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Ongoing trends in volunteering in Australia

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Abstract

This paper provides an analysis of how formal volunteering in Australia was impacted by the pandemic, the characteristics of those who were volunteering in April 2023 as the country continued to recover from the pandemic, the factors associated with the number of hours spent volunteering, and the dynamics of volunteering at different points on the pandemic recovery. The paper makes use of data from COVID-19 Impact Monitoring Series, an Australian longitudinal data set which provides data on volunteering from late-2019 just prior to the pandemic through to April 2022 at which time most of the COVID-19 restrictions had been lifted in Australia, as well as the ongoing ANUpoll series of data that continued asking similar questions after the pandemic and contains information on volunteering as of April 2023.

We find a small but significant increase in volunteering in the 12 months leading up to our most recent survey, though even by then volunteering numbers had not returned to their pre-pandemic levels. Furthermore, because those who volunteered in the 12 months leading up to the April 2023 survey volunteered for fewer hours than those who volunteered in the 12 months leading up to the April 2022 survey, we estimate that the total number of hours spent volunteering did not increase in the full year after the pandemic. Females and older Australians continue to volunteer at higher rates than males and those in the middle part of the age distribution. Those with relatively low levels of education are less likely to volunteer, whereas those who live outside of capital cities are more likely to do so than those in capital cities. Mental health and wellbeing also appears to be a barrier to volunteering.

1 Introduction and overview

There has been a long-term gradual decline in the proportion of the Australian population who undertake formal volunteering,¹ falling by about 20% between 2010 and 2018 (ABS 2020). Against this backdrop, there was a very substantial reduction in volunteering activity during the COVID-19 pandemic period. Data presented in this paper and published elsewhere suggests a fall of over 25% between late 2019 and April 2021 with little evidence of a recovery in volunteering rates by April 2022 (Biddle et al. 2022).

Despite the decline in volunteering, demand for volunteer services throughout COVID-19 has been as high as ever before and arguably even higher. A 2022 study of Australian volunteer organisation's experience of COVID found that 'most' (83 percent) reported their organisations needed 'more volunteers immediately or in the near future' (Holmes et al. 2022). This increased need for volunteer work coinciding with a reduction in the number of volunteers is likely to have negative consequences for the Australian community.

While the drop in volunteering during the pandemic had costs both in terms of the loss of volunteer work and the valuable and much needed services which were not provided and for the wellbeing of volunteers, the longer-term potential consequences of the pandemic having accelerated the decline in volunteering are large. It is an open question and one we will touch on in this paper as to whether rates of volunteering will return to their pre-COVID levels or whether they do not recover and the pandemic ends up resulting in a ratcheting down of the rate of volunteering.

These declines are important to respond to as volunteering has been shown to contribute directly to the Australian economy, with volunteers often engaging in sectors and activities that are not well supported by government or the market (Kragt and Holtrop 2019). Volunteering has also been shown to have a positive impact on the wellbeing of volunteers (Van Willingen 2000), providing a sense of meaning and satisfaction, as well as social interaction in addition to or instead of the social interaction that often occurs in paid work.

The impacts of COVID-19 on volunteering are likely to have been greater for vulnerable groups. In a review article, Grotz et al. (2020) concluded that 'The abrupt cessation of volunteering activities of and for older people because of the COVID-19 pandemic is highly likely to have negative health and wellbeing effects on older adults with long-term and far-reaching policy implications.'

The longer-term decline in volunteering is not unique to Australia, with the United Kingdom also having experienced a similar long-term decline and a big decrease in formal volunteering during COVID-19. For example, between 2013/14 and 2019/20 the proportion of the adult population who had volunteered at least once in the last year fell from 45% to 37% (UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport 2021). During the initial stages of the pandemic, Dederichs (2022) found that volunteering "... dropped at least by a third during the first lockdown and did not increase until March 2021." Dederichs also found that only 3.4% of respondents had undertaken volunteering in response to COVID-19.

Using longitudinal data from a large non-probability sample, Mak and Fancourt (2022) found that 12% reported that they had increased their participation in volunteering during lockdown, 23% reported decreasing their volunteering and 65% reported about the same amount of volunteering. The findings of the relatively small numbers undertaking COVID-19 related

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volunteering differs from the general finding that of substantial levels of disaster related volunteering during and in the aftermath of natural disasters (Barraket et al. 2013).

