

# CONTEMPORARY MOTIVATIONS FOR SERVICE IN THE VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES

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## Abstract

In this study we explore the motivations behind joining Volunteer Fire Brigades in the Western Pomeranian Voivodeship (Poland). We address a gap in understanding how individual, social, and cultural factors shape motivations in the context of voluntary emergency services. In the research a qualitative approach was employed, analysing responses from 338 firefighters across six districts. The study reveals a complex interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, influenced by social and technological changes. It highlights the importance of tradition, community engagement and the evolving nature of volunteerism in contemporary society. The findings offer insights for improving recruitment strategies and adapting to the changing landscape of volunteer emergency services, especially considering the needs and expectations of younger generations.

**Keywords:** Volunteer fire brigades, Western Pomeranian Voivodeship, emergency services volunteerism, motivation.

## Introduction

The aim of this study was to determine motivations for serving in a Voluntary Fire Brigade (VFB) on the basis of questionnaire surveys conducted among firefighters of selected VFB units in the area of Western Pomeranian Voivodeship.

The conceptualisation of this study assumed that motivations to serve in the VFB are a complex phenomenon, affected by individual, social and cultural factors. Given the dynamics of social and technological change, the focus was on identifying and analysing the diverse motivations behind the decision to join a VFB. The desirability of this endeavour stems from the need to understand how changing social conditions affect the perception and implementation of the fire service in local communities.

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The study emphasises a diversity of perspectives, including gender, generational and cultural differences, which allows a more comprehensive analysis. The fundamental aim of the study is to identify and understand the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of VFB members, taking into account the role of tradition, upbringing and the impact of social and technological change. The significance of this study is multidimensional. First, it can provide insights into the dynamics of motivation in the context of the voluntary fire service, which has important implications for recruitment strategies and public policies. Second, it can help us to understand how changes in the society affect perceptions of the fire service. Such findings can be used to shape training and development programmes for VFB, as well as to promote and strengthen their role in local communities. Its results can also contribute to a better understanding of how institutions can adapt to the changing needs and expectations of communities, especially the younger generation. Finally, the study is educational if only in that, through the choice of subject matter, it highlights the importance of the role and significance of VFB.

The selection of the research sample was intentional. It took into account the opinion of the Marshal's Office of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship regarding the VFB units that have demonstrated their commitment to local community activities in 2019–2021. 17 VFB units from the districts of Drawsko, Goleniów, Gryfino, Koszalin, Pyrzyce and Świdwin were randomly selected for the study. The research was carried out in the period of February–March 2023.

A total of 338 firefighters took part in the research. Men outnumbered women by 81.1% (274 respondents) to 18.9% (64 respondents). Among the respondents, the largest group was in the age range of 35–47 years (32.2%, representing 109 people). Slightly fewer respondents have been recruited from the 25–35 age group (24.6%, or 83 respondents). The youngest firefighters, that is those under 25 years of age, accounted for 20.7% of the respondents (70 individuals). The age category of 55–65 years accounted for 9.5% of the respondents (32 individuals). The least numerous group of respondents comprised those in the age category of 47–55 years (8.3%, representing 28 respondents) and above 65 years (4.7%, i.e., 16 respondents). The majority of the respondents had secondary education: 55.6% (188 respondents); 25.4% of the respondents (86 firefighters) indicated primary, high school or vocational education; and higher education (including a bachelor's degree): 18.9% (64 respondents). In the surveyed collective, the vast majority were rank holders (70.7% – 239 respondents); 29.3% of the respondents indicated holding a managerial position (99 persons). For the purposes of the study, also taken into account was membership in the Youth Fire Brigade (YFB). More than half of the respondents (53.6%, i.e., 181 people) belonged to a YFB, slightly fewer (45.9%, representing 155 respondents) were not members of YFB.

