

Starting young: Promoting volunteering and community participation amongst young people

Volunteering Victoria, the state peak body for volunteering is calling for investment in initiatives to promote, recruit, and support diverse young people and students to volunteer. Making volunteering more accessible and meaningful for young people is vital for promoting increased community participation and the social, professional, and wellbeing benefits of being actively engaged in the community.

Volunteering holds enormous benefits for young people, which result in improved social, economic, and health outcomes. Participation in volunteering from a young age delivers clear positive impacts on pathways to employment, the development of new skills, professional networking, increased confidence, and improved mental health and social connections.^{1 2 3} Young people who engage in volunteering are also more likely to continue to be active citizens and volunteer throughout their lifetime.⁴

Previous research has indicated that while 1 in 3 young people in Australia (aged 12 to 24 years) volunteer, they do not do so on a regular basis.⁵ More recently, the results of the General Social Survey indicate that youth volunteering has been heavily impacted by COVID-19, with a sharp decrease in volunteering rates. In 2019, 28.8% of people aged 15-24 reported engaging in formal volunteering. By 2020, volunteering participation of young people dropped to 19.4%.⁶

Young people's understandings and practices of community contribution differ from those of traditional definitions of volunteering. There has also been a rise in non-traditional volunteer roles and practices, such as online social action, e-volunteering, alternative reciprocal, and monetary systems, and 'tourism volunteering', which are more frequently undertaken by young people.⁷

Young people's interest in non-traditional roles and their preferences for volunteering options are not reflected in the current approaches to recruitment, roles, and retention within volunteer-involving organisations (VIOs). Young people express a preference for flexible volunteer opportunities, in roles that provide tangible personal and professional benefits, and within organisations that align with their values and interest in social justice causes.⁸ Based on the trend of declining volunteer participation, there is an urgent need for VIOs to become more accessible and attractive to young people seeking to volunteer.

In 2021, Volunteering Victoria partnered with the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) and YACVic to develop a [Youth Ready Guide and Assessment Tool](#) to support environmental organisations to attract and support young volunteers. The guide provides evidence-based and practical resources, strategies, and guidance to make environmental organisations accessible to young people and promote increased participation. Adapting and expanding such resources for other sectors is likely to increase the uptake of volunteering by young people.

There is also a need to promote the benefits of volunteering and provide tools and resources that support young people to maximise the benefits of their volunteering experience.

1 Wynne, C. [Volunteering is catching: A study into young people's volunteering in 2011](#). YACVic. 2011.

2 Lindsay, S. [A scoping review of the experiences, benefits and challenges involved in volunteer work among youth and young adults with disability](#). 2016. *Disability & Rehabilitation*, 38(16), 1533

3 Jardim C, Marques da Silva S. [Young People Engaging in Volunteering: Questioning a Generational Trend in an Individualized Society](#). 2018. *Societies*, 8(1):8.

4 Walsh, L., & Black, R. [Youth Volunteering in Australia: An Evidence Review](#). 2015.

5 Walsh, L., & Black, R. [Youth Volunteering in Australia: An Evidence Review](#). 2015.

6 [General Social Survey: Summary Results](#). ABS. 2021.

7 Walsh, L., & Black, R. [Youth Volunteering in Australia: An Evidence Review](#). 2015.

8 Walsh, L., & Black, R. [Youth Volunteering in Australia: An Evidence Review](#). 2015.

This has been demonstrated in other states where innovative approaches have been developed to support young people to volunteer, including Western Australia's [YVolunteer program](#) and Tasmania's Youth Volunteer Army.

Tasmania's Youth Volunteer Army

Supported by the Tasmanian Government, Volunteering Tasmania has partnered with [Student Volunteer Army New Zealand](#) to launch the [Youth Volunteer Army](#). Available to high school students and young job-seekers, the program recognises and links youth volunteering to skills that support young people to find employment, build networks, and increase civic participation. Through the Student Volunteer Army Service Award app, volunteers can record and reflect on the good they do in their communities, and automatically build a CV of volunteering. Volunteers can use this CV to stand out when applying for apprenticeships, scholarships, and employment.

Overall, the Youth Volunteer Army aims to:

- » Change a young person's trajectory by improving their resilience, confidence, and employability
- » Link volunteering with education
- » Support VIOs by encouraging a culture of volunteering in young people

"Our youth are incredible volunteers and contributors to our community, and this deserves to be recognised to secure the future of volunteering. Through the Youth Volunteer Army, we will support a new generation of volunteers through school-based, community-led volunteering initiatives and recognition of youth volunteering efforts. This program has already provided much greater recognition to our young volunteers in its first 6 months. I cannot endorse the model, the app or the relationship with Student Volunteer Army enough and can only encourage the Victorian Government to take to the opportunity to support our sister peak body Volunteering Victoria to emulate this program in Victoria."

– Dr Lisa Schimanski, CEO, Volunteering Tasmania.

Young people from diverse backgrounds have the right to access volunteering that is suited to their interests and preferences. Increased participation in volunteering is critical to supporting young people to be empowered, active participants in their communities, strengthening the volunteer sector, and promoting the collective wellbeing of Victoria.

Volunteering Victoria makes the following recommendations to promote increased participation in volunteering for young people:

- » The establishment of a Youth Volunteer Army initiative in line with New Zealand's Student Volunteer Army model.
- » The development of sector-specific youth-ready guides, resources and tools that support volunteer-involving organisations to be more accessible for young people.

These recommendations are endorsed by Volunteering Tasmania, the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY), VicWise, the Victorian Working Group on Student Employability, and Student Volunteer Army New Zealand.