While there are a number of studies into COVID-19 volunteering, most have focused on the public health response such as contact tracing. (Trautwein et al. 2020) and there has been relatively little research into the impacts of the pandemic on other types of formal volunteering apart from the research of Dederichs (2022) and Mak and Fancourt (2022) for the United Kingdom.

This paper provides an analysis of how formal volunteering in Australia was impacted by the pandemic, the characteristics of those who were volunteering in April 2023 as the country continued to recover from the pandemic, the factors associated with the number of hours spent volunteering, and the dynamics of volunteering at different points on the pandemic recovery. The paper makes use of data from COVID-19 Impact Monitoring Series, an Australian longitudinal data set which provides data on volunteering from late-2019 just prior to the pandemic through to April 2022 at which time most of the COVID-19 restrictions had been lifted in Australia, as well as the ongoing ANUpoll series of data that continued asking similar questions after the pandemic and contains information on volunteering as of April 2023.

The Australian experience of COVID-19 and the associated public health response differed to that in many other countries. An effective shutting of Australia's international border, closure of many interstate borders and a tough and widespread lockdown that included closures of many schools, universities, businesses, and public transport during the initial period of COVID-19 meant that spread of COVID-19 was massively reduced and there were long periods of very low numbers of cases in most areas of Australia. Once vaccination rates were high (above 95 per cent first dose for adults), restrictions were progressively eased, and infection rates increased. The very effective limiting of the number of COVID-19 cases until after the population had been vaccinated means that Australia has had far fewer deaths from COVID-19 than many other comparable countries including the US, the UK and Canada.

Since the end of the pandemic, Australia has also experienced a high inflationary period due in part to the lingering impact of the pandemic, but also due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 and other global economic challenges. High inflation has been a global problem, but inflation in Australia has been higher over the last 18-24 months than it has been in recent years. Over the longer term, there have been periods of higher inflation, including the Korean War boom in the early 1950s (Maddock 1987), oil price shocks in the 1970s (Valadkhani and Mitchell 2002), and the apparent impact of loose monetary policy in the 1980s (Nelson 2005).

The year-on-year increase in prices of 7.8 per cent observed in the December 2022 quarter was the highest since 1990, surpassing the short-term spike observed when Australia implemented a Goods and Services Tax (GST) in 2000. Inflation has moderated slightly since the end of 2022, but the most recent CPI data released at the time of writing this paper still had consumer prices increasing by 5.4 per cent in the 12 months leading up to the September 2023 quarter.

The combined impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic economic shocks mean that understanding the experience of Australian volunteers is interesting in and of itself and potentially different to that in many other countries.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section provides an overview of the main data sources and measures used in the paper. Changes in volunteering during and

after COVID-19 are considered in Section 3. The characteristics that are associated with the likelihood of volunteering and the number of hours volunteered are documented in Section 4. A strength of the data used in this paper is that it follows the same group of individuals over time allowing the dynamics of volunteering at the individual level to be explored (Section 5). The final section concludes.

2 Data and measures

The survey data used in this paper are derived from the COVID-19 Impact Monitoring Series,² a 14-wave longitudinal survey nationally representative of the adult population conducted between April 2020 and January 2023.³ Three of the survey waves fielded during the pandemic included questions about volunteering. The first survey with volunteering questions was conducted in April 2020 (Wave 1 of the series; 3,155 respondents), the second in April 2021 (Wave 7; 3,286 respondents) and the third in April 2022 (Wave 11; 3,587 respondents).⁴ Also included in the analysis is data collected from the same group of respondents in late-2019. The data is for the people aged 18 years and over.

From April 2023, the surveys have continued to include tracking questions on wellbeing outcomes, economic circumstances, and political attitudes, but the focus of the surveys has returned to a broader set of issues as part of the long-term ANUpoll series. The April 2023 survey included a shorter volunteering module, with 4,469 respondents.

Combined, the April 2023 ANUpoll data and the COVID-19 Impact Monitoring series provide data collected from the same group of people from just prior to COVID-19 and allow a detailed analysis of how COVID-19 has impacted upon volunteers and volunteering at the individual level. To our knowledge, this data provides the most detailed, nationally representative, longitudinal data on volunteers from just prior to the pandemic through to April 2023.