## Volunteer Fire Brigades

Volunteer fire brigades (VFB) play a key role in the fire protection system of Poland. According to 2022 data, VFB units account for as much as 94% of all firefighting units in the country, which underlines their great importance. In the same year, volunteer firefighters carried out more than 112,000 interventions, accounting for approximately 61% of all firefighting activities in Poland. Funding for VFB comes mainly from municipal budgets and funds raised through donations and membership fees.

According to the Act on voluntary fire brigades, of December 17, 2021, VFB are uniformed fire protection units with specialised equipment intended to fight fires, natural disasters or other local threats, including those carrying out specialised rescue operations. They have the status of associations, and their serving role towards the local community is defined by law. The law indicates 15 activities and tasks of VFB undertaken to protect life, health, property or the environment.

The West Pomeranian Voivodeship is one of those with the relatively smallest number of VFB units. As of June 2022, it has 447 units, representing 2.91% of all units in the country; only the Lubuskie Voivodeship has fewer, i.e. 334 (Lista Ochotniczej Straży Pożarnej, 2023). In comparison, the West Pomeranian Voivodeship has a population of 1,650,021, or 4.35% of the country's total population (Lista Ochotniczej Straży Pożarnej, 2023).

The VFB Act is one of the few containing a preamble stating that the enactment of the Act is recognition of the special civic attitude of voluntary firefighting: 'to God for glory, to people for benefit throughout the history of our statehood, guided by the constitutional right to voluntary association.' It is worth noting how the duties of an VFB rescuer are formally defined; they include, inter alia: obeying orders and instructions of commanders; reporting immediately to the designated place to the ordered alarm; involvement in the execution of the assigned combat task; obtaining the necessary training; upholding the good name of the VFB; and showing camaraderie and understanding towards colleagues. The Act also indicates that a firefighter should be distinguished by the following personal qualities: resilience to stress, composure and calmness in difficult situations; discipline, commitment and a sense of responsibility; the ability of making quick decisions; determination and consistency in carrying out the assigned task; camaraderie and personal culture (gov.pl).

The essence of VFB is their rootedness and ability to persist despite political, historical or social turbulence. It is worth noting the historically formed networks of mutual cooperation that bind together the local structures of various rural organisations, in particular OSPs and Rural Housewives' Circles. The building of a voluntary fire station has the power to focus on various forms of social and cultural activity; manifestations of this are the Fireman's Clubs, which are established at VFB fire stations (Obracht-Prondzyński, 2007, p. 49). Volunteer firefighters are individuals who are highly respected in the local community

(Marcysiak, 2021, p. 120), mainly due to their widely perceived effectiveness and sacrifice (Torczyńska, 2014, p. 54). 'Belonging to a fire brigade is a distinction and a social obligation; to become a firefighter means to be recognised as a full member of the community; it is like being knighted in the past' (Tabasz, 2002, p. 50).

The tradition of VFBs lies not only in family legacy but also in the generally established firefighter ethos in the local environment. The key elements of the firefighter ethos are selfless help to others, solidarity, a spirit of joint action, cementing friendships and building a sense of responsibility and safety during actions. As P. Matusak pointed out, the basis for this lies in the slogans 'One for all, all for one' and 'In unity, strength' (Walczak, 2007). The most important values in VFBs are effectiveness, trust, honesty, solidarity and concern for the common good (Herbst, 2008). For centuries, firefighting has been based on egalitarianism – the joint action of people from different backgrounds and classes, a willingness to help, and a manly and often rough friendship (Gąsiorczyk, 2018, p. 313). VFBs function within the paradigm of the functioning of associations from the so-called old civil society, which are based on a long history, community ethos and specific personal models (Gawin, 2004, p. 320). The development of VFBs took place based on ideas of community and self-help, which constituted a revival of localism and a model of positive action (Skoczek, 2017, p. 297). Rural organisations such as VFBs base their activities primarily on community work and volunteerism to a significantly higher degree than urban organisations (Hałamska, 2008, p. 86). In the 1990s, VFB members were men who were then often permanently unemployed or migrating on a shuttle basis for casual work, and the fire brigade was a source of identity and socio-existential stability for them (Rakowski, 2016).

