

Research Briefing: The experience of volunteers during COVID-19

18 May 2020



Introduction

Volunteering Australia commissioned the Australian National University (ANU) Centre for Social Research and Methods to undertake analysis of the experience of volunteers during COVID-19 to date. Their analysis draws on the ANUpoll which involves a regular survey of around 3000 Australians that produces nationally representative results. The full paper and results are available at the [ANU website](#). The decline in paid work because of COVID-19 has been the focus of much analysis. This research is the first analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on volunteers and volunteering across Australia.

Key findings

Impact on volunteering

The decline in volunteering during COVID-19 has been substantial, with 65.9 per cent of volunteers estimated to have stopped volunteering between February and April 2020.

- The researchers estimate that this reduction in volunteering is equivalent to 12.2 million hours per week.
- Volunteers over the age of 65 were more likely to have stopped volunteering than other age groups.
- Female volunteers were also more likely to have stopped volunteering compared to male volunteers.

Impact on life satisfaction and psychological stress

The survey showed that volunteers had a higher level of life satisfaction prior to COVID-19 than non-volunteers. The impact of COVID-19 on life satisfaction and psychological distress varied by volunteering behaviour over the period, with those who managed to continue volunteering during COVID-19 faring much better.

- All Australians, volunteers and non-volunteers, experienced a decline in life satisfaction between January 2020 and April 2020.
- However, there was a significantly and substantially smaller decline in life satisfaction for those volunteers who did not stop volunteering compared to those who stopped or who never volunteered in the first place.
- If those who had continued volunteering had experienced the same decline in life satisfaction as those that stopped, this additional decline in life satisfaction would have been equal to a drop in income of \$216 per week. This suggests that maintaining volunteering activity appears to be a very important protective factor.
- For those who continued volunteering, levels of psychological distress were also significantly and substantially lower than those who stopped volunteering and those who had never volunteered in the first place.

Trends in social cohesion

The research considers three indicators of social cohesion - whether people think Australians in general: can be trusted; are fair; and are helpful.

- In February 2020, volunteers were more likely than non-volunteers to support these indicators of social cohesion.
- When these three measures are combined into a single index, the research found that there was an increase in social cohesion for all Australians between February and April 2020.

- There was a slightly larger increase in social cohesion between February and April 2020 for volunteers compared to non-volunteers.
- However, interestingly, the increase was similar for those who stopped volunteering and those who did not stop volunteering. This suggests that social cohesion has increased for all those who are inclined to volunteer. The researchers suggest that this may help support a return to volunteering once the physical distancing restrictions are eased.

Policy and practice implications

This research provides vital evidence of the impact of the COVID-19 situation on volunteers. The findings have several implications for volunteering policy and practice, for example:

- The scale of the cessation of volunteering reinforces the challenge ahead in reinvigorating volunteering. Organisations that have had to cease volunteer programs because of COVID-19 restrictions are seeking guidance on how to re-start programs safely and to support volunteers in their transition back.
- Because of COVID-19 restrictions, 12.2 million hours of volunteer work has been lost per week. The findings reinforce the power of the volunteer workforce and its contribution to the economic and social wellbeing of Australia. The nation needs these volunteers back supporting their communities.
- These new findings reinforce other research that has shown the mental health benefits of volunteering. As we move into the recovery phase, there is an opportunity to explore how volunteer opportunities might be extended to more people.

About Volunteering Australia

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering, working to advance volunteering in the Australian community. The seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies work to advance and promote volunteering in their respective jurisdictions and are Foundation Members of Volunteering Australia.

Volunteering Australia's vision is to promote strong, connected communities through volunteering. Our mission is to lead, strengthen, promote and celebrate volunteering in Australia.

Volunteering Australia Contacts

Sue Regan

Policy Manager

policy@volunteeringaustralia.org

(02) 6251 4060