The surveys identify formal volunteering using the question “Over the last 12 months did you spend any time doing voluntary work through an organisation or group?”⁵ In the April 2022 survey wave, respondents were also asked a set of questions about the direct impact of COVID-19. Specifically, the questionnaire started with the following introduction: ‘We are now going to ask you some questions about any changes you have made to your life since the start of the spread of COVID-19...Since February 2020, have you undertaken any of the following precautions to minimise COVID-19 transmission?’ One of the impacts asked about was whether they had “Stopped volunteering or other unpaid work”. The April 2022 survey wave also asked volunteers about the type of organisations they volunteered for and the type of activity undertaken when volunteering. A question was also asked about the mode of volunteering that had been undertaken in the previous twelve-months with the options being: in person at the organisation; in person in the field; over the internet; over the phone; and other.

A range of questions about future volunteering intentions were asked in April 2022. Respondents who had volunteered in the previous 12-months were asked ‘In the next five years, do you see yourself volunteering more or less frequently than the last 12 months.’ The response options were much less, less, about the same, more, or much more.

The April 2022 survey wave also asked respondents who had not volunteered in the previous 12-months a series of questions about whether they might be interested in volunteering in the future and if so which sector(s) and type of volunteer activity they might like to do in the future.

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People who had volunteered in the past (but not in the last 12 months) were asked ‘In the next five years, what do you think is the likelihood that you will recommence volunteering’. People who had never volunteered before were asked how likely it was that they would commence volunteering in the future. Response categories were not at all likely, not very likely, somewhat likely, and very likely.

In the April 2023 survey (like in the April 2022 survey), respondents were also asked ‘All things considered, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with your volunteering experience?’ Response options were very satisfied, satisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, dissatisfied, and very dissatisfied.

3 Changes in volunteering during and after COVID-19

In late 2019, just prior to COVID-19, it is estimated that 36.0 per cent of adults had undertaken formal volunteering in the previous 12-months. Fourteen months (April 2021) after the start of the pandemic the proportion who had volunteered in the previous 12-months fell to 24.2 per cent. The proportion of the adult population volunteering remained at around this level throughout the remainder of the pandemic, and was 26.7 per cent in April 2022. By April 2023, levels of volunteering were well above the COVID-19 low – 32.6 per cent – but were still significantly lower than prior to the pandemic.

