

Volunteering and Australia's crisis resilience

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Overview

This report aims to highlight the breadth and diversity of volunteering activity that contributes to ‘crisis resilience’ in Australia.

The term ‘crisis resilience’ refers to the capacity of communities to undertake prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery activities in relation to any major crisis, such as natural disasters, public health crises, and environmental emergencies.

- Volunteering is a fundamental component of Australia’s crisis resilience, facilitating social connections, contributing to the development of social capital, and improving access to local supports and services.
- Volunteers support crisis resilience by contributing to prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery activities. These contributions include:
 - Response and recovery during natural disasters.
 - Essential service provision, including food relief, the delivery of essential goods, and social connection.
 - Supporting the response to public health crises (for example, assisting at vaccination clinics during the COVID-19 pandemic).
 - Mental health support.
 - Suicide prevention and crisis intervention.
 - Environment and wildlife protection.
- Available data indicates that Australia’s crisis resilience is supported by well over one million volunteers.¹
- Volunteers support crisis management across local and state/territory government services, through major charities and not-for-profits, and directly through informal community groups or online platforms. However, support and planning for volunteer involvement is not consistently included in national crisis management frameworks.



Introduction

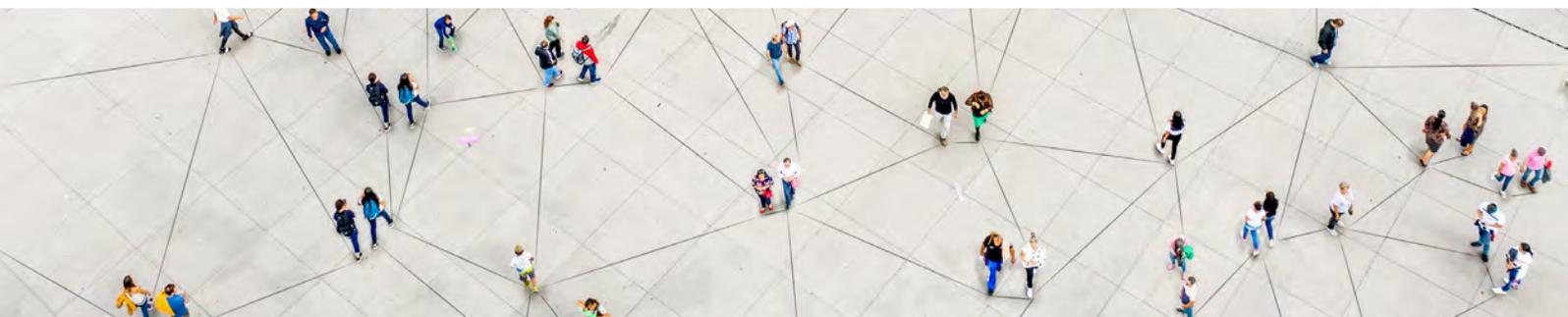
Volunteers are essential to Australia’s crisis resilience, including in responding to and supporting recovery following natural disasters, and ensuring essential service provision to marginalised communities and the general Australian population. Despite this, precise data on the extent of volunteer involvement in emergency management, disaster recovery, crisis intervention, and the provision of essential services is limited.

This report provides an analysis of the ways volunteers contribute to crisis resilience in Australia. It examines available official data on volunteering, academic literature and sector-led research on volunteers in emergency management, and the inclusion of volunteers in current national disaster arrangements. It concludes by highlighting key drivers of change in the sector, and suggesting measures to improve the effectiveness, safety, and sustainability of volunteering in crisis resilience in Australia.