It is worth noting new challenges faced by VFBs. For decades, the structures were filled by members for whom it was, as mentioned, either a family tradition or a value of the firefighter ethos and a desire to help other people. However, many volunteers used to work in agriculture, and their availability for firefighting was almost unlimited (Marcysiak, 2021, pp. 120–121). The gainful employment outside agriculture and the increase in educational aspirations associated with education outside the village narrowed the group of potential volunteers (Charycka & Gumkowska, 2021, p. 58). Along with the aforementioned characteristic sociodemographic processes taking place in rural areas in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the challenge to VFBs and their former functions and values is the contemporary emphasis on professionalisation (Marcysiak, 2021, p. 124).

## **Motivations and Ethos**

Every action a person takes stems from motivations. In general, these can be defined as internal forces that trigger and direct a person's behaviour to achieve a chosen goal. Concurrently, this goal represents a specific value for the individual. In literature, many ways of defining motivation may be found, which are the

subject of research interests in sciences dealing with the interpretation of human behaviour. The difficulty of defining motivation can be conveyed by the words:

It is a matter of a man willingly doing what he must do, so that what he must do he does not do just because he must, so that in doing what he must do he finds a liking and thus improves his work many times over, showing generosity in giving himself to it. (Kotarbinski, 1975, p. 273)

Motivation, as a human action, is not a single act but a process going on inside the individual. Theories of motivation can be used to explain the mechanisms of motivation. Of the many, it is worth mentioning content theories, which, in an attempt to explain an individual's motivations for action, assume that the substrate of human activity lies in needs. This group includes, most famously, the A. Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory. According to him, the fulfilment of higher-order needs can only occur after the fulfilment of lower-order needs. The system of needs defined by A. Maslow results from the development of human personality (2023, p. 51). McClelland's theory, in contrast, identifies three main needs that motivate humans to act: the need for power expressed in the desire to influence others and the desire to control one's environment (Robbins, 2004, p. 101). Nowadays, this need is related to the desire to have a high status as a member of a given group; the need for affiliation (expressed in the need for social contact and approval of the others, the need to be liked); and the need for achievement (expressed in the desire to be successful).

There is a conviction that needs are the basis of motivation to act. The desire to accomplish something that stands for a generally acknowledged value in turn causes that, to satisfy needs and desires, the individual sets goals for themselves and also makes a choice of paths leading to their achievement.

The motives of human actions are to a large extent determined socially (Mika, 1984, p. 81). This mechanism works particularly in local communities. This is due to the very specificity of the community, in which one can distinguish the spatial aspect (geographical territory), the social aspect (interactions and dependencies between inhabitants), and the psychological aspect (common links and identification of inhabitants) (Starosta, 1995, p. 31).

Attention should also be paid to the role and importance of the social bond as one of the constitutive elements of any social group. In general, it can be said that a social bond is the glue that connects an individual to a group – the collective and the resulting relationships, relations and dependencies. Consequently, the social bond of rural local communities appears to be an important cornerstone of their functioning. Shared concerns, goals and the means to achieve them stemming from living in a common spatially limited area become the ground for direct, personal relations. In addition, a specific social relationship – the so-called neighbourhood – develops between the residents. Its essence is the awareness of a sense of community, which translates into the behaviour of the individual towards the local community. The sense of community may be a source of certain behaviours felt as an obligation towards the community (an intrinsic motivation stemming, for

example, from moral norms). It should be mentioned at this point that certain patterns of social behaviour result, in addition to cultural conditions, from an emotional connection to the place of residence. In local communities, there are relatively strong ties to the place where they live. The feeling of group togetherness, usefulness to the local group, and a sense of belonging to it (identification with the group) seem to be the key driving forces behind an individual's behaviour towards the group. In this sense, they may also be recognised by them as a kind of obligation.