3.1 Differences by age and sex

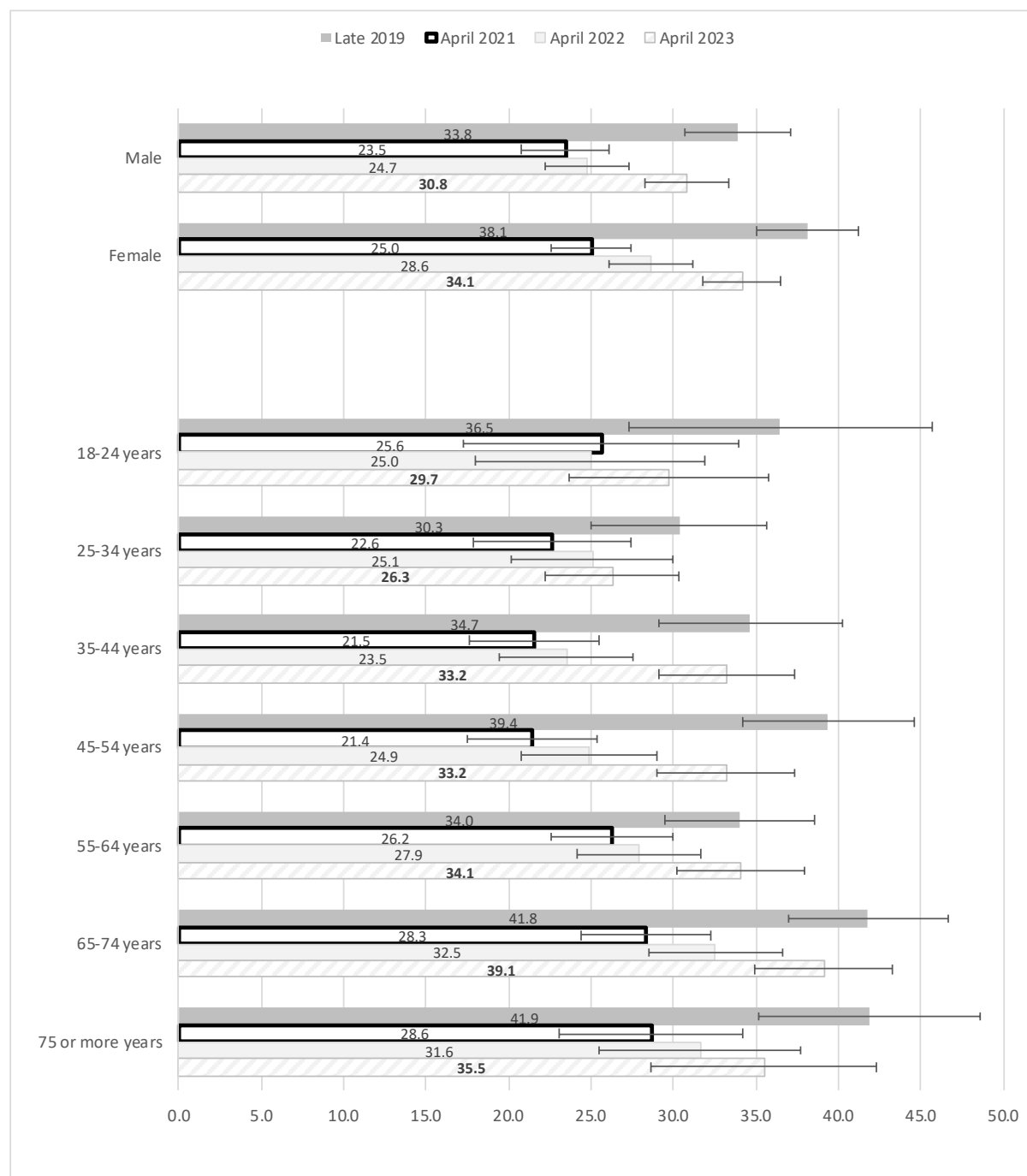
The volunteering rate of both women and men fell during the COVID-19 period. For women, it fell from 38.1 per cent in late 2019 to 28.6 per cent in April 2022, and for men it fell from 33.8 per cent to 24.7 per cent. The falls in volunteering during the pandemic were statistically significant for both men and women. After the pandemic, there was a slightly larger increase for males (to 30.8 per cent) than for females (to 34.1 per cent). So, although females still volunteer at higher rates than males, the decline over the pandemic and into the post-pandemic period has been slightly larger for females compared to males.

The rate of volunteering fell for all age groups between late 2019 and April 2021 (Figure 1). The biggest decline was amongst those aged 45 to 54 years, with the rate of volunteering for this group almost halving from 39.4 to 21.4 per cent. While between April 2021 and April 2022 there was either no change or a small increase in volunteering rates for all age groups, the rate of volunteering in April 2022 remained lower than the pre-COVID rate for all age groups.

This relatively large decrease in volunteering by older age groups early on in the pandemic could be influenced by volunteers deemed at high risk being stood down or opting to limit their volunteering. For example, in Australia, the New South Wales Department of Communities and Justice (2020) survey showed that those volunteers considered to be of ‘high risk’ were ‘stood down [from organisations] ... in order to keep them safe’.

In the 12 months that followed the end of the pandemic, there were large increases in volunteering rates for the middle part of the age distribution, with a roughly forty per cent increase for those aged 35 to 44 years (from 23.5 to 33.2 per cent) and a one-third increase for those aged 45 to 54 years (24.9 to 33.2 per cent). Increases were either small or not statistically significant for younger Australians (particularly those aged 25 to 34 years) or older Australians (aged 75 years and over).

Figure 1 Per cent of Australians who undertook volunteering in the previous 12 months, by age, late 2019, April 2021, and April 2022



Note: The “whiskers” on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate. Population aged 18-years and older. Population weights have been applied.

Source: ANUpoll, April 2020, April 2021, and April 2022.

