



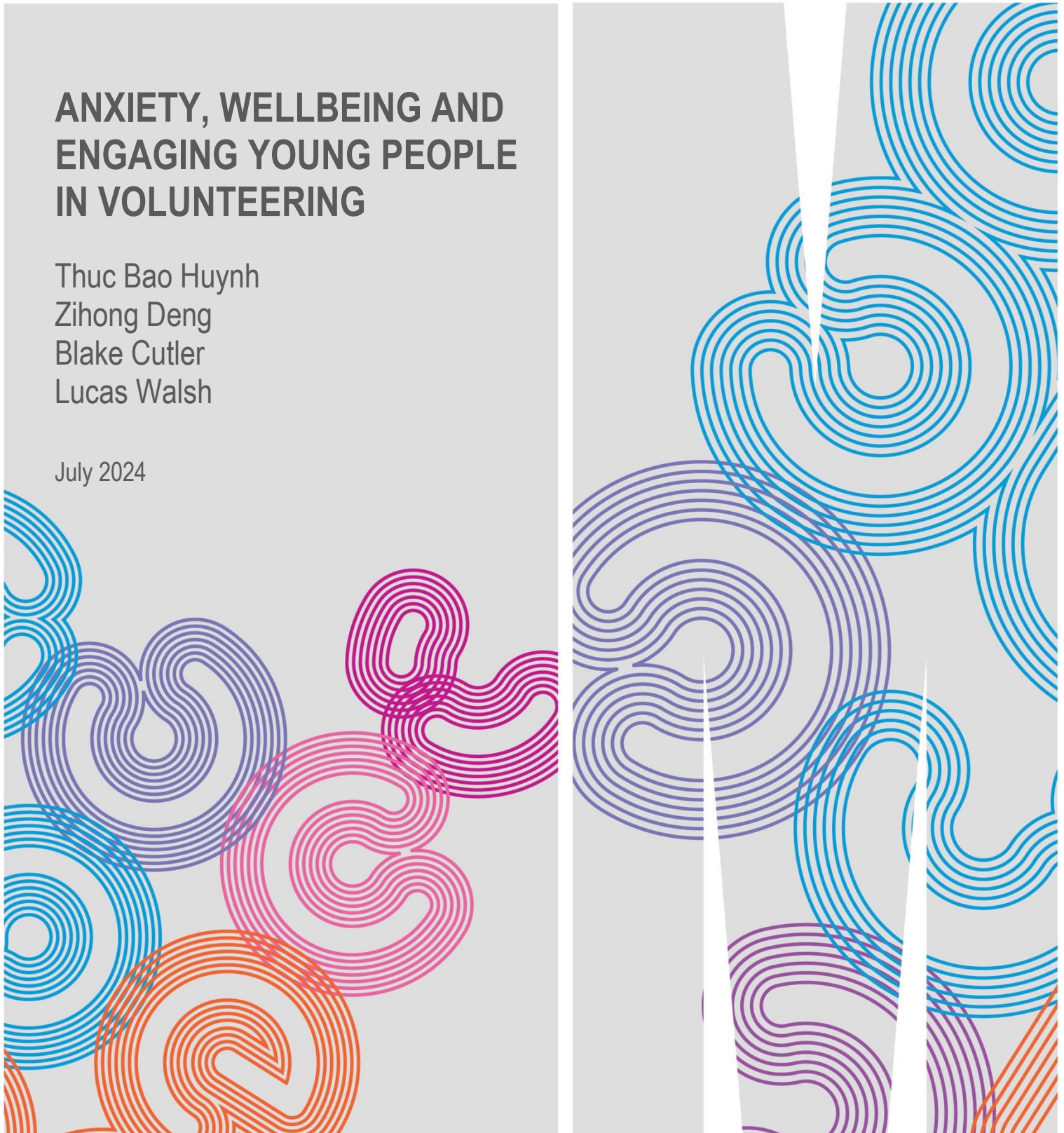
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PRACTICE

ANXIETY, WELLBEING AND ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE IN VOLUNTEERING

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ABOUT US

The Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice (CYPEP) is a multidisciplinary research centre based in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. By focusing on issues that affect young people, and on developing policy and educational interventions to address youth disadvantage, CYPEP aims to identify the challenges to, and opportunities for, improved life outcomes for young people today and throughout their lives. Our vision is for education that creates lifelong and life-wide opportunities for young people and enables them to thrive. Our mission is to connect youth research to policy and practice. We do this by working with policy-makers, educators and youth-focused organisations on research that addresses emerging needs and that respects and includes young people. Working at the nexus of young people and policy, we raise awareness of the challenges faced by young people today and explore how education can harness the capacity of young people to contribute to building thriving communities.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Australia currently faces a shortage of volunteers. Only around one-quarter of Australians volunteered in 2022,¹ and 83% of volunteering organisations say that they need more volunteers and find it particularly difficult to attract young people².

Yet, in 2023, 73% of young Australians aged 18–24 volunteered in organised activities at least once in the previous 12 months. However, 86% of young Australians in 2023 felt that there were barriers to becoming involved in organised activities on issues that were important to them. These included high costs, lack of time, lack of interest, being unsure of what could be done, and difficulty of access.

Drawing from data collected for the Australian Youth Barometer, which has surveyed and interviewed young Australians since 2021, our research offers a different and more positive perspective. Young Australians have a broader view of what volunteering entails than is generally accepted. Young people see volunteering as one aspect of social participation, which includes many types of unpaid community, social, or political engagement in a variety of forms and via various media (e.g. social media). Consequently, there is a need to recognise how young people understand and participate in volunteering in order to connect young people who want to volunteer with the organisations that need them.

Key findings:

1. There is a previously unexamined link between anxiety, volunteering, and wellbeing. Young people may use volunteering as one way of managing feelings of political anxiety, and those who volunteer most often report more positive mental health.
2. Young people understand volunteering in ways that are not captured by currently accepted definitions and see volunteering as one facet of broader social participation.
3. Although young people wish to engage with volunteering, and draw a range of benefits from participating, various barriers – including a lack of broader support – prevent them from doing so.

These findings can help volunteering organisations, social educators (and educators in general) and policy makers to engage young people in volunteering in the ways that are most appealing and appropriate to them.

1. PREFACE

Nearly ten years ago, Dr Rosalyn Black and I were commissioned to write a review of youth volunteering in Australia.³ What we found was a paucity of data and evidence about the prevalence of, and motivations for, volunteering amongst young people. How volunteering was defined and enacted was varied, complex and nuanced. This paper further explores that complexity and nuance.

A major change since 2015 is that we now have a new definition of volunteering from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (more about this below). In addition, we have been collecting data about young Australians aged 18–24 and the ways in which they seek to contribute and shape their worlds through volunteering and other forms of civic participation.