Glossary²

- **Formal volunteering:** 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:** 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.
- **Emergency management volunteering:** The concept of 'emergency volunteering' encompasses all volunteering that supports communities before, during and after a disaster or emergency, regardless of its particular organisational affiliation, or lack thereof.³
- **Emergency management organisations (EMOs):** The government and non-government organisations that have recognised roles in relevant state and territory, district or municipal emergency management and recovery plans.⁴
 - **Primary response EMOs:** The government and non-government organisations which are the primary responders when an emergency or disaster occurs, and for whom emergency management is their core organisational mission.
 - **Support EMOs:** Organisations that have wider social welfare, community service, humanitarian, or environmental conservation missions that also have formally recognised responsibilities for relief and recovery, for which they plan and mobilise volunteers when needed.
- **Volunteer involving organisations:** Any organisation/company/department that engages volunteers may be known as a volunteer involving organisation.
- **Volunteering ecosystem:** The volunteering ecosystem is the network of organisations and people that enable and benefit from volunteering. It covers the non-profit, public, and private spheres. It involves relationships between volunteers, volunteer involving organisations, Volunteering Support Services, Volunteering Australia, State and Territory Volunteering Peak Bodies, national peak bodies, community organisations, philanthropy, business, and Governments, all working for the collective viability and recognition of volunteering in Australia.
- **Spontaneous volunteers:** People who are not affiliated with recognised volunteer agencies, and may not have relevant training, skills, or experience, but seek out or are invited to contribute their assistance to various volunteering opportunities.
- **Virtual volunteering, remote volunteering, or online volunteering (e-volunteering):** Virtual, remote, or online volunteering allows individuals to work with organisations remotely. Volunteer tasks are completed online, and interaction is through a digital platform or via email.
- **Episodic volunteering:** This refers to volunteering on a periodic or recurring basis, as opposed to on an ongoing capacity. It could include people who are engaged in 'project-based volunteering'.



What we mean by crisis resilience

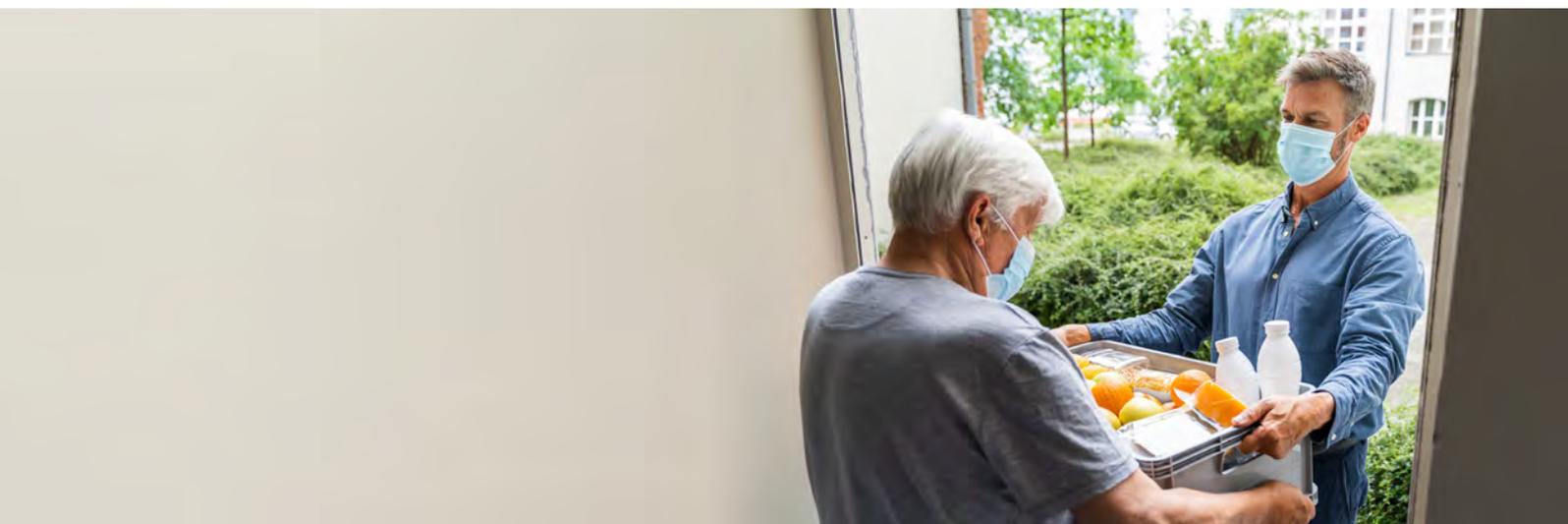
Many concepts and terms are used to describe the landscape of crisis prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery in Australia. This report focuses on the concept of “crisis resilience” to examine data, research, and standing national arrangements on volunteering in Australia.

