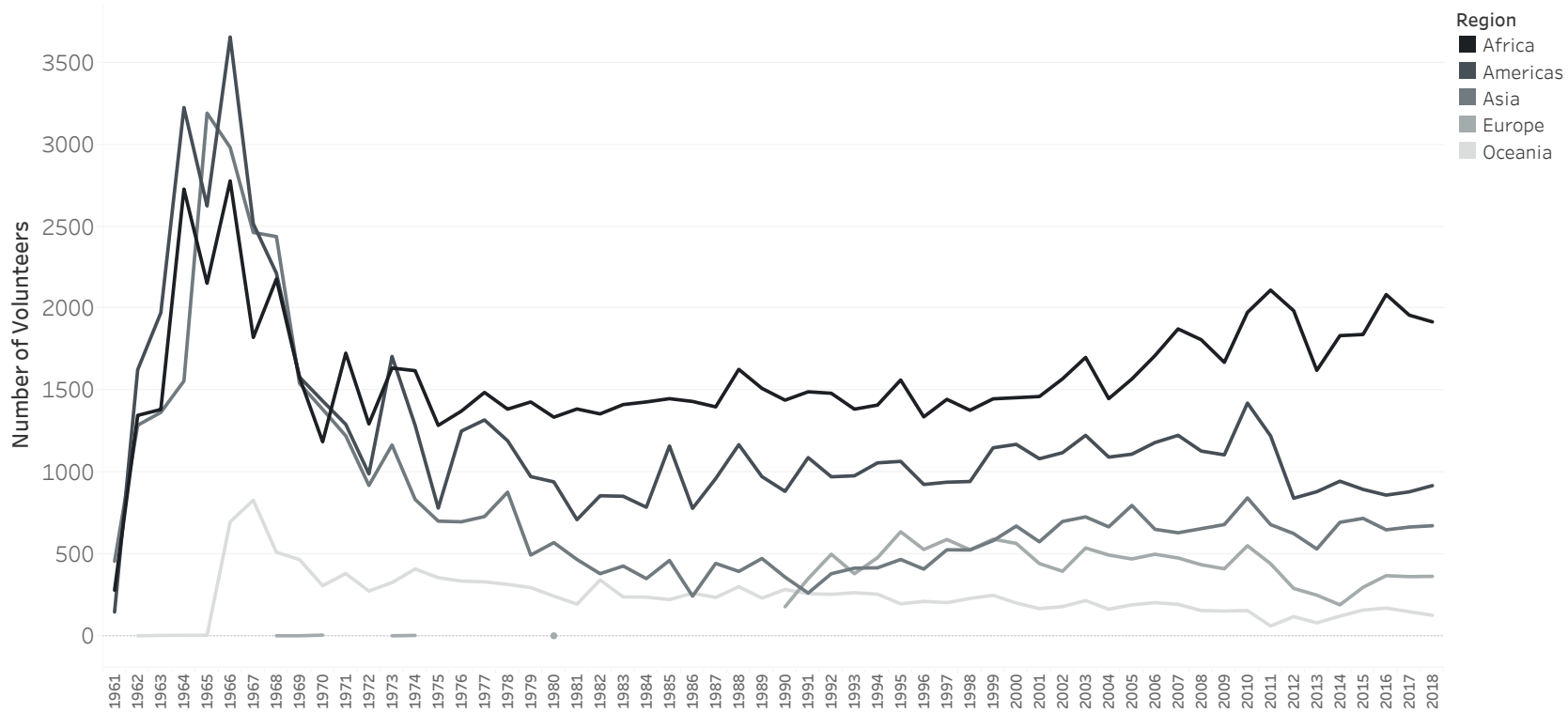
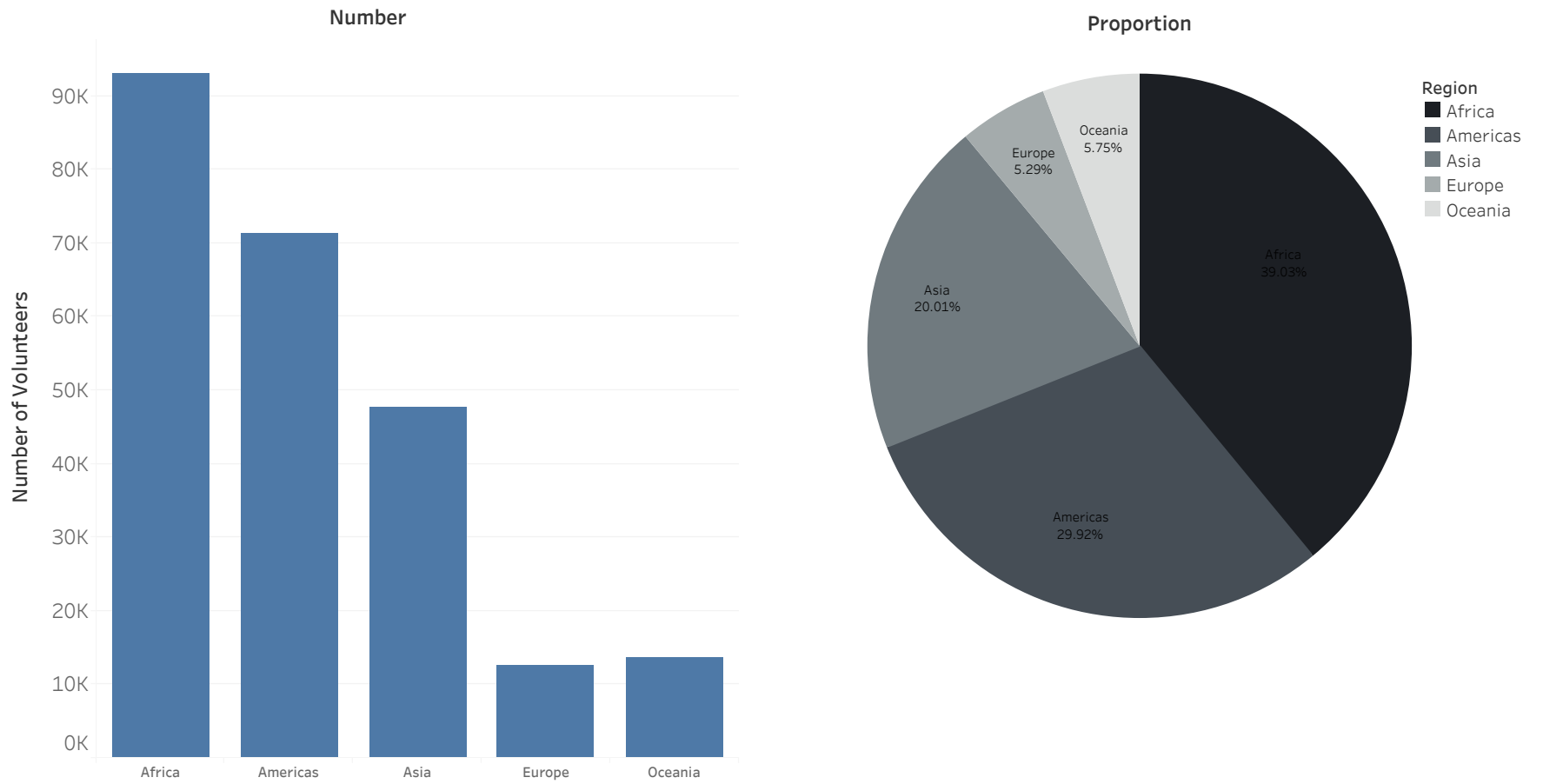


Figure 4: Number and Proportion of Volunteers by Region



## 3.2 Gender

In this section, I investigate how the gender composition of volunteers evolved over 60 years since the beginning of the Peace Corps. As noted in the introduction, the most remarkable pattern occurred in the mid-1980s when the groups' dominant gender shifted from male to female (as shown in the top panel of Figure 5). In the 2010s, the majority of volunteers were female; for example, female Americans outnumbered male counterparts by 4,367 from 2010 to 2014 (see the bottom panel of Figure 5). The gap between these two groups emerged during the late 1990s, and recent trends show it continuing into the near future.

This female dominance starkly contrasts with the male dominance of the 1960s and 1970s. Figure 5 shows that during 1965-1969, the agency sent 10,985 more men than women to developing countries. Interestingly, the trends around 1966 reveal that the increase in the number of male volunteers was disproportionately larger than that of females. The size of the male group grew by 1,809 from 1965 to 1966; the size of the female group grew by only 274. This pattern is closely linked to the military draft of college graduates during that period. In other words, thousands of male college graduates joined the Peace Corps program to avoid the military draft. This claim is backed by various accounts of volunteers and the media.<sup>6</sup> Even so, a more important structural factor underpinning this pattern was the much smaller number of female college graduates compared with males. This may have been caused by gender norms and barriers against women's education back in the 1960s and 70s.

Not surprisingly, Figure 6 exhibits unusually high male-to-female ratios, which reached almost 70% in 1968, 1969, and 1970. After that peak, the proportion of female Americans in the Peace Corps gradually increased, crossing the one-to-one ratio for the first time in 1986. Since then, male volunteers have never outnumbered females, and the proportion of female volunteers reached its highest level of 62.77% in 2013.

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<sup>6</sup>Source: <http://www.peacecorpswriters.org/pages/2005/0505/505warpeace.html>

Figure 7 shows that the reversing pattern varied in different regions of the world. The proportion of female volunteers differed among regions over the decades, but the overall pattern of the ratio shift occurred on every continent. For example, females have been the dominant gender in all regions since the 1990s; their smallest proportion was 50.66% in Oceania during the 1990s.

Figure 5: Number of Volunteers by Gender

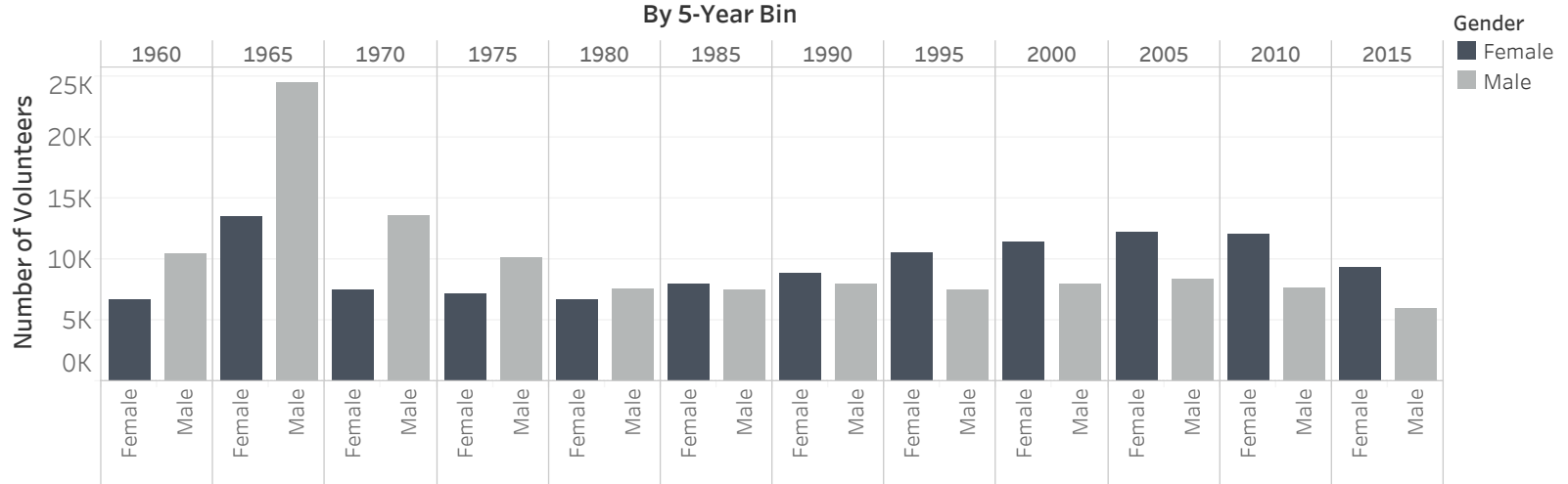
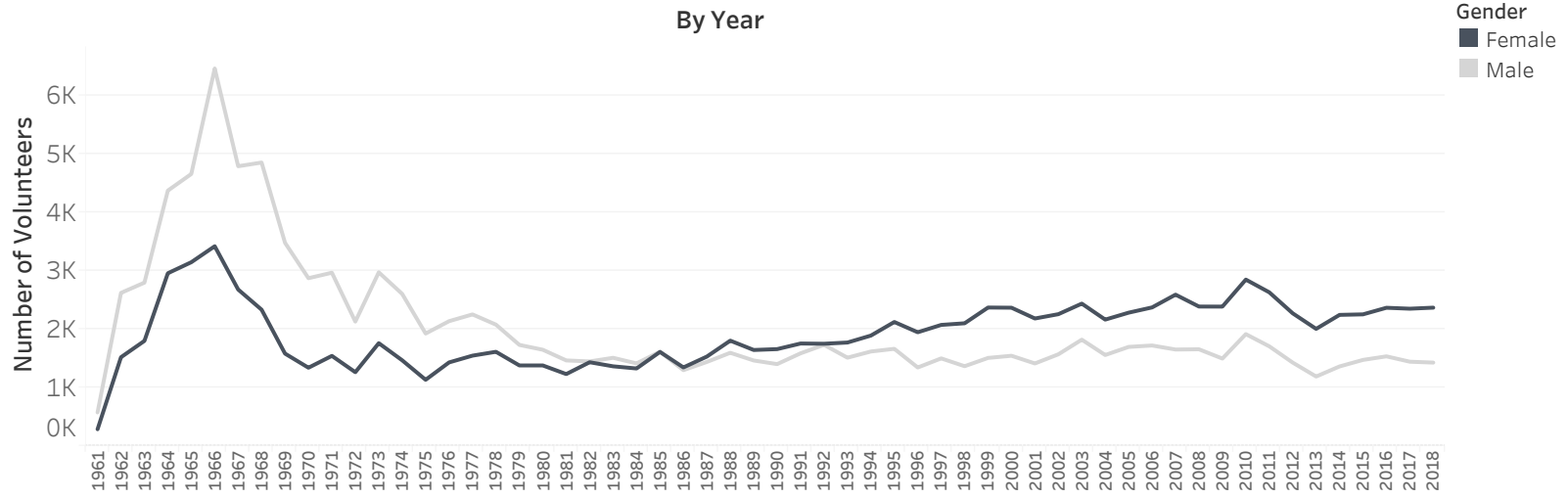


