



Australian Social Trends

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Article: Voluntary work

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Voluntary work

In 2006, 21% of the Australian population aged 18 years and over volunteered at least once a fortnight.

Volunteers make a valuable contribution to society in both economic and social terms.¹ Volunteers provide services which would otherwise have to be paid for or left undone, allowing organisations to allocate their often limited finances elsewhere. The value of the work contributed by volunteers to non-profit institutions in 1999–2000 was estimated to be \$8.9 billion.²

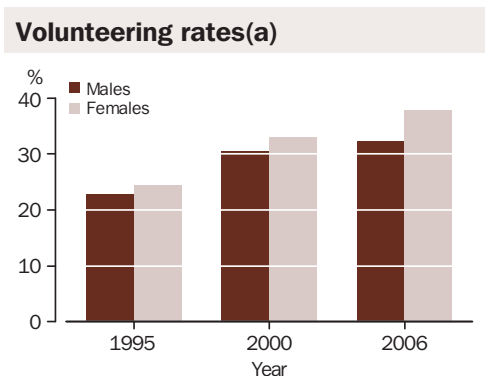
The effect of volunteering on the functioning and connectedness of communities is increasingly being recognised. Through their contribution to a wide range of organisations, volunteers help to build social networks, shared values and social cohesion.³

This article focuses on adults aged 18 years and over who volunteer at least once a fortnight for one or more organisations.

Trends in volunteering

The proportion of the population who volunteered at least once in a 12 month period increased from 24% in 1995 to 32% in 2000 and 35% in 2006. This increase occurred for both men and women across most age groups. While the total annual hours contributed by volunteers increased between 1995 and 2006, the amount of time each volunteer gave decreased. The median annual hours contributed by volunteers fell from 74 hours per person in 1995 to 56 hours per person in 2006.

In 2006, 5.2 million people aged 18 years and over participated in voluntary work at least once in the previous 12 months. Of these, 3.1



(a) 2006 data have been made comparable to data from 1995 and 2000. For more information see *Voluntary Work, Australia, 2006* (ABS cat. no. 4441.0).

Source: *Voluntary Work, Australia, 2006* (ABS cat. no. 4441.0).

Data sources and definitions

The *Voluntary Work Survey* was conducted throughout Australia from March to July 2006 as part of the General Social Survey (GSS). It is the third detailed ABS survey conducted on volunteering, with previous surveys conducted in June 1995 and over four quarters in 2000. The survey collected data on rates of participation in voluntary work, hours contributed, characteristics of volunteers and the types of activities undertaken by volunteers aged 18 years and over.

A *volunteer* is someone who willingly gives unpaid help in the form of time, service or skills, through an organisation or group at least once in a 12 month period.

A *regular volunteer* is someone who gives unpaid help at least once a fortnight for one or more organisations.

The *volunteer rate* for any group (for example an age group) is the number of volunteers in that group expressed as a percentage of the total population of that group.

Many people volunteer for more than one organisation. For each person, detailed information was collected about the voluntary work done for up to three organisations.

For further information see *Voluntary Work, Australia, 2006* (ABS cat. no. 4441.0).

million (21% of the population aged 18 years and over) were volunteers who worked at least once per fortnight for one or more organisations.

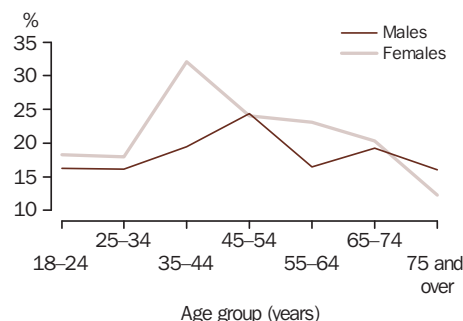
Who are the regular volunteers?

In 2006, 22% of women were regular volunteers compared with 19% of men. Rates of regular volunteering were highest among people aged 35–44 years and 45–54 years. Women aged 35–44 years were the group most likely to be regular volunteers (32%) followed by men and women aged 45–54 years (24% each).

...labour force status

People's participation in unpaid voluntary activities is related to their type of engagement in the paid labour force, with different patterns for men and women. Men who were employed were more likely than those who were unemployed to be regular volunteers, with 19% of both full-time and part-time employed men volunteering at least once a fortnight.

Rates of regular volunteering for adults aged 18 and over, by age and sex — 2006



Source: ABS 2006 Voluntary Work Survey.