The term “crisis” is adapted from the Australian Government Crisis Management Framework, which outlines the Australian Government’s approach to prevention, preparation, response, and recovery from all crises including natural disasters, disasters caused by humans, public health crises, environmental emergencies, and any other hazards.⁵

“Resilience,” meanwhile, refers to the capacity of communities to prepare for, absorb, and recover from crisis events, and the capacities of communities to learn, adapt, and transform towards resilience.⁶ This definition is adapted from the Australian Natural Disaster Resilience Index, broadened to include other types of crises.

The concept of crisis resilience is chosen for its breadth of scope, allowing for a more holistic analysis of the contribution of volunteering to the resilience of Australian communities.

This report therefore uses the term “crisis volunteering” to refer to the broader practice of willingly giving time to contribute to crisis preparedness, response, recovery, and resilience without financial gain. This includes volunteering through government organisations, non-government organisations and groups, and directly in the community outside of a formal organisation or group.



What we know: Data on volunteering

Data on volunteering in Australia can be difficult to assess holistically. This is because most available data is collected in general surveys or in sector-specific data collection efforts. As a consequence, estimating the true contribution of volunteers in crisis response efforts in Australia can be difficult.

With these limitations in mind, the following sections present the available data on volunteering in government emergency management services, non-government emergency, and relief organisations, and other organisations which contribute to broader crisis resilience. It must be noted, however, that these numbers represent only the reported numbers of volunteers involved in formal organisations. Those involved informally in their communities are not included. The numbers presented below are conservative figures, and the actual number of volunteers who contribute directly to crisis preparedness, response, recovery, and resilience is very likely higher.

As well as official data sources, many organisations collect and publish more detailed data on their volunteering programs. This data is presented where it offers greater clarity on the role and contributions of volunteers in crisis resilience.

Data on the contributions of volunteers at each stage of crisis management is presented in the sections below. It should be noted that, due to different data collection methods and the possibility that people who volunteer in multiple sectors are counted more than once, it is not possible to estimate the total number of volunteers in the crisis resilience space. However, with 940,365 volunteers in environmental charities alone, it is very likely that the total number is well over one million.



Volunteers and crisis resilience

Prevention

While the efforts of volunteers in crisis response and recovery are widely known, volunteers also contribute significantly to prevention and preparedness.

Volunteers contribute to crisis prevention in many ways. The most prominent example is volunteers in environmental organisations, who support sustainability efforts and contribute to natural disaster prevention. For example, in 2021, Landcare volunteers in the Snowy Monaro region planted over 4,500 native trees and shrubs.⁷ This revegetation activity will help control the invasion of weeds, rehydrate and restore soil life, and abate approximately 3,277 tonnes of carbon over the next 25 years.⁸ According to the Annual Information Statement (AIS) data published by the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission, there are: 940,365 volunteers in charities which identified 'environmental activities' as their main activity.⁹



Preparedness

Volunteers contribute directly to crisis preparedness, particularly before natural disasters. This is done both through formal organisations and informally in the community. However, a properly resourced and well-connected volunteering ecosystem can be its own contribution to preparedness—a large supply of people who are connected with organisations, groups, or online platforms and who are willing to volunteer in their community can provide surge capacity which can be activated quickly during a crisis.

