



# Volunteering during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (April 2021)

## ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods

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### Abstract

The April 2021 ANUpoll, the seventh in the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods COVID-19 Impact monitoring program, collected data on volunteering and this can be combined with data on volunteering collected from the same group of individuals collected in late 2019 prior to COVID-19 and in April 2020 during the early stages of the pandemic in Australia. This paper provides data on changes to volunteering and voluntary work since COVID-19, and the impacts of these changes. The proportion of adult Australians doing voluntary work has fallen very substantially since COVID-19. This fall appears to have had a large impact on life satisfaction in Australia, particularly up until October 2020.

### Executive summary

- This paper provides data on changes to volunteering and voluntary work since COVID-19, and the impacts of these changes. The April 2021 ANUpoll, the seventh in the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods COVID-19 Impact monitoring program can be combined with data on volunteering collected from the same group of individuals collected in late 2019 prior to COVID-19 and in April 2020 during the early stages of the pandemic.
- The **proportion of adult Australians doing voluntary work has fallen** very substantially since COVID-19. 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. Although many of the lockdown and social distancing restrictions had eased across Australia by April 2021, **many of those who had previously volunteered but had stopped doing so had not returned to volunteering.**
  - There are an estimated **2.3 million less Australians volunteering in April 2021** than there were in late 2019. The data suggests that unpaid work has been impacted even harder by the COVID-19 recession than paid work, at least in terms of relative decline (that is, unpaid 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. This implies that the loss in economic output due to the pandemic would be 16.1 per cent higher if volunteering was included, compared to paid work only.
  - 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 45 to 54 years.**
  - There was a **smaller decline in the probability of volunteering for people living in non-capital cities.**
  - People who had the greatest decrease in hours worked over the COVID-19 recession had the greatest relative increase in the probability of volunteering.
- More Australian volunteers said that they had done ‘Substantially less voluntary work’ (15.3 per cent of those who did any volunteering) than said that they did ‘Substantially more voluntary work’ (9.2 per cent) in the previous 12 months.
- 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 no change or minimal impacts, whereas others talked about the positive effects volunteering had on them during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many others, however, talked about the changes they had to make to the way in which they volunteered and the negative impacts of restrictions. The qualitative data will be analysed in more detail in a subsequent paper.
- Voluntary work is vital to Australian society. There is a risk that many of those who have stopped volunteering during the COVID-19 period will not return to voluntary work and at least some will be volunteering less. The COVID-19 related loss of volunteering hours is potentially impacting on many vulnerable Australians who rely on volunteering. A strong argument can be made that **unpaid activities also need specific consideration, and potentially additional government support.**

### 1 Introduction and overview

When the COVID-19 pandemic first hit Australia, there were real fears that the unemployment rate would increase to levels not seen in decades, and perhaps even levels not seen since the Great Depression in the 1930s. Initial data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS') Labour Force Survey (LFS)<sup>1</sup> did indeed show a dramatic reduction in the employment-to-population ratio over the first few months of the crisis from 62.4 per cent in March 2020 to 58.2 per cent in May 2020 and a dramatic increase in unemployment from 5.2 per cent in March to 7.5 per cent in July.

The employment rate stabilised in mid-2020 and since largely recovered and by March 2021 was 62.6 per cent, slightly above pre-pandemic levels. The unemployment rate in March 2021 (5.6 per cent) was also close to pre-pandemic levels.

While this extraordinary employment recovery is not unique across the world, with Canada having a higher employment to population ratio in April 2021 than prior to the pandemic, most other comparable countries (such as the US and the UK) still have not returned to pre-pandemic employment levels.<sup>2</sup>

While there is rightly a focus of the impact of COVID-19 on paid employment, it is important to also consider the impacts on unpaid activities, such as voluntary work. A simple starting definition of volunteering is 'time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain.'<sup>3</sup> Volunteers make an enormous contribution to Australian society, with their work making contributions in areas as varied as aged care, disability support, emergency services, the arts, education, sport, environment, health, tourism, and community welfare.

It has been estimated that prior to COVID-19, volunteering work in Australia was worth around \$43 billion to the Australian economy per year, 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 Willigen 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.

Many forms of volunteering activity were made more difficult during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly activity which involves face-to-face interaction. The impacts 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.' Counter-balancing this to a certain extent is the potential for new volunteering opportunities to arise, as online interaction becomes more ubiquitous and familiar for people, and as new demands arise (for example to support the delivery of vaccine programs) (Bazan et al. 2021).

In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic (up to and including April 2020), the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods analysed the initial impact of COVID-19 on volunteering in Australia (Biddle and Gray 2020). This research found that during the early stages of the pandemic there has been a large negative impact on volunteering. Biddle and Gray (2020) concluded that 'Around one-third of volunteers have been able to continue volunteering, and this group has been less affected by COVID-19 with life satisfaction and mental health benefits having been maintained. For the other two-thirds or so of volunteers who have had to stop – equivalent to 12.2 million hours per week – the wellbeing declines and worsening in mental

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health have been large.’

The aim of this paper is to update the evidence on volunteering using a number of additional waves of data collected on the longitudinal sample from the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods COVID-19 Impact Monitoring Survey program. The most recent data used is from the April 2021 wave, data collection for which commenced on the 12<sup>th</sup> of April and concluded on the 26<sup>th</sup> of April. The final sample size for the survey is 3,286 respondents, and 54.7 per cent of the sample had completed the survey by the 15<sup>th</sup> of April. The vast majority of respondents (94.9 per cent) completed the survey online, with the remainder completing the survey over the phone.

Because the survey was collected on a longitudinal sample, it is possible to link response in April 2021 to previous waves of data collection. Of those who had completed the April 2021 survey, 94.6 per cent (3,109 respondents) had completed the January 2021 survey. Looking even further back, of those who had completed the April 2021 survey, 81.0 per cent (2,663 respondents) had completed the April 2020 survey. More detail on the survey is available in Appendix 1.