Data indicates that formal volunteering is declining. Overall, 31% of people in Australia volunteered through an organisation in 2014. Only 29% volunteered in 2019 and 25% in 2020.⁴ The troubling 2020 data about volunteering could very well have been impacted by COVID-19 but official trends point to long-term decline. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that we still have significant COVID-19 infection and mortality rates. Our research suggests that the ripple effects of the pandemic are affecting young people in a variety of ways.⁵

An important factor in any discussion of volunteering is how we define it. Definitions and measures to capture volunteering remain somewhat nebulous and hard to pin down. The ABS used to define volunteering as “the provision of unpaid help willingly undertaken in the form of time, service or skills, to an organisation or group, excluding work done overseas”,⁶ but this definition was limited. For young people, many types of volunteering take place invisibly through online activities, like sharing information about causes and activities on social media, that contribute to a wider cause. These might not be for any particular organisation, nor might they be limited by national borders.

Acknowledging that its definition did not account for informal volunteering and other activities such as activism, the ABS General Social Survey now includes “the provision of unpaid work and support to non-household members, excluding that provided only to family members living outside the household”.⁷ This is an important step, but more data is needed, particularly on how young people engage with volunteering.

Young people’s reasons for volunteering have many facets. For example, young people will often seek volunteering opportunities and internships to build their resumes and gain what they perceive to be valuable experiences for future employability. Their motivation is therefore instrumental. Others closely identify with the organisation for whom they are volunteering and their shared purpose.

At the same time, young people often negotiate different demands. For example, they might be working and studying at the same time and/or raising a family. Some seek flexibility in their lives and do not necessarily want to be committed to fixed hours. For many, flexibility is not a choice but a necessity. This presents a challenge for volunteering organisations seeking structured commitments to certain hours and ways of working. Such misalignments with young people’s situations are not new but have intensified as social attitudes, values and norms change and as more young people work – often in multiple jobs – while studying.

On the positive side, our research suggests that young people want to give back to society and are seeking meaningful ways to make a difference. Interestingly, our research finds that young people characterise themselves as volunteering at higher rates than suggested by other indicators.

Why might this be the case? One reason boils down to how young people define volunteering. Young people tell us that volunteering is occurring across formal and informal settings, as well as online, offline and both simultaneously.

In this discussion paper, we seek to unpack the relationship young people have with volunteering. We explore how a better understanding of young people’s engagement with volunteering might be useful to those seeking to expand

their volunteering workforces, to political organisations seeking more active participation by young people, and to policy makers seeking to foster greater civic and political participation in contemporary society. Organisations relying on volunteering perform important economic, social and cultural functions, particularly in response to the needs of people experiencing disadvantage. And with an aging population, new generations will be needed to replenish the volunteering workforce.

While we present no simple answers, this report provides insights into how young people themselves think about their participation in society. We hope you find it useful.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lucas Walsh". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'L' and 'W'.

Professor Lucas Walsh
Director, Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice.

2. INTRODUCTION

Volunteering in Australia, as in many other countries, is undergoing significant change. The COVID-19 pandemic had major impacts on volunteering, with many people choosing to volunteer less or to stop volunteering altogether. Research from Volunteering Australia¹ indicates that this is part of a long-term trend, in which participation in volunteering has generally declined from around one-third of Australian adults in 2002 to around one-quarter in 2022. Although rates of volunteering increased slightly between 2021 and 2022, they remain well below pre-COVID levels.

This gives some cause for concern. According to Volunteering Australia,² 83% of volunteering organisations say that they need more volunteers. Several reasons are given for this need, including a mismatch between the types of volunteering opportunities available and what participants are interested in. As Hamilton Calder, CEO of Volunteering SA & NT states, organisations may need to rethink how they seek to attract volunteers, and to acknowledge that “people are just volunteering differently”.⁸

Further, volunteering organisations have noted that it can be difficult to engage young people in volunteering, and that prominent barriers may exist in recruiting and retaining young volunteers. However, research by Volunteering Australia also suggests that young people want to volunteer, with many young people being deeply worried about the state of the world and wanting to become involved in issues that concern them.² This is supported by our own research. Data from the 2023 Youth Barometer⁹ indicates that 73% of young Australians aged 18–24 volunteered in organised activities at least once in the previous 12 months.

Taken together, these considerations point to a need to examine how volunteering is currently understood, particularly by young people in Australia. It is this need that we aim to address by examining young people’s perceptions of, participation in, and relationship with volunteering, in order to gain a better understanding of how young people might be more meaningfully engaged.

Data from the Australian Youth Barometer, collected annually from 2021 to 2023, provide useful insights. This research used a concurrent mixed-methods design consisting of an online survey and semi-structured interviews. In each year, the cross-sectional survey was completed by more than 500 participants aged 18–24 and the quantitative data were weighted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 young people aged 18–24 and lasted approximately 60 minutes. Interviews and surveys were conducted with young people from all Australian states and territories.

Drawing from this research, this discussion paper presents and discusses three key findings:

1. There is a previously unexamined link between anxiety, volunteering, and wellbeing. Young people may use volunteering as one way of managing feelings of political anxiety, and those who volunteer most often report more positive mental health.
2. Young people understand volunteering in ways that are not captured by currently accepted definitions and see volunteering as one facet of broader social participation.
3. Although young people wish to engage with volunteering, and draw a range of benefits from participating, various barriers – including a lack of broader support – prevent them from doing so.

3. WHY DO YOUNG PEOPLE VOLUNTEER?

Volunteering has been defined in various ways. One definition of a volunteer is someone who willingly donates their time for the common good without remuneration.¹⁰ Volunteering has been defined as “a specific type of a helping behaviour that has clear boundaries”, which “entails some commitment of time and effort”.^{11. p.343}

It can be useful to distinguish between formal and informal volunteering. Formal volunteering is defined by the ABS as “providing unpaid help (time, service or skills) to an organisation or group, excluding work done overseas”.⁶ This covers a relatively narrow range of activities, focusing on those undertaken by individuals as part of recognised organisations and involving ongoing social or community engagement. Conversely, informal volunteering is defined by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare as “the provision of unpaid support to non-household members, excluding family members”.⁴ This covers a broader range of activities, and provides an understanding of volunteering that focuses on unpaid activities undertaken by individuals to assist others in some way.

Other more specific forms of volunteering include crisis volunteering, which involves one-time, short-term responses to emergencies and socio-political crises, with volunteering efforts often being spontaneous and without organisational context or guidance.¹² An example of this was during the COVID-19 pandemic, where people volunteered to support public health systems, went shopping or performed tasks for others, or supported non-profits in their area.¹³ Another form is online volunteering, in which individuals undertake volunteer activities through websites and apps, without the need for physical or face-to-face contact.¹⁴

Despite the range of available definitions, there is still some ambiguity around young people’s relationship to volunteering. For example, young people may consider some actions, such as umpiring at local sporting events, as pursuing personal interests rather than formal volunteering.³ Additionally, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may consider caring and support activities as part of their everyday lives, rather than describing them as volunteering.¹⁵ Given this, it is important to examine more closely how young people understand and engage with volunteering.