Volunteering also contributes significantly to community connectedness. Research on community resilience identifies three factors which support resilience: physical, procedural, and social.¹⁰ As well as good physical infrastructure and well-established policies and procedures, community resilience requires high social trust and a strong network of connections between members of the community. The improved community participation facilitated by a well-supported volunteering ecosystem can encourage collaboration between organisations and community members, improved information sharing, and greater community trust, all of which allow communities to respond more effectively to crises.¹¹ The work of volunteers in marginalised communities also fosters crucial lines of communication for important health and safety information and directives, which can be accessed when a crisis occurs.

Australian Red Cross

The Australian Red Cross engages 17,047 volunteers, delivering services across Australia and in 36 countries.¹² Emergency management is a significant part of the organisation's work.

Australian Red Cross volunteers contribute to preparedness, response, and recovery efforts. During the 2019/20 bushfires, the Australian Red Cross supported 49,718 people evacuation centres and over the phone, and assisted 67,764 people with recovery through 1-1 and group support, training and workshops, information, and referrals.¹³ Red Cross Recovery Teams also run community workshops and preparedness sessions to support resilience to future crises by providing information to the community on crisis response arrangements, identifying areas of risk in the community, and providing first aid training.¹⁴



Response

The role of volunteers in crisis response in Australia is well-known.

According to the most recent Report on Government Services from the Productivity Commission, 233,284 people volunteered in government emergency services organisations in Australia in the 2020-21 financial year.¹⁵ This number includes:

- 200,780 volunteers in fire services organisations.
- 25,076 volunteers in State and Territory Emergency Service.
- 7,428 volunteers in ambulance service organisations.

However, data from previous years shows that the number of volunteers in government fire services organisations has decreased gradually since 2015-16.¹⁶ Over the same period, the number of volunteers in State and Territory Emergency Service organisations has remained relatively steady, while the number of volunteers in ambulance service organisations has increased. However, these changes have resulted in an overall decrease of 23,167 volunteers in government emergency services organisations since 2015-16.

Volunteers also deliver essential emergency relief services. For example, Foodbank volunteers provide essential supplies to people affected by natural disasters and to first responders.¹⁷ Meals on Wheels, which engages 45,000 volunteers, delivered essential food and hygiene products to vulnerable communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁸

Spontaneous volunteers

Spontaneous volunteers are volunteers who are not affiliated with recognised volunteer agencies, and may not have relevant training, skills, or experience, but seek out or are invited to contribute their assistance to various volunteering opportunities. Spontaneous volunteers are often recruited and coordinated over the internet, either through informal social media groups or through dedicated online platforms. The State and Territory peak volunteering bodies operate online matching platforms that are activated during crises. For example, the EV CREW platform run by Volunteering Queensland has made over 33,000 volunteer referrals to 200 disaster preparation or recovery campaigns since it was established in 2008.¹⁹

While these numbers demonstrate the scale of spontaneous volunteer involvement in crisis resilience, comprehensive data on spontaneous volunteering in Australia is not currently available.



Recovery

According to the ACNC Annual Information Statement (AIS) dataset, 217,776 volunteers are engaged in 1,192 registered charities which identified 'emergency and relief' as their main activity. This does not include any fire service or other government services organisations.

This figure also excludes other organisation types which are heavily involved in emergency response and recovery. For example, while emergency and disaster services are a significant area of focus, the Australian Red Cross is classified in the AIS dataset as a 'social services' organisation. Similarly, while they often contribute to emergency relief efforts, religious organisations would not be recorded as 'emergency and relief' organisations.²⁰