For women, those employed part-time had the highest rates of regular volunteering (29%), followed by those who were unemployed (25%). Women employed full-time were equally as likely as men who were employed full-time to be regular volunteers.

...health status

Research has established a strong relationship between volunteering and health. Health issues may limit a person's ability to participate in some voluntary activities and good health leads to continued volunteering. Studies have also suggested that volunteering leads to improved physical and mental health.⁴

In 2006, people who described their own health as excellent or very good were more likely to be regular volunteers (23%) than people who described themselves as having fair or poor health (14%).

...geographic differences

In 2006, the rate of regular participation in voluntary work was higher outside capital cities (23%) than in capital cities (19%).

Life stage

The rate of regular volunteering and the type of organisation a person volunteers for varies as people move through different stages in their lives. Among the selected life stages, people with a child aged less than 15 years were the most likely to volunteer regularly (29% of people in couple relationships and 27% of lone parents). While people with young children had higher rates of volunteering than people in other life stages, on average they spent fewer hours per week volunteering than did people with older children or older people living without children.

Regular volunteers aged 55 years and over in a couple only relationship contributed the most hours among the selected life stage groups, with an average of nearly six and a half hours per person per week. Lone persons aged 55 years and over contributed an average of five and a half hours per week.

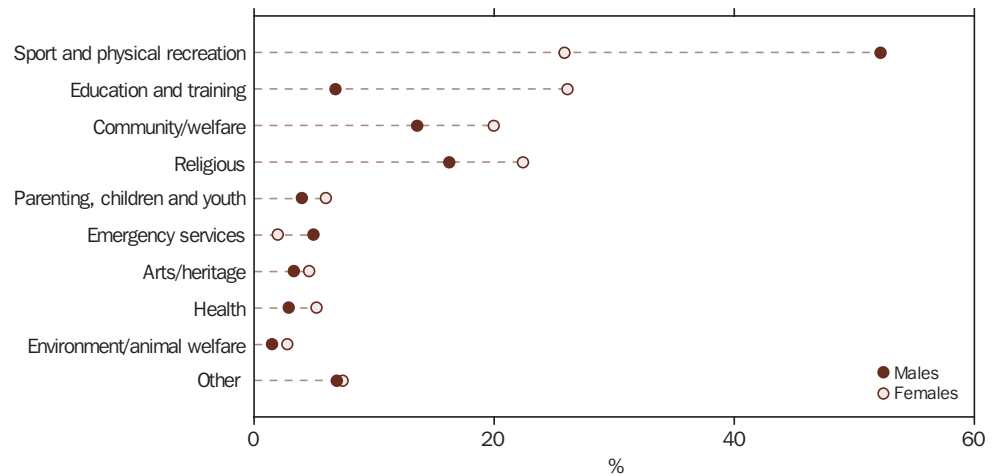
In total, regular volunteers contributed 646 million hours to their communities in the 12 months prior to the 2006 survey. People aged 55 years and over in a couple-only relationship contributed over a quarter of those hours (170 million). A further 151 million hours were contributed by people in a couple relationship with a child aged less than 15 years.

Persons in selected life stages — 2006

Selected person's life stage	Rate of regular volunteering %	Average weekly hours	Total annual hours million hours
Lone person aged less than 35 years	14.8	3.3	7.4
Couple only, aged less than 35 years	17.2	2.5	21.3
Couple with youngest child aged less than 15 years	28.6	2.8	151.5
Couple with youngest child aged 15 years and over	18.6	4.8	67.0
Lone parent with youngest child aged less than 15 years	26.5	3.6	21.6
Lone parent with youngest child aged 15 years and over	17.4	4.2	14.4
Couple only aged 55 years and over	19.9	6.4	170.3
Lone person aged 55 years and over	17.6	5.5	53.8
All persons aged 18 years and over	20.5	4.0	645.9

Source: ABS 2006 Voluntary Work Survey.

Type of organisation(a) by sex: regular volunteers aged 18 and over — 2006



(a) Does not add to 100% as people may report their voluntary work for up to three organisations.

Source: ABS 2006 Voluntary Work Survey.

Type of voluntary organisation

People volunteer regularly for a variety of organisations. The type of organisation people choose to volunteer for differs between men and women and according to their life stage.

Over half (52%) of men who volunteered regularly did so for a sport and physical recreation organisation. Women who volunteered regularly spread their time between sporting organisations (26% of female volunteers), education and training organisations (26% of female volunteers), religious organisations (22% of female volunteers) and community or welfare organisations (20% of female volunteers).