The reasons why people volunteer is also debated, and different disciplines use different models. Psychologists, for example, often use the Volunteer Function Index (VFI) to examine why people volunteer. The VFI consists of six factors: protective motives, values motives, career motives, social motives, understanding motives, and enhancement motives.¹⁶ Notably, this model of volunteering focuses on individuals’ motivations for volunteering, and assumes that people purposely engage in volunteering to satisfy their own values and needs.

A similar model proposes four factors related to volunteering: subjective dispositions, including personality traits, attitudes and values; individual human resources, such as gender, race, education and income; life course, depending on where an individual is in their life; and social context, such as social networks, schools, neighbourhoods or countries.¹⁷ These factors broaden the scope of motivations to include an individual’s social circumstances and suggests that different people may volunteer for different reasons.

An economic approach suggests that individuals who volunteer are motivated by some form of personal gain, other than money. An investment model of volunteering, for example, proposes that individuals engage in volunteering to accumulate human capital, such as business contacts or skills.¹⁸ A consumption model of volunteering presents volunteering as a “good”, which individuals can consume in order to gain benefits such as prestige, reputation, personal enrichment, self-actualisation, satisfaction, or happiness.¹⁹ An alternative concept is one of a contract-like engagement, in which a volunteer enters into an exchange relationship, consisting of the obligations, rights, and rewards that a volunteer believes they are entitled to in return for their efforts.²⁰

These models present some limitations for understanding young people’s motivations to volunteer. Most notably, volunteers are assumed to be rational and self-interested and participate to gain some form of benefit, either in the form of social gain or personal satisfaction. Further, these models focus on positive gains, in the sense that

individuals are motivated by obtaining a positive goal, as opposed to avoiding a negative circumstance. This leaves space for developing a broader understanding of why young people participate in volunteering, which may be more complex than previously suggested.

Survey and interview data from the 2023 Australian Youth Barometer suggest a previously unexamined relationship between young people's anxiety, volunteering, and wellbeing. Further, young people may understand volunteering in different ways and their participation may be affected by circumstances outside of their immediate control.

4. YOUNG PEOPLE’S ANXIETY, VOLUNTEERING AND WELLBEING

Anxiety is usually negatively associated with people’s wellbeing. This was evident in our data where 37% of young people who often or very often reported political anxiety reported very poor or poor mental health. This is compared with just 19% of those who never or rarely experienced political anxiety ($p < 0.001$, see Figure 1).

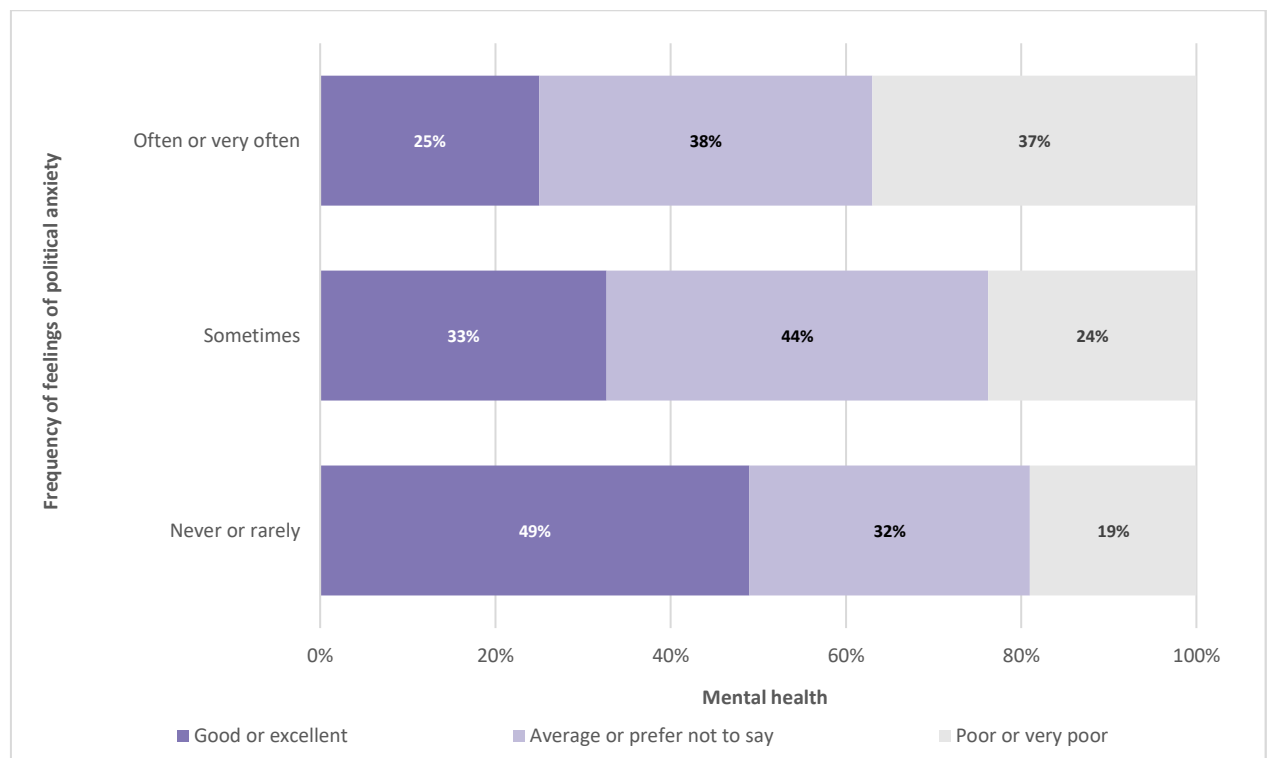


Figure 1. Political anxiety and mental health

Anxiety about various issues can be a motivator for taking action. For example, political anxiety can motivate individuals to become politically engaged or participate in collective social action.²¹ Political anxiety, a form of anxiety triggered by politically-related matters, is recognised as a major emotion affecting people’s political lives.^{22,23} In our survey, feelings of political anxiety were measured by asking: “In the last 12 months, how often have you felt: Worried or anxious about the current or upcoming political events?” Volunteering, as a form of social action, may therefore, be motivated by a feeling of anxiety. However, this relationship between anxiety and volunteering has yet to be directly investigated among young Australians.

Volunteering has also been positively associated with wellbeing. Many non-government organisations note that volunteering can help to connect people, bring mental and physical benefits, advance an individual’s skills and career, be fun and enjoyable, improve a sense of belonging, improve self-esteem, and aid in a sense of achievement and purpose.^{24, 25, 26} Volunteering may also have favourable effects on life satisfaction and general wellbeing.²⁷ These benefits are not limited to the individual, with research indicating that volunteering can also contribute to the wellbeing of neighbourhoods and communities.²⁸

Investigating the relationships between anxiety, volunteering, and wellbeing is particularly important. In 2023, 97% of young Australians aged 18–24 reported experiencing at least one feeling of anxiety or pessimism in the previous 12 months.⁹ Young Australians aged 15–24 also reported decreased life satisfaction, having the lowest life satisfaction levels among all age groups.⁵ Given this prevalence of anxiety among young Australians, it is useful to examine how

anxiety links to the actions young people take and how volunteering can assist in promoting their overall wellbeing.