A resource that influences a person's ability to act is social capital, implicit in interpersonal relations. The basis for its formation in local communities is, first of all, the need for a network of social ties that enable the interests of the community to be defined and organisations and associations to be formed bottom-up. Secondly, the activity of inhabitants is based on an individual sense of subjectivity (a sense of influence on the surrounding reality), which is externalised in actions for the common good (Dąbrowska, 2009, p. 393). And so, for example, according to Putnam's definition, social capital is based on trust, norms and connections through which the efficiency of social action can increase (1995, p. 258). He distinguished two sources of trust: norms of reciprocity instilled through socialisation and reinforced through imitation and networks of civic engagement, the essence of which is information exchange. The effectiveness of cooperation between people, or the success of joint action, depends on the density of these networks. Furthermore, Putnam pointed to the complementary nature of contacts and trust, which jointly ensure the optimal use of resources. Elsewhere, P. Sztompka's explanation of social capital includes 'bonds of trust, loyalty and solidarity, finding expression in self-organisation and self-governance, mainly within voluntary associations' (2002). Meanwhile, A. Giza-Poleszczuk et al. used the term social resources, which includes social bonds, the network of ties between individuals, their mutual trust and readiness to cooperate, and the presence of authorities capable of mobilising human activity (2002). In conclusion, social capital is a resource that brings concrete benefits to individuals and to local communities. It is a feature of local communities, and its main indicator 'is considered to be data on membership in various types of voluntary associations' (Zarycki, 2004, p. 35).

In one interesting study on the motivation for membership of formal organisations in rural and small-town settings, Starosta (1995, pp. 182, 184) identified two main groups of motives: 1) egocentric and intrinsic motives (the source and purpose of action focus on the individual) and 2) egocentric and extrinsic ones (the latter see the sources of action pointing to a certain social system, external to the individual, with the goal oriented towards the acting subject). In the first category of motivations, two subcategories can be distinguished: motivations of material benefits and motivations of personal satisfaction (e.g., motivations to achieve a certain social position, prestige, recognition, self-improvement and knowledge). Conversely, egocentric and extrinsic motivations include the motive of belonging to a group (social participation) and the motive of exercising power.

In addition to motivation, patterns of social behaviour are also associated with social action. They are manifested in socially recognised and acquired values (through socialisation, tradition and generational legacy) and moral norms and rules (customs and habits). Rooted values fulfilled in the space of social life, being at the same time an imperative for the members of a given community, form a kind of ethos. It is, as M. Ossowska defined, 'a style of life of a community, in general (...) an orientation of a culture, a hierarchy of values adopted by it, either formulated explicitly or decipherable from human behaviour' (1973, p. 7). Ethos has been created over generations, and its constitutive feature is its group character. For centuries, the concept of ethos has been embedded in the space of moral values, attitudes and beliefs in the fire service. A firefighter's ethos is defined by actions based on strong motivations and deep convictions. It is manifested by: courage, bravery, selflessness, honesty, fortitude, dedication to others, truthfulness, competence, courage, sense of social mission, altruism, empathy, sense of responsibility, expertise, and willingness to share it with others. Importantly, ethos involves more than adopting a particular attitude. Also important is a sense of community, which is reflected in the interactions and relationships of volunteer firefighters.

## Survey Results

The respondents were asked to indicate factors that prompted them to become members of the VFB. It was possible to provide more than one answer. In general, the factor most frequently indicated by respondents was the desire to do something extraordinary in life (58.57% of respondents) and to fulfil one's own dreams (56.8% of respondents). For 38.16% of the respondents, family tradition and previous participation in YFB activities (I was a member of YFB; 36.68% of respondents) were important for a decision to join an VFB. One in three survey participants indicated social recognition (30.47%). The least frequent answers indicated by the surveyed firefighters were: the desire to stand out in the social environment (12.72% of respondents) and persuasion on the part of friends (10.05% of respondents). A negligible proportion of the respondents pointed to chance (2.36%) and the only opportunity of earning extra money (0.29%) as factors that induced them to become firefighters.