The voluntary work undertaken by parents is likely to be related to their child's education and extracurricular activities. In 2006, the most common organisations for which people with a child aged less than 15 years volunteered, were education and training organisations (34% of people in couple relationships and 43% of lone parents), and sports and physical recreation organisations (46% of people in couple relationships and 36% of lone parents).

People aged 55 years and over, whether in a couple only relationship or living alone, were more likely to volunteer for welfare and community organisations (31% and 39%) and religious organisations (25% and 29%).

...type of voluntary activities

The most common activities performed by regular volunteers were fundraising, preparing and serving food, teaching and coaching or refereeing.

Among regular volunteers, over half of women (55%) and just under half of men (49%) regularly participated in fundraising and sales activities.

Preparing and serving food was a more common activity among regular female volunteers (48%) than regular male volunteers (29%). Around half (48%) of all regular male volunteers coached, judged or refereed compared with around one-fifth (21%) of regular female volunteers. Men were also more than twice as likely as women to regularly participate in repairing, maintenance and gardening activities (35% and 15% respectively).

Of regular volunteers, 6% volunteered for emergency and community safety activities and just under 7% volunteered for activities involving environmental protection.

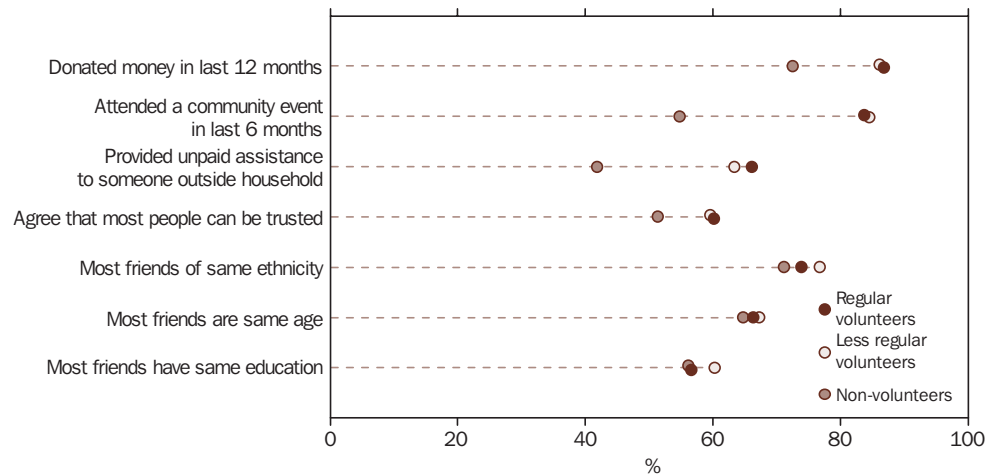
Social capital

Social capital is a measure of the connectedness and functionality of communities. It grows through the social networks we build and the network transactions we take part in (such as providing support or sharing knowledge).

While volunteering itself is considered a strong indicator of social capital,³ volunteers are also involved in other transactions which build social capital.

In 2006, volunteers, regardless of the frequency of their volunteering, were more likely than non-volunteers to donate money, attend a community event or provide unpaid assistance to someone outside their household.

Social networks and transactions by volunteer status — 2006



Source: ABS 2006 Voluntary Work Survey.

In addition to their formal volunteering for an organisation, 66% of people who volunteered at least once a fortnight and 63% of less regular volunteers provided unpaid assistance to someone outside their household, compared with 42% of non-volunteers.

While volunteers did not appear to have more diverse friendships (with respect to the age, educational level or ethnic background of their friends) than people who did not volunteer, they did report higher levels of trust in other people. In 2006, 60% each of regular and less regular volunteers felt that most people could be trusted compared with 51% of people who were not volunteers.

Endnotes

- 1 Volunteering Australia, 2004, Submission on the Productivity Commission's commissioned study: 'Economic Implications of an Ageing Australia', October 2004, viewed 22 February 2008, <[http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/files/J4LR59D9LE/Productivity Commissionsubmission041025.pdf](http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/files/J4LR59D9LE/Productivity%20Commissionsubmission041025.pdf)>.
- 2 Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002, *Australian National Accounts: Non-Profit Institutions Satellite Account, 1999–2000*, cat. no. 5256.0, ABS, Canberra.
- 3 Australian Bureau of Statistics 2004, *Information Paper: Measuring Social Capital: An Australian Framework and Indicators*, cat. no. 1378.0, ABS, Canberra.
- 4 Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Research and Policy Development, *The Health Benefits of Volunteering: A Review of Recent Research*, 2007, Washington, DC.

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