



**Volunteering Australia**

**Response to National Public Consultation on Statistics for Volunteering and Giving  
Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)**

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**Volunteering Australia Contacts**

**Ms Adrienne Picone, Chief Executive Officer**

[ceo@volunteeringaustralia.org](mailto:ceo@volunteeringaustralia.org) (02) 6251 4060

**Ms Lavanya Kala, Policy and Communications Coordinator**

[lavanya@volunteeringaustralia.org](mailto:lavanya@volunteeringaustralia.org) (02) 6251 4060



# Response to National Public Consultation on Statistics for Volunteering and Giving

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## About Volunteering Australia

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering. We work to advance volunteering in the Australian community.

Volunteering Australia's vision is to promote strong, connected communities through volunteering. Our mission is to lead, strengthen, promote and celebrate volunteering in Australia.

We work collectively with the seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies to deliver national, state/territory and local volunteering programs and initiatives in accordance with the Government's priorities.

## Introduction

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) have launched a national public consultation on statistics for volunteering and giving to clarify the data needs for information on volunteering and giving activity. The Australian Census has included an unchanged volunteering question in the past three Censuses. In light of this, the ABS is considering questions for Census 2021 and reviewing the questions accordingly.

Volunteering Australia appreciates the opportunity to provide a response on statistics for volunteering and giving activity. We would like to acknowledge the importance of volunteering to the Australian communities' workforce participation, inclusion and social cohesion. There would be a gap in skills and services without Australia's volunteering sector.

Reliable statistics are critical for ongoing policy development, future planning and long-term service delivery. Recent data indicates that formal volunteering is declining, while informal volunteering is increasing. These changes in data are pivotal in the way we plan and manage; keeping volunteering visible and giving value to the sector. The data is also important for workforce planning.

Volunteering continues to play a role central to our identity as a nation, with 5.8 million Australians or 31 per cent of the population volunteering<sup>i</sup>, making an estimated annual contribution of \$290 billion to our economic and social good<sup>ii</sup>. At Volunteering Australia, we define volunteering as "time willingly given, for the common good and without financial gain"<sup>iii</sup>; volunteers donate their time freely, but volunteering comes at a cost. The operational cost of delivering innovative and agile volunteering programs that respond to the needs of Australian society is increasing, and requires investment.

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### **Volunteering Australia Response**

#### The economic impact of volunteering

The economic contributions of the volunteering sector cannot be understated, with 5.8 million Australians engaging in volunteering activities and programs, making an estimated annual economic and social contribution of \$290 billion. Part of Volunteering Australia's policy and advocacy efforts are to ensure that the economic impact of volunteering is acknowledged, celebrated and supported.

Volunteering activities provide a potential pathway to employment, with volunteers gaining valuable employment related skills from their involvement in volunteering activities. Equally, with a strong economy benefiting from a healthy society, research indicates there are enormous health and lifestyle benefits to volunteering. Additionally, the fiscal contributions of volunteering are numerous, with many sectors reliant on volunteering activities and programs.

Volunteering supports the Government's key priorities in delivering jobs and growth, the disability and aged care services, emergency services, communications and the arts, health and other vital community programs.

The volunteering sector is being asked to evolve and grow in the face of a national decrease in formal volunteer participation, coupled with an increase in demand for the services that volunteers provide. Having accurate data provides an evidence-base for our advocacy efforts to Government, and assists with workforce planning for Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs), Volunteering Support Services (VSSs), as well as the private and not-for-profit sectors.

An evidence-base also assists with guaranteeing that the voice of the volunteering sector is recognised across all Government portfolios, that we receive ongoing Government funding, that there is recognition of the economic contributions of volunteering, recognition of the value of volunteering as a potential pathway to employment, and that VSSs contribute to safe and effective volunteering.

It is essential to capture data on labour force participation, socio-economic status of communities, age and rate of growth of communities. These areas are crucial for identifying priority funding areas and for specifying need for volunteering. It will also enable an accurate assessment of funding needs with respect to grants for volunteer programs, including determining infrastructure needs and service delivery strategies.

