



Review of 2021 Census Topics
Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)
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Volunteering Australia [REDACTED]
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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.

As the primary link between the volunteering sector and federal government, Volunteering Australia provides feedback into key decision making. All feedback is informed by research, evidence and consultation with the volunteering sector.

Introduction

Volunteering Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) on the *Review of 2021 Census Topics*.

The Census provides important data that informs Australia's policy, programs and service delivery. The ABS have launched a national public consultation on the Census to identify data needs on the 2021 Census.

The Australian Census has included an unchanged volunteering question in the past three Censuses. In view of this, the Australian Bureau of Statistics is considering questions for Census 2021 and reviewing the questions accordingly.

Census data is heavily relied upon by all Australians, organisations and government. Volunteering Australia is reliant on accurate and up-to-date statistics to carry out our work. In addition, ensuring that we have accurate national data collection is vital for policy, programming and effective service delivery.

While recent Census data is encouraging, in that it has not decreased, and reveals Australians are still engaged and committed to volunteering activities, it is not indicative of the overall narrative of Australian volunteering activity. In this submission, Volunteering Australia aims to outline our reasons on why the Census question needs to be updated to reflect the evolution of volunteering in Australia.

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Volunteering Australia Response

Need for national data collection on volunteering

At present, data on volunteering and unpaid work is available from three sources:

- The General Social Survey (GSS)
- The Census of Population and Housing
- The Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (SDAC)

The information gathered from the Census is “self-reported from a single question on whether a person did any voluntary work for an organisation or group in the last 12 months.”ⁱ

Volunteering Australia is reliant on Census data given it is the largest statistical collection in the country. With volunteering so diverse, Census data is also useful for cross-referencing and looking at different population groups, employment, geographical regions and other statistical measures.

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. Volunteering Australia recommends a reframing of the current question to capture informal volunteering. In particular, we recommend that Volunteering Australia works collaboratively with the ABS to reframe the question to make sure it captures both formal and informal volunteering in line with Volunteering Australia’s definition of volunteering.

The ABS state they use the information in voluntary work as a measure of how we contribute to society, as well as to provide an “indication of social connection within communities.”ⁱⁱ While this is important, it does not consider the evolution of volunteering from more formal types of volunteering within the community, to more informal forms of volunteering. For example, corporate volunteering, emergency services volunteering and virtual volunteering. All these forms of volunteering don’t necessarily have a primary objective of promoting social connection within the community, but do have other benefits for both the volunteer and/or the recipient of the volunteer engagement.

Strong data is essential for supporting ongoing policy development and research. Reliable statistics are critical for future planning and long-term service delivery. As a national peak body, Volunteering Australia plays a leadership role in the sector by advocating effectively to support and advance volunteering in Australia. The volunteering sector relies on accurate and up-to-date statistics to carry out this work.

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 is commensurate to the contributions of volunteering in the Australian community. However, with current data unreflective of the true picture of volunteering, this is a significant barrier to growing a culture of giving in the Australian community, as well as to building sector capacity and support.

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

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community need. It also enables for an accurate assessment of funding needs with respect to grants for volunteer programs, as well as determining infrastructure needs and service delivery strategies.

Definition of Volunteering

Volunteering Australia reviewed the definition of volunteering in 2015, in consultation with key stakeholders. The review considered the evolution of volunteering to include both formal and informal volunteering.

“Time willingly given, for the common good and without financial gain”ⁱⁱⁱ

There are strong indications to suggest that the Australian Bureau of Statistics should adopt Volunteering Australia’s definition of volunteering, which considers the evolution of volunteering in its entirety.

The exclusion of volunteering activities such as informal caring, corporate volunteering, emergency services, sport, and other informal volunteers excluded from non-profit organisations or projects, but still classified as volunteers, means that we still have not captured accurate data on volunteering in Australia.

We recommend all Government Departments, including the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 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 consistent standard when referring to volunteering.

Inconsistency in data

There is limited and inconsistent up-to-date disaggregated data collection on the economic contribution of volunteering. In addition, 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 value of volunteering would be an asset for those in the sector.

The *2016 Giving Australia Report* cites a figure of 8.7 million^{iv} volunteers who give their time to volunteering activities. This figure far exceeds the 5.8 million figure that is derived from the Census. *Giving Australia* 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 and more accurate sample size. However, this report also has its limitations, as it also does not include the full scope of volunteering activities in the Australian community.

The volunteering sector is being asked to evolve and grow, while nationally there is a decrease in formal volunteer participation. Recent data indicates that formal volunteering is declining, while informal volunteering is increasing. While much of this data is anecdotal (particularly in relation to informal volunteering), we are aware that formal volunteering is on the decline through data comparisons from the General Social Survey and Census. The 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, as there is an increase in the demand for the services that volunteers provide.

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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 engage volunteers to evolve and to better plan for their workforces.

Value of Volunteering

The contributions of the volunteering sector cannot be overstated, 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^v, making an estimated annual contribution of \$290 billion to our economic and social good^{vi}Part of Volunteering Australia's policy and advocacy efforts are to ensure that the economic impact of volunteering is acknowledged, celebrated and supported.

Volunteering Australia 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.

Volunteering is also 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. 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. Ensuring accurate data provides an evidence-base for policy, programming and advocacy efforts to Government.

Time series preservation and marketing opportunities

Given that volunteering makes such a large contribution to Australia's economic, social and cultural landscape, it is vital that we take this opportunity to improve the question now to ensure robust data collection. This would allow for widespread data capturing on formal and informal volunteering, and the capturing of volunteering data for groups not well represented in the Census to-date.

A national marketing campaign is always run in the lead-up to the Census, and we recommend that there is an emphasis on the volunteering question, to notify the Australian public of the changes, and assist people with making an informed answer on Census night. Volunteering Australia is interested in working with the ABS to assist with the dissemination of information, and to help Australians make an informed answer.

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Summary of Recommendations

- Modify the question on volunteering to capture informal volunteering.
- Adopt the Volunteering Australia definition of volunteering to better capture all forms of volunteering.

Conclusion

Volunteering Australia looks forward to working with the Australian Bureau of Statistics to improve the value and accuracy of data capturing for the volunteering sector. In particular, we look forward to working collaboratively with the ABS to reframe the question to make sure it captures both formal and informal volunteering in line with Volunteering Australia's definition of volunteering.

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.



Chief Executive Officer

Endorsements

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

Glossary

- VA** 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.
- VIO** Volunteer Involving Organisations are organisations that utilise volunteers as part of their workforce.
- VSS** Volunteering Support Service (also known as volunteer resource centres or volunteer support organisations) provide place-based volunteer support services to volunteers and VIOs in their locality.

ⁱ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2018), Introduction, Information Paper: Collection of Volunteering data in the ABS, March 2018,

<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4159.0.55.005Main%20Features1March%202018?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=4159.0.55.005&issue=March%202018&num=&view=>

ⁱⁱ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2018), Census of Population and Housing: Consultation on Topics, 2021, <http://abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/2007.0~2021~Main%20Features~Unpaid%20work%20and%20care~10>

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

^{iv} Giving Australia 2016 (2017), Individual giving and volunteering, September 2017,

https://www.communitybusinesspartnership.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/giving_australia_2016_report_-_individual_giving_and_volunteering.pdf

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

^{vi} 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>