Figure 6: Proportion of Female Volunteers by Year

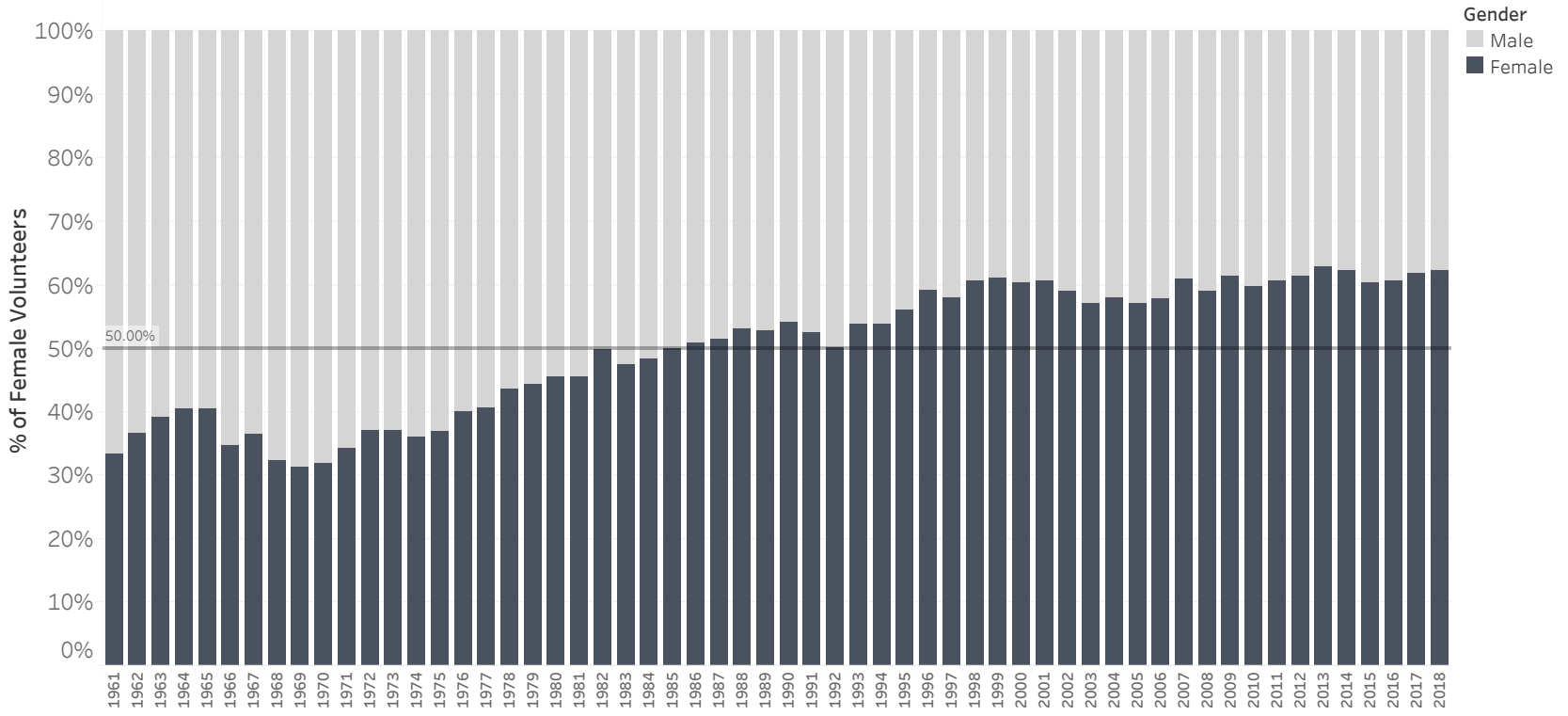
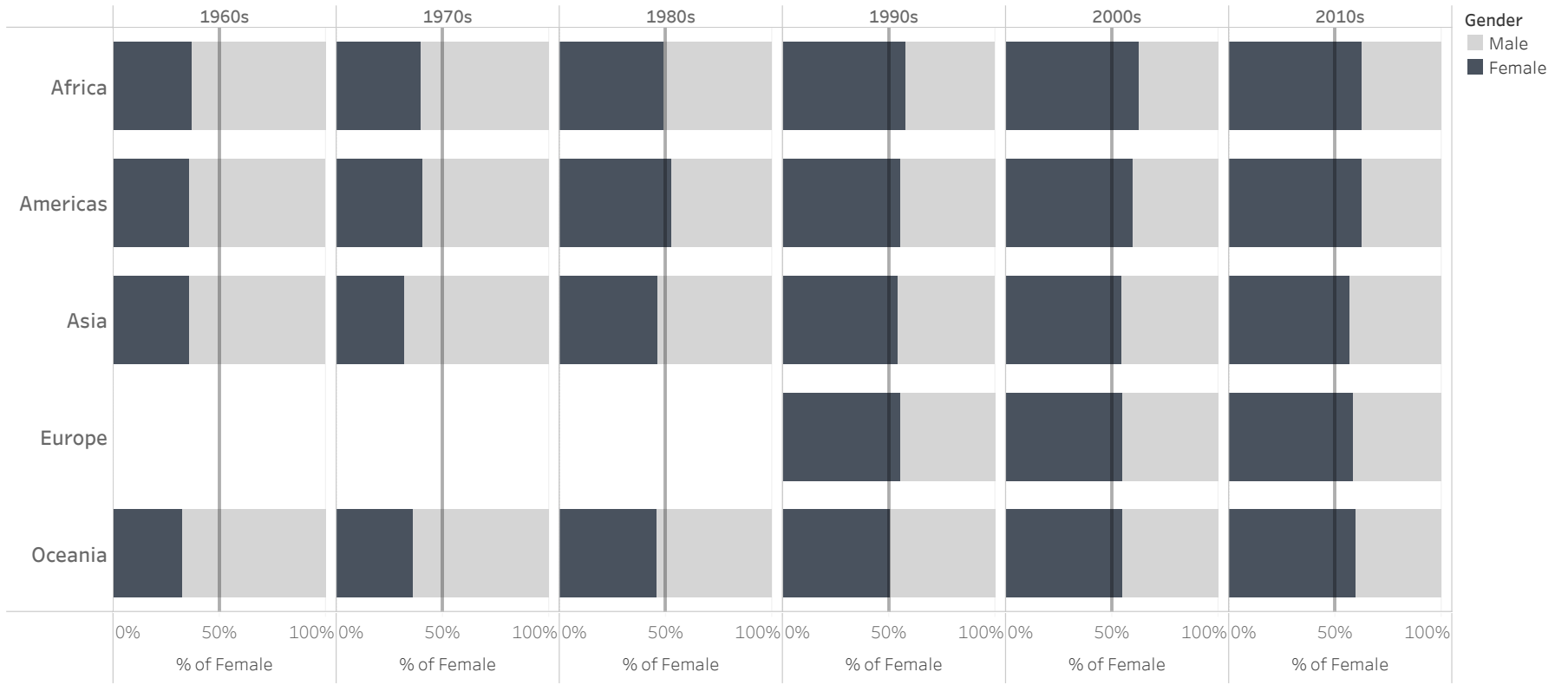


Figure 7: Proportion of Female Volunteers by Region and Decade





### 3.3 Race

Many people around the globe, especially those living in rural areas, have stereotypical ideas about American people. One very common stereotype is that all Americans are white. Thus, it is unsurprising that some host country nationals may be embarrassed or even disappointed when first meeting a Peace Corps Volunteer who is not white. In this section, I explore the racial distribution of the volunteers.

The statistics on race shown below reinforce the public perception that the majority of young Americans always has been white. Figure 8 illustrates the number of volunteers by race over six decades and shows that white volunteers constantly exceeded other races. Consistent with the pattern in the number of PCVs described above, the white group's size was largest during the 1960s and displays a subtle U pattern that reaches its bottom during the 1980s with fewer than 25,000 volunteers. The figure also shows that African Americans have been the second largest group followed by Hispanic Americans throughout the history of the program.

Figure 9 presents the ratio of volunteers' races by year. While the figure confirms the same pattern that Peace Corps volunteers were mostly white, it also shows that the high white-to-non-white ratio diminished slowly over the past 30 years. More specifically, the inflection point was in 1991 when the proportion of whites first reached 77%; it then began a period of gradual decline that continues to date. Before 1991, the proportion of white volunteers was always between 78% and 80%.

After examining Figure 9, two patterns in the ratios of the minorities emerge. First, the proportion of Black and Other groups remained remarkably constant with the percentage of African Americans at 10-12% and other minorities at 2- 3% throughout the whole period. Second, Hispanics and Asians assumed the declining share of whites since the 1990s: for example, Hispanics grew from 7% in 1991 to 12% in 2018, and Asians grew from 4% to 6% during the same period. It is notable that in 2018, Hispanics were the second largest group, followed by Blacks for the first time in the history of the Peace Corps. These patterns are consistent with the general trend in demographics

in the United States that shows gradual expansions of the Hispanic and Asian populations in recent years. The racial composition of bachelor's degrees conferred to U.S. citizens between the 2004/05 and 2014/15 academic years also confirms the trend: Black (10%) followed by Hispanic (7%) in 04/05 but Hispanic (12%) followed by Black (11%) in 14/15.<sup>7</sup>

In Figure 10, I investigate whether racial similarity affected volunteer assignments over regions; for example, whether whites were more likely to serve in Eastern Europe than on other continents. Figure 10 showing racial composition by region post-2000 suggests the conjecture is partly true. The affinity appears only in the Americas, with Hispanics being the second largest group since 2012 in that region. Asians and African Americans were not relatively overrepresented in the volunteer population serving Asia and Africa, respectively. Neither were whites in Eastern Europe; though their relative number there has been slightly larger or equal to those in other regions over the post-2000 period, the difference in percentage points is on average about 4% at the maximum in 2008.

Last, I plot the gender ratio by race in Figure 11 to see whether the shift was driven by a particular race. The figure shows that the change took place across all races with the shift most pronounced in whites when comparing the overall female-to-male ratio of whites (see the top panel) and the ratio post-1990 (see the bottom panel). The proportion of female Americans is uniquely less than half compared to other groups during the whole period in large part due to the massive influx of male volunteers during the 1960s. As described in the next section, the white group has been the overwhelming majority over the entire period, and it is evident that changes involving the white group led to the shift at the aggregated level.

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<sup>7</sup>*The Condition of Education 2017, Chapter 4. Postsecondary Education, Section: Completion, Certificates and Degrees Conferred by Race/Ethnicity*, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