Data from the Australian Youth Barometer points to a relationship between young people's political anxiety and their participation in volunteering. Young people who had higher self-reported levels of political anxiety were more likely to volunteer. For example, young people who rarely or never reported political anxiety reported volunteering less often (i.e. they had a smaller mean of volunteering sum score^a (Mean=6.125) than those who sometimes (Mean=8.196, $p<0.01$) or often or very often (Mean=8.834, $p<0.001$) reported political anxiety (see Figure 2). Although this data cannot be used to draw a causal link between anxiety and volunteering, the correlation is striking and suggests that anxiety may, in part, be a factor in understanding why young Australians participate in volunteering.

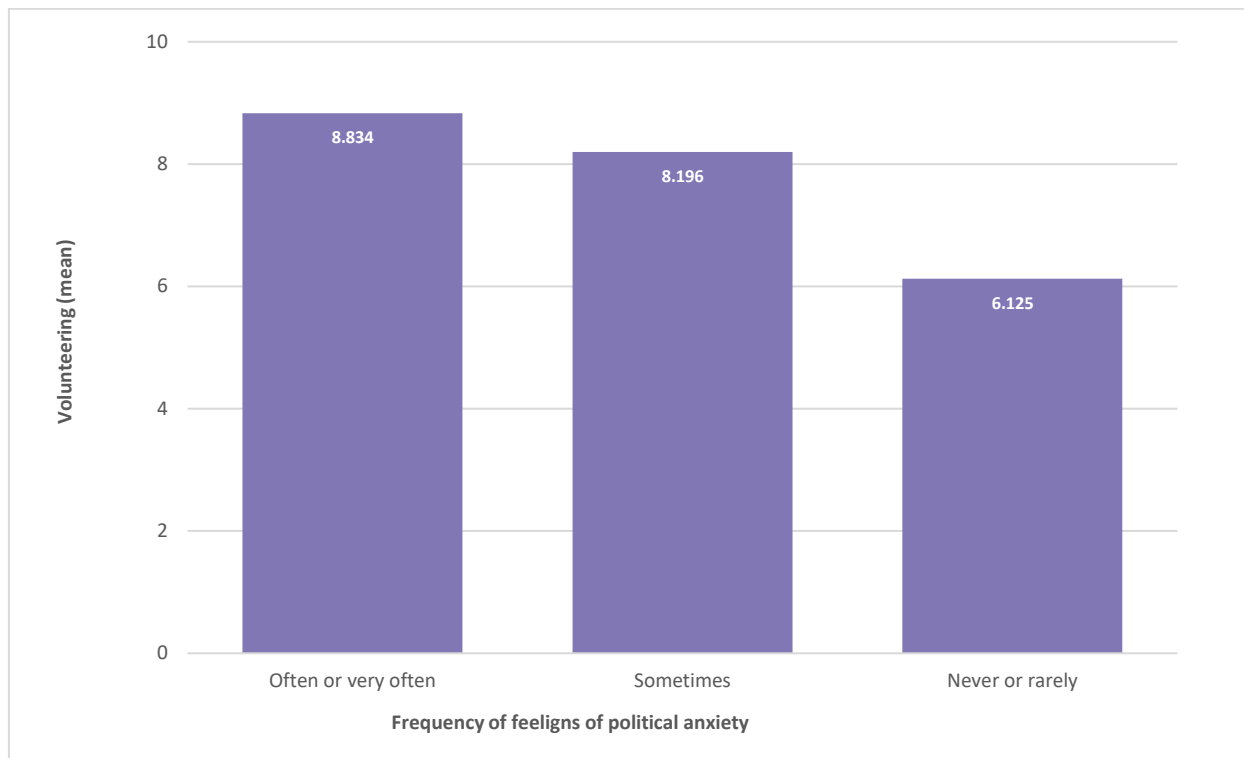


Figure 2. Political anxiety and participation in volunteering

Further insight into this relationship is provided by interview participants. For example, anxiety may motivate young people to become engaged in issues that are of concern to them, based on a desire to express agency and make a difference:

Confronting it, like, you have a problem, you can't just sit there thinking about it for months and months, because that's not going to get you anywhere. Once you have that type of mindset of a problem, let me try and fix it, take action, you're going to fix it eventually.

Man, 21, VIC

Alternatively, some young people may turn to volunteering as a form of therapeutic activity, which can help them to cope with anxiety or other negative feelings:

It helped me more feel like, I'd rather be present in the moment rather than worrying about the stuff in your head.

Woman, 21, QLD

^a The volunteering sum score is calculated by summing respondents' Likert response categories (e.g. Never = 0; Very often = 4) for the organised activities in the survey (i.e. Arts and cultural activities; Emergency services; Environment-related activities; Heritage/conservation groups; Political parties or organisations; Religious or spiritual organisations; Student government; and Welfare-related care and services). A higher summed score indicates more frequent involvement in a greater number of organised activities.

Our data also point to a correlation between young people’s participation in volunteering and positive wellbeing effects, including better self-reported mental health and life satisfaction. For example, young people who reported good or excellent mental health also reported volunteering more often (i.e. had higher volunteering scores, Mean=8.984) compared with those who reported poor or very poor mental health (Mean=5.943, $p<0.001$) (see Figure 3). There was also a weak positive, but statistically significant, correlation between young people’s participation in volunteering and their self-reported life satisfaction ($p<0.01$). This could be interpreted as those with better mental health or life satisfaction in the first place participate in volunteering more often. Yet, it may also be that volunteering played a role in fostering these positive states of mental health, a view which was reflected by young people in interviews:

I volunteer sometimes at events, and it just gets such, like, a good feeling. It just makes you feel like you belong there. Like, you’re doing a good thing.

