

Volunteering in Australia and NSW – what does it look like?

Volunteers provide an irreplaceable service to the community. Volunteering benefits communities, the economy, and the health and wellbeing of volunteers. Organisations cite that volunteers bring new insights, increase the efficiencies and volume of operations, improve effectiveness, enhance the image of the organisation. Volunteering broadens the networks and professional skills of the volunteers themselves.^{1 2}

In 2016, according to the Giving Australia Report³, Australians volunteered 932 million hours and donated \$12.5 million to charity. The portion of the population engaged in volunteering was estimated to be 43.7%. On average, volunteers gave 134 hours of their time over 12 months in 2015-2016 or about 2.5 hours per week. The median number of hours volunteered by individuals annually was estimated to be 55 hours.

In comparison, the 2016 Census⁴ noted that Australia's population was 23.4 million people. Of this:

- 3.6 million or 19% of the population aged 15 years and over are engaged in voluntary work through an organisation or group (this is an increase from the 2011 Census results, where 17.8% of people responded they were engaged in voluntary work).
- The rates of volunteering are highest among males aged 45-54 years at 302,612 people.
- The rates of volunteering are highest among women aged 35-44 at 399,889 people.
- Overall, rates of volunteering are highest in the 45-54 age group at 679,602 people.

According to the 2016 Census⁵, in NSW 18.1% of the population did voluntary work through an organisation or group in the preceding 12 months. This equated to 1,103,790 people. This was an increase compared to the 2011 Census data for the same question. However, this is not the whole picture for NSW.

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2017, Australia's Welfare 2017, Australia's Welfare Series no. 13.AUS 214, Australia's Welfare Report, Australian Government, Canberra

² Price Waterhouse Coopers Australia 2016, State of Volunteering in Australia, Volunteering Australia

³ Department of Social Services, 2016, *Giving Australia 2016: Individual Giving and Volunteering*, Canberra

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016 Census Quick Stats, 2016 Census

⁵ *ibid*

The 2014 General Social Survey ⁶ conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics fills in the picture of volunteer participation. It indicates that volunteer participation in NSW is higher, in the order of 1.8 million people or an estimated 30.6 % of the NSW population. This is due to the different data collection method, and the different questions asked.

If 30% of the population is indeed close to the portion of people in NSW participating in volunteering, in 2016, this would have equated to 2.28 million of the 7.48 million people in NSW according to the 2016 Census.

What is missing in the data?

The Australian Institute of Health and Wellbeing in 2017 ⁷ noted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities undertake large amounts of informal volunteering, giving back and helping out in their communities.

To date, most large data collections have utilised a definition of volunteering that explicitly excluded less structured and informal volunteering. As a result, these groups of people are often under-represented in national or state rates of volunteering.

Moving forward, it is important for data collections to capture the many forms that volunteering takes across a wide range of cultures.

Who are volunteers, what do they do and why?

Different types of volunteering are more common depending on life stage, age, gender, cultural background, religious group, income and education. The Giving Australia Report ⁸, in 2016 noted that:

- women (46.9%) are more likely to volunteer than men (40.3%)
- people aged between 35 and 44 are more likely to volunteer (50.7%) than other age groups, with 45-54 year olds the second most likely to volunteer (47.4%)
- volunteers 65 years and over volunteered the most hours on average (193 hours per annum).
- young people 18-24 years old accounted for 38.3% of the volunteering population.

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014, General Social Survey Data Tables (Table 22.1)

⁷ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2017, Australia's Welfare 2017, Australia's Welfare Series no. 13.AUS 214, Australia's Welfare Report, Australian Government, Canberra

⁸ Department of Social Services, 2016, *Giving Australia 2016: Individual Giving and Volunteering*, Canberra

When considering where people volunteer, the Giving Australia Report ⁹ identified that the most common cause areas people volunteered for were:

- primary and secondary education 21%
- sports 20%
- religion 18%
- health (including medical research) 17%
- social services 16%
- emergency relief 11%.

The causes most likely to attract volunteers differs by age group or life stage¹⁰:

- younger volunteers (18-24 year olds) most commonly volunteer for religious causes, sports, health and social services
- those aged 35-44 most commonly reported volunteering for primary and secondary education (in support of their children)
- 45-54 year olds most commonly volunteered in sports
- those aged 65 years and over are most likely to volunteer for religious causes, followed by health and social services.

The common reasons for people volunteering include ^{11 12}

- personal satisfaction and making a difference
- connection to community
- practical benefit (e.g. to gain skills and experience)
- keep busy when no longer working
- mental health benefits
- personal and family involvement, including family tradition
- use of skills and experience.

⁹ ibid

¹⁰ Department of Social Services, 2016, *Giving Australia 2016: Individual Giving and Volunteering*, Canberra

¹¹ ibid

¹² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2017, *Australia's Welfare 2017*, Australia's Welfare Series no. 13.AUS 214, Australia's Welfare Report, Australian Government, Canberra