Figure 8: Number of Volunteers by Race and Decade

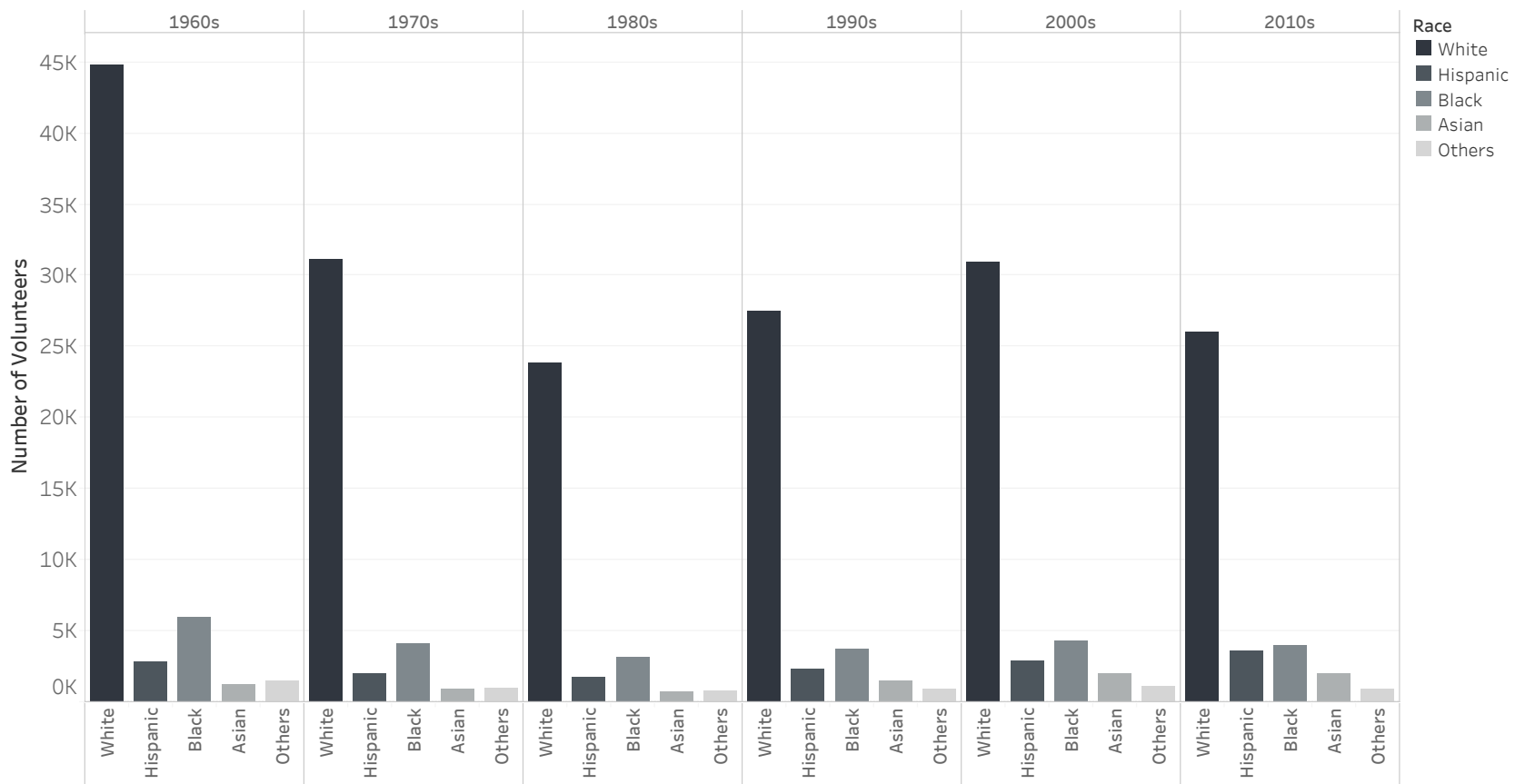


Figure 9: Race Composition of Race of Volunteers by Year

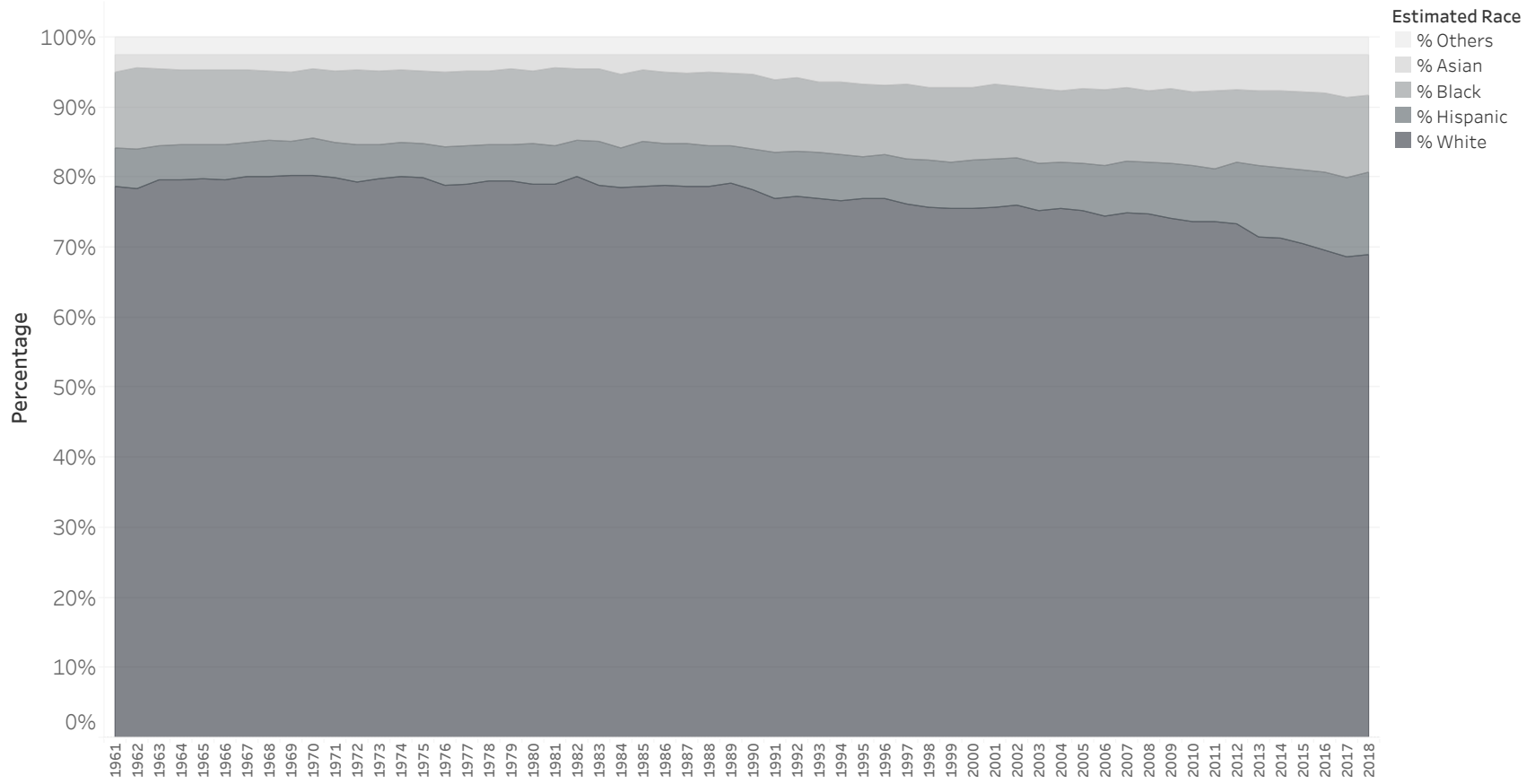


Figure 10: Race Composition of Volunteers by Year and Region post-2000

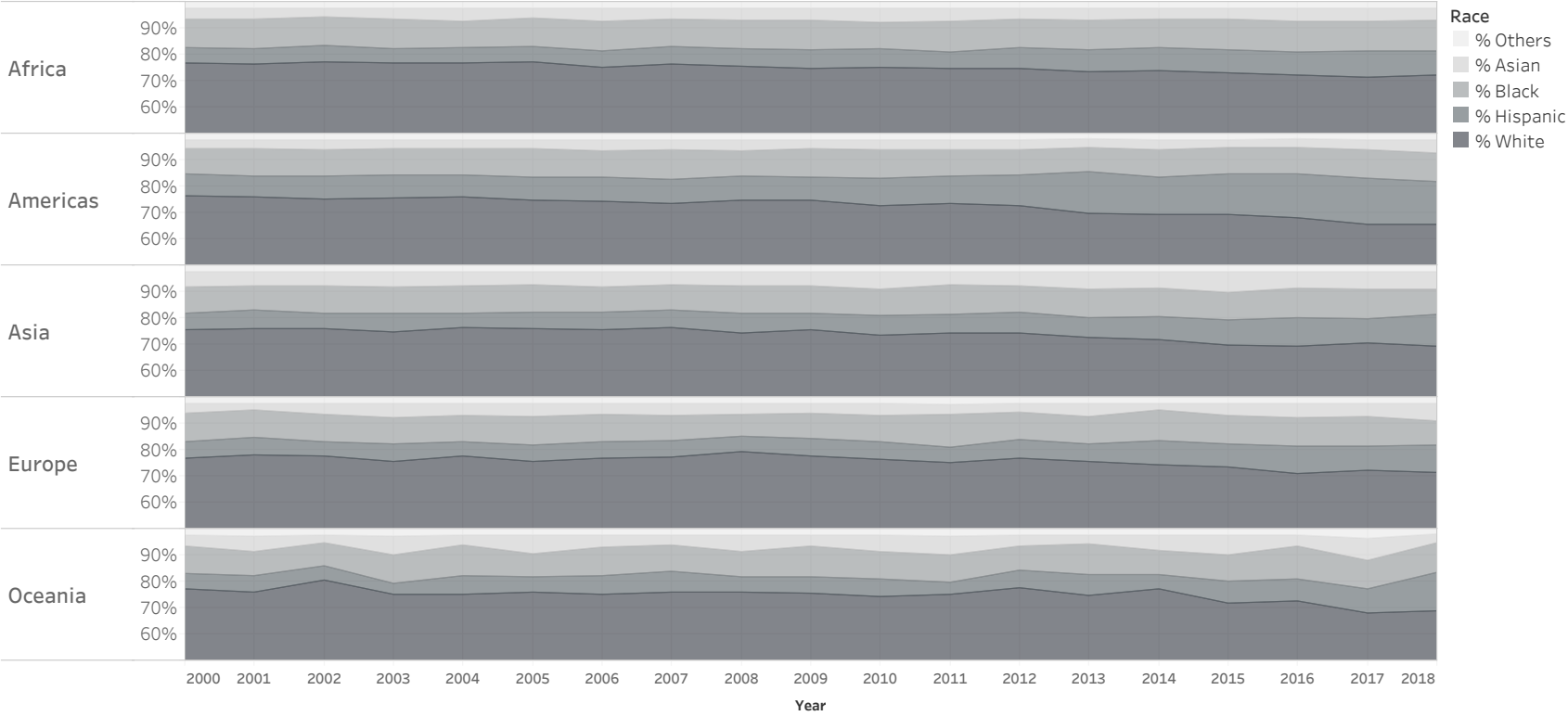
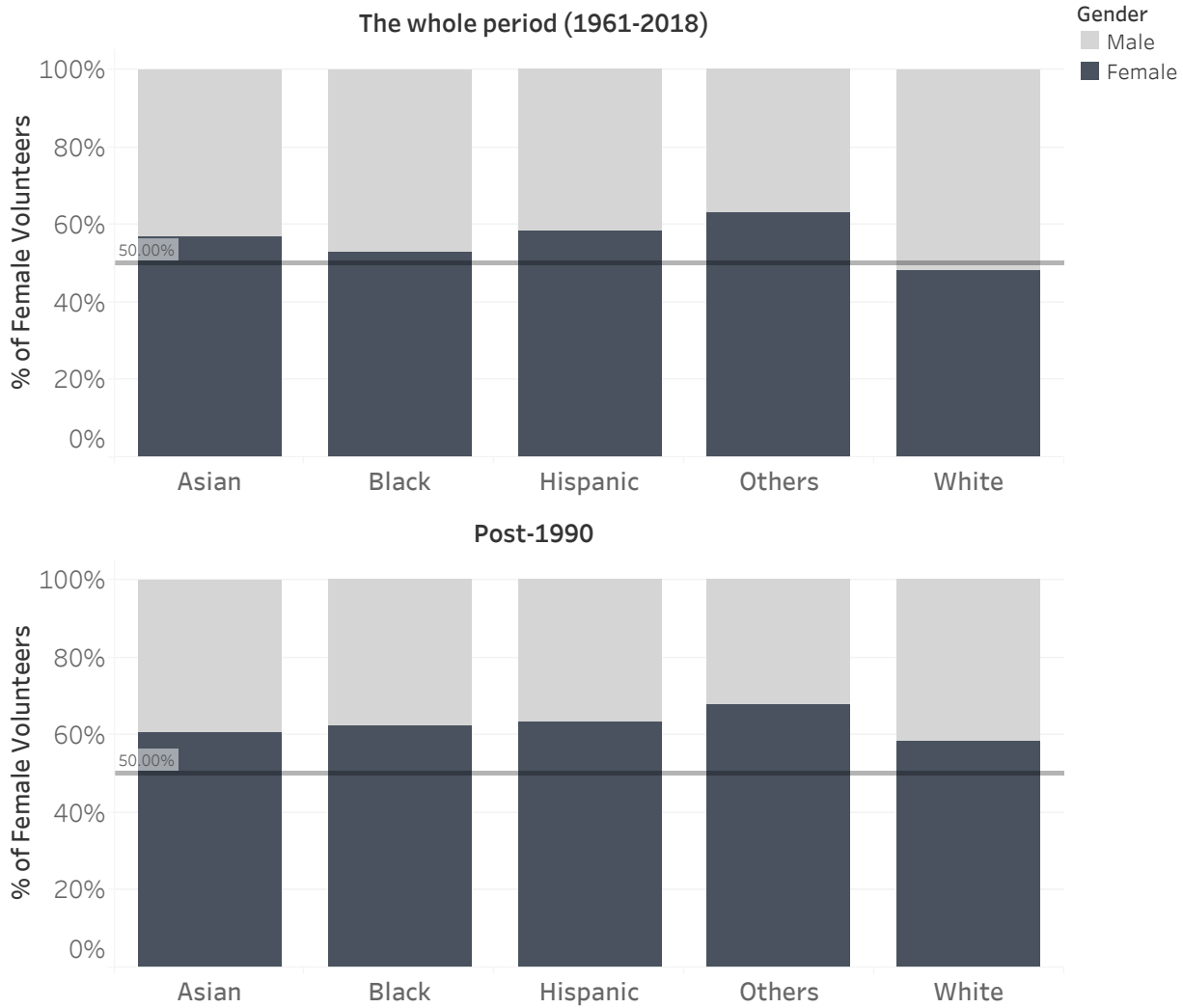


Figure 11: Proportion of Female Volunteers by Race



## 4 Geographic Distribution of Volunteers

A widespread conception held by the American public about Peace Corps Volunteers is that they go into “bushes” and serve people who live in the hinterland of Africa. Whether formed through American media or the agency’s recruitment advertising strategy, the question of where volunteers serve merits scholarly attention. In this section, I analyze the countries and regions in which volunteers serve. The distribution of volunteers at the subnational level will be analyzed in the following sections.

To summarize, I find that (1) the Peace Corps recipient coverage is global; (2) there was considerable variance in the number of volunteers at the country level both within and across regions; (3) notably, small countries received a disproportionately greater number of Americans; (4) the poorest countries did not host the largest number of volunteers; and (5) the level of democracy is not a decisive factor in the placement of volunteers. Though establishing (4) and (5) requires further statistical analyses, such as linear regression, the data in this section illustrates that the Peace Corps did not work predominantly in the poorest African countries.

### 4.1 Geographic Pattern

I display the geographic pattern of volunteer placement across the globe in Figure 12. The size of each circle indicates the total number of volunteers a country hosted to date (through 2018). Clearly, the coverage of the Peace Corps Volunteer services spans nearly every developing country in the world. It is difficult to identify the few developing countries that never hosted PVCs on the map. Some examples include: Belarus in Eastern Europe, Algeria in Africa, French Guiana in Latin America, Tajikistan in Central Asia, and Syria and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East. Also, the map appears to show volunteers serving around the globe in a specific year when, in fact, the substantial variation in number implies that waves of volunteers have been uneven across countries

and over time.