Woman, 21, QLD

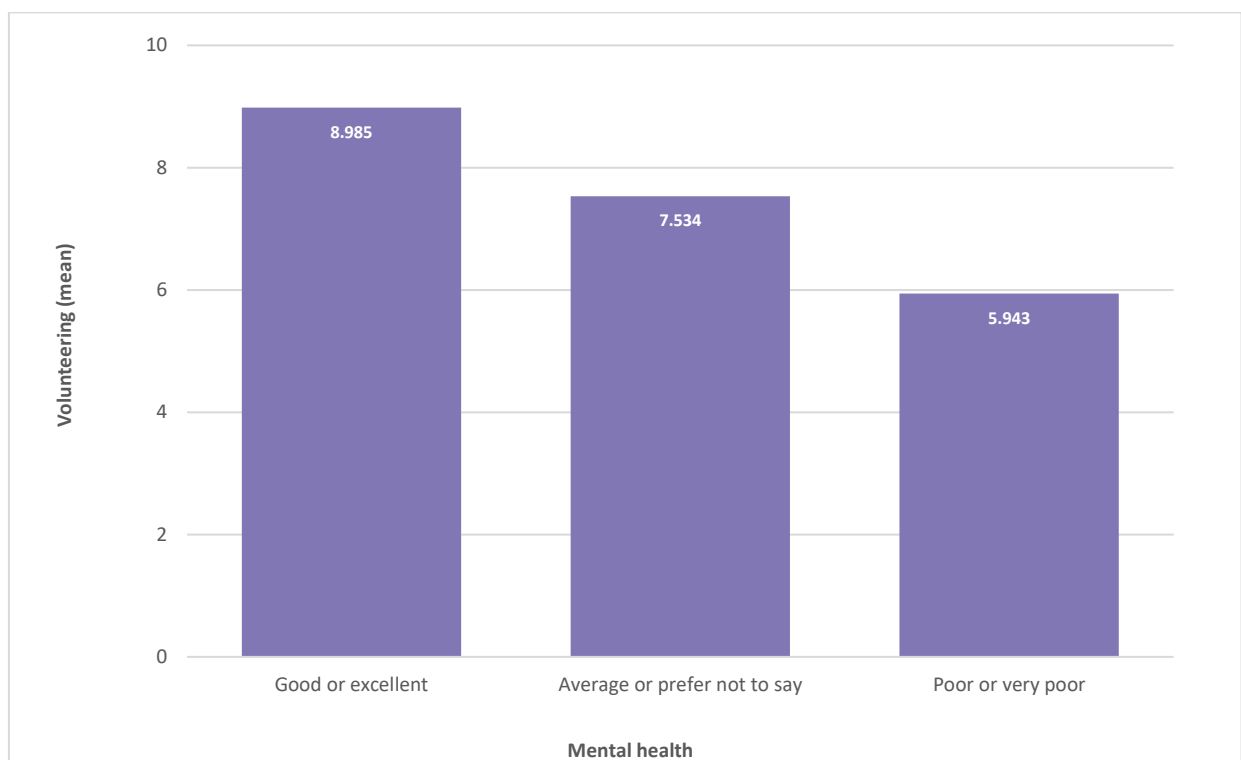


Figure 3. Reported mental health and participation in volunteering

Based on this, a connection can be drawn between young people’s anxiety, volunteering, and wellbeing. Young people who experience higher political anxiety may be more motivated to volunteer; at the same time, volunteering is associated with positive wellbeing outcomes.^b

This opens the possibility for volunteering, alongside other supports, to be used to mitigate young people’s feelings of anxiety, while also bringing a range of benefits to young people. Communities can also benefit, as volunteering may function as “an alternative source of social recognition” and “a central source of social integration”,^{29, p.30-31} As such, volunteering organisations, policy makers, educators, and others who work with young people can promote volunteering as a kind of healthy lifestyle³⁰ and as part of a recovery-oriented service,³¹ especially for those young people who have higher political anxiety.

^b While the analyses presented in this paper cannot speak to the causality of these relationships, our efforts to generate a deeper understanding of this relationship using more sophisticated statistical models is the focus of an upcoming journal article.

5. YOUNG AUSTRALIAN'S UNDERSTANDING OF VOLUNTEERING

Survey data from the Australian Youth Barometer indicate that volunteering plays an important part in the lives of many young people and that they engage in a range of organised volunteering activities. The proportion of young people who volunteered across different activities to some extent (very rarely, sometimes, often, and very often) increased from 74% in 2021 to 78% in 2022 and then decreased to 73% in 2023. For example, 55% of young people volunteered in arts and cultural activities in 2021, which increased to 59% in 2022 then decreased to 52% in 2023. Rates differ depending on the specific organised activities, but the pattern is generally similar (See Figure 4).

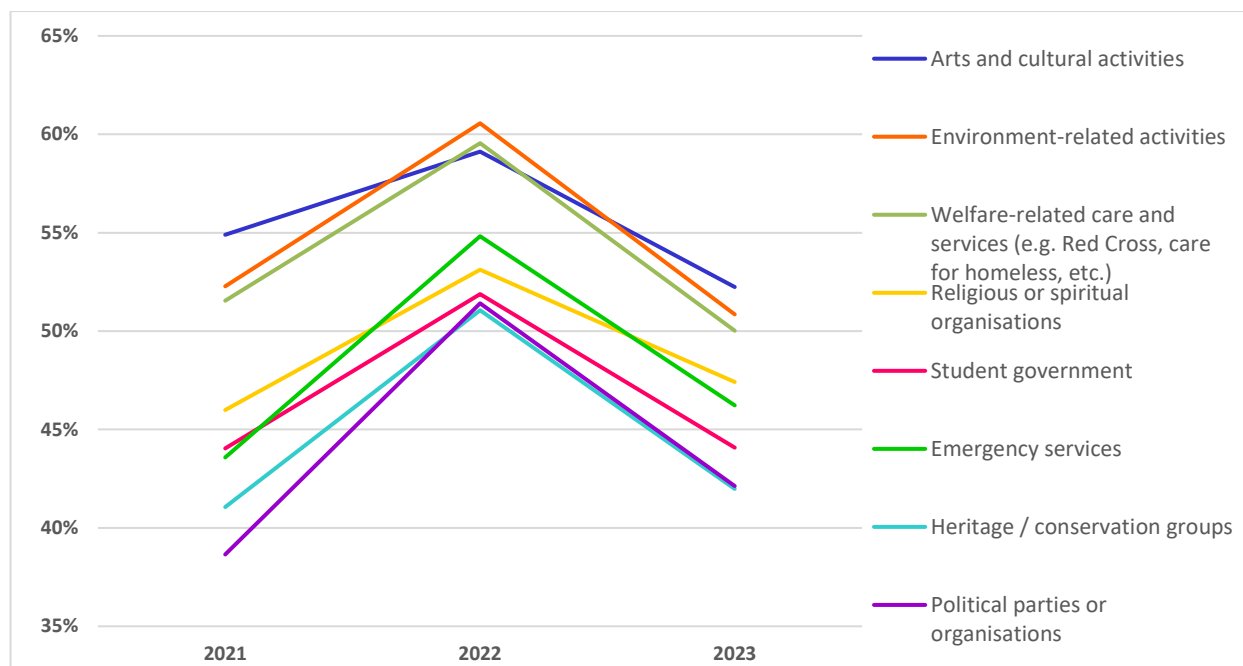


Figure 4. Young Australians' participation in different types of organised activities from 2021 to 2023

For the Australian Youth Barometer surveys, young Australians were asked if they had formally volunteered through an organisation at some time in the previous 12 months. In 2023, around 13% of young people aged 18–24 reported participating in one type of volunteering, and around 60% reported participating in multiple types of volunteering. More than one-quarter (27%) in 2023 reported that they had not participated in volunteering. Experiences of formal volunteering through organisations, and the reasons young people may do so, were also discussed in interviews:

I really care about my tennis club and I really want to see them succeed and so rather than just saying that, I'm on the committee and I'm their treasurer and we raise money and we do things like that. I care about refugees and so I went and joined the Red Cross and we actually put together a program so that new young migrants could have free tennis lessons and they could make friends and become engaged with the community.