In a previous paper in this series (Biddle and Gray 2021), we documented the changes in employment and wellbeing for the total Australian (adult) population. We found that ‘since November 2020, life satisfaction in Australia has stayed somewhere in between life satisfaction in October 2019 (a time of relative stability in Australia) and January 2020 which was during the height of the Black Summer bushfires’ and that ‘There was a continued decline in psychological distress (i.e., an improvement in mental health outcomes) as measured by the Kessler-6 measure between January 2021 and April 2021. Average psychological distress is now lower than it was pre-pandemic.’

This paper provides data on rates of volunteering in April 2021 compared to pre-COVID and the individual level factors associated with changes in the level of volunteering (Section 2). In the sections that follow the paper looks at whether changes in volunteering are associated with changes in life satisfaction (Section 3), and presents some initial qualitative data on the experience of volunteering during the pandemic (Section 4). Section 5 provides some concluding comments.

## 2 Rates of volunteering

Respondents to the April 2021 ANUpoll were asked: ‘Over the last 12 months did you spend any time doing voluntary work through an organisation or group?’ with the following instruction given ‘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.’

It is estimated that around one-quarter (24.2 per cent) of adult Australians had spent at least some time volunteering over the last 12-months. This equates to 4.8 million Australians who volunteered during the pandemic period.<sup>4</sup> The proportion of adult Australians reporting having spent time volunteering in the previous twelve months fell by 11.8 percentage points from 36.0 per cent in late 2019.<sup>5</sup>

We can also follow those who, in April 2020, said that they had stopped volunteering due to COVID-19. 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

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leading up to April 2021. This data strongly suggests that, although many of the lockdown and social distancing restrictions had eased across Australia by April 2021, many of those who had previously volunteered but had stopped doing so had not returned to volunteering.

The ABS has also found a decline in volunteering over the previous 12 months as part of their Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey program.<sup>6</sup> The decline was not as large when measured by the ABS, however the crucial difference between the data presented in this paper and the data collected by the ABS is that the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods COVID-19 Impact Monitoring Survey program has longitudinal information on the same individuals from prior to COVID-19. This means that comparisons of change through time in this paper are not affected by recall bias, whereas the ABS estimates for the 12 months prior to the 1<sup>st</sup> of March 2020 are based on a person's reflections in March 2021. This is 24 months since the start of the recall period, and incidentally gives an estimate for volunteering up to March 2020 that is below the estimate from their own General Social Survey (26 per cent compared to 28.8 per cent). Counterbalancing this to a certain extent is the known bias in online panels with regards to altruistic behaviour (Kazmirek et al. 2019). However, this should mostly impact levels, rather than change through time. These differences in methodology aside, both surveys find a large decline in volunteering in the 12 months prior to March or April 2021 compared to pre-COVID.

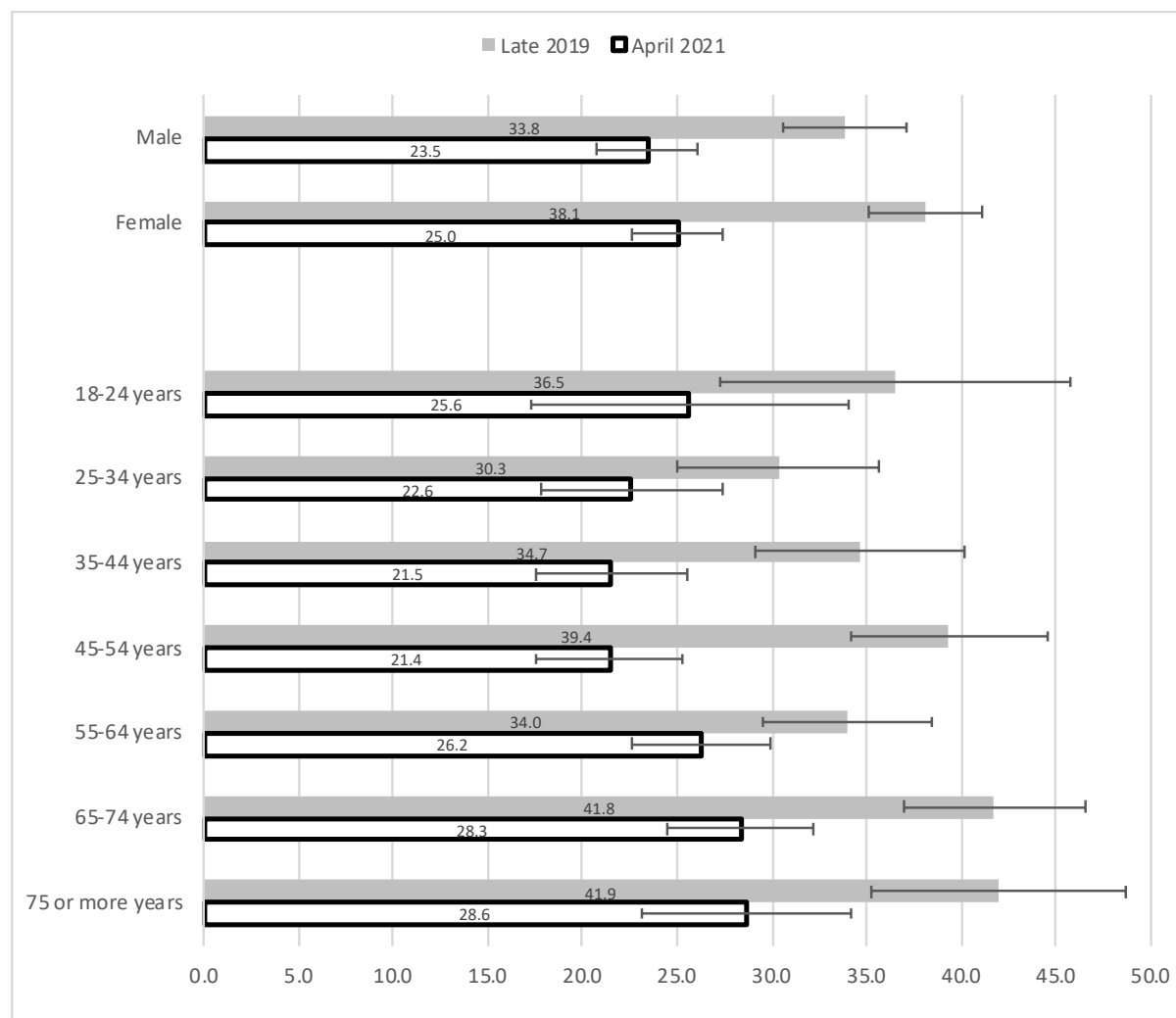
The decline in the proportion of Australians who volunteered since the start of COVID-19 translates into the number of adult Australians volunteering falling by 2.3 million compared to late 2019. If it is assumed that the number of hours volunteered by those who were volunteering was similar in April 2021 as it was pre-COVID (a point we will return to in the next section), then if each volunteer averaged 2.5 hours per week (Biddle and Gray 2020) then the drop in the number of people who volunteered equates to a total decline of around 293 million hours of volunteering across Australia.