The figure also suggests that country size is negatively related to the size of the American volunteer cohort in the country. This pattern is consistent with the conventional wisdom in the foreign aid literature: foreign aid flows to smaller countries disproportionately. Caribbean and Polynesian islands received considerable numbers of volunteers, given their populations. For example, the Federal States of Micronesia received more volunteers than China, Mongolia, and Indonesia combined together; the Dominican Republic hosted more PCVs than Brazil and Paraguay. In West Africa, countries such as Senegal, Liberia, and Ghana welcomed more than 4,000 volunteers through 2018. Figure 12 suggests that these areas were the most frequent destinations for American volunteers.

Next, I look closely at the top three regions that hosted PCVs: Africa, the Americas, and Asia. As Figure 13 shows, the Peace Corps placed more volunteers in Western and Eastern Africa than in other subregions. Sixteen West African countries—including Cape Verde, a small island—received more than 40,000 PVCs, which comprises more than one-sixth of the total volunteer population. Seventeen countries—including small island countries, such as Mauritius in East Africa—also received a large portion of the global Peace Corps workforce. They hosted about 25,000 volunteers (which exceeds 10% of the total volunteer population) with Kenya hosting the largest number of PCVs in the group. Some countries in North, Central, and South Africa—such as Morocco, Cameroon, and Botswana—are notable in terms of the size of the program. In those subregions, a few countries—such as Angola, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, and Sudan—received fewer than 100 volunteers.

Figure 14 presents the volunteer distribution in the Americas as skewed toward North America. Seven land countries—excluding Mexico in North America—received almost 25,000 volunteers. The agency also placed nearly 14,000 volunteers in Jamaica, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Eastern Caribbean countries. The total number of volunteers who served in North America outnumbers the approximately 32,000 who served in twelve Latin American countries. Meanwhile,



large countries, such as Mexico and Argentina, hosted fewer than 500 volunteers. These observations reinforce the point raised above: the placement of volunteers was biased in favor of small countries.

Finally, Figure 15 exhibits that nearly every Asian country—except a few countries in the Middle East and Central Asia—welcomed at least one American PCV. It also depicts a special tie between the U.S. and the Philippines: They hosted more than 9,000 volunteers, which makes the number of volunteers considerably larger than in most other Asian countries. The outstanding major recipients of American volunteers in Asia were the Philippines, India, Nepal, Thailand, and Malaysia. These five countries received 27,190 PCVs, which represents more than 50% of the 47,840 Peace Corps Volunteers sent to the region.

Figure 12: Geographic Distribution of Volunteers



Figure 13: Geographic Distribution of Volunteers: Africa

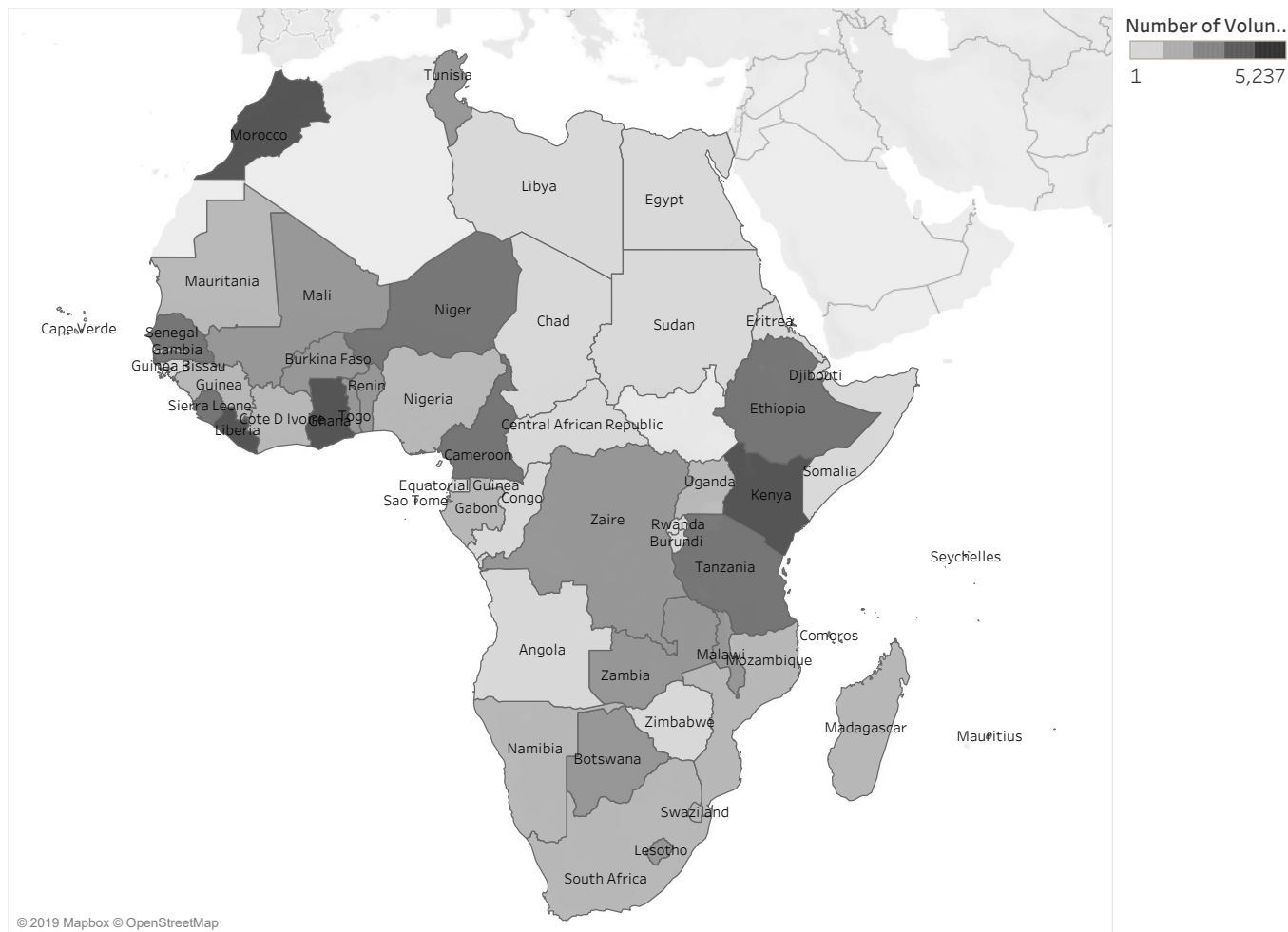


Figure 14: Geographic Distribution of Volunteers: Americas



Figure 15: Geographic Distribution of Volunteers: Asia



## 4.2 Top Recipients by Region, Income, and Democracy

The choropleth map in the previous section shows the geographic placement of volunteers, but it includes only a few categories, and some countries are too small to see. Therefore, I use tree mapping to allow comparison across countries through “boxes” of different sizes representing the total number of volunteers. These figures also help identify the top recipients and their rankings in specific subcategories.

For instance, Figure 16 allows an intuitive comparison of the size of the volunteer program at the country level in different regions. In descending order, Africa is followed by the Americas, Asia, Oceania, and Europe. Clearly, volunteers are more evenly placed across African countries than on other continents. This is especially evident in Asia and Oceania and may be due to the lack of human resources in education and health sectors that occurred more commonly in Africa.

I also plot the distribution of volunteers at the country level by income category defined by the World Bank in Figure 17. In contrast to the perception that low-income countries primarily benefited from Peace Corps services, upper-middle-income countries topped the list, followed by lower-middle-income countries with a very narrow margin. In the upper-middle-income category, a majority of top recipients were from the Americas, with a few exceptions, such as Thailand and Botswana. The lower-middle-income category contains a mixture of countries from different regions, such as the Philippines, Honduras, Morocco, the Federal States of Micronesia, and Ukraine. Africa dominates the low-income category, with Nepal among the few exceptions. Some countries, such as South Korea and Poland, that are now classified as high-income countries and have stopped hosting volunteers in recent years, received volunteers when they were classified as low-income countries.

In Figure 18, I use the Polity2 Index and classify countries into three levels of democracy in ascending order: autocracy, anocracy, and democracy. Importantly, the same country can appear in multiple subgroups as the index distinguishes countries at the country-year level. For example,

the Philippines hosted 2,276 volunteers during its democracy period, 2,752 volunteers during autocracy, and 3,794 during anocracy. This particular example suggests that volunteer placement is more affected by whether a country is friendly with the U.S. rather than its acceptance of democracy. Countries receiving American volunteers during autocracy deserve special attention. Except for Morocco and Brazil, these countries are mostly African and were in dire need of skilled labor: Liberia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Zaire (the Democratic Republic of the Congo), Sierra Leone, Nepal, Niger, and so forth. I conjecture that autocrats might have decided to host American volunteers to earn needed help and receive political approval from the West.