3.2 Hours volunteered and volunteering intensity

Amongst people who were doing volunteer work in the 12-months prior to April 2023, just under one-third (31.9 per cent) said they had increased the amount of volunteering they did, 42.4 per cent reported no change, and 25.8 per cent said their volunteering had decreased over the last 12-months.

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In the 12 months leading up to April 2023, volunteers estimate that they spent 151 hours volunteering. This is much less than the 180 hours per week that volunteers estimate they undertook in the 12 months leading up to the April 2022 survey. What that means is that the average hours spent volunteering over the whole adult population (volunteers and non-volunteers combined, with the latter set to zero) hardly changed at all between the twelve months leading up to April 2022 (45.8 hours) and the twelve months leading up to April 2023 (46.8 per cent).

There were declines in hours volunteered between 2022 and 2023 across the distribution. In our latest year of data, the standard deviation (317 hours) was quite similar to the previous year (325). The median, however, had declined substantially from 80 in 2022 to 52 in 2023.

Declines in hours volunteered (for those who volunteered at all) were much greater for males compared to females. For the former, the average number of hours spent volunteering declined from 202 hours in April 2022 to 153 hours in April 2023. For female volunteers, on the other hand, declines were much smaller, decreasing from 162 hours to 150.

4 Predictors of volunteering and volunteer hours

We have already seen that there are quite large differences in volunteering rates by age and sex. While the change through time in volunteering has been influenced to a certain extent by these demographic characteristics, the broad relativities haven't changed too much. Females are more likely to volunteer than males, young adults and those beyond retirement age are more likely to volunteer than those of prime working age and peak child-rearing years. In this section, we explore a broader set of determinants of volunteering, including economic circumstances, location, and mental health.

4.1 Factors associated with the likelihood of volunteering

To analyse the factors associated with volunteering, we use a regression-style approach. The dependent variable in the analysis is whether or not someone undertook volunteering in the 12 months preceding the April 2023 survey, and we estimate a simple model, and a more expanded model. The simple model includes sex, age, country of birth, education, and location. These variables are highly likely to influence volunteering, rather than be influenced by volunteering. That is, the direction of causality is reasonably clear.

In the second model, we include an additional set of explanatory variables, including whether the person was employed, their household income, their level of financial stress, their level of psychological stress, and whether they think it likely that they will be infected by COVID-19 in the six months after the survey. These variables are more time varying and may have a direct impact on volunteering, but may also be influenced by volunteering. The causal direction is much less certain.

To estimate these relationships, we use the probit model. This is appropriate for when the dependent variable is binary (yes/no). The relationship with the explanatory variables is presented as marginal effects or the differences in probability of volunteering compared to someone with a different value for that explanatory variable, whilst holding constant all other explanatory variables. We also report statistical significance.

Looking at the results presented in Table 1, we can confirm that females and older Australians were more likely to volunteer, even when other characteristics are held constant. Those born overseas in an English-speaking country are slightly less likely to volunteer. The biggest

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differences, however, are by education and location. Those Australians that have not completed Year 12 are far less likely to volunteer than those who had. Those with a degree (and particularly a postgraduate degree) are far more likely to volunteer.

In terms of location, those who live in a relatively disadvantaged areas are less likely to volunteer than those who live in advantaged ones. Furthermore, controlling for area-level disadvantage (and the other individual characteristics) those who live outside of a capital city are far more likely to volunteer than those who live in a capital city.

Looking at the expanded set of (time varying) explanatory variables, those in high income households are more likely to volunteer than those in middle and low-income households. Given we are controlling for individual characteristics including employment, this may reflect the financial freedom that comes from others in the household having a high income.

Those who were experiencing financial stress were no more or less likely to volunteer than those who were not. This is an important finding, because April 2023 was a time with high levels of financial stress across Australia. It would not have been surprising if that was making it more difficult for people to volunteer.

Those who were working full-time were significantly less likely to be volunteering than those working part-time, or those not working at all. Volunteering is clearly a time commitment, and working 35 hours or more makes it much harder to find that time.

Those who were experiencing a moderate level of psychological distress were not significantly less likely to undertake volunteer work than those who were not experiencing psychological stress (based on the Kessler-6 index and cut-offs). Those who were experiencing severe psychological distress, however, were significantly and substantially less likely to be undertaking volunteer work. This may be because volunteer work provides some form of protection against psychological stress (reverse causality). However, given we are controlling for a range of variables in the model that are likely to predict psychological stress, it is perhaps more plausible that those who are experiencing poor mental are less able to undertake volunteer work.

