

Navigating change and charting a new course: volunteering in recent times

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Acknowledgement of Country

Volunteering Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea, and community. We pay our respect to Elders past and present. We strive to raise awareness of the many forms that volunteering can take which includes recognising and uplifting First Nations' practices of community giving.

Navigating change and charting a new course: volunteering in recent times

Introduction

This report tells the story of how volunteering is changing in the face of challenges and opportunities. It is a story of resilience, innovation, and adaptation.

Drawing on the most recent national data, the report sets out new analysis revealing the diversity of who volunteers and how, and how this has changed in recent times. It highlights the enduring contribution that volunteering makes to the nation's wellbeing.

Looking ahead, volunteering is charting a new course. Through the implementation of the National Strategy for Volunteering and other key strategic initiatives, the volunteering ecosystem is working towards a shared vision. With a supporting and thriving ecosystem, we can create a better future by empowering everyone to contribute to the common good.



The volunteering data landscape

This factsheet focuses on national data. Increasingly, state and territory Volunteering Peak Bodies are producing their own 'State of Volunteering' surveys and reports which are a rich source of information within each jurisdiction. These and other reports can be found via the state and territory Volunteering Peak Bodies. National data may not adequately represent some segments of the population. Data on key topics is currently limited, such as volunteering in First Nations communities.

There are many sources of data on volunteering in Australia. These employ a wide variety of methodological approaches to produce evidence on volunteering. As a result, it is not always possible to make direct comparisons across datasets. However, available datasets have different strengths and can be used to produce a range of important insights on volunteering when brought together. This report uses data from a variety of sources to paint a picture of the current landscape, highlight the experiences of volunteers and the role of volunteering in their broader lives, explore how volunteering has changed over time, and consider how volunteering might change in the future. Data on volunteering is vital to building our understanding of volunteering and informing effective policy and practice.



Volunteering today

Scale

Despite fluctuations in participation rates, volunteering remains a powerful form of community participation in Australia. According to the Volunteering in Australia 2022 research, a significant 56.0 per cent of Australians engage in formal or informal volunteering. In April 2022 about a quarter (26.7 per cent) of people in Australia had volunteered formally in the previous 12 months and just under half (46.5 per cent) had volunteered informally in the previous four weeks.

Variety

Over the years, volunteering has taken on various forms, from formal roles within organisations to informal participation in the community. People volunteer for a wide variety of organisations, from sport and recreation (25.0 per cent) to environment (7.0 per cent) and animal welfare (5.3 per cent).¹

Within these organisations, volunteers undertake a range of different roles. Administration and management (22.8 per cent of volunteers), board and committee work (18.5 per cent), fundraising, sales, and events (24.6 per cent), arts and performance (9.3 per cent), companionship and social support (14.4 per cent), and emergency response and relief (11.7 per cent) are just a few examples of the diverse activities undertaken by volunteers, showcasing the breadth of their impact.² In addition to these roles, many people volunteer informally in the community.

Who volunteers

Volunteers are a highly diverse group. While formal volunteering is not always accessible, a wide range of opportunities exist.

Women, people aged 55 years and older, those born in Australia or born in another English-speaking country, those with a higher level

¹ <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf>

² *ibid*

of education, those living outside of a capital city, and those in paid employment are more likely to volunteer formally, while women and older people are more likely to volunteer informally.³ Further, while less likely to volunteer formally, those born overseas in a non-English speaking country are more likely to volunteer informally than those born in Australia. Available data shows no differences in rates of volunteering by the socioeconomic characteristics of the area in which a person lives, or between people with disability and people without disability.

Rates of volunteering, and the type of volunteering people undertake, also change as people age. Formal volunteering is highest among

³ <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf>

The definition of volunteering

Volunteering is time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain.*

This includes formal volunteering, undertaken through an organisation or group, and informal volunteering, undertaken directly in the community.

Formal volunteering is time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain, taking place within organisations (including institutions and agencies) in a structured way.[^]

Informal volunteering is time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain, taking place outside the context of a formal organisation or group. This includes assisting people in the community, excluding one's own family members. For example, looking after children, property or pets; providing home or personal assistance; or giving someone professional advice.

