

Volunteering and the ongoing impact of COVID-19 (May 2021)

Overview

This factsheet provides analysis of the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on volunteering, using data collected at the end of 2020/early 2021 and March 2021. It complements an earlier factsheet - [Volunteering and the early impact of COVID-19](#) - published in April 2020. The main sources of data in this factsheet are:

- A Volunteering Australia stakeholder survey¹
- The Australian Bureau of Statistics Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey²

The key findings are:

- Volunteering has not fully recovered from the impact of COVID-19 with nearly three quarters (72%) of survey respondents reporting that their volunteer programs were either only partially operational (60%) or not operational (12%).
- Formal volunteering participation rates have declined - from one in four (26%) of people volunteering through an organisation pre-COVID (before March 2020) to one in five (21%) in the last 12 months (prior to March 2021).
- Nearly one in ten (9%) Australians have stopped volunteering through an organisation or group in the last 12 months.
- However, nearly one in 25 Australians (4%) have started volunteering through an organisation or group in the last 12 months.
- Online volunteering was available to about one in five (21%) volunteers. Of those with access, three in four (76%) participated in online volunteering.

Background – the early impact of COVID-19 on volunteering

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 on-line 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 (66%) 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.

¹ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021.02.08-Re-engaging-Volunteers-and-COVID-19-Report.pdf>

² <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/household-impacts-covid-19-survey/latest-release#voluntary-work-and-unpaid-help>

The recovery of the volunteering sector

Volunteering Australia undertook a national stakeholder survey to assess how well the sector is recovering. The key finding of the survey was that volunteering has not ‘snapped back’ as COVID-19 restrictions are being lifted. The ‘Re-engaging Volunteers and COVID-19’ survey was an on-line survey completed by nearly 600 respondents over December 2020 and January 2021, found:

- Volunteering has not fully recovered. Nearly three quarters (72%) of respondents reported that their volunteer programs were either only partially operational (60%) or not operational (12%).
- Confidence is still weak. Four out of ten (42%) of respondents were not confident that their organisation will achieve pre-COVID levels of volunteering activity in the next six months.
- Demand for services has increased and more volunteers are needed. Four out of ten (43%) reported experiencing an increase in demand for services, with over half (56%) reporting that they need more volunteers.

Recent official volunteering data

Following the start of the pandemic, the Australian Bureau of Statistics developed the Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey, a longitudinal survey which collects information from the same panel each month. The March 2021 survey was run between 12 and 21 March 2021 via online forms and telephone interviews. The survey included around 1,676 continuing participants from previous cycles and responses from around 2,246 new participants, bringing the total panel to 3,922 people.

The March 2021 survey included several additional questions on volunteering. The survey asked about volunteering behaviour in the last 12 months and in the last four weeks.

Overall, participation rates have declined

- One in five (21%) Australians did unpaid voluntary work for an organisation or group in the last 12 months, compared to one in four (26%) prior to 1 March 2020. This captures the decline in volunteering since COVID-19 began.
- One in six (17%) Australians volunteered prior to 1 March 2020 and continued to volunteer in the last 12 months, including 13% who volunteered in the last four weeks. This represents ongoing volunteers.
- Nearly one in ten (9%) Australians volunteered prior to 1 March and have **not** volunteered in the last 12 months. This represents those who have stopped volunteering.
- Nearly one in 25 Australians (4%) was not doing unpaid voluntary work through an organisation or group prior to 1 March 2020 but did do in the last 12 months. This represents new volunteers.
- Similar trends are being experienced across the nation (see table below).