Comparing the results of analysis review of answers obtained with regards to the gender of the respondents, it can be stated that the most frequently chosen motivations, both for the female and male respondents, comprised the desire to do something extraordinary in life and the fulfilment of one's own dreams. The former was chosen by 60.94% of female respondents, and the latter by 51.56%. In contrast, 58.03% of men chose the first motivation and 58.03% the second one. Differences were found in the choice of further motivations. For men, family tradition (39.42% of respondents) ranks second; for women, it is 32.81% and occupies the fourth

**Table 1.** Factors Driving People to Become Members of an VFB

	fulfilment of one's dreams;	social recognition	the only way to get extra money;	desire to do something extraordinary in life	family tradition;	Encouragement from friends	to stand out in a social environment	coincidence	I was a member of YFB
<b>all</b>	<b>56.8%</b>	<b>30.47%</b>	<b>0.29%</b>	<b>58.57%</b>	<b>38.16%</b>	<b>10.05%</b>	<b>12.72%</b>	<b>2.36%</b>	<b>36.68%</b>
<b>Gender</b>									
woman	51.56%	18.75%	0.00%	60.94%	32.81%	10.94%	9.38%	1.56%	39.06%
man	58.03%	33.21%	0.36%	58.03%	39.42%	9.85%	13.50%	2.55%	36.13%
<b>Position in service</b>									
private	54.81%	32.64%	0.41%	58.58%	36.82%	11.71%	13.39%	2.51%	35.98%
head	61.59%	25,24%	0.00%	58.56%	41.39%	6.05%	11.10%	2.01%	38.37%
<b>Level of education</b>									
basic	57.07%	25.62%	0.00%	59.4%	36.1%	8.15%	12.81%	1.16%	33.7%
secondary	59.06%	30.86%	0.53%	61.72%	41.50%	9.04%	13.30%	2.66%	37.24%
higher	50.09%	36.00%	0.00%	48.52%	31.30%	15.65%	10.95%	3.13%	39.13%
<b>Age</b>									
-25	72.89%	22.68%	0.00%	62.85%	22.85%	11.43%	10.00%	1.42%	51.45%
25-35	50.51%	33.67%	1.2%	58.9%	43.29%	8.41%	13.22%	3.6%	48.10%
35-47	52.36%	30.32%	0.00%	60.62%	40.40%	10.10%	15.61%	1.83%	26.64%
47+	55.22%	34.18%	0.00%	51.28%	43.39%	10.51%	10.51%	2.62%	24.98%
<b>Previous membership of YFB</b>									
YFB	60.76%	28.16%	0.00%	53.57%	39.21%	9.37%	13.80%	2.20%	65.73%
No YFB	51.60%	34.46%	0.63%	64.51%	37.40%	10.31%	10.94%	2.57%	3.20%

position. The fact of having been a member of the YFB was indicated similarly by both men and women (39.06% vs. 36.13%, respectively). Social recognition was more important for men than for women (33.21% vs. 18.75%, respectively). This was followed, in the case of men, by the following motivations: the desire to stand out in the social environment (13.5% of respondents) and persuasion from friends (9.85% of respondents). Among female respondents, the indications for these motivations were, respectively, 9.38% and 10.94%, indicating that for women, the persuasion of friends was a more important factor than the desire to stand out in the social environment. The least frequently indications given by respondents were for two motivations: chance and the only opportunity to get extra money (for men,

respectively: 2.55% of respondents and 0.36% of respondents; for women, 1.56%, and no woman selected the second motivation discussed).

The distribution of the relationship between the chosen motivations and the position in the VFB occupied by the respondents at the time of the survey showed that firefighters holding a managerial function most often indicated the fulfilment of their own dreams (61.59% of respondents) and the desire to do something extraordinary in life (58.56% of respondents). In the case of firefighters holding a ranked position, there was the reverse order of choice compared to their predecessors: the most frequently selected answer was the desire to do something extraordinary in life (58.58% of respondents) and the fulfilment of one's dreams (54.81% of respondents). Respondents holding a managerial position were more likely to indicate family tradition (41.39%) than respondents in a ranked position (36.72%). A similar trend was recorded for membership in YFB, as indicated by 38.37% of managers, whereas firefighters in a ranked position indicated 35.98%. The motivation for social recognition was more important for respondents in a ranked position (32.64% of respondents) than for managers (25.24%). The declaration of a desire to stand out in the social environment fared similarly: among rank firefighters, 13.39% indicated as such, and among managers, 11.10%. A similar situation occurred in the next motivation: persuasion of friends (11.71% of indications among respondents holding a ranked position) and 6.05% of indications among managers. Coincidence was indicated by 2.51% of rank firefighters and 2.01% of managers. The opportunity to earn extra money appeared only among rank firefighters (0.41% of respondents).