Figure 16: Distribution of Volunteers by Region

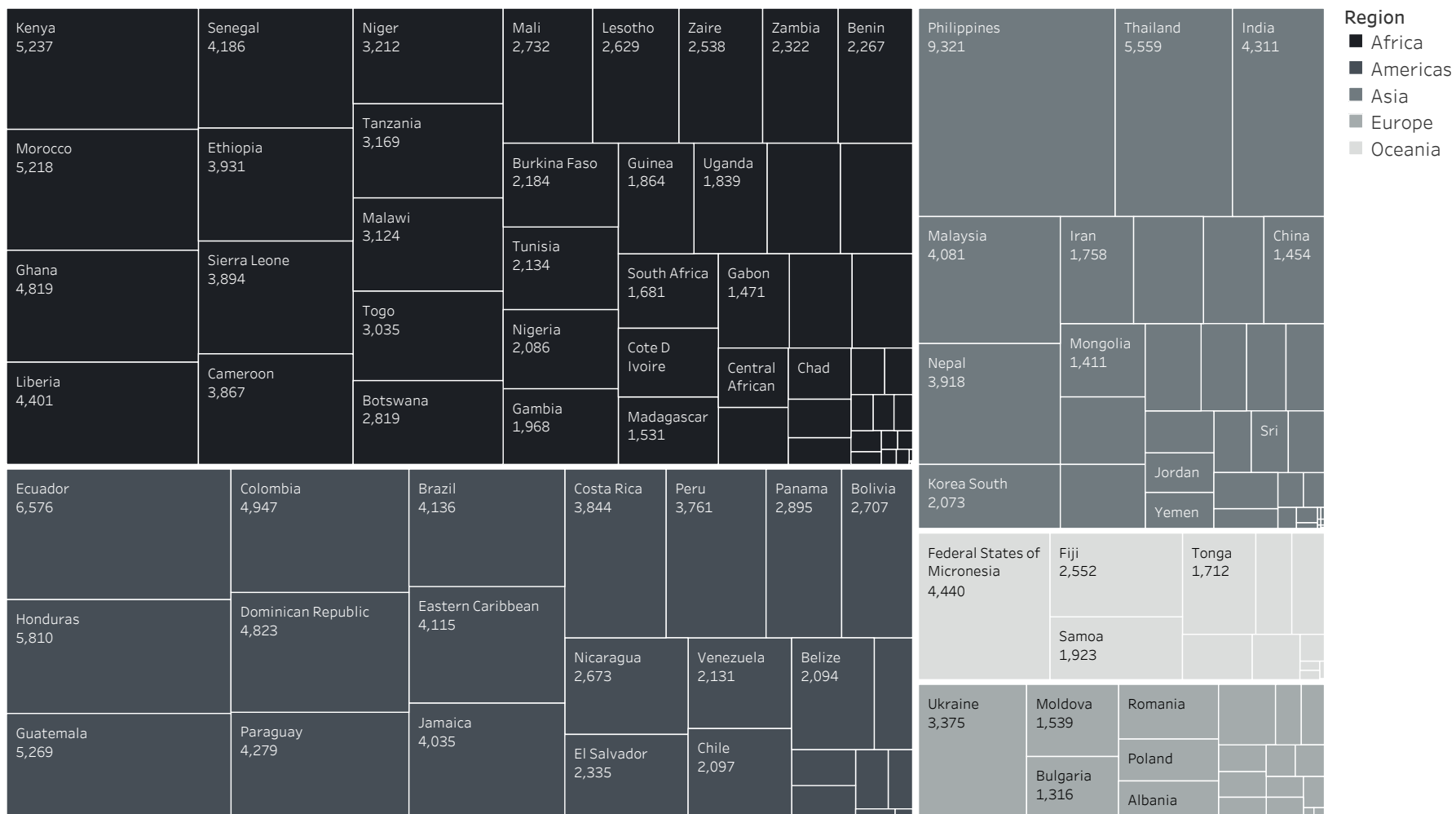




Figure 17: Distribution of Volunteers by Income Level

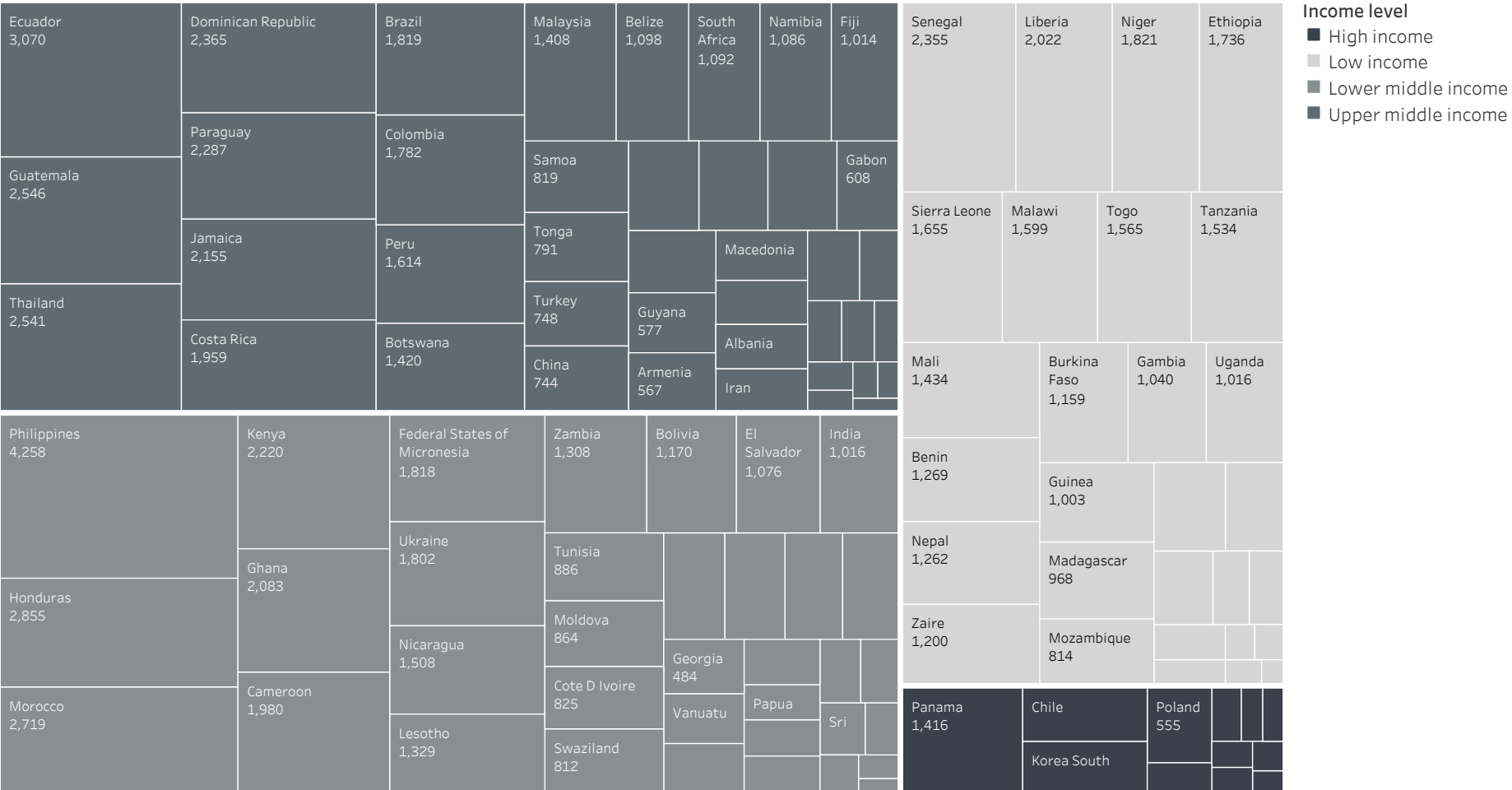
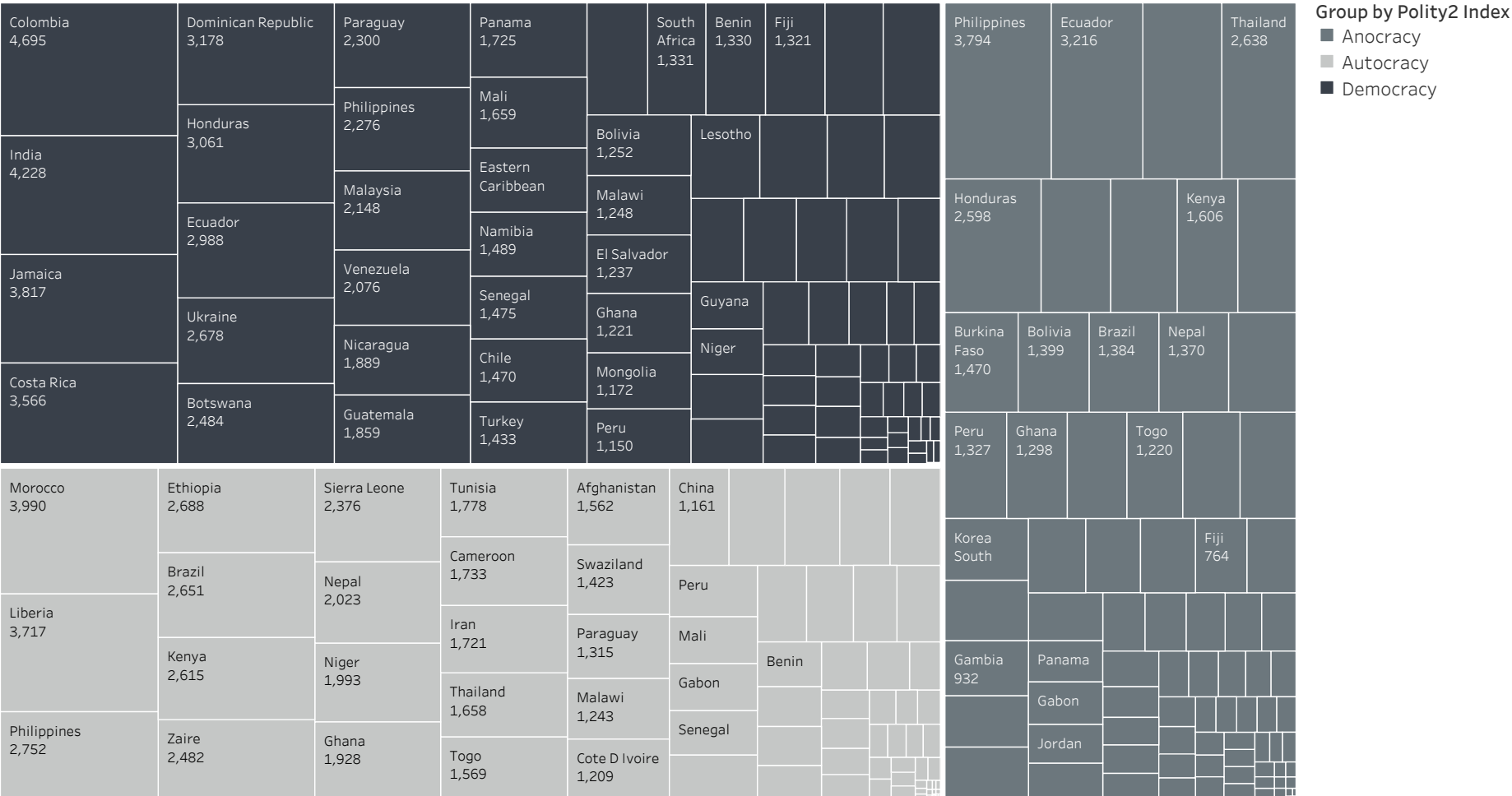


Figure 18: Distribution of Volunteers by Polity2 Index



## **5 Geographic Distribution of Volunteers over Time**

In this section, I explore how the geographic distribution of volunteers across the globe evolved over time. The figures presented below show a great deal of variation in both (1) the size of and (2) the continuity of the Peace Corps program over time, even within the same country. The first section reveals the distribution of volunteers by decade; the second section presents the program's continuity by year in each country. Note that I only cover Africa, the Americas, and Asia, and the list of countries is in ascending order from the smallest to the largest number of volunteers that a country received through 2018 over the past six decades.

Fluctuations are best understood in terms of both the supply of and demand for American volunteer forces in developing countries. On the supply side, for example, the agency could withdraw its volunteers from a country when a civil war breaks out. On the demand side, a recipient country could stop requesting volunteers due to deteriorating diplomatic relations with the U.S. Those accounts imply that political and social factors drive decisions about where U.S. volunteers serve across the globe, which corroborates my point that economic factors are not the sole determinant of volunteer placement.

### **5.1 Geographic Distribution by Decade**

Figure 19 presents changes in the program's size over decades by country. One common pattern in all three regions is that the distribution of volunteer placement was skewed toward a handful of countries in the 1960s and 1970s and has become increasingly more even since then. For example, Ethiopia and Nigeria received more than 2,000 volunteers, respectively, in the 1960s, while Benin, Gambia, and Swaziland each welcomed fewer than 100 during the same period. Volunteers were distributed most evenly across countries in Africa during the 1990s—no country received more than 1,000 volunteers at that time.

Another notable pattern is that some countries at the top of the PCV-recipient lists in the early days of the program underwent dramatic changes later. This is either because they were unwilling to accept U.S. volunteers at some point or because the U.S. did not want to endanger their volunteers by sending them to hostile countries. Ethiopia, for instance, hosted 2,267 volunteers in the 1960s; the number dropped significantly to 585 in the '70s, and the program became almost non-existent in subsequent periods. This was mainly due to the establishment of a Marxist government in 1974 after the Derg, a communist military junta, overthrew the government of the pro-US Emperor Haile Selassie.

Nigeria hosted 2,023 US volunteers in the 1960s but only 63 since then. The abrupt halt of the program can be best explained by the Nigerian Civil War in 1967 and political instability in the following decades. As described in the previous section, the U.S. government sent volunteers to autocratic regimes that were pro-US: Ethiopia under Emperor Haile Selassie during the 1960s is one example. Therefore, the end of the Peace Corps program in Nigeria could have been due to deteriorating security within the country or to the refusal of military leaders to receive U.S. volunteers.

Other civil wars impacted the Peace Corps' services in Africa. During the Sierra Leone Civil War (1991-2002) and the First (1989-1997) and Second Liberian Civil Wars (1999-2003), as well as other battles, the U.S. quickly withdrew every volunteer from countries in conflict. These examples also demonstrate that the end of conflict does not necessarily lead to the immediate return of volunteers due to the government's inability to maintain social order. For example, Figure 22 shows that the Peace Corps resumed placing volunteers in Sierra Leone in 2010—eight years after the Lome Peace Accord ended the Sierra Leone Civil War in 2002.

In contrast, some countries—such as Kenya, Morocco, Ghana, and Senegal—have continued to be major PCV hosts throughout the past six decades. These countries share two common features: they have been historically important U.S. allies in their region and have never experienced country-wide destructive civil conflicts. For example, Morocco is among the oldest and closest

U.S. allies in North Africa, first establishing its diplomatic relationship during the American Civil War in the 18th century. In Senegal, where France established its West African colonial government, an overwhelming majority of nationals view the U.S. favorably according the Pew Research Center.<sup>8</sup> Kenya supported the U.S. during the Cold War, and this relationship has grown stronger since the founding of its democratic government in 2002.

In Central and South America, a similar pattern is observable: During the 1980s, the Peace Corps suspended its programs serving the top PCV-recipient countries in the 1960s, such as Colombia and Brazil. The main cause of the suspension in Brazil was a diplomatic conflict over the U.S. refusal to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and its technical cooperation with West Germany regarding nuclear energy in the late 1970s. The US-Brazil relationship further deteriorated when Brazil exported arms to Libya and Iran in the following decade. Along with suspending the Peace Corps program, the U.S. government blacklisted the country to prevent it from accessing sensitive technologies.

It is more difficult to understand why the U.S. suspended its volunteering program in Colombia during the 1980s due to a lack of relevant federal government records. My conjecture is that it could be due to friction between the two countries in the early 1980s combined with a lack of confidence in the Colombian government's capability to protect volunteers from the increasing threat of drug cartels. In 1980, the U.S. realized the international effect of the growth in domestic drug trafficking in Colombia: about three-fourths of the cocaine exports to the U.S. originated in Colombia. The Reagan administration provided military and economic aid to Colombia in the hope of winning the war against drug cartels. However, the newly-elected President Betancur refused to adhere to the 1982 extradition treaty, specifically designed for drug criminals, on the basis of protecting Colombian nationals. By 1984, criminal organizations had grown so powerful that they assassinated the Colombian Minister of Justice in Colombia in retaliation for raids by the

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<sup>8</sup>For instance, 81% of the Senegalese nationals viewed the U.S. favorably in 2013 survey by the Pew Research Center. Of course, this could be one of the effects of hosting Peace Corps volunteers. Source: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/database/indicator/1/country/sn/>

Colombian National Police on the Yari River area.

Breaking down the volunteer distribution into the country-decade level, Figure 21 shows that the Peace Corps favoring of the Philippines was restricted to decades before the 1990s—a pattern that is not obvious at the aggregate level. This is probably because the agency could not meet the rising needs for its volunteers in other regions after the collapse of the Soviet Union, also evident in this figure. Many post-communist countries in Central Asia—such as Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan—began hosting U.S. volunteers in the 1990s, although in minuscule numbers. It is notable that their share of the volunteers has gradually grown over the past three decades.