Participation in unpaid voluntary work through an organisation or group over time BY S/T

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	NT	Tas	ACT	Total
Was doing unpaid voluntary work through an organisation or group prior to March 1 2020 and continued in the last 12 months	15.7	16.9	16.7	21.4	19.1	#11.8	16.4	#17.6	17.0
<i>Was doing unpaid voluntary work through an organisation or group prior to March 1 2020 and continued in the last 12 months including in the last four weeks</i>	10.6	13.3	13.1	16.2	14.4	#10.8	12.5	#15.3	12.7
<i>Was doing unpaid voluntary work through an organisation or group prior to March 1 2020 and continued in the last 12 months but not in the last four weeks</i>	5.2	3.3	3.8	5.3	4.7	np	4.0	np	4.3
Was doing unpaid voluntary work through an organisation or group prior to March 1 2020, but did not do in the last 12 months	8.7	9.3	7.6	8.5	9.9	#5.5	12.9	11.5	8.9
Was not doing unpaid voluntary work through an organisation or group prior to March 1 2020 but did do in the last 12 months	1.9	4.4	6.0	4.5	2.2	np	5.2	np	3.6
<i>Was not doing unpaid voluntary work through an organisation or group prior to March 1 2020 but did do in the last 12 months including in the last four weeks</i>	#1.3	2.0	3.3	2.5	1.6	np	3.4	np	2.0
<i>Was not doing unpaid voluntary work through an organisation or group prior to March 1 2020 but did do in the last 12 months but not in the last four weeks</i>	#1.1	2.7	3.0	2.0	0.8	0.0	#1.8	0.0	1.9
Was not doing unpaid voluntary work through an organisation or group prior to March 1 2020 and did not do in the last 12 months	73.2	69.0	69.3	65.3	68.5	#80.7	65.4	#70.4	70.1
<i>Total persons aged 18 years and over(h)</i>	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note: shaded rows are subsets of row above.

Online volunteering appears strong

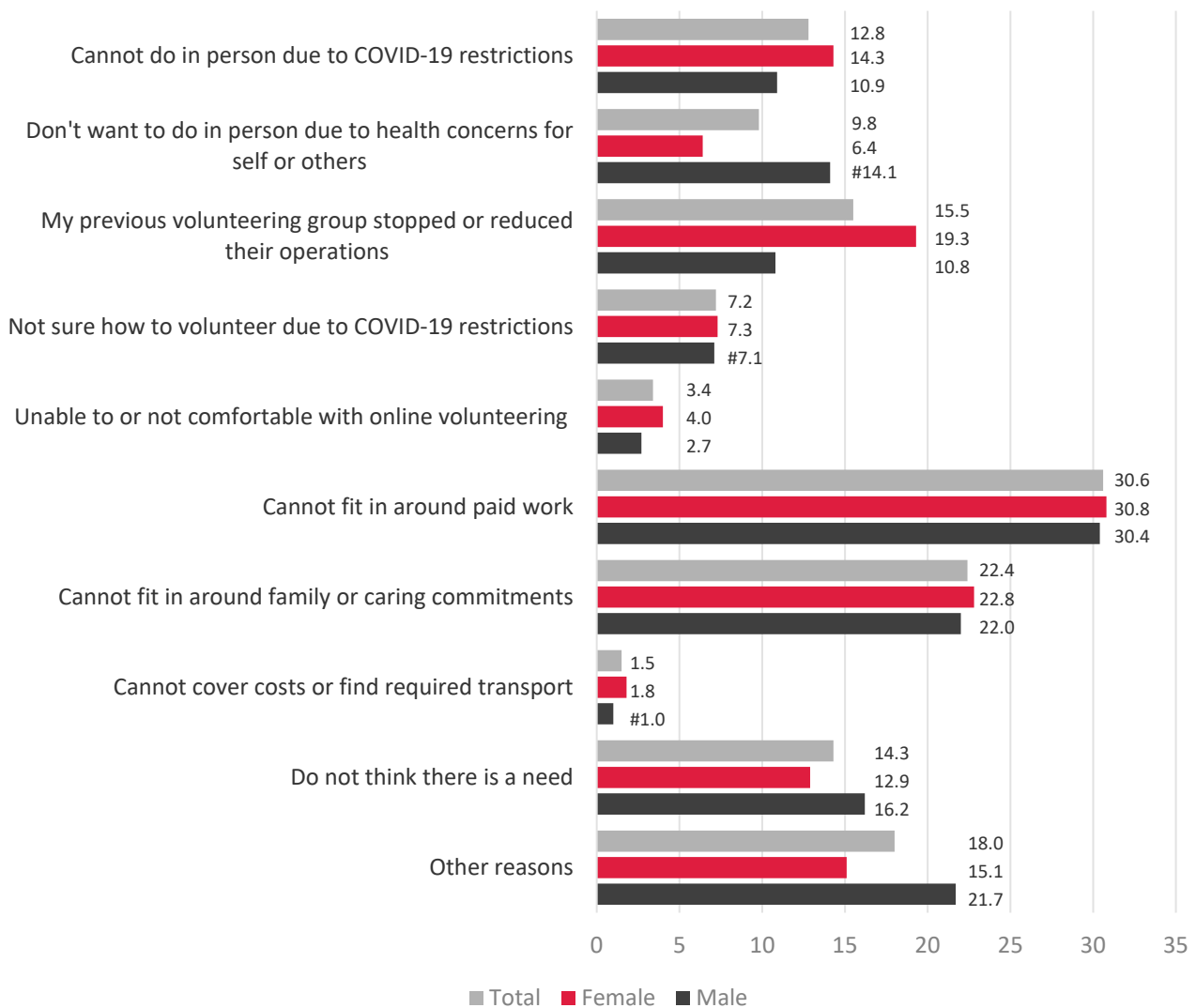
- The survey asked current and former volunteers if they had access to online volunteering through their organisation or group in the last 12 months.
- Online volunteering was available to about one in five (21%) volunteers.
- Of those with access, three in four (76%) participated in online volunteering.