Taking into account the educational level of the respondents, it can be concluded that the most frequently selected category was the desire to do something extraordinary in life, which was indicated by 61.72% of respondents declaring secondary education. This motivation was also most frequently indicated by respondents with primary education (59.4%). As regards those with tertiary education, this motivation was indicated by 48.52%. That said, they most frequently indicated the fulfilment of their dreams (50.09% of respondents). Family tradition as a factor inducing people to join the ranks of VFB was indicated by most people with secondary education (41.50% of respondents), followed by primary education (36.1%) and higher education (31.30% of respondents). Conversely, participation in an YFB was chosen by the most respondents with a higher education (39.13%), slightly fewer by those with a secondary education (37.24%), and the least with a primary education (33.7%). A similar trend occurred in social recognition (this motivation was indicated by 36.0% of respondents with tertiary education, 30.86% with secondary education, and 25.62% with primary education) and in the category of persuasion on the part of friends (15.65% of respondents with tertiary education, 9.04% with secondary education and 8.15% of respondents with primary education). However, as regards the motivation of wanting to stand out in the social environment, the most indications were obtained in the group of

people with secondary education (13.30% of respondents), followed by primary education (12.81% of people) and higher education (10.95% of respondents).

Taking into account the age categories of the respondents, it can be concluded that the greatest number of indications by respondents concerned two motivations. The first one of these was the pursuit of one's dreams (in all age categories, this received more than 50% of indications, the highest one among firefighters under 25 years of age (72.89%), the lowest from among those over 47 years of age [52.22%]), and the second was the desire to do something extraordinary in life, which received the highest number of indications again from firefighters under 25 years of age (62.85%) and the lowest from those up to 47 years of age (51.28%). In contrast, the motivation of family tradition was selected least frequently by respondents under 25 years of age (22.85%) and most frequently by firefighters in the age bracket of over 47 (43.39%) and in the 25–35 years age group (43.29%). Membership of a YFB was indicated by more than half of the respondents (51.45% of people) from the age bracket up to 25 years and by almost half of the respondents (48.10% of people) from the age bracket 25–35 years. In the subsequent groups, far fewer indications were recorded (for those aged 35–47 years, 26.64%; for those over 47 years, 24.98%). Social recognition was most often indicated by those over 47 years of age (34.18%) and least often by young firefighters under 25 years of age (22.68%). Persons under 25 years of age (11.43%) most often indicated the persuasion of friends as another factor inducing them to become a VFB firefighter, whereas respondents from the 25–35 age group (8.41%) were least likely to do so. Respondents in the two extreme age categories, that is, under 25 and over 47, gave the least indications of wanting to stand out in the social environment (10.00% and 10.51%, respectively). This motivation was most often indicated by respondents in the 35–47 age group (15.61%) and the 25–35 age group (13.22%). The case motivation was chosen by a negligible number of respondents, with 3.6% of those in the 25–35 age group; 2.62% of respondents over 47; 35–47, 1.83%; under 25, 1.42%. Only 1.2% of respondents in the 25–35 age group chose the motivation: the only opportunity to earn extra money.