Lifeline

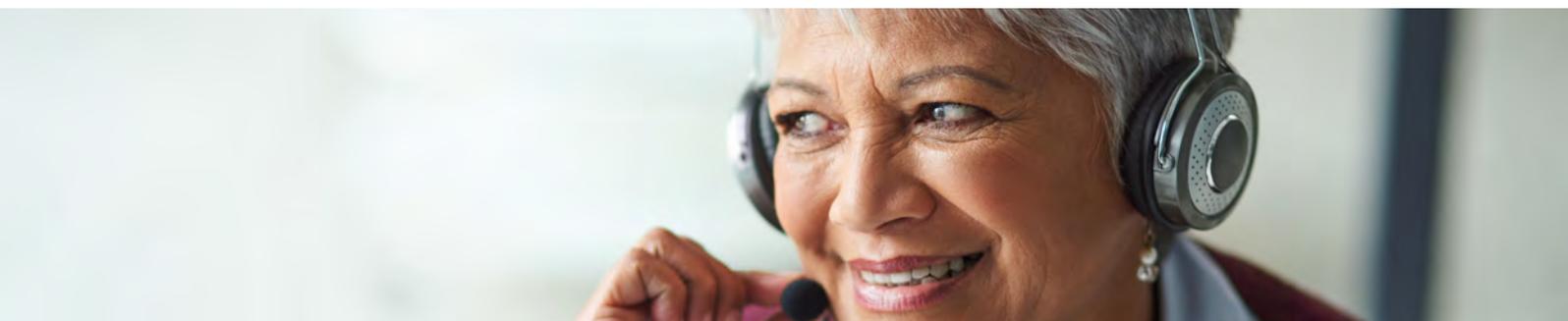
Lifeline engages 10,000 volunteers across Australia.²¹ In 2018, these volunteers answered 739,481 calls and initiated 5,840 emergency interventions for Australians in need of crisis support.²²

Mental health and suicide prevention services are especially critical during and after major emergencies, including the COVID-19 pandemic. The volunteer hours that have supported Lifeline's crisis helpline increased from just under 20,000 per month in 2019 to around 24,000 per month in 2021, peaking at 25,682 in August 2021.²³ These numbers illustrate the crucial role volunteers have played in supporting the mental health of Australians during the pandemic.

BlazeAid

Statistics published by BlazeAid show that their 10,255 volunteers contributed 125,358 days to support disaster recovery in 2020.²⁴ This work was conducted across 3,918 properties in regional, remote, and rural Australia from 37 basecamps.

During the 2019/2020 Black Summer Bushfires, BlazeAid engaged the largest numbers of volunteers and volunteer days in the organisation's history.



Volunteers in Australia's crisis management arrangements

Australia's national disaster and crisis arrangements are undergoing significant change. Following the 2019/20 Black Summer bushfires, the Australian Government established the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, which tabled its final report in Parliament on 30 October 2020.

Since the release of the final report, progress has been made to reorganise Australia's crisis management arrangements. This includes the establishment of the National Recovery and Resilience Agency in May 2021 to provide national leadership and

coordination of disaster response, recovery, resilience, and risk reduction functions.²⁵

Precise arrangements vary by state and territory, however, volunteers are generally involved in broader crisis response arrangements in three areas:²⁶

- State and territory government emergency management organisations. These include State and Territory Emergency Service organisations, as well as fire service organisations and ambulance organisations which have official roles in crisis response.
- Charities and not-for-profits which support crisis prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery.
- Providing direct assistance as informal volunteers. Informal volunteers are present across prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery, though are typically mobilised in the response and recovery phases. These volunteers are not affiliated with an emergency management organisation, but may be coordinated through an informal community group or an online platform.



National arrangements

At the highest level, crisis responses are governed by a series of overlapping national frameworks and strategies, which operate by consensus between the Commonwealth and state/territory governments and are enacted separately by each.²⁷

The overarching policy for coordinated, whole-of-government crisis management is the Australian Government Crisis Management Framework (AGCMF), which was last updated in December 2021.²⁸

The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements made the following recommendation on the inclusion of volunteers in national arrangements:

Recommendation 21.3 – National coordination forums: The Australian Government, through the mechanism of the proposed standing national recovery and resilience agency, should convene regular and ongoing national forums for charities, non-government organisations and volunteer groups, with a role in natural disaster recovery, with a view to continuous improvement of coordination of recovery support.