* <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/resources/definition-of-volunteering/#/>

[^] <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Common-Languages-Guide-2022-FINAL.pdf>

people aged 40-54 years.⁴ It is also traditionally high among people aged 55-69 years, and young people aged 15-24 years, though formal volunteering among young people has been slowest to recover since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Conversely, informal volunteering is significantly more common among people aged 25-39 years compared to other age groups. Recent data does not provide accurate estimates of the rate of volunteering among First Nations people. Changes to data collection to address this issue are currently being considered.⁵

How we use our time

According to the most recent Time Use Survey, people who volunteer are more likely to engage in other social and community interaction, and spend more time doing so, than those who don't.⁶ Volunteers are also more likely to undertake domestic activities, such as food and drink preparation, shopping, housework, grounds care, gardening, and other activities, in addition to their volunteering. How people volunteer is closely connected to other parts of their lives, and changes as they age. For example, when people have school-aged children, they are more likely to volunteer in relation to schools or community sport, and then this changes as they get older. For example, people with school-aged children are more likely to volunteer for school-related or community sports activities, but this tends to change as their children grow older.



4 <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Volunteering-Australia-Key-Volunteering-Statistics-2024-Update.pdf>, 13

5 The *Future foundations for giving Draft report* from the Productivity Commission includes the draft recommendation that, following engagement with communities, the Australian Bureau of Statistics should develop methodologies that enable better measurement of volunteering by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and culturally and linguistically diverse communities: <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/philanthropy/draft/philanthropy-draft.pdf>, 49

6 <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/how-australians-use-their-time/latest-release>

Navigating change

The challenges of COVID-19

Despite its benefits to individuals and communities, volunteering has faced challenges, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The rate of formal volunteering decreased sharply during the pandemic, from 29.5 per cent in 2019 to 24.8 per cent in 2020.⁷ Despite this, volunteers persevered, finding innovative ways to engage in their volunteering amid lockdowns and other public health restrictions.⁸

Weathering the storm

Volunteers report greater life satisfaction compared to non-volunteers, with those who continued to volunteer during the pandemic experiencing heightened levels of wellbeing despite the circumstances.⁹

While many were unable to continue volunteering during the pandemic, many who did continue had positive experiences, reporting that their volunteering helped them maintain a connection with others, kept them active and busy, and gave them a sense of purpose.¹⁰ Volunteers also emphasised the benefits of using or gaining new skills, the opportunity to understand others, and the sense that volunteering became more accessible.

“ [Volunteering] provided another purpose in my day-to-day. Kept the brain going and occupied in these stressful times. ”¹¹

“ Voluntary work opens you up to new perspectives, generally, and even more so during COVID-19. It also has allowed me to establish connections and gain skills during a time when most other opportunities were closed off. ”¹²

7 <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf>

8 <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Continuity-and-change-volunteering-during-the-COVID-19-pandemic.pdf>

9 <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf>

10 <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Continuity-and-change-volunteering-during-the-COVID-19-pandemic.pdf>

11 *ibid*

12 *ibid*

New approaches and embracing change

In the wake of COVID-19, volunteers have embraced lasting change. The most significant shift has been the rise of remote volunteering, facilitated by advancements in technology and the innovation of volunteer involving organisations. From 2019 to 2022, the proportion of people engaging in online volunteering increased from 8.5 per cent to 30.2 per cent, highlighting the adaptability of volunteers and a willingness to embrace new modes of engagement.¹³

“ It’s been easier to do voluntary work because of the convenience of doing a lot of it online (reducing transport times and costs). ”¹⁴



¹³ <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf>

¹⁴ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Continuity-and-change-volunteering-during-the-COVID-19-pandemic.pdf>

Long-term trends

Formal volunteering has declined over the past decade, with participation rates dropping from 36.2 per cent in 2010 to 24.8 per cent in 2020, the lowest recorded rate.¹⁵ While long-term trend data is not available, informal volunteering has been more resilient to recent challenges, seeing a much smaller decline during the pandemic (from 33.4 per cent of people in 2019 to 32.1 per cent in 2020).¹⁶

Formal volunteering has shown signs of recovery in recent years, increasing to 26.7 per cent in 2022 and 32.6 per cent in 2023.¹⁷ However, contemporary challenges still affect our capacity to volunteer and the experience of volunteering.