Among the respondents, 65.73% confirmed their membership of the YFB. In this group, respondents most often indicated pursuing their dreams (60.76% of people) and wanting to do something extraordinary in life (53.57%). In contrast, those who were not members of the YFB most often declared a desire to do something unusual in life (64.51%) and to fulfil their dreams (51.60%). Family tradition was slightly more frequently indicated among respondents who had previously been members of YFB (39.21%) than among those who had not participated in YFB activities (37.40%). A similar situation emerged for choosing the motivational desire to stand out in the social environment (13.8% of respondents who were members of YFB and 10.94% of respondents who did not participate in YFB). In contrast, those who were not YFB members were more likely to indicate social recognition (34.46% of respondents) than those who were (28.16%). A similar trend occurred in the motivation for persuasion from friends (10.31% of those

**Table 2.** Criteria for Choosing a VFB Unit

	possibility to gain additional qualifications useful for professional work	possibility to work in a unit that is part of National Rescue and Firefighting System	no VFB in the town where I live	opinion of friends/ neighbours about a given VFB unit	my personal contacts with firefighters from the unit
<b>all</b>	<b>31.36%</b>	<b>42.31%</b>	<b>6.51%</b>	<b>12.72%</b>	<b>67.16%</b>
<b>Gender</b>					
woman	32.81%	45.31%	6.25%	10.94%	76.56%
man	31.02%	41.61%	6.57%	13.14%	64.96%
<b>Position in service</b>					
private	33.89%	39.75%	8.79%	12.97%	65.69%
head	25.25%	48.48%	1.01%	12.12%	70.71%
<b>Level of education</b>					
basic	27.91%	34.88%	6.98%	10.47%	74.42%
secondary	30.85%	42.02%	6.38%	13.83%	65.43%
higher	37.50%	53.13%	6.25%	12.50%	62.50%
<b>Age</b>					
-25	30.00%	28.57%	10.00%	10.00%	60.00%
25-35	30.12%	39.76%	7.23%	10.84%	66.27%
35-47	34.86%	46.79%	2.75%	13.76%	68.81%
47+	28.95%	51.32%	7.89%	15.79%	72.37%
<b>Previous membership of YFB</b>					
YFB	35.98%	47.56%	4.27%	13.41%	71.95%
No YFB	28.05%	39.02%	9.15%	12.80%	65.85%

who were not YFB members and 9.37% of those who were). Coincidence was indicated by only 2.57% of the respondents from the group of non-YFB members and 2.20% of those who were YFB members. The only opportunity to earn extra money as a motivation was chosen by 0.63% of the non-MCP respondents.

The respondents were asked what criteria influenced their choice of the VFB unit of which they are members. Multiple answers were allowed. The most common answer indicated by 67.16% of respondents was: my personal contacts with firefighters from the unit of which I am currently a member. Moderately frequent answers were: the possibility of gaining additional qualifications useful for professional work (42.31%); activity in a unit that belongs to the National Rescue and Firefighting System (31.36%). The least frequent answer was the opinion of

friends or neighbours about a given unit (12.72%) and the lack of an VFB in the town where I live (6.51%).

Analysing the aforementioned responses with regard to age groups, it can be seen that the indications of 'my personal contacts with firefighters from the unit of which I am currently a member' and 'acting in a unit that belongs to the National Rescue and Firefighting System' were the most differentiated between the groups. In both of these categories, firefighters aged over 55 indicated this motivation more often than the youngest respondents (under 25). Acting in a unit belonging to the National Rescue and Firefighting System was indicated by 51.32% of respondents over the age of 47, whereas only 28.57% of respondents under the age of 25 did so. Personal contacts with firefighters of the unit were referred to by 72.37% of respondents in the 47+ group, whereas only 60% of the under-25 group did so. This may be partly due to the fact that the various age groups differed in the number of responses indicated, with an average of 1.39 responses indicated for respondents under 25 and as many as 1.76 in the 47+ group. Consequently, only the response referring to the lack of an VFB in the locality of residence was indicated in the youngest group more often than in the 47+ group. Gender was also a factor differentiating firefighters' responses, mainly in terms of the percentage indicating 'my personal contacts with firefighters from the unit of which I am currently a member', with women giving this response 11.6% more often.