By way of comparison, using February 2020 as the baseline hours worked for an individual, we estimate that on average Australian adults worked 90.7 hours less in paid work between May 2020 and April 2021 than they would have if they had have continued working at their pre-pandemic level. This equates to 1.8 billion hours lost in paid work over a 12-month period due to the COVID-19 recession. That is, the loss in economic output due to the pandemic would be 16.1 per cent higher if volunteering was included, compared to paid work only.

There were declines in volunteering for both males and females, and for all age groups (Figure 1). However, the declines varied somewhat across the population. There was a slightly larger decline for females (38.1 per cent to 25.0 per cent) than for males (33.8 per cent to 23.5 per cent). The age group with the greatest decline in the probability of having volunteered in the previous 12 months was those aged 45 to 54 years, declining from 39.4 per cent to 21.4 per cent. However, other age groups also suffered declines, including those aged 65-74 years (41.8 per cent to 28.3 per cent) and those aged 75 years and over (41.9 per cent to 28.6 per cent), the groups in Australia that had the highest rate of volunteering pre-COVID.

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**Figure 1** Per cent of Australians who undertook volunteering in the preceding 12 months, by age and sex – late 2019 and April 2021

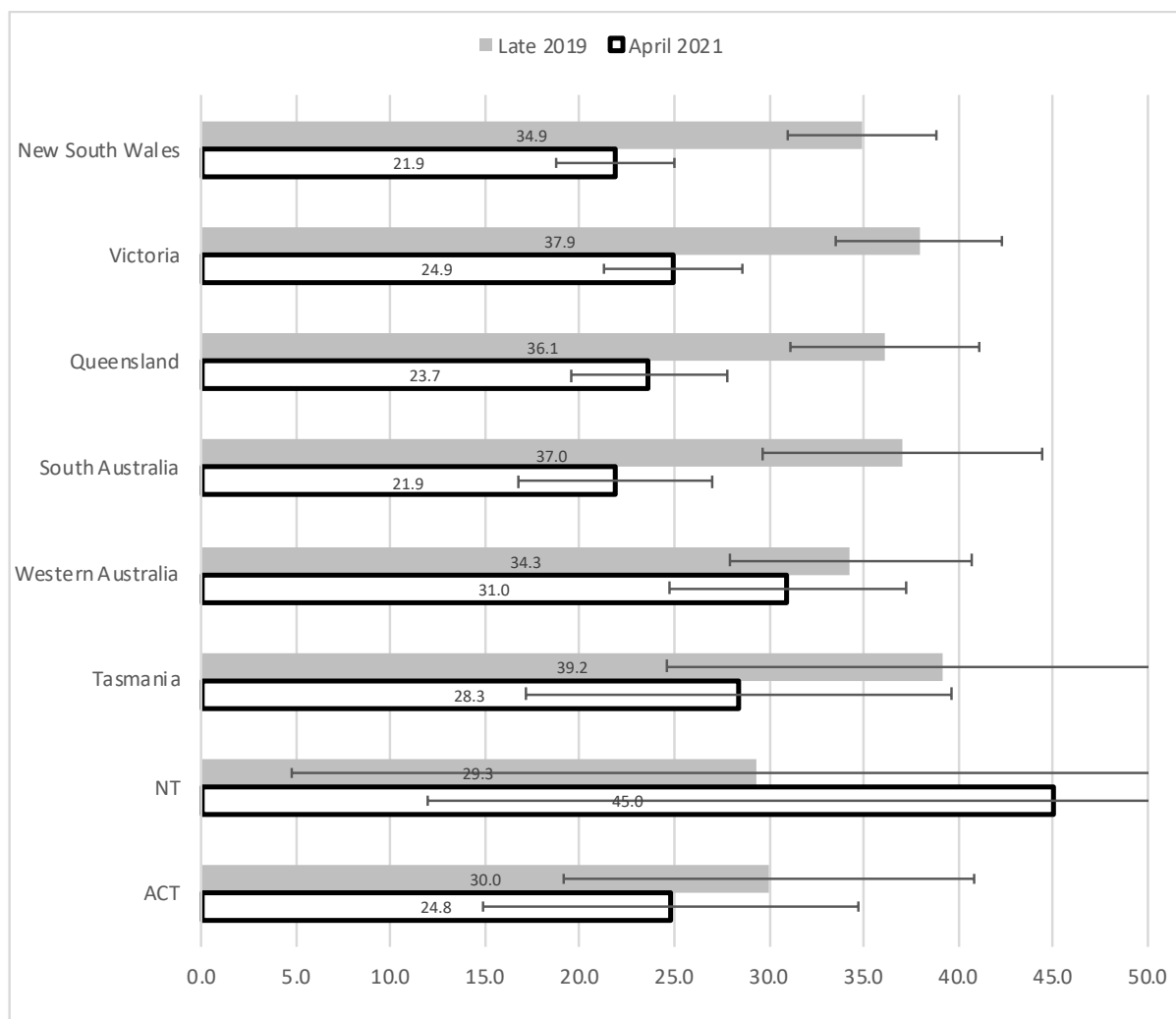


Note: The “whiskers” on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

Source: ANUpoll, April 2020 and April 2021.

There were also reasonably consistent declines in volunteering across the eight Australian States and Territories (Figure 2). The only exception to this is the Northern Territory, which had an increase in volunteering. While there is considerable uncertainty around this estimate due to the relatively small sample sizes, it should be noted that data from April 2020 showed that those in the Northern Territory had the lowest probability of reporting that they had stopped volunteering due to COVID-19 (Biddle and Gray 2020). Across the other jurisdictions, relative decline was greatest for South Australia and New South Wales, with Western Australia the only one of the large jurisdictions that did not have a statistically significant decline over the period.

