



4.4 Working for free— volunteers in Australia

Australians have a long history of volunteering across many aspects of community life. Volunteers provide an irreplaceable service to the community. Volunteering benefits both the economy and the health and wellbeing of volunteers. In 2012–13, the estimated value of voluntary work in not-for-profit organisations was equivalent to \$17 billion (ABS 2015a). Organisations report that volunteers bring new insights, enhance the image of the organisation, increase the efficiencies and volume of operations, and improve effectiveness; volunteering also broadens the networks and professional skills of the volunteers themselves (PwC 2016). Many report that volunteering makes them happier, and provides them with a sense of personal satisfaction, which has flow-on health benefits.

Fewer people are volunteering

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) General Social Survey (GSS) defines a volunteer as 'someone who is over the age of 15 and, in the previous 12 months, willingly gave unpaid help, in the form of time, service or skills, through an organisation or group' (ABS 2015a). Informal volunteering, such as the care provided by informal carers, is not included under this definition (for information on informal carers, see Chapter 8.3 'Informal carers').

Data from the GSS show that, in 2014:

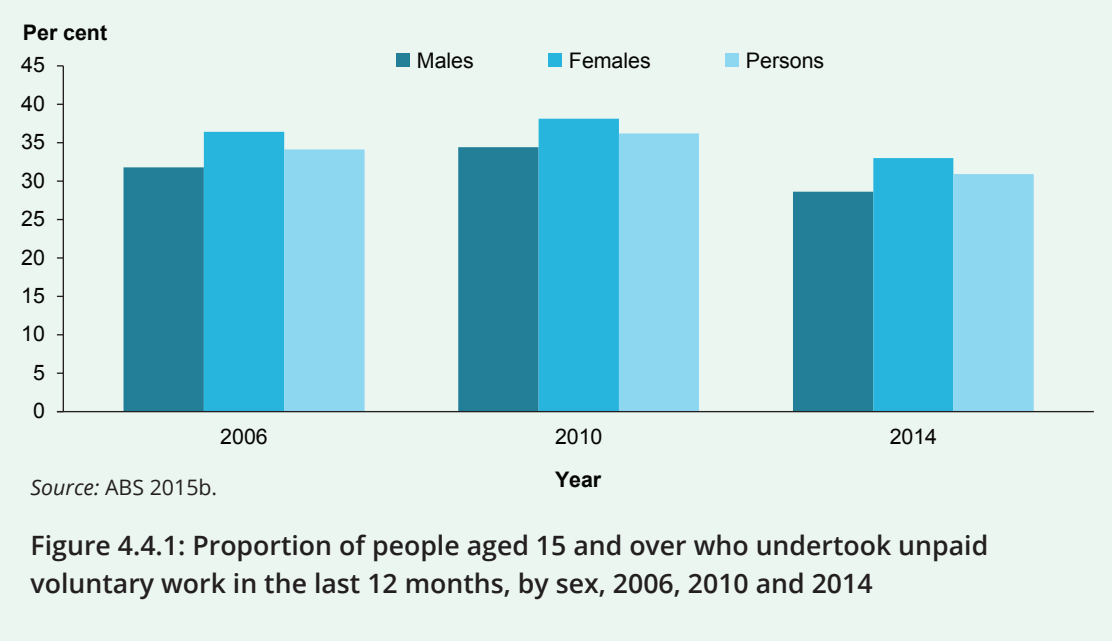
- an estimated 5.8 million people aged 15 and over (or 31% of the population) participated in voluntary work
- an estimated 748 million hours of voluntary work were provided (or an average of 128 hours per volunteer)
- sport and physical recreation (31%) was the most common type of organisation for which people volunteered
- fundraising or sales (23%) was the most common type of voluntary work undertaken
- the proportion of the population who volunteered was lower than in previous years, and the change between 2010 and 2014 was statistically significant (Figure 4.4.1; ABS 2015b).

Australia's volunteer rate fell for the first time in 2014 after several years on the increase. Yet, it is still above the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average. In 2012, the volunteer rate for working-age people (aged 15–64) in Australia was 40%, compared with the OECD average of 34% (OECD 2016). Nevertheless, the decline in the rate of volunteering is concerning as it has links to the economy and health, is thought to be an indicator of wellbeing (for example, by building social connections) and is often highlighted by the World Health Organization as contributing to an age-friendly world (WHO 2015).





Australia's welfare 2017



Who volunteers?

In 2014, volunteering was highest among:



people born in Australia (34%), compared with people born overseas (26%)



females—who made up 54% of all volunteers



young people aged 15–17 (42%), followed by people aged 35–44 (39%) and 65–74 (35%)



people living in *Outer regional* and *Remote* areas (39%), compared with people living in *Major cities* (30%)



people working part time (38%), followed by people who were unemployed (31%) and people working full time (30%)



people with a Bachelor degree or above (41%), compared with people without a non-school qualification (25%)



people living in households in the highest gross household income quintile (39%), compared with people living in the lowest (23%).

(ABS 2015b)





Helping—the main reason to volunteer

According to the GSS, in 2014, helping others and helping the community was the most commonly reported reason for volunteering (64%), followed by personal satisfaction (57%), to do something worthwhile (54%), and personal or family involvement (45%) (ABS 2015a). Around one-third of volunteers reported the reason for being a volunteer was for the social contact (37%), and to use their skills or experience (31%).

What is missing from the picture?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and people from a non-English speaking background undertake large amounts of informal volunteering. As most definitions of volunteering explicitly exclude less structured and informal volunteering, these groups of people are often under-represented in national rates of volunteering. For a deeper understanding of volunteering among these groups, see the report [Giving and volunteering in culturally and linguistically diverse and Indigenous communities](#).

Rates of volunteering appear to be in decline. Data on why this is occurring—such as societal factors (including changes in work patterns and living arrangements)—and on the impacts on society (for example, on trust and social cohesion) are not readily available. The associated implications for organisations that rely on volunteers are also unknown. Understanding the demand for, or potential undersupply of, volunteers is hindered by the unavailability of reliable data.

Where do I go for more information?

Information about volunteers in this snapshot is sourced from the ABS [General Social Survey](#).

An entire chapter was dedicated to volunteering in the 2015 edition of the OECD's biennial publication [How's Life?](#), which summarises a range of data measuring wellbeing.

See also Chapter 9.2 'Indicators of *Australia's welfare*'.

References

- ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2015a. Australian national accounts: non-profit institutions satellite account, 2012–13. ABS cat. no. 5256.0. Canberra: ABS.
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- PwC (PricewaterhouseCoopers Australia) 2016. State of volunteering in Australia. Volunteering Australia.
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