There is limited up-to-date disaggregated data collection on the economic contribution of volunteering. Apart from Census data, there is a reliance on data from the ABS General Social Survey, research cultivated by Volunteering Australia and researchers on volunteering. Additional data capturing the economic benefits would be an asset for those in the volunteering sector.

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### Evolution of the volunteering definition

In 1996, the definition of volunteering according to Volunteering Australia was, “formal volunteering is an activity that takes place in non-profit organisations or projects and is of benefit to the community and undertaken of the volunteer’s own free will and without coercion; for no financial payment; and in designated volunteer positions only”<sup>iv</sup>.

The next decade saw a decline in formal volunteering and an increase in informal volunteering. This also presented a major data gap, given the definition of volunteering did not account for informal volunteering activities. This excluded volunteering activities such as informal caring and corporate volunteering. It also accounted for the data gap with emergency services personnel, sport, and other informal volunteers excluded from non-profit organisations or projects, but still classified as volunteers.

Volunteering Australia reviewed the definition of volunteering in 2015, in consultation with the state peak bodies. The review considered the evolution of volunteering to include both formal and informal volunteering. The Volunteering Australia definition is more closely aligned with the United Nations definition of volunteering, which was much broader in scope:

“Time willingly given, for the common good and without financial gain”<sup>v</sup>

We suggest that all Government Departments use Volunteering Australia’s definition of volunteering as the primary definition. This definition provides a comprehensive overview of volunteering in Australia and will allow for a nationally defined standard when referring to volunteering.

### Separating volunteering and giving

It is the firm belief of Volunteering Australia that charitable giving or in-kind giving, as described by the ABS discussion paper, are not forms of volunteering. Volunteering Australia, and our state peak bodies, unequivocally define volunteering as “time willing given”, as opposed to monetary giving.

In October and December 2016, the ABS and Department of Social Services (DSS) conducted consultations with key Government departments to define their needs for volunteering data. All agencies contributed feedback on the importance of collecting data on volunteering and giving. However, they expressed that charitable giving was important to consider with volunteering, as it represented an alternative method of providing support where a volunteering service was not possible.

While Volunteering Australia agrees that giving activity plays an important role with individual and community resilience and wellbeing, we strongly oppose the assertion that volunteering and giving can provide an alternative and interchangeable role. A clear and distinct separation of giving from volunteering needs to be established in the questions, as charitable donations and fundraising do not constitute a form of volunteering according to the Volunteering Australia definition.

According to the Giving Australia 2016 Literature Review Summary Report, “giving occurs in the context of givers and receivers”<sup>vi</sup>, with this review focusing on those “who make donations to NGOs in an unplanned way”<sup>vii</sup>. In contrast, volunteering is defined as “community participation, civic engagement and social inclusion”<sup>viii</sup>.

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While giving activity can provide economic support where a volunteering service is not possible, it does not provide the social and cultural benefits provided by volunteering. Volunteering is essential in building strong and resilient communities, by encouraging economic participation, mitigating isolation and loneliness, and increasing social inclusion, community participation and cohesion. Volunteers gain valuable skills and develop personally and professionally from their involvement in volunteering activities, with research indicating that those who volunteer are happier and healthier individuals.

Volunteering also has enormous benefits for the community. Australian society depends on the volunteering sector, and this is evident with a large proportion of volunteers involved in aged care and disability, emergency services, and sport and recreation.

Volunteering Australia believes there should be clear distinctions in the questions between time-giving volunteering, as opposed to monetary giving, to ensure accuracy of data capturing. To avoid confusion between the two, the questions should make it very clear that volunteering is about the value of time given. There should be different methods applied to measure the value of time given.

### Strong partnerships to boost data collection

As the national voice of the sector, Volunteering Australia will continue to be a strong advocate for effective volunteering to ensure that Volunteering Support Services, managers of volunteers and volunteers, are well resourced and supported.