The National Coordination Mechanism operated under an interim arrangement for charity coordination until 1 July 2021. As of June 2021, the most recent progress update released by the National Recovery and Resilience Agency, the model for a new National Coordination Mechanism underwent stakeholder consultation with draft terms of reference provided to the Minister for Emergency Management in mid-April 2021.²⁹ The new National Coordination Mechanism is now embedded in the Australian Government Crisis Management Framework and convenes collaborative forums with relevant sectors including the community sector, in which many volunteers are engaged in crisis response and recovery.³⁰

Volunteer involving organisations involved in emergency relief and recovery are also represented on the Emergency Relief National Coordination Group, established by the Department of Social Services. The National Coordination Group provides advice to Government on providing emergency relief, food relief, and financial counselling during times of crisis, including the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters.³¹

State/territory arrangements

State and territory emergency management organisations are represented nationally by the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council (AFAC), which also includes Australian Government agencies such as Emergency Management Australia in its membership.

State and territory governments have primary responsibility for both response and recovery following most crises, particularly natural disasters.

Local government arrangements

While primary responsibility for crisis management rests with the state and territory governments, some recovery responsibilities are delegated to local councils and shires in all states and territories.³² These include relief services and recovery information for communities, supporting clean-up efforts, coordinating local relief funds, conducting damage assessments, and leading local recovery plans.³³

While there are thousands of volunteers in local government organisations,³⁴ it is unclear how many contribute directly to crisis management.

Organisation-led arrangements

Volunteers are also organised through initiatives of organisations in the not-for-profit sector. This includes national volunteer involving organisations such as the Australian Red Cross and Save the Children, as well as a wealth of regional and local volunteer involving organisations. Many of the state and territory volunteering peak bodies run online platforms to recruit and coordinate spontaneous volunteers.³⁵

A recent development is the Volunteer Resilience Corps initiative by the Minderoo Foundation which aims to recruit and train volunteers to be involved in local community activities to build resilience to fires and floods.³⁶



Conclusion: Three drivers of change in crisis volunteering

Research on crisis management volunteering has identified significant changes in the landscape, including:

1. Declining rates of volunteer participation.
 - a. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the proportion of people volunteering in Australia decreased from 36.2 per cent in 2010 to 28.8 per cent in 2019.³⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this decline. A study from the Australian National University Centre for Social Research and Methods found that only slightly more than half (56.4 per cent) of those who stopped volunteering in 2020 resumed in the 12 months leading up to April 2021, despite the easing of lockdowns and social distancing restrictions in many jurisdictions at that time.³⁸
 - b. In key crisis resilience sectors such as emergency management, researchers have also noted rising turnover and an aging volunteer base.³⁹
2. Changing demand for volunteer roles.
 - a. Formal roles are becoming more difficult and demanding as disasters grow more severe. As a consequence, volunteers involved in crisis response and recovery will require more comprehensive support from their organisations and from government.
 - b. Demand for more flexible, self-directed, and cause-driven volunteer roles also appears to be increasing. These include virtual, skills-based, spontaneous, informal, and episodic volunteering opportunities. Coordinating and supporting these volunteers in crisis prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery will require consistent investment in the appropriate platforms and management processes.
3. An unclear role in national disaster arrangements.
 - a. The model for coordinating the contributions of the charity and not-for-profit sector in crisis resilience has yet to be formalised.
 - b. This model must consider ways to engage volunteers across prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. This should include volunteers in emergency response and recovery, as well as those in other key sectors such as environmental protection, mental health, and social services. It should aim to engage both formal and informal volunteers.