Cost-of-living and current challenges

Amid the current cost-of-living crisis, many people find it difficult to prioritise volunteering, or to afford the costs that can be associated with volunteering, such as transport or fuel. Financial pressures are a significant barrier to volunteering, especially among younger people. 25.5 per cent of people aged 18 to 34 years indicated ‘financial reasons’ as a reason they did not volunteer in 2022.¹⁸ Volunteer involving organisations are also under significant financial strain, which affects their capacity to deliver services and safely and effectively engage their volunteers. Just over half (54 per cent) of volunteers incur out-of-pocket expenses through their volunteering role.

15 <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf>

16 <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Volunteering-Australia-Key-Volunteering-Statistics-2024-Update.pdf>, 7

17 https://csm.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2023/10/Ongoing_trends_in_volunteering_in_Australia.pdf

18 <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf>

Looking ahead

The mismatch problem

A significant mismatch exists between the volunteering opportunities being offered and what people who are not currently volunteering are interested in. This applies to both the types of organisations and types of roles. For example, while 28.5 per cent of non-volunteers expressed interest in working with animals, only 4.4 per cent of current volunteers were involved in such roles.¹⁹ This mismatch underscores the importance of aligning volunteer opportunities with community preferences to ensure maximum engagement and impact.

There is also growing demand for services that traditionally rely heavily on volunteers. For example, the care and support workforce is growing three times faster than other sectors in the Australian economy.²⁰ Demand for care and support workers is expected to double by 2050. In addition, unmet demand for services supported by volunteers can be sharpened by external shocks, such as the current cost-of-living crisis, which both increase demand and reduce people's capacity to volunteer. Ensuring demand for both paid staff and volunteers can be met will be of critical importance to the health of these sectors, and our communities.



¹⁹ <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf>

²⁰ <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/draft-national-care-and-support-economy-strategy-2023.pdf>

The wellbeing dividend

Volunteering improves wellbeing and supports social cohesion. For this reason, the rate of volunteering is a powerful indicator of the wellbeing of communities and the nation.

The *Measuring What Matters Framework*, designed to track our progress towards a more healthy, secure, sustainable, cohesive, and prosperous Australia, includes formal and informal volunteering as measures of social connection.²¹ Through this framework, data on volunteering in Australia will guide government decision-making in the future.

A shared vision

In 2023, the National Strategy for Volunteering was launched, charting a course for the future of volunteering in Australia. The National Strategy, alongside state and territory volunteering strategies, is a powerful resource to achieve a shared vision for a strong future of volunteering.

Volunteering is the heart of Australian communities.

For the future common good

There are significant opportunities to leverage the power of volunteering to create stronger, more resilient communities. In coming together as an ecosystem, we can unlock the full potential of volunteering to tackle pressing challenges such as social cohesion, mental health, and climate change. A thriving and effective volunteering ecosystem can give individuals and communities across Australia the opportunity to contribute to the common good.

²¹ https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-07/measuring-what-matters-statement020230721_0.pdf

Data sources

This report brings together data from a variety of sources to tell a story about the recent history of volunteering. These include:

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (June 2021), General Social Survey, Australia
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (September 2022), Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey, Australia
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (October 2022), How Australians Use Their Time, Australia
- Biddle, Nicholas, 2022, “ANU Poll 50 (April 2022): Volunteering, aged care, policy priorities and experiences with COVID-19”, doi:10.26193/AXQPSE, ADA Dataverse, V1
- Biddle, Nicholas, 2021, “ANU Poll 46 (April 2021): Vaccination, Stress and Unemployment during COVID 19”, doi:10.26193/BC2QEB, ADA Dataverse, V2
- The Volunteering in Australia 2022 research, a series of reports that analysed data from a survey of the general population over four waves, a survey of volunteer involving organisations, the General Social Survey, and the Census to present a full picture of volunteering in Australia. The Volunteering in Australia research was undertaken by Volunteering Australia in collaboration with the Australian National University (ANU) Centre for Social Research and Methods, and a consortium of researchers from Curtin University, Griffith University, and the University of Western Australia.

Key information from other national data sources can be found in the [Key Volunteering Statistics](#) factsheet.



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