Strong research and data is essential for supporting good policy and advocacy. As a policy and advocacy body, VA plays a leadership role in the sector by advocating effectively to support and advance volunteering in Australia.

We rely on accurate and up-to-date statistics to carry out this work. Building and maintaining strong and mutually beneficial partnerships with all relevant agencies to ensure engagement and investment for the volunteering sector is crucial for long-term success, and would support our policy and advocacy activities.

A collaborative approach to data collection is essential to guarantee robust data gathering. Partnerships between the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Government agencies, Universities, the private sector and researchers should be established to boost existing disaggregated data collection in relation to volunteering.

### Time series preservation

Volunteering Australia recommends having one question which sets the benchmark. This would allow for the preservation of a time series to enable comparisons of data to previous estimates, which can be monitored over time. Given that volunteering makes such a large contribution to Australia's economic, social and cultural landscape, it would be also beneficial to supplement existing questions by adding further possible responses. This would allow for widespread data capturing on formal and

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informal volunteering, the integration of data from other surveys, research and partnerships, and the capturing of volunteering data for groups not well represented in other ABS data.

### Accurate targeting of questions

#### *Identify who is being targeted (including informal volunteers)*

To understand the needs of the volunteering sector, it is essential to understand volunteers themselves. Effective data collection is vital to understanding this key section of society. At present, it is not clear who is being targeted with the questions, and this is affecting the data being captured. At Volunteering Australia we believe that the current methods and scope of collecting data require assessment. Better targeting in the questions, by targeting a large sample size (including those who are informal volunteers), will ensure accurate data collection.

Currently the Census question limits those who volunteer to those in the not-for-profit (NFP) sector, and this leaves out capturing volunteers who are informal, in the emergency services, private sector, sporting, education, arts and who volunteer in their community. The *2016 Giving Australia Report* includes corporate volunteering programs, and highlights the arts, community services, environment, health and education as key areas that people can be involved in volunteering. By doing so, this allows for a larger sample size.

#### *Ascertain barriers to participation*

The volunteering sector is being asked to evolve and grow, while nationally there is a decrease in formal volunteer participation. This is coupled with an increase in the demand for the services that volunteers provide.

Issues such as a lack of time, disinterest, health factors, and the casualisation of the workforce, which has placed substantial pressure on personal finances for many volunteers, have potentially impacted on the rates of volunteering. It is essential we effectively capture data on the barriers to volunteering for robust reporting, and to assist Volunteer Involving Organisations, Volunteering Support Services, organisations and businesses who utilise volunteers to evolve and to better plan for their workforces.

The recent *2016 State of Volunteering in Australia* report released at the National Volunteering Conference in Canberra last year, analysed findings from a national survey of volunteers, Volunteer Involving Organisations and corporations for the first time. This report captured important trends, demographics, challenges and successes of volunteering and civic participation. This report relied on ABS figures that highlight the decline in the rates of formal volunteering for the first time in two decades.

The report found numerous barriers to attracting and retaining volunteers, with eighty-six per cent of Volunteer Involving Organisations struggling to attract the volunteers they required. Volunteers were deterred by factors such as personal expense, red tape and a lack of flexibility. Overall the findings of the report were positive, with ninety-nine per cent of volunteers indicating they would continue to

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volunteer in the future. However, eighty-six per cent of Volunteer Involving Organisations specified they required more volunteers and resources.

As evident, we require robust data to ascertain barriers to participation for volunteers. Reports such as these also provide an evidence-base for Volunteering Australia's advocacy efforts to government, the private sector and the volunteering sector, and support critical investment in the future of volunteering.

