

## Volunteering and the early impact of COVID-19 (May 2020)

This factsheet includes data from various sources to describe the early impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on volunteering. Further data will be published in *Volunteering and the ongoing impact of COVID-19* in March 2021.

### Impact on volunteers

In April 2020, Volunteering Australia commissioned the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods to undertake analysis of the experience of volunteers during COVID-19. Their analysis draws on the ANUpoll which involves a regular survey of around 3000 Australians that produces nationally representative results.

The decline in volunteering during COVID-19 was substantial with nearly two thirds of volunteers (65.9%) estimated to have stopped volunteering between February and April 2020.

- This reduction in volunteering across Australia 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.
- This reduction occurred across the country in every state and territory.

*ANU May 2020 The experience of volunteers during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>i</sup>*

#### *Per cent of volunteers who reported they had stopped volunteering since the spread of COVID-19 (by age)*

18-24 years	63.6%
25-34 years	70.3%
35-44 years	68.3%
45-54 years	58.7%
55-64 years	55.0%
65-74 years	72.7%
75+ years	74.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>65.9%</b>

*ANU May 2020 The experience of volunteers during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic*

#### *Per cent of volunteers who reported they had stopped volunteering since the spread of COVID-19 (by gender)*

Female	68.3%
Male	62.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>65.9%</b>

*ANU May 2020 The experience of volunteers during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic*

#### *Per cent of volunteers who reported they had stopped volunteering since the spread of COVID-19 (by State / Territory)*

New South Wales	69.7%
Tasmania	65.7%
Victoria	65.5%
ACT	65.3%
Western Australia	64.2%
South Australia	63.6%
Queensland	62.4%
Northern Territory <sup>ii</sup>	33.6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>65.9%</b>

The research considered 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 statements.
- 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.

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 better.

- All Australians experienced a decline in life satisfaction between January 2020 and April 2020.
- 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, the additional decline was equal to a drop in income of \$216 per week.
- For those who continued volunteering, levels of psychological distress were significantly lower than those who stopped volunteering and those who had never volunteered in the first place.

ANU May 2020 *The experience of volunteers during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic*

*Life satisfaction by change in volunteering during COVID-*

<i>19 (0-10 scale)</i>	<i>January 2020</i>	<i>April 2020</i>
<i>Non-volunteers</i>	6.88	6.41
<i>Volunteers who stopped volunteering</i>	7.17	6.72
<i>Volunteers who continued volunteering</i>	7.12	6.81

ANU May 2020 *The experience of volunteers during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic*

*Psychological distress by volunteering, April 2020*

	<i>Kessler (K6) score of psychological distress<sup>iii</sup></i>	<i>% with probably serious mental illness</i>
<i>Non-volunteers</i>	12.09	11.44
<i>Volunteers who stopped volunteering</i>	11.88	10.07
<i>Volunteers who continued volunteering</i>	11.05	7.05

**Official data on the impact of COVID-19 on volunteering**

The ABS undertook an additional regular survey during 2020 – the Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey. In late May, the survey (cat. no. 4940.0), asked about volunteering. This survey found that of the Australians who volunteer, almost two out of five (37%\*) reported spending less time volunteering. About half (49%) reported spending the same amount of time volunteering, and 14 per cent reported spending more time.

The December 2020 Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey contained a question about volunteering behaviour. This data will be published at the end of February 2021.

**Impact on community sector and its volunteers**

Our Community's Community Sector Impact Survey<sup>iv</sup> from April 2020 covered the impact on volunteering:

- A total of 248 respondents to the survey (74% of the sample) said they relied on volunteers to deliver programs or services.
- Of those, 58% had experienced a drop in volunteer numbers as a result of the pandemic, with 43% reporting a significant drop in numbers.

### Impact on volunteer involving organisations

Volunteering Australia sent out a survey to stakeholders in April 2020. Over 80% of organisations who replied to the survey have stood down volunteers because of the COVID-19 situation. Other findings included:

- Around 3/4s of these organisations reported having stood down all or at least half of volunteers.
- 37% of organisations reported experiencing an increase in demand for their services.
- Nearly 80% of organisations had adapted their volunteer programs to remove or reduce face-to-face contact.
- Examples of innovation included: shifting to phone and on-line services, letter writing and video conferencing.

By far the greatest concern of volunteer involving organisations was how to retain volunteers and keep them engaged during the COVID19 shutdown. Other concerns included:

- Welfare concerns for those volunteers who had been stood down – isolation, loneliness, and general wellbeing concerns.
- The impact on clients given reduced face to face contact.
- Safety and well-being of those continuing to volunteer.
- Pressure on paid staff and services, as volunteers not currently engaged.
- Uncertainty and not knowing what will happen next.
- Losing income and resources.

Volunteer Resource Centres also reported having more people wanting to volunteer than available positions in the community.

### Helping others

In May 2020, the Melbourne Institute's Taking the Pulse of the Nation Survey<sup>v</sup> asked about engaging in activities that involves helping those outside of the respondent's household. The question provides some insight into the scale of informal volunteering that might have been taking place.

- Across Australia, approximately 30 per cent report supporting others: 25–28 percent are helping the same or more than they did before COVID-19, while 4–5 per cent report helping out but not as much as they did before COVID-19.
- Across the age groups, those who are aged 65 or older are less engaged in helping others and those between 50 and 64 are the most engaged.

### Spontaneous emergency volunteering

A surge in interest from the public occurred in support of the emergency COVID-19 response. In partnership with their relevant Governments, the State and Territory peak bodies for volunteering established registration and matching platforms to organise assistance from spontaneous volunteers.

For example, in April 2020, Volunteering Queensland in partnership with the Queensland Government received over 28,000 registrations for the 'Care Army'<sup>vi</sup>.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://csrc.cass.anu.edu.au/research/publications/experience-volunteers-during-early-stages-covid-19-pandemi-c>

<sup>ii</sup> Considerable uncertainty based on local sample sizes although still statistically significant

<sup>iii</sup> Ranges from 6 to 30

<sup>iv</sup> <https://communitydirectors.com.au/research/covid19-community-sector-impact-survey>

<sup>v</sup> <https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/publications/research-insights/covid-19>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://volunteeringqld.org.au/volunteers/care-army>