Man, 21, ACT

Young people also discussed a range of informal volunteering activities, which tended to be more ad hoc and based around specific events or activities rather than happening on a regular basis or with organisations. When discussing their participation in this type of activity, the young people we interviewed often discussed a desire to help out and support others:

I was a school representative, so I used to take [the] parents out on tours. I was part of the committee which did the yearbook. I planned the formal, the year 12 formal.

Woman, 23, VIC

I reckon I just love helping people honestly, like, whenever like, in my day-to-day life. Whenever I see an ad, or like a volunteering thing, I always want to help as well.

Woman, 18, QLD

Our survey did not include questions that would tell us whether young Australians had participated in informal volunteering. It is possible that some respondents who reported not participating in volunteering engaged in informal volunteering. It is also possible that respondents did not clearly distinguish between formal, informal or other types of volunteering in their responses. Hence, we do not have a complete picture of how young people understand volunteering, and what activities constitute participation in volunteering. These understandings warrant further investigation.

This ambiguity around what young people might consider as volunteering is reflected in the interview data, in which they discussed a range of activities that do not readily fit within the formal definitions, but which seem to occupy the same role in their lives. Many of these activities revolved around various types of community and political participation. Some participants spoke about activism and other forms of political action as activities that young people participate in with the aim of making a difference in their communities:

I'm more one of those people that like to do things for university, like writing essays and stuff like that, and like, social commentary, I suppose opposed to the direct action.

Man, 24, NSW

Several of the activities identified by young people occurred on social media and other digital spaces. As the above quote suggests, many young people prefer to engage in forms of activism where they can directly communicate with others. Social media is one avenue young people are using to achieve this. Some young people, for example, used social media to become more connected and engaged in social and political events, while others used digital media to create and share content (See Figure 5).

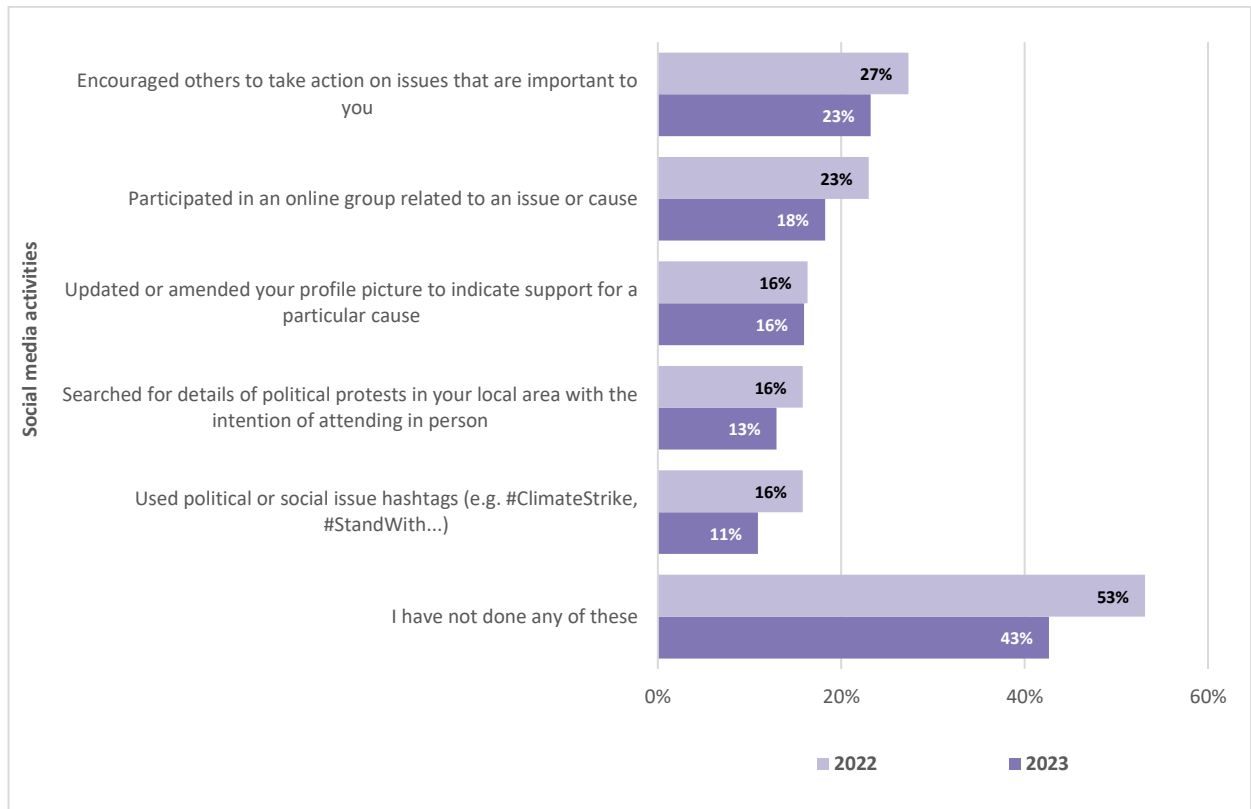


Figure 5. Young people's social and political activities on their social media profile(s)

Note. These questions were not included in the 2021 survey.

In 2022 and 2023, 55% of young people thought that social media worked very well or somewhat well in helping underrepresented groups to amplify their voice. Similar proportions (52% in 2022 and 53% in 2023) thought that social media worked very well or somewhat well in allowing important issues to receive attention that they might not have gotten otherwise. Young people’s perceptions of using social media, however, are not always positive: 54% of young people in 2022 thought that people can become side-tracked from important issues because of social media. This proportion increased slightly to 56% in 2023. Similarly, 50% in 2022 and 52% in 2023 reported that people who think they are making a difference using social media are not always doing so (See Figure 6).