References

- 1 This is based on data from the General Social Survey, the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Annual Information Statements, the Report on Government Services 2022, and organisation-specific data sources. While it is not possible to calculate an exact figure, combined data from these sources indicates that there are more than 1 million volunteers in the sectors identified.
- 2 Unless an alternative source is referenced, all definitions are taken from the Common Languages Guide published by Volunteering Australia; <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Common-Languages-Guide-2022-FINAL.pdf>
- 3 https://www.bnhcrc.com.au/sites/default/files/managed/downloads/rmit_emergvol-igvtviews_finalreport_oct2018.pdf, 10
- 4 *ibid*
- 5 <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/aus-gov-crisis-management-framework-v3-1-2.pdf>
- 6 <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/media/3649/ajem-32-02-09.pdf>
- 7 <https://landcareaustralia.org.au/news/2020-chep-land-management-and-sustainable-agriculture-landcare-grant/>
- 8 *ibid*
- 9 The AIS dataset includes information on all charities which access Commonwealth charity tax concessions and other benefits and publishes a variety of statistics including the size of the charity, their main activity, and the number of paid staff and volunteers they engage; <https://data.gov.au/dataset/ds-dga-34b35c52-8af0-4cc1-aa0b-2278f6416d09/details?q=acnc>
- 10 <https://www.flinders.edu.au/content/dam/documents/research/torrens-resilience-institute/understanding-community-resilience.pdf?msckid=22251445cf4711ec87568d6aaa2c0591>, 9-10
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- 15 <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2022/emergency-management>
- 16 Data taken from 2022 Report on Government Services for each year except 2010-2011, which was taken from the 2021 Report on Government Services
- 17 <https://www.foodbank.org.au/natural-disaster-relief/?state=nsw-act>
- 18 <https://mealsonwheels.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/MOWA-Annual-Report-2021-FINAL-Digital.pdf>, 3
- 19 <https://volunteeringqld.org.au/services/emergency-volunteering>
- 20 The ACNC Annual Information Statement dataset is updated weekly. The figures presented in this report were accessed 11 April 2022.
- 21 <https://www.lifeline.org.au/resources/data-and-statistics/>
- 22 <https://www.lifeline.org.au/media/krdfx53w/submission-to-the-productivity-commission-of-inquiry-into-mental-health-2019.pdf>
- 23 Data on volunteer hours provided to Volunteering Australia by Lifeline Australia
- 24 <https://blazeaid.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Overview-Statistics-2009-11-12-13-14-15-TO-BE-UPDATED.pdf>
- 25 <https://recovery.gov.au/about-us>
- 26 <https://naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/html-report/chapter-03>
- 27 These include, for example, the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework, the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience, the National Climate Resilience and Adaptation Strategy, the Australian Disaster Preparedness Framework, the National Framework for Improve Government Radio Communications Interoperability, and the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements. <https://naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/html-report/chapter-03>
- 28 <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/aus-gov-crisis-management-framework-v3-1-2.pdf>
- 29 <https://recovery.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/royal-commission-natural-disaster-june-2021.pdf>, 10
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- 31 <https://www.dss.gov.au/communities-and-vulnerable-people-programs-services-emergency-relief/national-coordination-group>
- 32 Except for the Australian Capital Territory, which functions as both territory and local government. <https://naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/html-report/chapter-21>
- 33 *ibid*
- 34 <https://alga.com.au/app/uploads/ALGA-Pre-Budget-Submission-2022-23.pdf>, 5
- 35 <https://emergency.volunteer.org.au/>; <https://volunteeringqld.org.au/services/emergency-volunteering>
- 36 <https://www.resiliencecorps.org.au/about-us-the-corps/>
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- 39 https://www.bnhcrc.com.au/sites/default/files/managed/downloads/rmit_emergvol-igvtviews_finalreport_oct2018.pdf, 11

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 and resilient communities through volunteering. Our purpose is to lead, strengthen and celebrate volunteering in Australia. Many volunteers offer their time formally through organisations, whilst others self-organise and volunteer informally in the community. We recognise the breadth, diversity and richness of volunteering activity in our communities and how it is evolving over time. We celebrate all forms of volunteering as contributing to a strong civil society.

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