Figure 19: Distribution of Volunteers by Decade: Africa

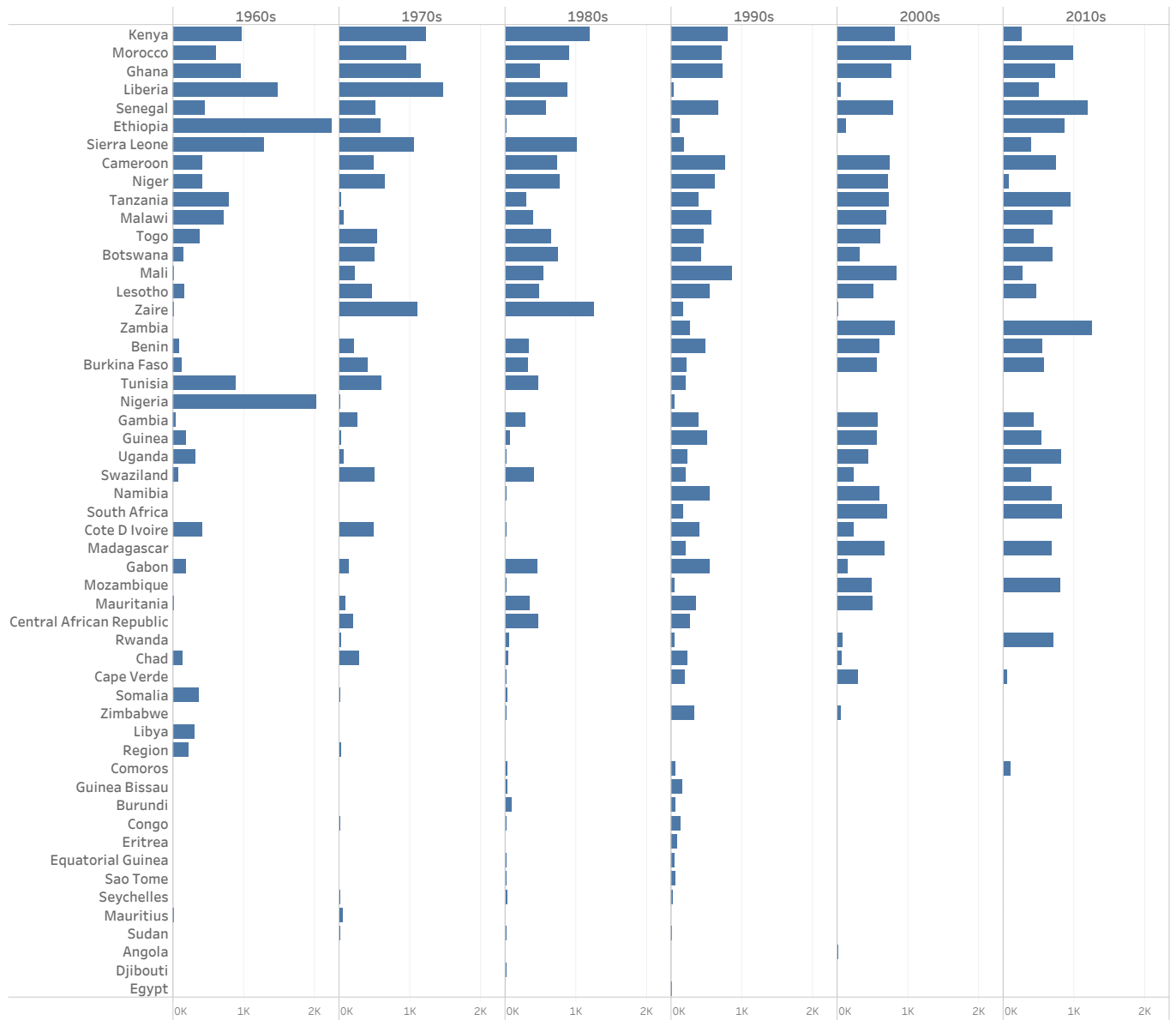


Figure 20: Distribution of Volunteers by Decade: Americas

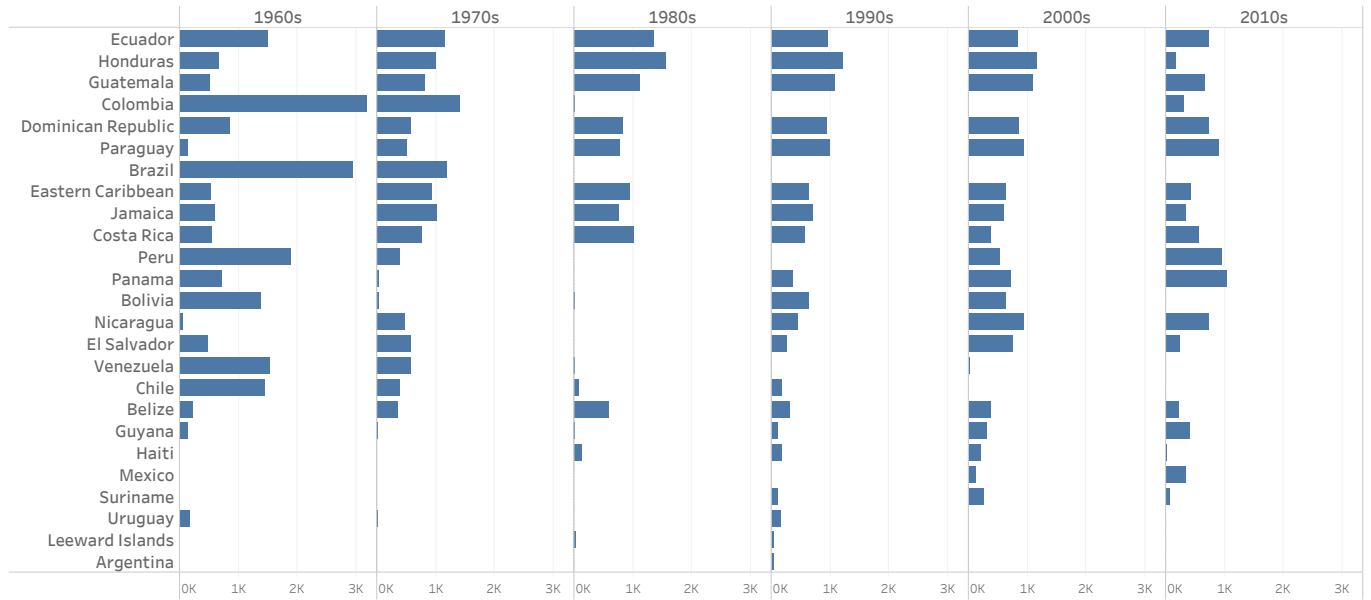
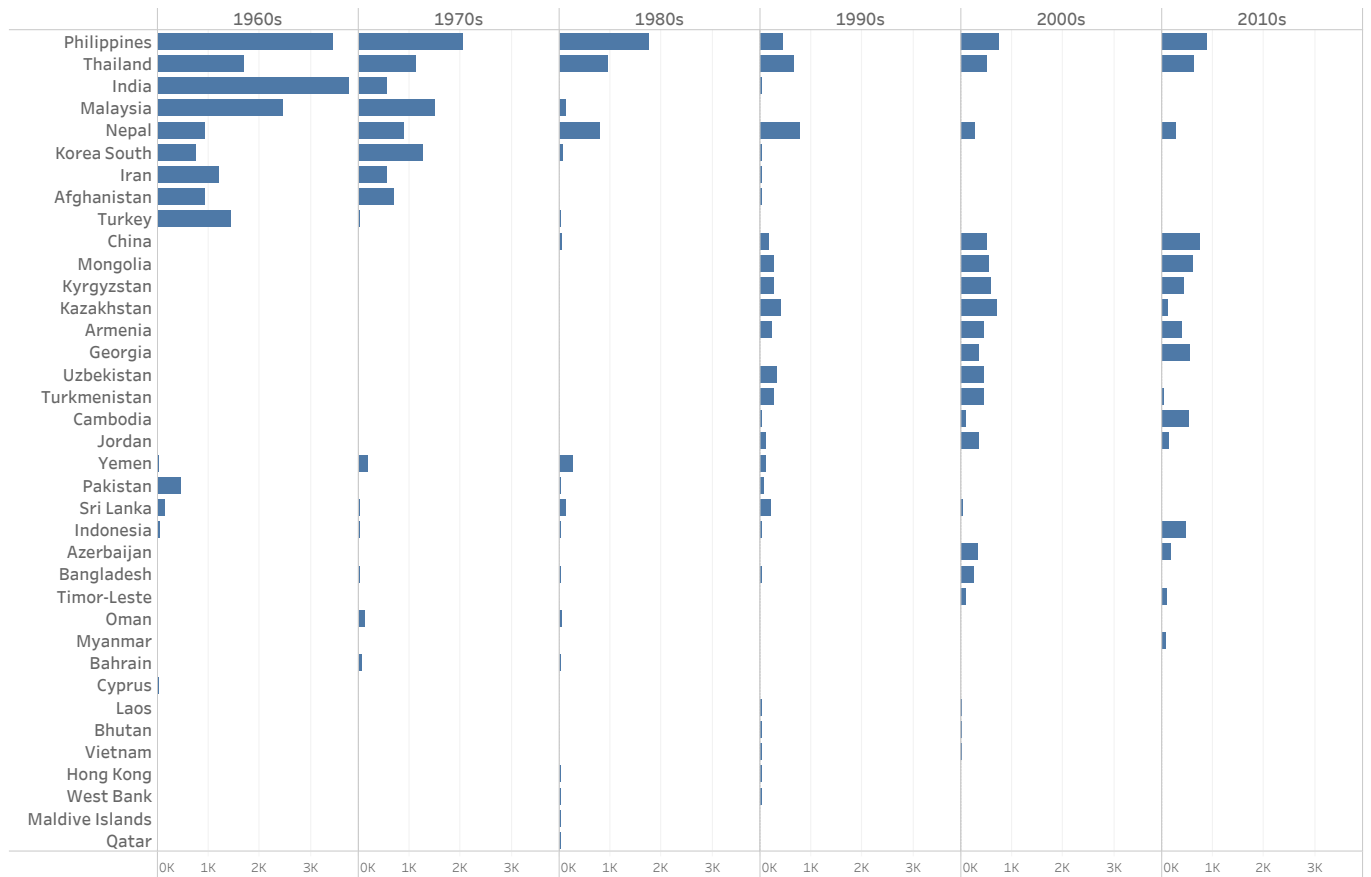




Figure 21: Distribution of Volunteers by Decade: Asia



## 5.2 Volunteer Assignment over Time

In this section, I analyze the continuity of the Peace Corps program in each nation by region, a type of Gantt chart. In these figures, a piece of a bar in a year in a country denotes that at least one PCV was assigned to that country in that year. By intentionally discarding information about quantity, there is more granular information on the trends of volunteer assignments over time compared to the bar graphs in the previous section. One important caveat: these charts do not account for volunteers' duration of service. This means that the program could have ended that year or continued into the following years depending on volunteers' duration of service in previous years. In other words, the figures presented below show the continuity of the placement of volunteers, not their actual presence in the country.

Figure 22 shows over-time volunteer placement in Africa, which varied greatly by country. Some countries—such as Kenya, Morocco, Ghana, Senegal, and Cameroon—present remarkably stable Peace Corps involvement over more than half a century. In contrast, countries—such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, and Zaire (The Democratic Republic of Congo)—experienced discontinuity of the volunteering program at some point, probably due to civil wars or anti-US sentiment.

The figure reaffirms that civil conflicts usually put the program on hold, though not always immediately. For example, Sierra Leone's civil war went from 1991 to 2002; the agency sent at least a few volunteers there until 1993. Liberia hosted volunteers intermittently during the first Liberian Civil War (1989-1997), perhaps because government forces were able to protect civilians and maintain security at least in their capital city<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, a closer look at the yearly volunteer placement in Ethiopia reveals that the Peace Corps placed volunteers there even after the rise of the Marxist regime in 1974. The reason behind that decision requires further study of US-Ethiopia relations. Tanzania also demonstrates that a major diplomatic conflict with the U.S. does not necessarily lead to instant suspension of the

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<sup>9</sup>However, the current dataset does not provide the location of the volunteer site.

program. In 1965, two members of the U.S. embassy were expelled by the Tanzanian government when its leader, Julius Nyerere, denounced the U.S. military operation in Congo, which he regarded as his political rival in the region. The U.S. retaliated by expelling a member of the Tanzanian embassy from American soil. Yet, these events did not stop the influx of American volunteers to the country until 1967.

Figure 23 demonstrates a similar pattern in the Americas characterized by great variety in the volunteer presence across countries. Ecuador, Guatemala, Dominican Republic, and Paraguay are among the group that has hosted PCVs without any long pauses. Conversely, Colombia, Brazil, Peru, Nicaragua, and Venezuela experienced either temporary suspension or complete withdrawal of the Peace Corps program at some point between the 1970s and the 1980s. A difference between Africa and the Americas that caused discontinuity is related to their souring relationships with the U.S. For example, the pro-US Somoza dictators were overthrown by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in 1979. They established a revolutionary government committed to Marxist ideology and undoubtedly had a close relationship with the Soviet Union and Cuba. The year 1979 was also when the agency stopped placing volunteers in the country.

According to Figure 24, few countries received PCVs without major interruption since the 1960s except the Philippines and Thailand. Meanwhile, a group of post-communist countries in Central Asia joined the Peace Corps host country group, consistent with the pattern shown in Figure 21. It is intriguing that China has received Peace Corps Volunteers since 1981, though in small numbers, given that the country is a Maoist-communist nation. The policy change coincided with significant economic reforms and foreign policy changes led by its Paramount Leader, Deng Xiaoping.