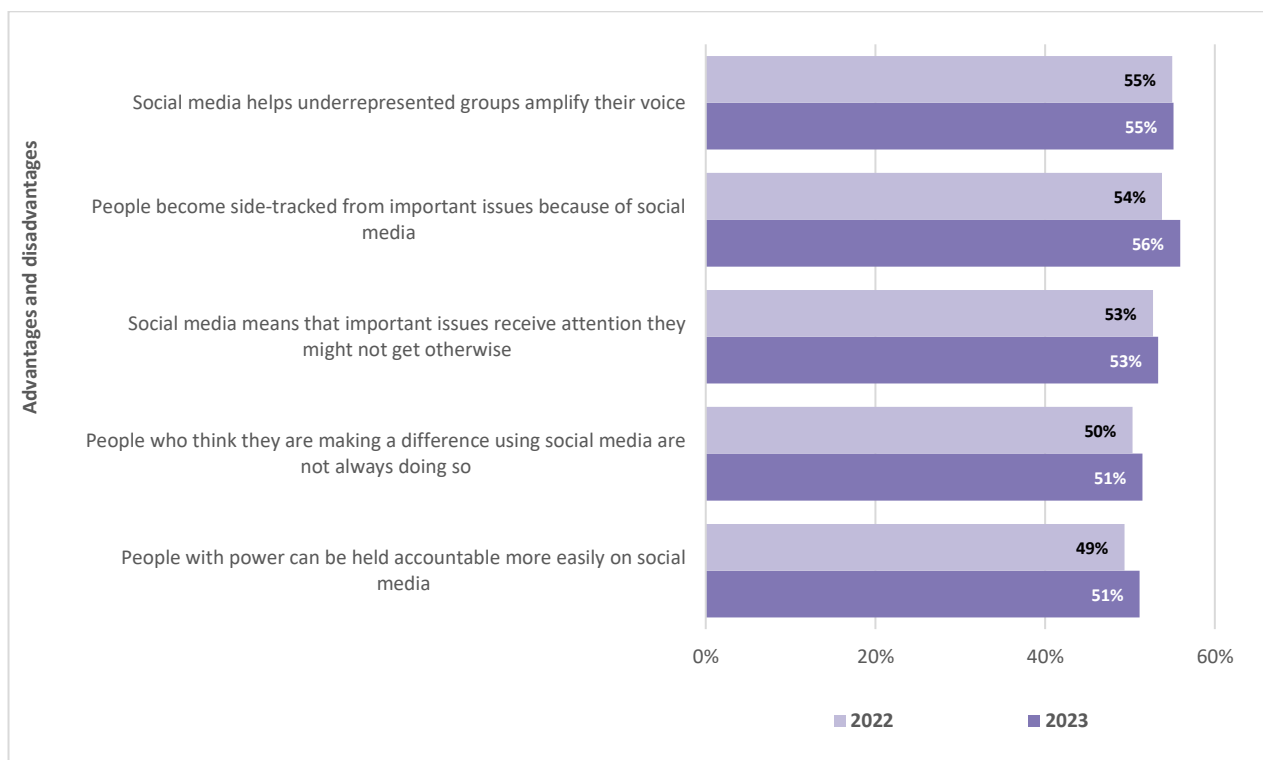


Figure 6. Advantages and disadvantages of using social media

Note. The percentage includes young people who think the statement describes social media very well or somewhat well. These questions were not included in the 2021 survey.

In interviews, young people discussed how social media was a means to get involved in the conversation and make their voices heard:

I would say get involved in, like, elections, local and state, federal, and, you know, be an activist for the things you care about. Get[ting] involved on social media is definitely a way you can make your voice heard.

Man, 24, VIC

Given this, many of the activities that young people participate in, both online and offline, fall outside the formal definitions of volunteering. Following the definition of informal volunteering as unpaid support,⁴ it is not always clear who young people thought they were supporting and what form of support was being provided. Support appears to be thought of as something general, rather than being directed at any specific individual or group. The same ambiguity is also present even with broad definitions of volunteering as “intentionally productive unpaid work”.^{32, p.19} It is unclear if the activities discussed by young people in the interviews were thought of as a form of work, nor is it clear if and in what sense young people thought of these activities as being productive.

However, being active on social media was often discussed by young people alongside more commonly recognised forms of volunteering and appears to occupy a broadly similar conceptual space in young people’s experiences. That is, young people may have a broader understanding of what volunteering entails than previously thought, one which appears to include many forms of unpaid community, social, or political engagement, across a variety of forms and media.

6. BROADER BENEFITS OF VOLUNTEERING

Volunteering has been widely recognised as beneficial to both individuals and their communities.³ Being sensitive to the ways in which young people understand volunteering is, therefore, an important factor in being able to fully realise the benefits that volunteering can bring. Interview participants discussed a broad range of benefits relating to a variety of activities, some of which fell outside standard definitions of volunteering.

Improved employability

Twenty per cent of survey respondents in 2023 indicated that they volunteered with the intention of getting a job. One participant spoke of how interviewers for potential roles often asked about previous volunteer experience:

Every single time I went for a grad program interview ... they didn't ask once about university, they wanted to know what I was doing in volunteering.

Man, 21, ACT

Learning new skills

Young people saw volunteering as an informal source of learning.³³ The skills learnt and reinforced range from specific skills related to certain roles or activities to more generic ones, such as communication skills. For example, one participant noted that volunteering in surf lifesaving had helped her to develop broader communication skills:

Probably one of the coolest things I've done and also having to do the skill, like, I volunteered as a surf lifesaver and that was really amazing. Just talking to people and everything, I think is a good skill to learn.

Woman, 18, QLD

A sense of belonging and connection

Volunteering can help young people feel a sense of belonging and maintain connections with others.³⁴ Interview participants spoke about how volunteering for university organisations helped them maintain communal contacts, even after their time as a formal part of the organisation ended:

I still feel I belong because I do some volunteer work at the uni. So still connected ... Like, I don't go to events anymore, but I still feel like I'm connected with the community.

Man, 24, NSW

Affecting change and making a difference

Volunteering was seen as a way to affect change and make a difference. Young people viewed volunteering as part of a wider array of social and political engagement, with many of the effects overlapping. Importantly, this extended beyond traditional views of volunteering and appeared to include the broader understandings of volunteering, such as community, social and political engagement discussed above. Several participants, for example, spoke about volunteering as one way in which young people could become more politically active and express their agency and desire to enact change:

I volunteer quite a bit and I think that's one way I can also contribute to changes, like, when you do things like run events, or help younger students, help them with things that you can actually help the next generation grow.

Man, 24, NSW

You don't have to just sit on the sidelines. You can do something about it; you do have an agency. You can get involved with charity and even if you only do a little bit it does matter. Individual bricks make up a house, right? That's my perspective.

Man, 21, ACT

Improving general wellbeing

As discussed above, volunteering can be beneficial for young people's general wellbeing. Interview participants understood volunteering as a way to empower young people, exercise agency, improve mental health, confidence, and happiness in the community, to avoid thinking about worries and anxieties, and bring about positive outcomes. Volunteering can also provide an opportunity for young people to undertake self-care, look after themselves, and feel good about themselves. Improved wellbeing overlaps with other identified benefits, such as making a difference and belonging:

It can be a lot of work but it's very rewarding. I think that I always get this comment sometimes from people that we don't get paid for it so why do you care but I think, well, it's not, like, why does life have to be about money all the time? There's more to life than just earning income ... It makes you feel as though you're actually making a difference and that you've got agency and you're using it.

