

Introduction

Volunteering Australia has been working in partnership with the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods (CSRM) to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on volunteering. The ANU CSRM analysis draws on the [ANUpoll](#) which involves a regular survey of around 3000 Australians that produces nationally representative results. In May 2020, [research](#) was published into volunteering behaviour in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. The headline finding was that two out of three volunteers stopped volunteering between February and April 2020.

The new ANU CSRM analysis, published in May 2021, explores volunteering using data collected in late 2019 prior to COVID-19, data from April 2020 and data from April 2021. The April 2021 survey question asked, 'over the last 12 months, did you spend any time doing voluntary work through an organisation or group?' The full paper and results are available [here](#).

Key findings

Volunteering during the pandemic

The proportion of adult Australians undertaking volunteering has fallen very substantially since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Many of the lockdown and social distancing restrictions had eased across Australia by April 2021. However, many of those who had previously volunteered but had stopped doing so due to COVID-19 had not returned to volunteering:

- In April 2021, 24.2 per cent of Australians had done voluntary work in the previous 12 months, down from 36.0 per cent in late 2019.
- Only slightly more than half (56.4 per cent) of those who in April 2020 said that they stopped volunteering due to COVID-19 had said that they had volunteered in the 12 months leading up to April 2021.
- An estimated 2.3 million less Australians volunteered in the 12 months prior to April 2021 compared to late 2019. In April 2021, 24.2 per cent of Australians had done voluntary work in the previous 12 months, down from 36.0 per cent in late 2019.
- There were declines in volunteering for both males and females, with slightly larger declines for females.
- All age groups experienced a decline in volunteering. The age group that had the largest fall in volunteering is the 45 to 54 year old age group.

Linking volunteering and paid work

The data suggests that voluntary work has been impacted even harder by the COVID-19 recession than paid work, at least in terms of relative decline (that is, voluntary work declined at a higher rate than paid work):

- The total number of hours of volunteering is estimated to have fallen by around 293 million hours over a 12-month period since COVID.
- The loss in economic output due to the pandemic would be 16.1 per cent higher if volunteering was included, compared to considering paid work only.

- People who had the greatest decrease in hours in paid work over the COVID-19 recession had the greatest relative increase in the probability of volunteering.

Impact on life satisfaction and loneliness

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 loneliness varied by volunteering behaviour over the period, with those who managed to continue volunteering during COVID-19 faring much better.

- Australians who had stopped volunteering since 2019 had a greater loss of life satisfaction than those who continued to volunteer during COVID-19. Loss in life satisfaction appears to have occurred between April and October 2020.
- Those who stopped volunteering were far more likely to say that they felt lonely at least some of the time than those who continued volunteering.

Qualitative data collected in the same survey highlighted a diversity of experience over the period. Many respondents mentioned little impact; others talked about the positive effects volunteering has had on them during the COVID-19 pandemic; others still talked about the way their volunteering has had to change and they have had to adapt over the period. The qualitative data will be analysed in more detail in a subsequent paper.

Policy and practice implications

This research provides important evidence of the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 situation on volunteers and volunteering. The findings reinforce the importance of volunteering to the economic and social wellbeing of Australia and have several implications for policy and practice, for example:

- Given the weak recovery in volunteering to date, there remains an important challenge ahead in reinvigorating volunteering. This will require further and sustained action by the volunteering sector and by governments.
- Further research is needed on understanding which sectors are being worse affected by the decline in volunteering and on how specific volunteer workforces (for example volunteers working in aged care, disability care and mental health services) are to be sustainable into the future.
- This new analysis reinforces the earlier ANU CSRSM analysis, and other research, that demonstrates the well-being benefits of volunteering. If we are concerned about improving the well-being of Australians and improving overall mental health, we need to be concerned about reinvigorating volunteering.

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

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