Figure 22: Volunteer Assignment over Time: Africa



Figure 23: Volunteer Assignment over Time: The Americas

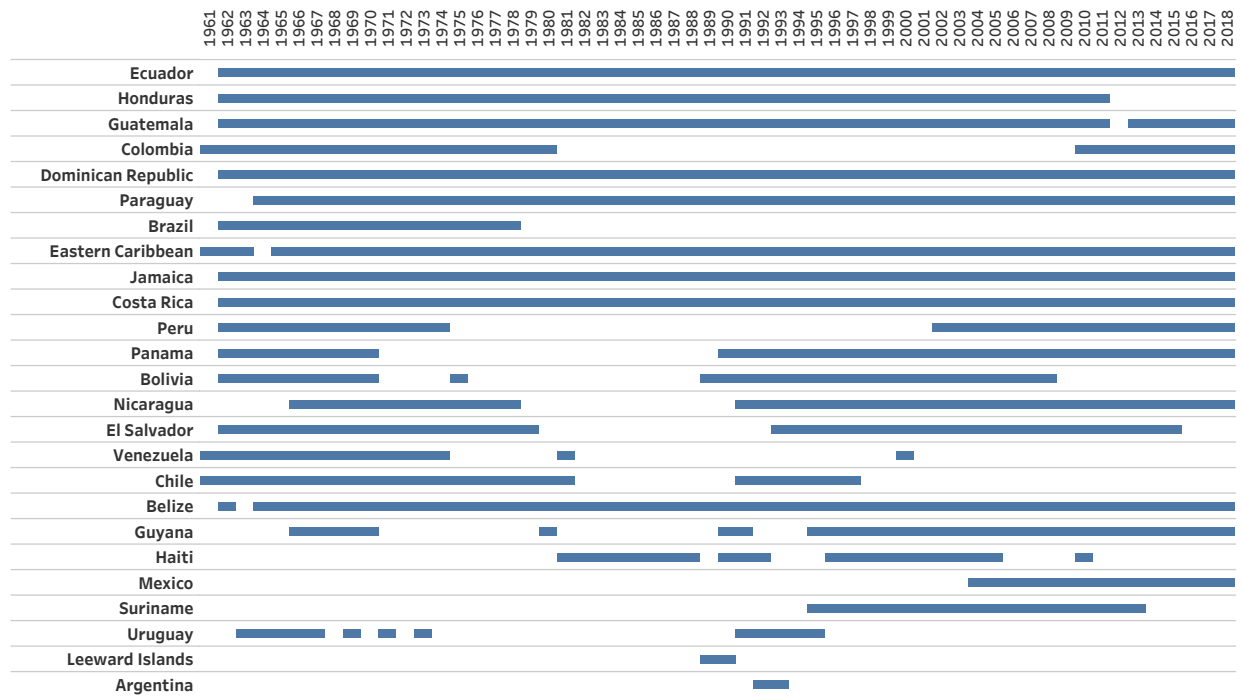
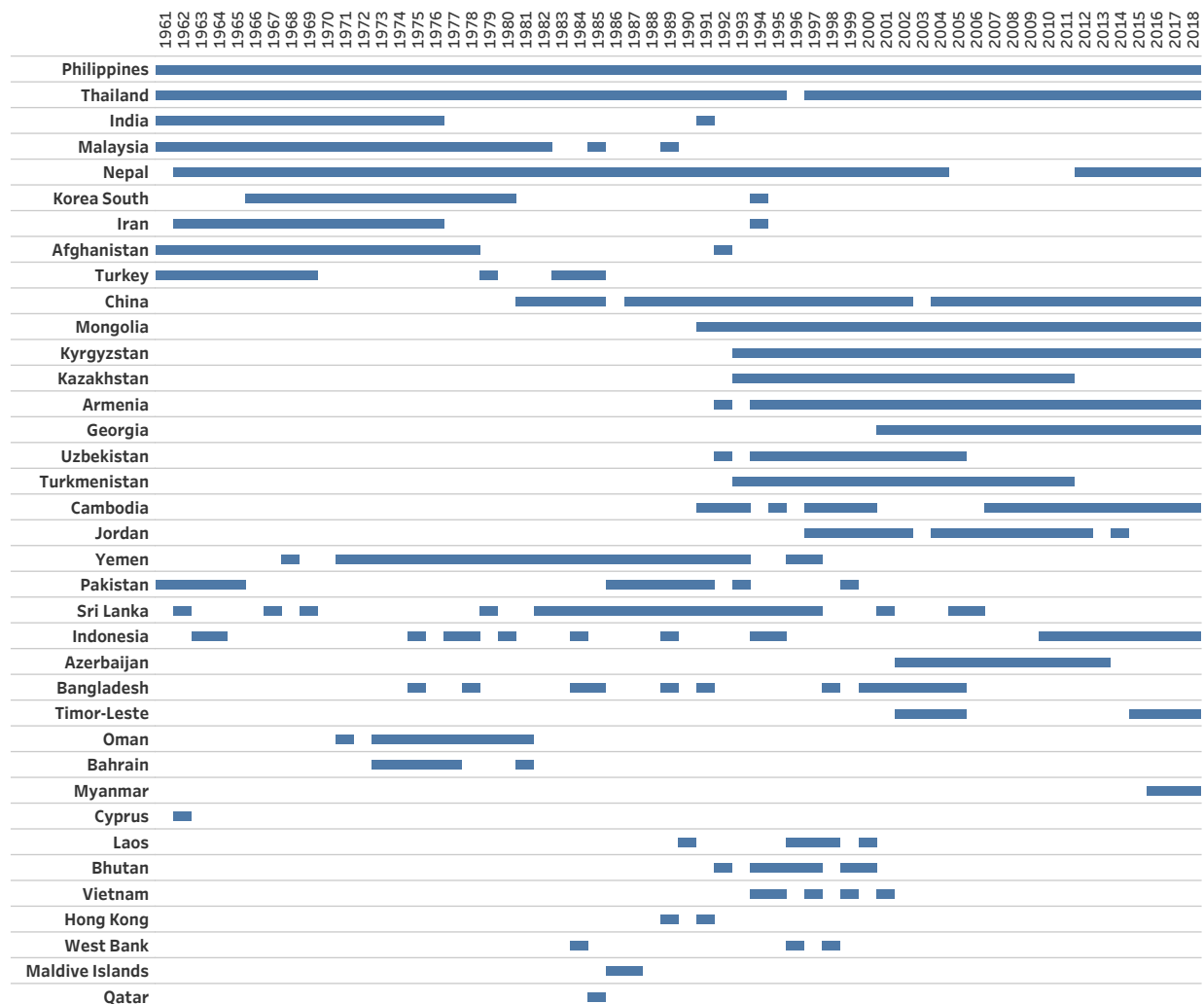


Figure 24: Volunteer Assignment over Time: Asia

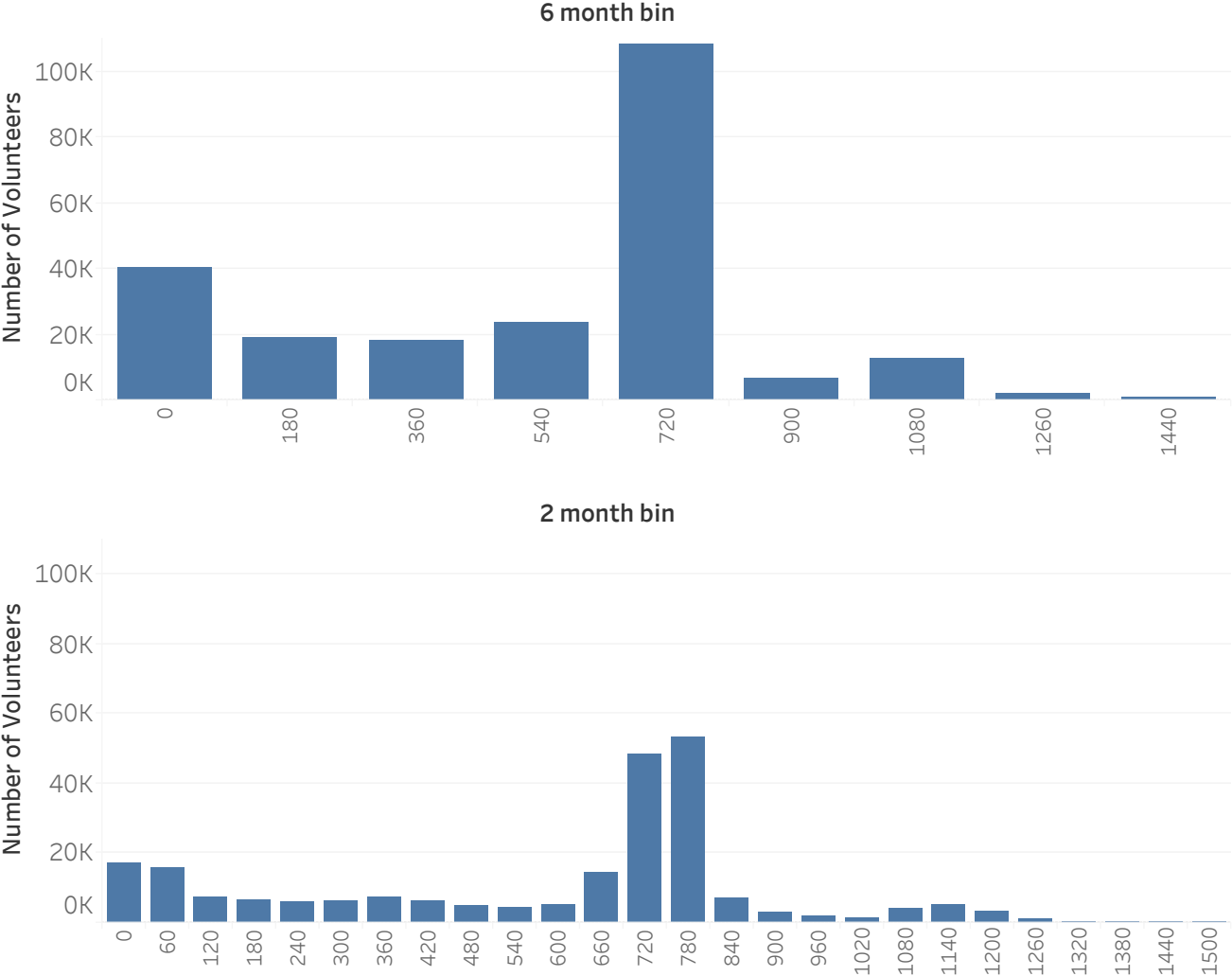


## 6 The Duration of Volunteer Service

### 6.1 Service Duration

Figure 25 illustrates the distribution of volunteers' service duration. The modal category is 720-899 days in the six-month bin graph on the top panel and 780-839 days in the two-month bin graph on the bottom panel. Once volunteers accept offers from the agency, they agree to serve in designated sites for two years: 730 days in addition to mandatory pre-service training in the local language and culture for a couple of months in their host country. Volunteers can end their service before their expected closure if they fail to adapt to life in the host country or if they must attend college or start a new job. The latter case is implied by the large number (14,229) of volunteers who terminated their service several months earlier than planned (see the 660-719 days bin on the bottom panel). Volunteers are sometimes forced to leave their posts early due to concerns about their security and safety due to wars or disease outbreaks. A small number of volunteers chose to extend their service by one year. They also can work in the Peace Corps country office after their service, for instance, coordinating among volunteers and host country national coworkers.

Figure 25: Service Duration





## 6.2 Early Termination of Service

In this section, I explore early termination of service by time and region using service duration data for each volunteer. Unfortunately, because the dataset does not report why the volunteer terminated their service, deeper analysis beyond the actual termination pattern is limited. Figure 26 shows the early termination rate by decade.<sup>10</sup> Throughout this section, I define “early” as either termination within two or six months from the starting date of service in host countries.

The figure shows that the proportion of early terminating volunteers has been decreasing significantly over the past 60 years. During the 1960s, nearly 25% (average at the country level) of volunteers ended their service within six months and 12% within two months. As noted, this requires further investigation, but I suppose that the agency and country offices could not meet the needs of the rapidly increasing number of volunteers placed in their countries due to a lack of staff or resources. As volunteering management experience accumulates over time, the proportion has become as low as 11% for the six-month time period and 4% for the two-month period.

According to Figure 27, one could misleadingly construe that volunteers placed in Europe are most less likely to return to America before their expected date. This is because Eastern Europe began to host American volunteers as late as the 1990s. To control this, I plot post-2000 early termination ratios in Figure 28. The figure demonstrates that there was not a large difference in the proportions between regions. On average, about 5% of the volunteers ended their service before two months, and approximately 13% did so before six months. Europe showed the lowest ratio among regions, perhaps because of its relatively higher living standards than other regions.

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<sup>10</sup>The early termination rate is defined by the ratio of the number of volunteers terminating their service earlier to the total number of volunteers in a host country.