Figure 2 Per cent of Australians who undertook volunteering in the preceding 12 months, by State/Territory – late 2019 and April 2021



Note: The “whiskers” on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

Source: ANUpoll, April 2020 and April 2021.

## 2.1 Explaining the decline in volunteering

We can use the longitudinal nature of our sample to help understand trajectories in volunteering. Across the Australian population, it is estimated that 60.5 per cent of adults did not volunteer in the 12 months leading up to the April 2021 nor in the 12 months leading up to late 2019. An additional 19.7 per cent of Australian adults volunteered in both periods. This leaves 4.1 per cent of adults who volunteered during the pandemic period who did not volunteer prior to the pandemic, far outweighed by the 15.7 per cent of Australian adults who stopped volunteering over the period.

We can use a regression-style of analysis to identify the characteristics of the different groups above. Beginning with a cross-sectional analysis of volunteering in April 2021, and controlling for a range of demographic, socioeconomic, and geographic variables with full results presented in Table 1 in Appendix 2, we can see that older Australians (aged 55 years and over), those with a degree, and those who live outside a capital city were more likely to have



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volunteered over the previous 12 months. Those born overseas in a non-English speaking country and those who had not completed Year 12 were less likely to volunteer.

When volunteering as of late 2019 is controlled for (that is, analysing the change in probability through time), there is no longer an association with being an older Australian, though those aged 45 to 54 years have a more negative change in volunteering than those aged 35 to 44 years (the base case). There is no longer an association with education (implying that the relative differences in volunteering by education haven't change through time), however those born overseas in a non-English speaking country have had a relative decline (albeit with a p-value of 0.101).

Those in non-capital cities have had a smaller decline in the probability of volunteering over the period, starting off from a higher base. Outside of the modelling context, the rate of volunteering in non-capital cities declined from 39.5 per cent to 29.1 per cent, whereas in capital cities the decline was from 33.3 per cent to 21.1 per cent.

There is a very strong interaction between participation in paid work and volunteer work. The greater the number of hours a person did of paid work per week as of February 2020, the lower the probability of having undertaken volunteer work in the 12 months leading up to April 2021. This makes sense, as paid work can crowd-out unpaid work. However, there was a positive association between the estimated 'lost hours' of paid work between February 2020 and January 2021 and the probability of volunteering.<sup>7</sup> That is, 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 (and vice versa).

### 2.2 Changes in amount of volunteering for individuals

Those respondents who in April 2021 said that they undertook volunteering over the previous 12 months were asked 'In the last 12 months, have you done more or less voluntary work than you did previously? Would you say you have done...?'

It was slightly more common for respondents who had volunteered in the previous 12-months to say that they did 'Substantially less voluntary work' (15.3 per cent of those who did any volunteering) than it was to say that they did 'Substantially more voluntary work' (9.2 per cent). However, the most common response was that the person did 'About the same amount of voluntary work' (38.6 per cent) with about the same number of people saying that they did 'A little more voluntary work' (18.4 per cent) as saying they did 'A little less voluntary work' (18.5 per cent). It would seem, therefore, that the estimate of a total decline of around 293 million hours of volunteering across Australia is a slight under-estimate, as there are more volunteers who decreased their hours than increased their hours over the period.

Using a multinomial probit model, there were a number of factors that were associated with having changed the amount of volunteering over the previous 12 months (Table 2). Those who worked a greater number of hours in February 2020 were less likely to have increased their volunteering over the period, but were also less likely to have decreased their volunteering. That is, there was less change in volunteering the greater the number of paid hours prior to the COVID-recession. The more a person lost paid hours over the period the higher the probability they increased the amount of volunteering they did, with no association with the probability of decreasing the amount.

Having volunteered in the 12 months prior to the end of 2019 was not associated with change in volunteering over the pandemic. However, those who in April said that they had stopped

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volunteering due to COVID-19 were less likely to have said in April 2021 that they had increased volunteering and more likely to say they had decreased.

Older Australians (aged 75 years and over) were less likely to say they had increased volunteering. Indigenous Australians were less likely to say they had increased and decreased volunteering. Those born overseas in an English-speaking country were less likely to say they had increased volunteering.

### 3 Relationship between wellbeing and volunteering

The decline in volunteering over the period has the potential to have had a large negative impact on those who rely on volunteers. Further research is needed to understand the impact of the decline on volunteering on society and those who benefit from the contribution of volunteers and it is highly unlikely that all or even most of the 293 plus million lost hours of unpaid work did not have an impact on the functioning of Australian society. Stopping volunteering since COVID-19 also appears to have negatively impacted on the volunteers themselves, as documented in this section.