The last three variables in the model relate to the potential ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It would appear that as of April 2023 the pandemic was not creating a direct barrier to volunteer work. Those who thought it was likely that they would contract COVID-19 in the next six months were more likely to be undertaking volunteer work, and those who had to isolate in the previous 3 months were also more likely to be undertaking volunteer work. It is possible that it is the volunteer work that is leading to the COVID-19 experience rather than vice-versa. However, it does suggest that many of the direct impacts of the pandemic have started to fade.

Table 1 Regression model estimates of the factors associated with volunteering, April 2023

Explanatory variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	M.Effect.	Signif.	M.Effect.	Signif.
Lives in lowest income household (1st quintile)			0.025	
Lives in next lowest income household (2nd quintile)			0.008	
Lives in next highest income household (4th quintile)			0.016	
Lives in highest income household (5th quintile)			0.073	**
Finding it difficult on current income			0.032	
Employed full-time			-0.058	***
Employed part-time			0.008	
Moderate psychological distress			-0.024	
High psychological distress			-0.056	*
Thinks COVID-19 likely in next 6 months			0.031	*
Anxious or worried due to COVID-19 in previous 3 months			0.019	
Had to isolate in previous 3 months			0.042	*
Female	0.052	***	0.034	*
Aged 18 to 24 years	0.008		0.011	
Aged 25 to 34 years	-0.075	***	-0.058	**
Aged 45 to 54 years	-0.003		0.007	
Aged 55 to 64 years	0.027		0.023	
Aged 65 to 74 years	0.071	**	0.047	
Aged 75 years plus	0.072	*	0.066	
Indigenous	-0.012		-0.050	
Born overseas in a main English-speaking country	-0.040	*	-0.039	*
Born overseas in a non-English speaking country	-0.023		-0.021	
Speaks a language other than English at home	-0.032		-0.022	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-0.104	***	-0.088	***
Has a post graduate degree	0.117	***	0.117	***
Has an undergraduate degree	0.052	*	0.056	*
Has a Certificate III/IV, Diploma or Associate Degree	-0.002		0.008	
Lives in the most disadvantaged areas (1st quintile)	-0.053	*	-0.058	**
Lives in next most disadvantaged areas (2nd quintile)	-0.025		-0.011	
Lives in next most advantaged areas (4th quintile)	0.021		0.023	
Lives in the most advantaged areas (5th quintile)	0.023		0.014	
Lives outside of a capital city	0.079	***	0.075	***
Probability of base case	0.279		0.250	
Sample size	4,370		4,067	

Notes: Probit regression model. The base case individual is male; aged 35 to 44 years; non-Indigenous; born in Australia; does not speak a language other than English at home; has completed Year 12 but does not have a post-graduate degree; lives in neither an advantaged or disadvantaged suburb (third quintile); lives in a capital city.

Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance are labelled ***; those significant at the 5 per cent level of significance are labelled **, and those significant at the 10 per cent level of significance are labelled *

Source: ANUpoll, April 2023.

4.2 Factors associated with the number of hours spent volunteering

In this second part of the section, we consider whether similar factors are associated with the number of hours spent volunteering. We estimate the model only for those who said that they undertook at least one hour of volunteering in the previous 12 months.⁶

We find that volunteers who were 45 years and older spent more hours volunteering than younger volunteers, whereas those volunteers born overseas in a non-English speaking country spent fewer hours. There were some differences by socioeconomic characteristic of the area, but this was not consistent across the distribution.

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In the expanded model, employment and income are strongly associated with hours worked. Volunteers in high income households spent fewer hours volunteering, whereas volunteers who worked full-time and particularly part-time also spent fewer hours volunteering.