There were noticeable differences between firefighters in leadership roles and rank-and-file VFB members. Managers more often referred to the criterion of a unit belonging to the National Rescue and Firefighting System (48.48% against 39.75%), whereas rank-and-file firefighters referred to the possibility of gaining additional qualifications (33.89% against 25.25%). The situation was similar with regards to education. Firefighters with higher education were more likely to indicate the possibility of gaining additional qualifications useful for their career and acting in a unit that belongs to the National Rescue and Firefighting System (37.50% and 53.13%, respectively, against 27.91% and 34.88% for firefighters with basic education). Meanwhile, the latter group was more likely to refer to personal contacts with firefighters (74.42% against 62.50% for firefighters with higher education). In the case of earlier YFB membership, firefighters who had previously been members indicated more criteria for choosing a unit. Only the answer 'no VFB in the locality where I live' was indicated more often by firefighters with no YFB experience, which seems a natural consequence: because there is no VFB unit in the locality, there is also no YFB.

## **Conclusions and Discussion**

The survey highlights the significant role of VFBs in the fire protection system in Poland, which is consistent with their historical importance and active role in local communities. The survey results indicate a predominance of men in VFBs, reflec-

ting traditional demographic structures in such organisations. The survey results also indicate some differences in motivations between genders and between different age groups, which may influence recruitment and training policies in VFBs.

When defining the factors that led them to join VFBs, respondents indicated by far the most frequently the desire to do something extraordinary in life and to fulfil their dreams. The results of the study can be interpreted in this way, adopting the categories from Starosta's work: nowadays, service in VFBs is mainly driven by egocentric and intrinsic motives, which focus the source and purpose of action on the individual in the form of motivation for personal satisfaction. Conversely, pointing to the 'unusual' and referring to the 'dream' draws a concrete and, at the same time, common and established image of serving as a firefighter in a rural environment, confirming the metaphor of W. Tabasz quoted earlier, who compared joining the ranks of the fire brigade to knighting. The way in which an VFB unit is chosen, most often referring to personal acquaintance with existing members, shows a typical mechanism for local communities, where there is a strong sense of group community and a sense of belonging. VFB units owe their existence to a network of social relationships that, in rural areas, complement and reinforce each other. Personal ties facilitate the solidarity and unity so fundamental to the effectiveness of the voluntary fire service. Membership in a VFB allows different types of expectations to be fulfilled, whether in terms of affiliation or achievement, but also in some cases of power (particularly for those in leadership roles).

It is important to recognise that VFB membership is not only a new dimension of existing social networks but also a tradition rooted in the collective and individual past. In total, more than half of the respondents indicated that VFB membership was for them a continuation of family tradition or that they had previously been members of an YFB, that is, that the ethos of a volunteer firefighter had been shaped in them from childhood or adolescence. Furthermore, it is within this local community that the particular image of the volunteer firefighter, whose extraordinary service is the object of dreams, must have been created and perpetuated.

The preceding research confirms and builds on earlier observations on the ethos and motivation of VFB members. Further research in this area could address the issue of changes in the VFB ethos in the local community related to social and technological changes. A generation of people is coming of age for potential VFB service, referred to as Generation Z, that is, people born after 2000 who do not know a world without the internet, preferring to interact on social media and instant messaging rather than in the real world. These are further challenges to the position and ethos of VFBs in local communities, which, together with other trends (migration and the birth crisis, which may result in depopulation of the countryside), may undermine the foundations of volunteer firefighting units. Perhaps a good space for research is to enter into a dialogue with the female and male members of the VFBs. Getting to know their world of values, needs and expectations could help find answers to the question of what to do to make this

younger generation want to continue serving as firefighters within VFBs, despite the dynamically changing world. The study could also be an element in a discussion on social capital and its role in local communities, especially in the context of voluntary services. Analysing the motivations of VFB members, taking into account both individual and social aspects, highlights the importance of personal relationships and social networks in recruitment and retention of involvement.

The aforementioned findings may be of relevance to policymakers, offering insights into how VFBs can be better integrated and supported within the wider fire protection and emergency management system.

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