### Gaps in digital access and equity

Given the diversity of volunteers who engage with volunteering activities and programs across the country, to ensure accurate data capturing, there needs to be significant thought on the implications on digital data collection of the Census. In recent years, the ABS has made significant moves to transition to digital modes of data collection, encouraging consumers to abandon the paper Census form. However, digital data gathering also presents a range of complications in terms of access and equity. Thought needs to be given on the implications of digital data capturing as opposed to paper Census collection, given the high proportion of older and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) volunteers. Volunteering Australia would like to ensure robust data collection. The scope and quality of data gathered could be affected with this transition to digital data gathering, so it is important that consideration of the diversity of volunteers is given. Recognition of access and equity issues around the Census must be given to older and CALD volunteers, people with disabilities, as well as those in remote areas.

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### Summary of Recommendations

- Capture data that delivers an understanding of the economic benefits provided by volunteering, the skills development, and how volunteering is a potential pathway to employment.
- The comprehensive Volunteering Australia definition should be used by all Government Departments as the principal definition when referring to volunteering in Australia.
- Volunteering Australia recommends clearly distinguishing between monetary giving and time-giving in all questions, to ensure accuracy of data capturing. This includes separating volunteering and giving, as charitable donations and fundraising do not constitute a form of volunteering according to Volunteering Australia's definition.
- Target questions to clearly identify who the target market is (including informal volunteers), as well as ascertaining barriers to participation.
- Establish partnerships between the Australian Bureau of Statistics, other agencies and researchers to boost collaboration, foster new relationships, and disaggregated data collection in relation to volunteering.
- Preserve the time series to enable comparisons of data to previous estimates, and supplement existing questions to increase the number of responses. This will allow widespread data capturing.
- Recognise the diversity of volunteers and ensure gaps in digital access and equity are addressed.

### Conclusion

Volunteering Australia looks forward to working with the Australian Bureau of Statistics to ensure the efficiency and accuracy of data capturing for the volunteering sector. ABS data is integral to our work in providing informed policy and advocacy initiatives, as well as delivering support to our members, volunteers, and Volunteering Support Services. Through our work, we support the Australian Government's priorities, including the delivery of jobs and growth, important community programs and a range of services across a number of portfolios.

We would welcome further opportunities to consult on or expand on recommendations raised in this response.



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### Authorisation

This submission has been authorised by the Chief Executive Officer of Volunteering Australia.



**Ms Adrienne Picone**

Chief Executive Officer

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### Endorsements

This submission has been endorsed by the seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies.

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### Glossary

<b>VA</b>	Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering in Australia. It works collectively with the peaks to deliver national, state and local volunteering programs and initiatives.
<b>VIOs</b>	Volunteer-involving organisations are organisations that utilise volunteers as part of their workforce.
<b>VSSs</b>	Volunteer support services (also known as volunteer resource centres or volunteer support organisations) provide place-based volunteer support services to volunteers and VIOs in their locality.

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<sup>i</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2015) 'General Social Survey: Summary Results, Australia, 2014', <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4159.0>

<sup>ii</sup> Flinders University (31 October 2014) 'Volunteering worth \$290 billion a year', <http://blogs.flinders.edu.au/flinders-news/2014/10/31/volunteering-worth-290-billion-a-year>

<sup>iii</sup> Volunteering Australia (2015) 'Definition of Volunteering', <http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/policy-andbest-practise/definition-of-volunteering/>

<sup>iv</sup> Volunteering Australia (1996) 'Definitions and Principles of Volunteering Fact Sheet', [https://volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Def\\_and Princ\\_English.pdf](https://volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Def_and Princ_English.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> Volunteering Australia (2015) 'Definition of Volunteering', <http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/policy-andbest-practise/definition-of-volunteering/>

<sup>vi</sup> Giving Australia 2016 'Literature review summary report', Chapter 1: Volunteer Engagement, Page 9

<sup>vii</sup> Giving Australia 2016 'Literature review summary report', Chapter 1: Volunteer Engagement, Page 9

<sup>viii</sup> Giving Australia 2016 'Literature review summary report', Chapter 1: Volunteer Engagement, Page 3