The reasons for not volunteering are diverse and differ by gender and age

- The biggest reasons for not volunteering for both men and women were 'cannot fit in around paid work' (31%) and 'cannot fit in around family and caring responsibilities' (22%).
- Over 7% (one in fourteen) of people are no longer sure how to engage in volunteering due to COVID restrictions and 10% (one in ten) don't want to volunteer in person due to health concerns for self or others.
- Ongoing COVID-19 restrictions presented a barrier for 14% of women and 11% of men, and many people were unable to volunteer because their regular volunteering activities had been reduced or cancelled.

- Women were disproportionately affected, with 20% of women who normally volunteer not currently volunteering because their activities have been cancelled or reduced, compared to 11% of men. (See table below).
- Those over 65 years of age were more likely than other age groups to have not volunteered because of COVID restrictions (23%, compared to 12% for 35-64 year olds and 9% for 18-34 year olds) or because previous role had stopped (27%, compared to 15% for 35-64 year olds and 10% for 18-34 year olds).
- The reasons for not volunteering informally in the community are diverse: four in ten people (40%) do not think there is a need; a quarter cannot fit in around paid work (27%); a fifth (21%) cannot fit in around household caring responsibilities and one in seven Australians (15%) want to minimise exposure to people to protect health of myself or others.
- Women are more likely than men to say that they cannot volunteer informally because they cannot fit it in around household caring responsibility - 27% for females compared to 16% for men.

Reasons for not doing unpaid voluntary work through an organisation or group in the last four weeks(I) BY GENDER



Explanatory notes:

Australia's definition of volunteering is "time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain."ⁱ This document deploys this definition and hence includes information on formal and informal volunteering. The ABS defines 'formal volunteering' as unpaid voluntary work through an organisation and 'informal volunteering' as the provision of unpaid work/support to non-family members outside of the household.

Throughout this document, estimates marked with a '#' have a high margin of error and should be used with caution.

This document uses the terms 'men/male' and 'women/female' to denote those who have selected this sex during their response to the ABS survey. Volunteering Australia recognises that only those who identify as male or female are represented in these statistics.

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