Table 2 Regression model estimates of the factors associated with the number of hours spent volunteering (natural log), April 2023

Explanatory variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	M.Effect.	Signif.	M.Effect.	Signif.
Lives in lowest income household (1st quintile)			0.150	
Lives in next lowest income household (2nd quintile)			0.278	
Lives in next highest income household (4th quintile)			-0.076	
Lives in highest income household (5th quintile)			-0.542	***
Finding it difficult on current income			0.121	
Employed full-time			-0.310	*
Employed part-time			-0.458	***
Moderate psychological distress			0.008	
High psychological distress			0.181	
Thinks COVID-19 likely in next 6 months			-0.124	
Anxious or worried due to COVID-19 in previous 3 months			-0.087	
Had to isolate in previous 3 months			-0.115	
Female	0.066		0.018	
Aged 18 to 24 years	0.177		0.069	
Aged 25 to 34 years	0.055		-0.027	
Aged 45 to 54 years	0.300	*	0.325	*
Aged 55 to 64 years	0.396	**	0.216	
Aged 65 to 74 years	1.014	***	0.600	***
Aged 75 years plus	1.222	***	0.694	**
Indigenous	0.102		-0.068	
Born overseas in a main English-speaking country	0.027		0.046	
Born overseas in a non-English speaking country	-0.599	***	-0.753	***
Speaks a language other than English at home	0.018		0.010	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	0.272		0.066	
Has a post graduate degree	0.051		0.185	
Has an undergraduate degree	0.034		0.099	
Has a Certificate III/IV, Diploma or Associate Degree	0.083		0.039	
Lives in the most disadvantaged areas (1st quintile)	0.315		0.261	
Lives in next most disadvantaged areas (2nd quintile)	0.130		0.089	
Lives in next most advantaged areas (4th quintile)	0.359	**	0.402	**
Lives in the most advantaged areas (5th quintile)	0.012		0.172	
Lives outside of a capital city	0.066		0.077	
Constant	3.298		3.795	
Sample size	1,479		1,389	

Notes: Linear regression model. The base case individual is male; aged 35 to 44 years; non-Indigenous; born in Australia; does not speak a language other than English at home; has completed Year 12 but does not have a post-graduate degree; lives in neither an advantaged or disadvantaged suburb (third quintile); lives in a capital city.

Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance are labelled ***; those significant at the 5 per cent level of significance are labelled **, and those significant at the 10 per cent level of significance are labelled *

Source: ANUpoll, April 2023.

5 Volunteering dynamics

One of the major strengths of the ANUpoll data is that we look at the volunteering dynamics at the individual level. That is, we can not only see whether levels of volunteering are going up or down nationally, but also which people have started volunteering, as well as those who have stopped.

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Across the April 2022 and 2023 surveys, we have data on volunteering in both waves for 2,460 respondents. Of those who were not volunteering in April 2022, 13.0 per cent had commenced volunteering by April 2023. Moving in the opposite direction, of those who were volunteering in April 2022, 22.5 per cent had stopped by April 2023. Because there were more people not volunteering in 2022 than volunteering, these percentages translate into a net increase in volunteering rates (as discussed previously). However, looking at the flows highlights that there is some churn in volunteering, even over a 12-month period.

When we analysed the April 2021 and 2022 surveys, we were particularly focused on the characteristics of those who stopped volunteering. Many of the patterns that we observed with earlier data have held with subsequent waves of data. However, one dynamic that has become more pronounced over the last survey period has been the relationship between hours spent volunteering in the 12 months leading up to the April 2022 survey, and the likelihood of still volunteering in the 12 months leading up to the April 2023 survey.

If we classify those who volunteered in the 12 months leading up to April 2022 into roughly five equal groups based on how many hours they volunteered for over those 12 months, then there are quite large differences in the likelihood remaining as a volunteer. Of those in the lowest quintile (volunteered for 16 hours or less), only 68.0 per cent remained volunteering by April 2023. For the top quintile (294 hours or more in the previous 12 months), this increases to 88.7 per cent. The rest of the volunteering population were somewhere in between (78.6 per cent). Those with greater volunteering commitments are more likely to stay volunteering.