#### 3.1 Lost life satisfaction

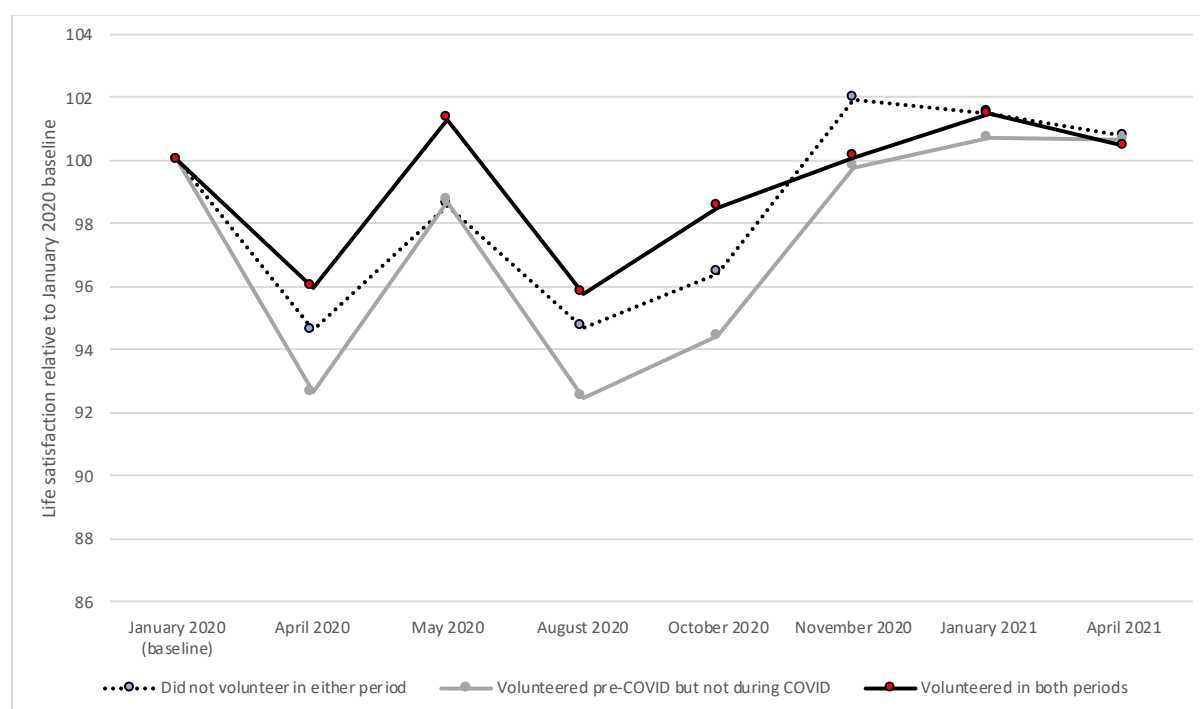
In a previous paper in this series (Biddle and Gray 2021), we documented the changes in life satisfaction that occurred over the COVID-19 pandemic. We showed a very large decline in life satisfaction between January 2020 and April 2020, some fluctuations between April and October 2020, and then a return to approximately pre-COVID life satisfaction by November 2020. On a scale of 0 to 10, the average lost life satisfaction (compared to January 2020 baseline) over the period was 0.135 per month.<sup>8</sup>

Controlling for whether or not a person volunteered in the 12 months up until late 2019 (as well as demographic, socioeconomic, and geographic factors), there was a significant association between changes in volunteering and loss in life satisfaction (Table 3). The regression analysis suggests that those who volunteered in the 12 months prior to April 2021 had a significantly and substantially lower loss of life satisfaction than those who did not.

Based on descriptive statistics, those who did not volunteer in either period had a loss of life satisfaction equal to 0.127. Those who commenced volunteering over the period had a loss of life satisfaction of only 0.037. Those who were volunteering in 2019 but not in the 12 months up until April 2021 had the largest loss in life satisfaction, with an average loss of 0.204. Whereas those who volunteered in both periods had a loss in life satisfaction of 0.069.

Leaving aside those who commenced volunteering over the period (due to small sample sizes), Figure 3 gives the patterns in life satisfaction for our sample depending on a person's volunteering status pre- and post-COVID, setting the January 2020 life satisfaction level to 100. For all waves of data collection, life satisfaction relative to baseline for those who continued to volunteer over the period was greater than or equal to life satisfaction for those who stopped volunteering, with the differences greatest up to and including October 2020. Those who didn't volunteer in either period had greater relative life satisfaction in November 2020 than those who volunteered in both periods, but had lower life satisfaction for all months leading up to and including October 2020. The data strongly suggests that the impact on life satisfaction from reductions in volunteering was concentrated in the first seven-eight months of the pandemic.

Figure 3 Life satisfaction – January 2020 to April 2021, by volunteering status



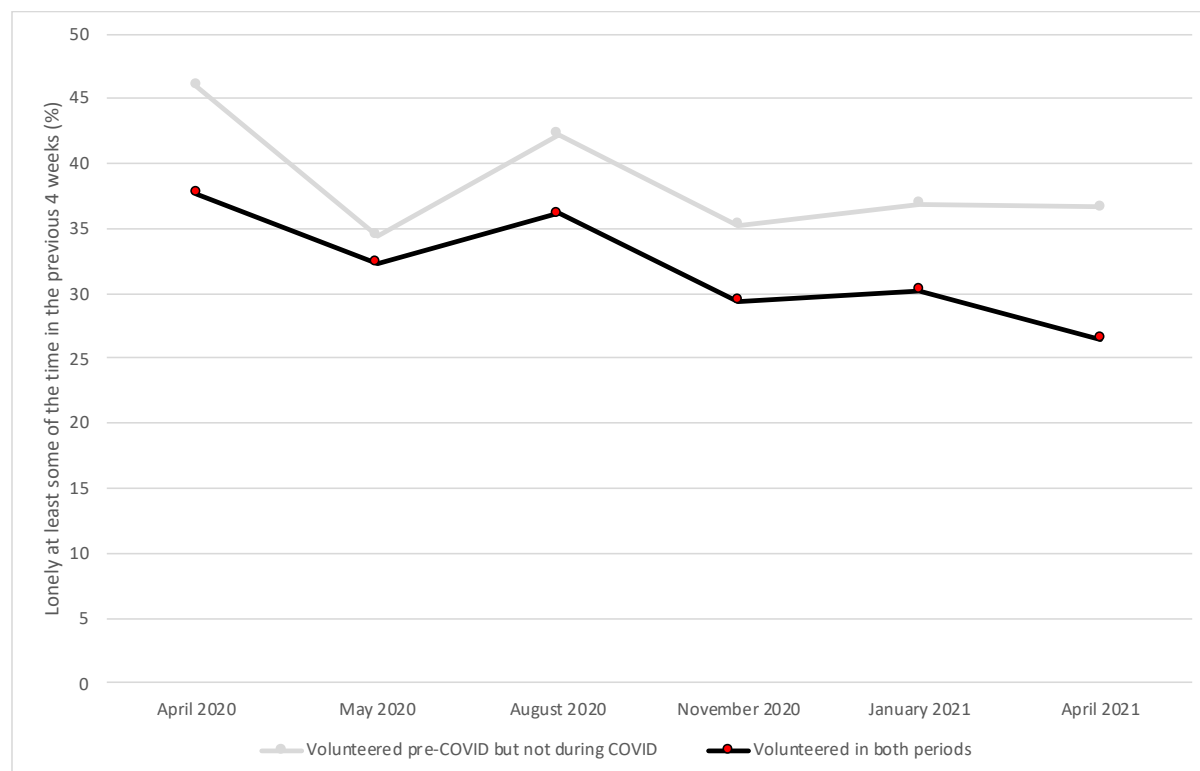
Note: The “whiskers” on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

Source: ANUpoll, January, April, May, August, October, and November 2020; January and April 2021.

