

Research to strengthen the volunteer sector

Volunteering Victoria, the state peak body for volunteering is advocating for investment in research into volunteering trends and practices to address the downward trend in volunteering rates and barriers to participation. Evidence and data are necessary to inform effective and sustainable initiatives that encourage increased participation in volunteering.

Volunteer rates have been in decline over the last 10 years,¹ a trend that has been amplified by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, 58% of volunteer-involving organisations (VIOs) experienced a decline in volunteer rates.² Similarly Volunteering Australia found that 41% of organisations are having difficulty recruiting volunteers and previous volunteers are not returning to their roles.³ Throughout Volunteering Victoria's consultations, VIOs across all sectors in Victoria reported difficulties with recruiting and retaining volunteers. This is a significant contributing factor threatening the viability of organisations in the aftermath of the pandemic as identified in the [COVID-19 Community Sector Impact Survey](#).⁴ VIOs are confronting difficult decisions on their service offerings and capacity to continue operating.

These findings are supported by the recent 2021 Census data that has shown a 19% decline in volunteering within organisations since 2016.⁵ While formal volunteering is only one aspect of volunteering, its benefits on social capital and collective wellbeing are critical and reflect the broader impact of community giving. Despite the steady decline in volunteering rates, there is an absence of in-depth research on the reasons and specific barriers encountered by volunteers or the ways these barriers differ across communities. Developing an evidence base on barriers, facilitators, and practices of volunteering will enable informed decision making to achieve increased community participation through volunteering.

Funded by the government, the [State of Volunteering in Victoria 2020](#)⁶ report provided key insights on the characteristics and contribution of volunteering, and initial data on issues impacting VIOs. However, prior small scale research projects in Australia and internationally have identified the importance of longitudinal, mixed-method research that provides evidence on volunteer motivations and the influence of volunteer recruitment practices across sectors and diverse demographic groups over time.^{7 8 9 10} Research areas as diverse as neurobiology and behavioural economics have offered insights into improving volunteer recruitment and retention.¹¹ The importance of further research is acknowledged in the Victorian Volunteer Strategy (VVS), which identifies evidence and data as a key enabler to achieving the aims of the strategy.

1 [2021 Census Date Release](#). Volunteering Australia. 2022.

2 [The COVID-19 Community Sector Impact Survey](#). Our Community & Salesforce. 2021.

3 [Re-engaging Volunteers and COVID-19](#). Volunteering Australia. 2021.

4 [The COVID-19 Community Sector Impact Survey](#). Our Community & Salesforce. 2021.

5 [2021 Census Date Release](#). Volunteering Australia. 2022.

6 Ellis, C., Muller, P., & Szeker, D. [State of Volunteering in Victoria 2020](#). Volunteering Victoria. 2020.

7 Cho, M., Bonn, M., & Han, S.J. Generation Z's Sustainable Volunteering: Motivations, attitudes and job performance. 2018. *Sustainability*, 10, 1400.

8 Kappelides, P., Cuskelly, G., & Hoye, R. The influence of volunteer recruitment practices and expectations on the development of volunteers' psychological contracts. 2019. *Voluntas*, 30, 259.

9 Fedeli, G., & Cigurova, L. Volunteer recruitment and retention: Evidence from the visitor attraction sector. 2021. In *Routledge Handbook of Volunteering in Events, Sport and Tourism*.

10 [Pathways to culturally diverse volunteering towards COVID-recovery](#). Volunteer West. 2021.

11 [How to use brain research for volunteer recruitment](#). VolunteerPro, 2019.

The current volunteering crisis and the government's vision to support volunteers and strengthen the sector warrants the commissioning of regular State of Volunteering reports to establish longitudinal data and credible trends. The scope of the report should also be broadened to further explore the complex issues and barriers impacting volunteers and VIOs. Investment is also required in research projects aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of the practices, motivations, and barriers to volunteering across diverse communities. These projects could be undertaken in partnership with organisations and academics with interests in volunteering and community participation across diverse communities. A strong evidence base will improve the effectiveness of future volunteer promotion, recruitment, and retention initiatives, and enable the VVS to achieve its vision for volunteering to build strong, resilient, and inclusive communities and better the lives of all Victorians.



“The State of Volunteering research presents a unique opportunity to triangulate Government policy with sector practice. It collects qualitative and quantitative evidence from the lived experience of volunteers and volunteer managers to benchmark the impact of volunteering, the challenges stakeholders face and the value that society enjoys. As an important, sector-wide resource, State of Volunteering reports go beyond ABS and other niche studies to give a comprehensive and ideally longitudinal view of volunteering that aligns to an emerging national standard.”-

– Paul Muller, CPD, Institute of Project Management.

Volunteering Victoria recommends investment in the following research to develop longitudinal data and important insights into trends and practices of volunteering:

- » Regular State of Volunteering reports that gather both quantitative and qualitative data on volunteering issues and trends.
- » Academic research grants to explore practices, barriers, and strengths of volunteering and community giving across diverse Victorian communities.

Research and data are critical to the development of evidence-based initiatives and programs that promote increased community participation and address barriers to volunteering, so that all Victorians have access to volunteering and the benefits of contributing to their community.

These recommendations are endorsed by the Institute of Project Management.