Now that net flows are in the opposite direction, we have the opportunity to better understand what factors drive the commencement (or recommencement) of volunteering, which has occurred at much greater rates over the last survey window. One of the socioeconomic factors that is associated with starting volunteering was education. Of those who were not volunteering in April 2022, only 7.3 per cent of those who had not completed Year 12 volunteered in the 12 months leading up to the April 2023 survey. This is compared to 16.6 per cent of those with a postgraduate degree, 14.0 per cent of those with an undergraduate degree, 14.2 per cent of those with a Certificate or Diploma, and 12.5 per cent of those that had completed Year 12 but did not have any qualifications.⁷

The dynamics by education led to a widening in the gaps in volunteering by education, as those with higher levels of education already had a higher level of participation in April 2022. There was, however, a narrowing in the gap by location. Amongst those who weren't volunteering in 2022, only 10.2 per cent of those who lived in a non-capital city had commenced volunteering by 2023, compared to 14.2 per cent of those who lived in a capital city.

We can also look at the likelihood of commencing volunteering based on responses to questions in the April 2022 survey. Those who weren't volunteering according to the April 2022 survey were asked whether they had volunteered in the past. By the April 2023 survey, 27.3 per cent of those who said they had volunteered a lot in the past had commenced volunteering, and 25.3 per cent of those who had volunteered a little had commenced. This is roughly three times the rate of commencement relative to those that had not volunteered at all in the past.

Non-volunteers in the 2022 survey were also asked their likelihood of volunteering in the next 5 years. Of those who said it was very unlikely or unlikely that they would volunteer in the next five years, a very low per cent had indeed commenced by 2023 (7.2 per cent and 6.7 per cent). However, even amongst those that said it was likely and very likely that they would commence,

only a minority had done so (17.4 and 29.6 per cent respectively). Volunteering intentions therefore have some information, but it is incomplete.

6 Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a dramatic fall in the number of volunteers. As of April 2022, there had only be a very small recovery in the rate of volunteering, and even by April 2023 volunteering numbers had not returned to their pre-pandemic levels. This follows a long-term gradual decline in volunteering in Australia. Furthermore, because those who volunteered in the 12 months leading up to the April 2023 survey volunteered for fewer hours than those who volunteered in the 12 months leading up to the April 2022 survey, we estimate that the total number of hours spent volunteering did not increase in the full year after the pandemic.

While during the initial phases of the pandemic lockdowns did prevent much of the face-to-face volunteering, the lack of a recovery raises serious questions as whether rates of volunteering will recover without significant policies efforts and what types of policies will be most effective.

We identified a number of characteristics that predict volunteering. Females and older Australians continue to volunteer at higher rates than males and those in the middle part of the age distribution. Those with relatively low levels of education are less likely to volunteer, whereas those who live outside of capital cities are more likely to do so than those in capital cities. Mental health and wellbeing also appears to be a barrier to volunteering, though fortunately it does not appear to limit the number of hours spent volunteering for those who are able to volunteer.

Supporting people to volunteer could improve wellbeing outcomes while bolstering service delivery and social connection during future crises. Across Australia's history, volunteers have provided essential goods and services that are either not provided by the market or by government, or which many people do not have access to due to financial or other barriers. The demand for these goods and services has not gone away during the COVID-19 pandemic, and in some ways may have increased. The policy challenge, therefore, is to find ways to engage or re-engage those who aren't volunteering or who have stopped volunteering. This research provides insights into how to go about this and demonstrates the value of doing so.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Formal volunteering is defined as time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain, taking place within organisations (including institutions and agencies) in a structured way.
- ² See <https://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/research/publications/covid-19>
- ³ The ANUpoll series of surveys is collected on a probability-based, longitudinal panel. By using probability-based recruiting (predominantly telephone-based) the unknown and unquantifiable biases inherent in opt-in (non-probability) panels are minimised and it is also possible to quantify the uncertainty around the estimates due to sampling error using standard statistical techniques. This is not possible with non-probability surveys.
- ⁴ Of those respondents who completed the April 2022 survey, 62.6 per cent had completed the April 2021 survey, and 57.8 per cent had completed the April 2020 survey (the first COVID-19 Impact Monitoring survey).
- ⁵ The guidance to respondents in answering this question was “Please include voluntary work for sporting teams, youth groups, schools, or religious organisations. Please exclude work in a family business or paid employment. Please exclude work to qualify for a government benefit or to obtain an educational qualification or due to a community / court order?”
- ⁶ Because the variable is highly skewed, we use the natural log of hours spent volunteering as our dependent variable, and estimate the parameters using Ordinary Least Squared or OLS regression.
- ⁷ These differences hold in a regression model.