### 3.2 Loneliness

Although we do not have pre-COVID data on loneliness, we are able to track the level of loneliness for those Australians who volunteered over the period compared to those who volunteered prior to COVID-19 but did not volunteer during the COVID-19 period. Any pre-COVID differences in baseline loneliness will still be present in the data, but they will be minimised to a certain extent by conditioning on having volunteered previously. As we can see in Figure 4, those who stopped volunteering were far more likely to say that they felt lonely at least some of the time than those who continued to volunteer. Unlike with life satisfaction where the difference narrows over the period, however, this difference appears to have widened since May 2020.

**Figure 4** Per cent of Australians who reported that they were lonely at least some of the time in the previous 4 weeks – April 2020 to April 2021, by volunteering status

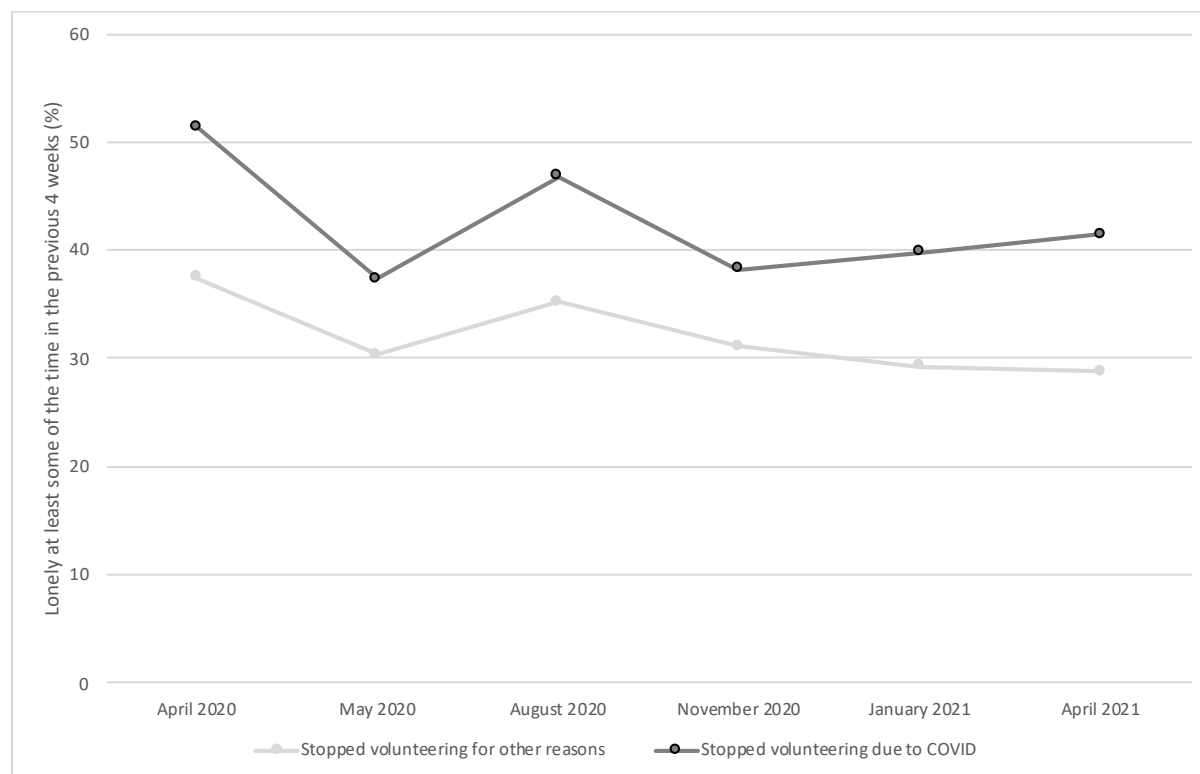


Note: The “whiskers” on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

Source: ANUpoll, January, April, May, August, October, and November 2020; January and April 2021.

We can further break the group who volunteered pre-COVID but not during COVID into those who, in April 2020 said they stopped volunteering due to COVID-19 (66.8 per cent of the sub-sample), and those who did not, presumably because they stopped for other reasons. Those who said that they stopped volunteering due to COVID-19 had even higher rates of loneliness than those who stopped for other reasons (Figure 5). Specifically, more than half of Australians (51.4 per cent) who reported that they stopped volunteering due to COVID-19 and didn’t start volunteering again reported that they were lonely at least some of the time in April 2020

**Figure 5** Per cent of Australians who reported that they were lonely at least some of the time in the previous 4 weeks – April 2020 to April 2021, by volunteering status



Note: The “whiskers” on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

Source: ANUpoll, January, April, May, August, October, and November 2020; January and April 2021.

## 4 The subjective experience of volunteering during COVID-19

The analysis of life satisfaction change by volunteering highlights a very strong correlation, that is statistically significant, and large relative to the standard deviation of life satisfaction for a given wave. It is unclear from the data that we have what the direction of causality is, as it is possible that people who experienced a drop in life satisfaction due to other aspects of COVID-19 were less likely to take up, or continue volunteering. It is quite likely that the causality goes in both directions.

To better understand the subjective impact of COVID-19 on those who did volunteer over the period, we asked the 952 respondents who said they volunteered in the 12 months prior to the April 2021 survey ‘How has doing voluntary work during COVID-19 impacted your life in general?’ In total, we received text responses from 820 respondents, ranging from a number of one-word responses indicating no change, to quite detailed responses outlining both positive and negative impacts.

This data will be analysed in more detail in a subsequent paper using standard qualitative analysis techniques, as well as quantitative text analysis tools. Furthermore, the data is available for others to analyse and draw out new insights. However, there are a number of responses that highlight the breadth of the experience.