Figure 26: Early Termination of Service by Decade

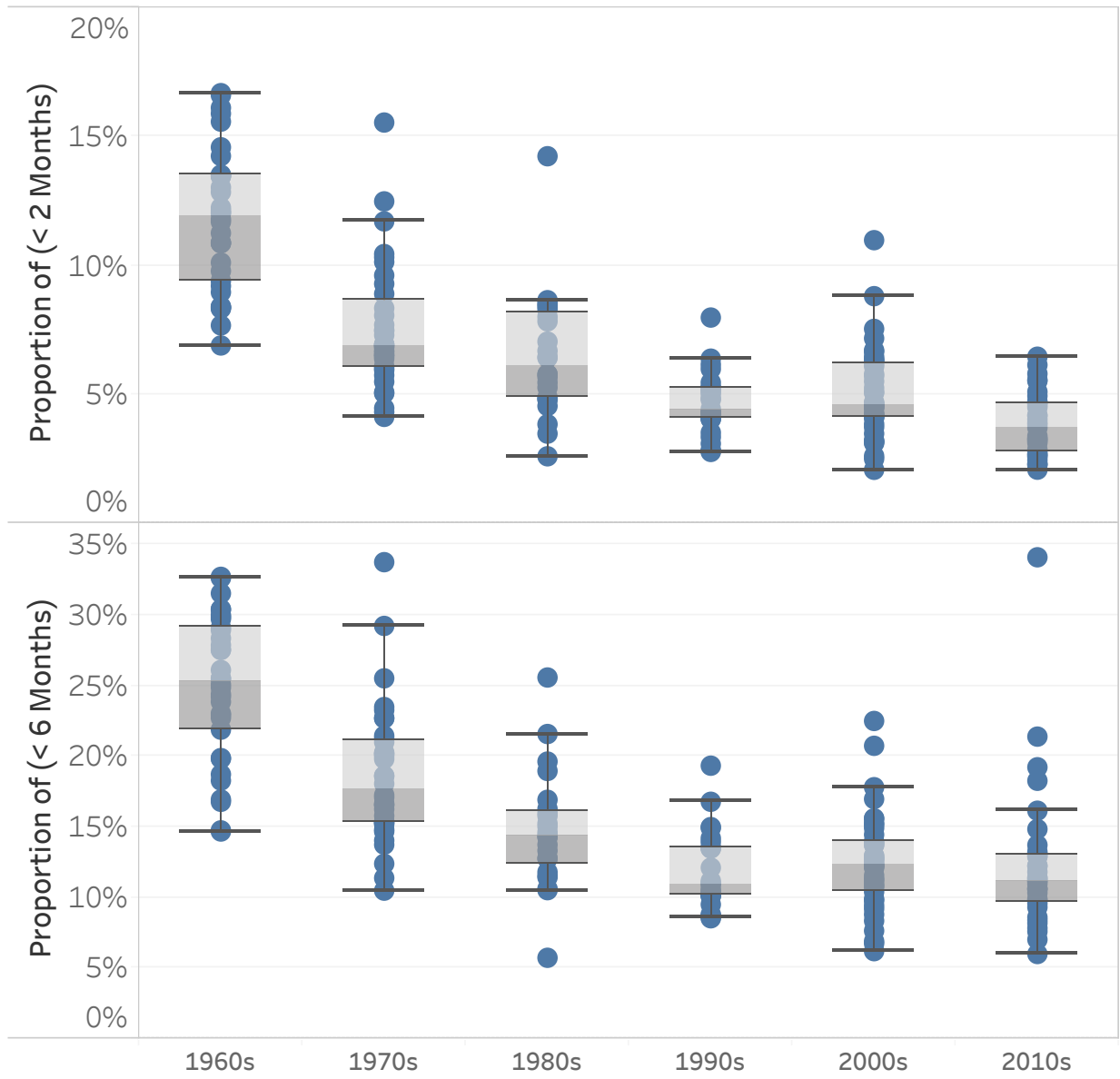


Figure 27: Early Termination of Service by Region

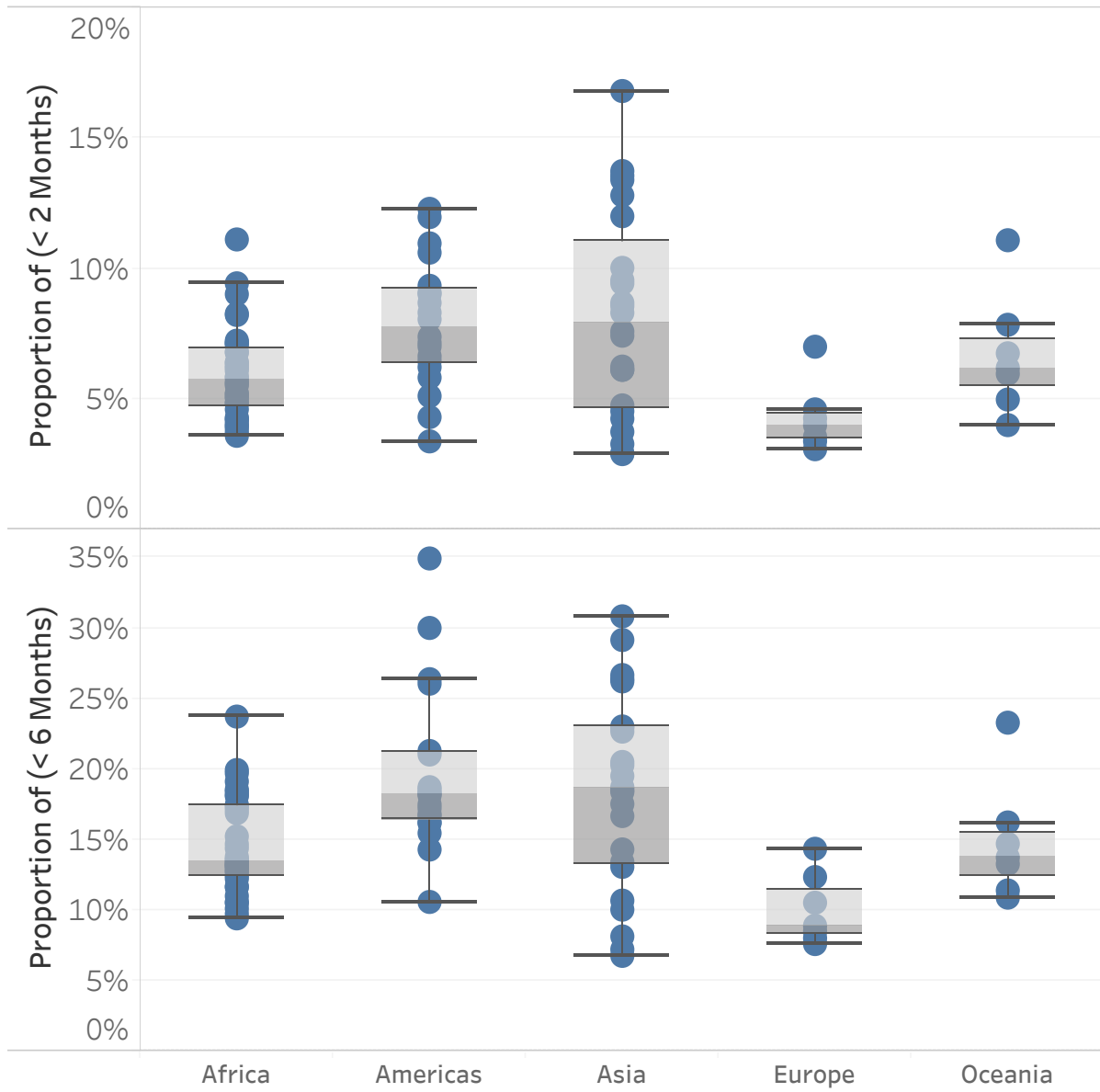
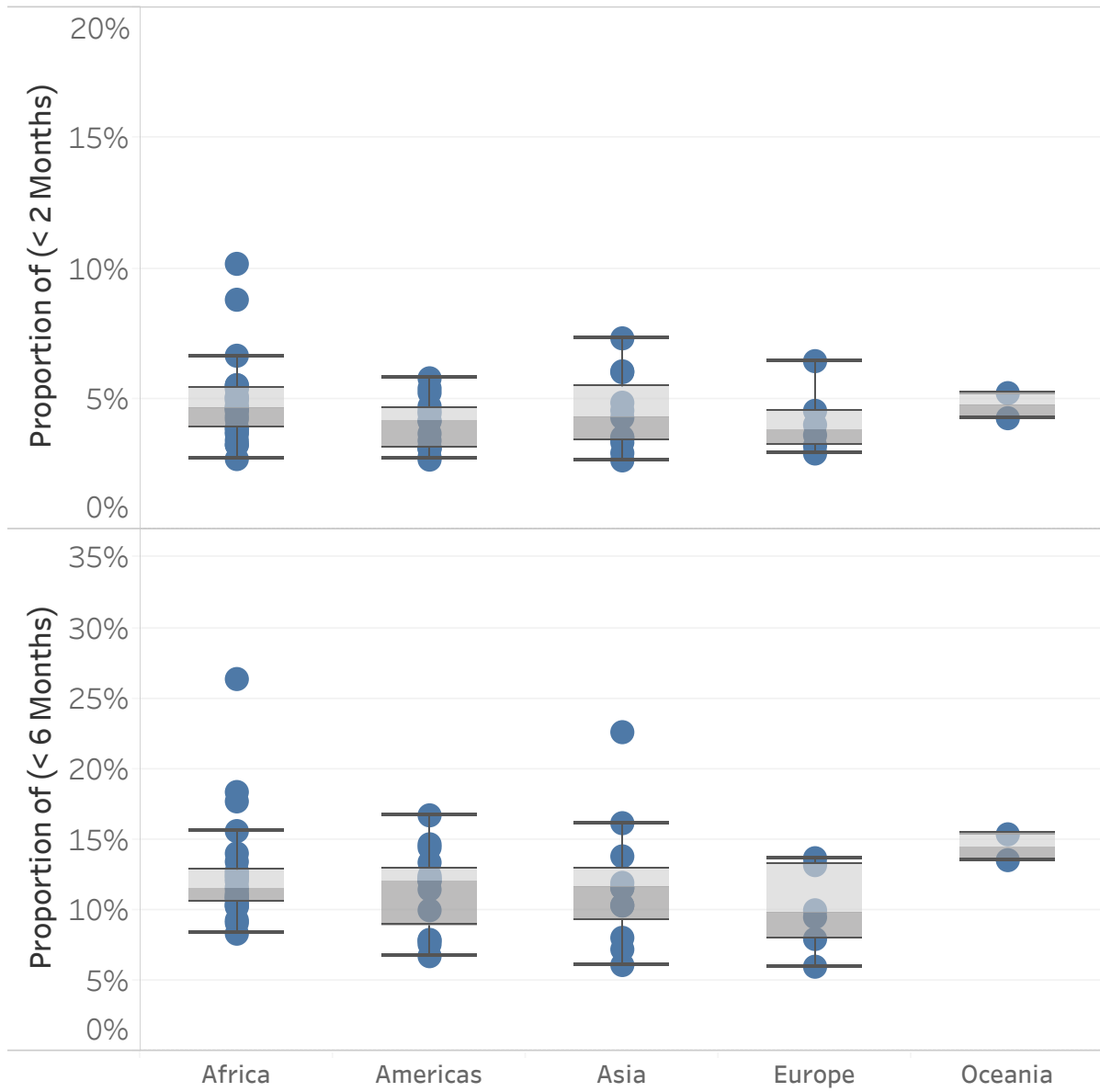


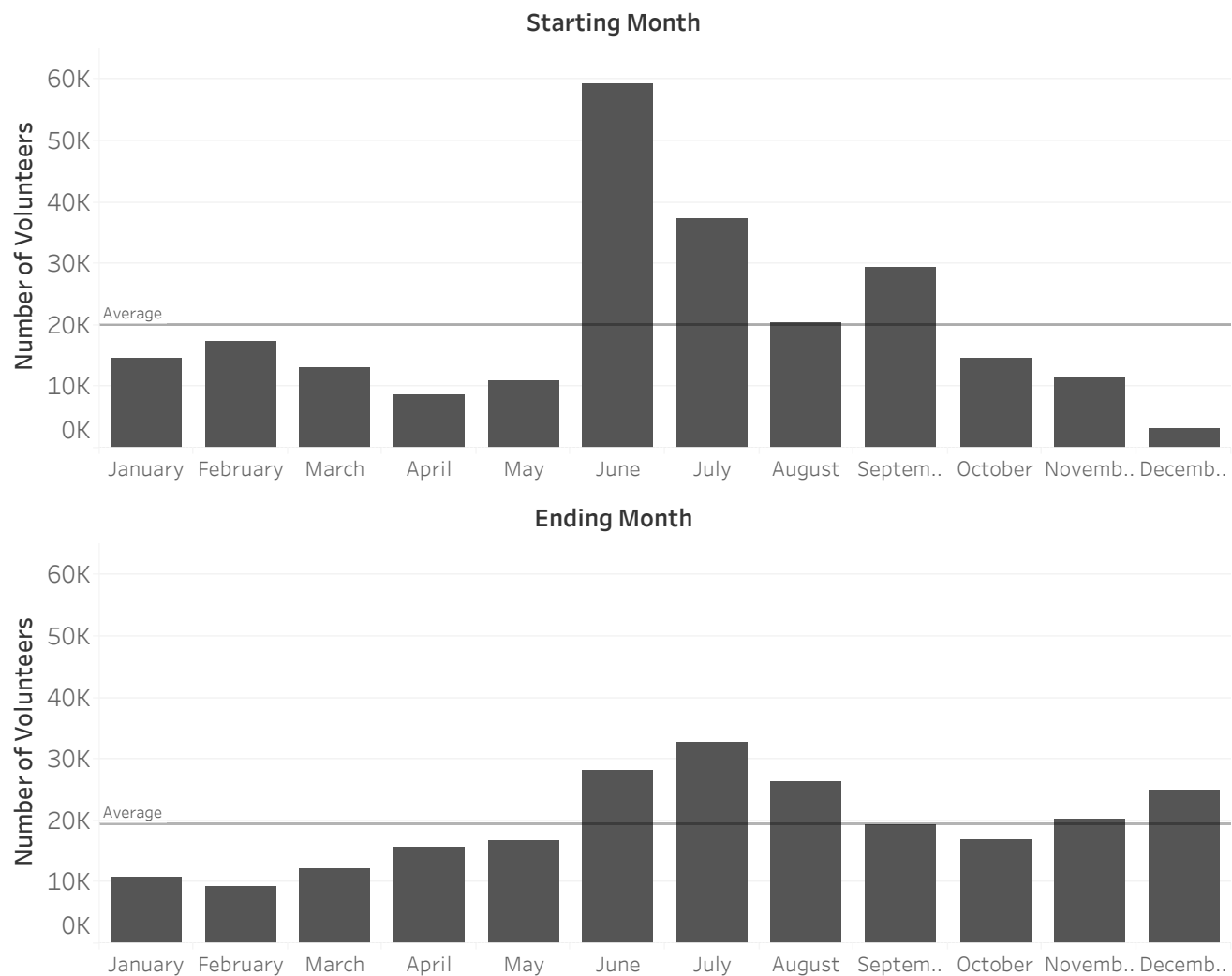
Figure 28: Early Termination of Service by Region post-2000



### **6.3 Timing of Departure and Return**

Figure 29 shows the distribution of volunteers' starting months on the top panel and their ending months on the bottom panel. Because most volunteers were college graduates, they tended to begin their service in June and July after their graduation in May. Unlike the starting month, the ending month is much more evenly distributed among all months while still centered around June, July, and August, when a two-year-long mission starting in June or July would end.

Figure 29: Number of Volunteers by Service-Starting and Ending Month



## 7 Discussion

In this article, I examine the demographics of Peace Corps Volunteers and the geographic patterns of their placement. Further statistical analyses of the determinants of volunteer assignments across countries are required to answer questions including: “Controlling for other variables, such as poverty, is volunteer placement driven by political factors, such as U.S. cooperation?” “Did the Cold War change the way volunteers were assigned?” and “What is the strategic relationship between cultural aid (i.e., the Peace Corps program) and other types of foreign aid?” Finally, I hope this article sheds light on the political aspect of the Peace Corps program and its role in U.S. foreign aid strategy.

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