For many respondents, there was very little if any impact, to the extent that a few people didn’t quite understand why the question was asked. For example, a man aged between 55 and 64 years said in relation to whether COVID had impacted on their volunteering ‘*No living remote*

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*most of my participation in national committees was already via web cam link*. Another man, who was aged 75 years or older said that there was *'No effect. Voluntary work is done from home. Minimal contact with other people.'* That doesn't mean, of course, that volunteering has not had an impact for these individuals, but rather that the relationship between COVID-19 and volunteering has been marginal.

There were another group of respondents who mentioned the positive impact that volunteering had over the period. For example, one female aged 65 to 74 years said *that 'My voluntary work kept me engaged and occupied during COVID-19, Our group worked hard to establish the ability to continue volunteering from home throughout the whole year to ensure we didn't feel isolated and felt that we were still able to contribute'* whereas another said that *'Keeps me connected to our country and the world and is a part of my current purpose in life.'* A younger woman, aged 25 to 34 years, said about volunteering that it *'Give me something to do.'*

Some respondents mentioned the steps they took to maintain their own safety over the period. For example, a man aged 65 to 74 years said that they were *'trying to carry out the usual tasks but 1.5m away and frequent hand sanitiser usage.'* A woman aged 65 to 74 years talked about the steps she took to be well for volunteering stating that she *'Stayed home a lot more, so i would be well for volunteering & hurried with my shopping & banking & no socialising for coffee drinks, when away from home & no visiting or receiving family, friends or visitors to my home.'*

One of the more common changes given to maintain safety related to the switch to online volunteering. One man aged between 25 and 34 said that he *'Switched to online digital assistance (like managing social media) rather than teaching brass instruments like usual.'* This was rarely cited as a positive change, with most talking about the challenges or less than satisfactory experiences, with one man aged 65 to 74 years saying that *'Using Zoom I continued to help my ESL students. But I much prefer face to face teaching.'*

There was a large number of respondents who talked about the negative impact of COVID-19 on their volunteering experience. A woman aged 55 to 64 years said that *'It has decreased due to facilities being closed and this has impacted my mental wellbeing.'* Another woman aged 55 to 64 years talked about the impact on their organisation, saying that the *'Snap lock down in WA resulted in fundraising events/club revenue being cancelled resulting in loss of income for our not for profit sporting club.'*

A final group of respondents talked about the fluctuating experience. For example, a man aged 65 to 74 years said *that 'COVID did reduce the amount of voluntary work. That is no longer the case.'* Another man in the same age group said that *'After the first 6 months very little impact and was able to resume normal volunteers routine as it was before covid. Life is good.'*

## 5 Concluding comments

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on many aspects of life in Australia. While Australia has fared better than many other countries and there may be some positives in terms of social cohesion and confidence in government (Biddle and Gray 2021), there is no doubt that there have been a number of negative impacts. One negative impact has been the dramatic reduction in volunteering over the period.

We estimate that there has been a drop in the per cent of people who volunteered from 36.0 per cent prior to the pandemic to 24.2 per cent during the year leading up to April 2021. This

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appears to be at least a 293-million-hour reduction over the period, potentially impacting on many vulnerable Australians who rely on volunteering. We also find an apparent impact on the volunteers themselves with the loss in life satisfaction over the period greatest for those who volunteered in 2019, but not during the pandemic.

Many volunteers told us about the challenges of volunteering over the period. But many also told us about the extra meaning and social interaction that volunteering was able to bring during this most difficult of times.

From a policy perspective, governments have justifiably been focused on reducing infections and mortality from COVID-19, and reducing the economic impacts. However, data presented in this paper suggests that unpaid work has been impacted even harder than paid work, with a much greater decrease in the proportion of Australians who undertook volunteering than the decline in the proportion of Australians in paid work. A strong argument can be made that unpaid activities also need specific consideration, and potentially additional support.

### Appendix 1 About the survey

The primary source of data for this paper is the April 2021 ANUpoll. Data collection commenced on the 12th of April 2021 with a pilot test of telephone respondents. The main data collection commenced on the 13th of April and concluded on the 26th of April. The final sample size for the survey is 3,286 respondents. 54.7 per cent of the sample had completed the survey by the 15th of April and the average interview duration was 13.9 minutes. Of those who had completed the April 2021 survey, 94.6 per cent (N=3,109) had completed the January 2021 survey.

The Social Research Centre collected data online and through Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) in order to ensure representation from the offline Australian population. Around 5.1 per cent of interviews were collected via CATI. The contact methodology adopted for the online Life in Australia™ members is an initial survey invitation via email and SMS (where available), followed by multiple email reminders and a reminder SMS. Telephone non-response of panel members who have not yet completed the survey commenced in the second week of fieldwork and consisted of reminder calls encouraging completion of the online survey.

The contact methodology for offline Life in Australia™ members was an initial SMS (where available), followed by an extended call-cycle over a two-week period. A reminder SMS was also sent in the second week of fieldwork.

A total of 4,002 respondents were invited to take part in the survey, leading to a wave-specific completion rate of 82.1 per cent. Taking into account recruitment to the panel, the cumulative response rate for this survey is around 7.0 per cent.

Unless otherwise stated, data in the paper is weighted to population benchmarks. For Life in Australia™, the approach for deriving weights generally consists of the following steps:

1. Compute a base weight for each respondent as the product of two weights:
  - a. Their enrolment weight, accounting for the initial chances of selection and subsequent post-stratification to key demographic benchmarks
  - b. Their response propensity weight, estimated from enrolment information available for both respondents and non-respondents to the present wave.
2. Adjust the base weights so that they satisfy the latest population benchmarks for several demographic characteristics.

The ethical aspects of this research have been approved by the ANU Human Research Ethics Committee (2014/241).



## Volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic

### Appendix 2 Regression tables

**Table 1** Factors associated with having volunteered over the previous 12 months, April 2021

Explanatory variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coeff.	Signif.	Coeff.	Signif.	Coeff.	Signif.
Paid hours worked in February 2020					-0.00849	***
Lost hours over the COVID-19 period					0.00019	**
Volunteered in 12 months to late 2019			1.647	***	1.640	***
Stopped volunteering due to COVID-19 in April 2020			0.079		0.095	
Female	0.041		-0.087		-0.147	*
Aged 18 to 24 years	0.204		-0.172		-0.241	
Aged 25 to 34 years	0.041		0.050		0.052	
Aged 45 to 54 years	0.015		-0.219	*	-0.249	*
Aged 55 to 64 years	0.168	*	-0.008		-0.107	
Aged 65 to 74 years	0.250	**	0.035		-0.156	
Aged 75 years plus	0.337	***	-0.066		-0.289	*
Indigenous	-0.367		-0.145		-0.391	
Born overseas in a main English-speaking country	-0.116		0.087		0.105	
Born overseas in a non-English speaking country	-0.249	**	-0.236		-0.231	
Speaks a language other than English at home	-0.114		-0.094		-0.072	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-0.289	**	-0.189		-0.169	
Has a post graduate degree	0.399	***	0.139		0.224	
Has an undergraduate degree	0.288	***	0.148		0.224	*
Has a Certificate III/IV, Diploma or Associate Degree	-0.002		-0.109		-0.052	
Lives in the most disadvantaged areas (1st quintile)	-0.141		-0.187		-0.276	**
Lives in next most disadvantaged areas (2nd quintile)	-0.123		-0.163		-0.265	**
Lives in next most advantaged areas (4th quintile)	0.080		0.058		0.019	
Lives in the most advantaged areas (5th quintile)	-0.003		-0.016		-0.075	
Lives in a non-capital city	0.244	***	0.262	***	0.305	***
Constant	-0.841	***	-1.426	***	-1.175	***
Sample size	3,128		2,529		1,133	

Source: ANUpoll, April 2020 and April 2021.

Notes: Probit Regression Model. The base case individual is female; 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); and 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 \*.

## Volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic

**Table 2** Factors associated with changes in volunteering levels over the previous 12 months, April 2021

Explanatory variables	Did not volunteer		Increased volunteering		Decreased volunteering	
	Coeff.	Signif.	Coeff.	Signif.	Coeff.	Signif.
Paid hours worked in February 2020	0.00043		-0.02006	***	-0.01633	***
Lost hours over the COVID-19 period	-0.00007		0.00036	*	0.00024	
Volunteered in 12 months to late 2019	-2.212	***	-0.088		-0.349	
Stopped volunteering due to COVID-19 in April 2020	-0.128		-0.422	**	0.385	*
Female	0.231	*	0.085		0.037	
Aged 18 to 24 years	0.204		-0.157		-0.177	
Aged 25 to 34 years	0.018		0.390		-0.175	
Aged 45 to 54 years	0.260		-0.056		-0.136	
Aged 55 to 64 years	0.084		0.069		-0.240	
Aged 65 to 74 years	0.068		-0.292		-0.139	
Aged 75 years plus	0.107		-0.713	**	-0.232	
Indigenous	-0.050		-1.120	**	-0.990	
Born overseas in a main English-speaking country	-0.376	**	-0.110		-0.912	***
Born overseas in a non-English speaking country	0.236		0.195		-0.438	
Speaks a language other than English at home	-0.025		-0.265		-0.105	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	0.169		0.110		-0.324	
Has a post graduate degree	-0.258		0.107		0.067	
Has an undergraduate degree	-0.159		0.228		0.278	
Has a Certificate III/IV, Diploma or Associate Degree	-0.001		-0.263		0.039	
Lives in the most disadvantaged areas (1st quintile)	0.216		-0.181		-0.265	
Lives in next most disadvantaged areas (2nd quintile)	0.218		-0.232		-0.163	
Lives in next most advantaged areas (4th quintile)	0.127		0.398		0.030	
Lives in the most advantaged areas (5th quintile)	0.042		-0.248		0.037	
Lives in a non-capital city	-0.261	*	0.193		0.237	
Constant	2.602	***	0.376		0.451	
Sample size			2,382			

Source: ANUpoll, April 2020 and April 2021.

Notes: Multinomial Probit Regression Model. The base case individual is female; 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); and 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 \*.

## Volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic

**Table 3** Factors associated with lost life satisfaction over COVID-19 period., April 2021

Explanatory variables	Model 1	
	Coeff.	Signif.
Volunteered in 12 months to April 2021	-0.161	*
Volunteered in 12 months to late 2019	0.085	
Female	0.059	
Aged 18 to 24 years	0.014	
Aged 25 to 34 years	0.161	
Aged 45 to 54 years	-0.059	
Aged 55 to 64 years	0.134	
Aged 65 to 74 years	-0.090	
Aged 75 years plus	-0.393	***
Indigenous	0.192	
Born overseas in a main English-speaking country	-0.203	**
Born overseas in a non-English speaking country	-0.188	
Speaks a language other than English at home	-0.049	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	0.363	***
Has a post graduate degree	0.149	
Has an undergraduate degree	0.088	
Has a Certificate III/IV, Diploma or Associate Degree	0.084	
Lives in the most disadvantaged areas (1st quintile)	-0.359	***
Lives in next most disadvantaged areas (2nd quintile)	-0.034	
Lives in next most advantaged areas (4th quintile)	0.225	**
Lives in the most advantaged areas (5th quintile)	0.315	***
Lives in a non-capital city	0.103	
Constant	-0.019	
Sample size	2,523	

Source: ANUpoll, April 2020 and April 2021

Notes: Linear Regression Model. The base case individual is female; 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); and 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 \*.

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-australia/latest-release>. Employment data from the LFS mentioned in this paper has been seasonally adjusted.
- <sup>2</sup> <https://data.oecd.org/emp/employment-rate.htm>
- <sup>3</sup> <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Definition-of-Volunteering-27-July-20151.pdf>
- <sup>4</sup> This is estimated by combining data from the April 2021 ANUPoll with the ABS estimate of the population in September 2020 of 20.0 million adults.
- <sup>5</sup> The Life in Australia™ was refreshed during the period August to December 2019. As part of the refresh of the panel members of the panel were asked whether they had spent time volunteering in the previous 12-months.
- <sup>6</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/household-impacts-covid-19-survey/latest-release#voluntary-work-and-unpaid-help>
- <sup>7</sup> ‘Lost hours’ is measured by the difference between actual hours worked and predicted hours worked if the person kept working at their February 2020 rate.
- <sup>8</sup> The standard deviation in life satisfaction in January 2020 was equal to 1.83, which was quite similar to other waves.