Man, 21, ACT

7. BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

Despite the benefits of volunteering, many young people face barriers that prevent them from volunteering to the extent that they would like. Connected to their broader views on volunteering, young people discussed these barriers to volunteering as part of wider barriers to participation in organised activities and general social and political engagement.

Data from the Australian Youth Barometer highlighted that the majority of young Australians (87% in 2022, 86% in 2023,) felt that there was something preventing them from being involved in organised activities on issues that were important to them. Major barriers to volunteering and other forms of participation included high costs, lack of time, lack of interest, being unsure of what could be done, and difficulty of access (see Figure 7). With the exception of difficulty of access and needing prior experience, the number of young people reporting these barriers increased from 2022 to 2023. The general increase in young people who perceived barriers may explain why fewer volunteered in different types of organised activities in 2023 compared with 2022.

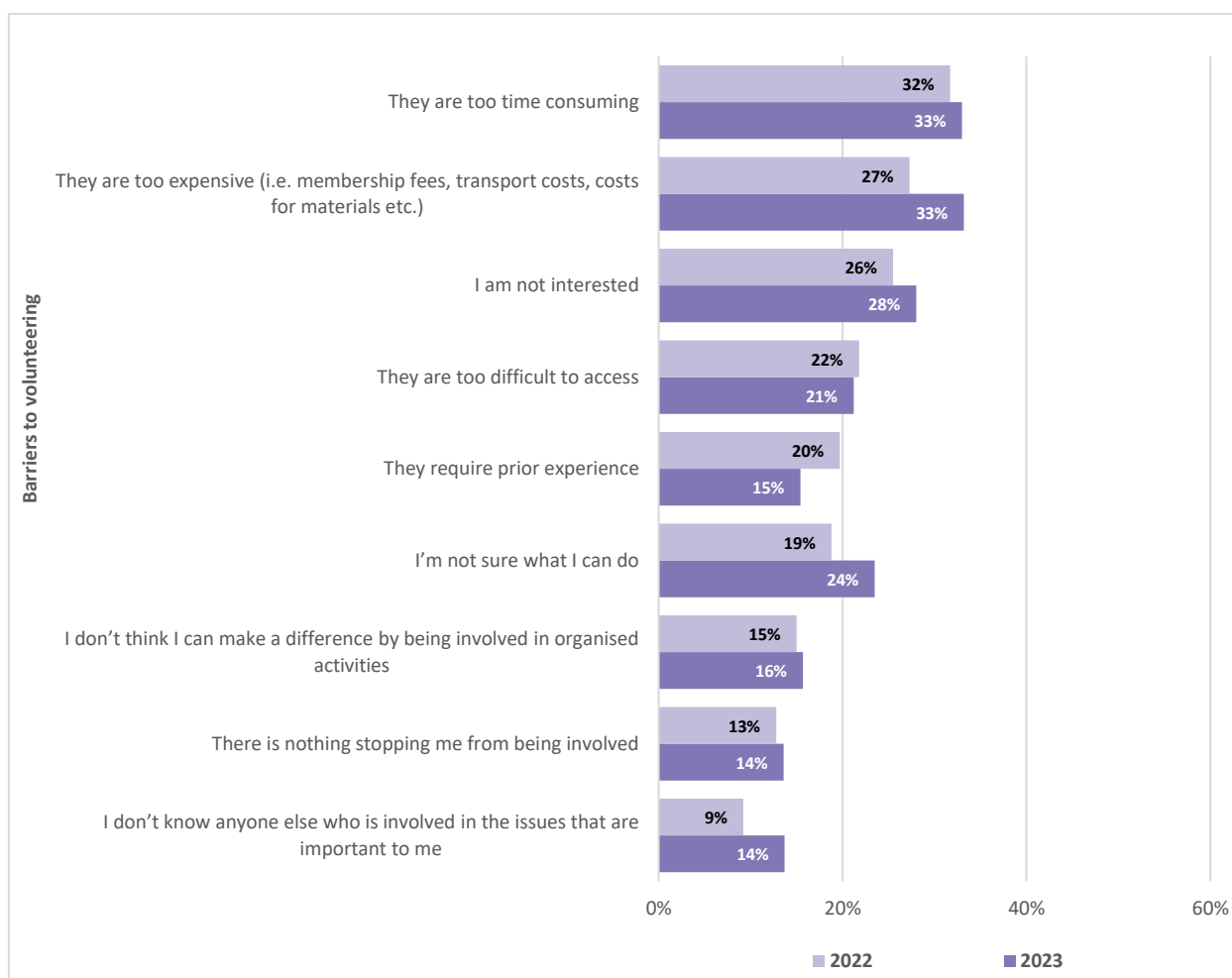


Figure 7. Main reasons that stop young people from being involved in organised activities on issues that are important to them

Note. These questions were not included in the 2021 survey.

These findings were reflected by interview participants, who spoke of four main barriers that prevented them from volunteering or participating in similar activities.

Lack of support

Young people felt a lack of support when volunteering or participating in similar activities. This largely revolved around emotional support, which young people felt was important in allowing them to effectively participate. For example, one participant mentioned that support is needed to talk about problems and answer questions:

You need support systems in place. You need to be able to have people that you can talk to about your problems. You need people that you can ask questions in a professional setting that can be mentors to you. I think it takes a village.

Man, 21, ACT

Lack of time or money

Young people faced logistical barriers, such as time and money, where they thought volunteering was time-consuming and expensive. Some young people also felt that there were not enough opportunities for them to volunteer:

I would like to be quite a bit more politically involved. I spend way too much time working and I don't have the effort to truly put in as much as I would like ... I'd like to be more so but there's not much opportunity to where I am.

Man, 23, NSW

Bureaucratic obstacles

Some young people experienced organisational or bureaucratic obstacles, particularly when they did both paid and unpaid work for the same organisation. One participant discussed how her volunteer status within a wider organisation made it feel like she had been forgotten in the payroll system:

I work in a youth centre, right, and by work, I mean, I volunteer and then occasionally get work ... Because there's no, like, you're not on a payroll, you get forgotten very easily in, like, bureaucracy.

Woman, 22, TAS

Not being taken seriously

Young people engaged in many activities in both traditional and digital spaces but felt that they rarely received enough attention from governments and agencies, and that their voices were rarely heard. This barrier was closely linked to a broader understanding of volunteering, and was often discussed in conjunction with barriers to young people's political participation more generally:

I think it's taking a long time for governments and agencies to realise that my generation, as such, interact a lot more online and does things differently to how things have been done before. I don't know how to peg that as an issue, but it's just that barrier of communication is blocked, which I think is why our voices aren't coming across.

Woman, 24, WA

These barriers are preventing young people from engaging more meaningfully in volunteering. This is particularly important as volunteering has a wide array of benefits and, as discussed above, may be one way for young people to manage increasing levels of personal and political anxiety.

Volunteering organisations often find it difficult to recruit, attract, and maintain volunteers.³⁵ Therefore, the barriers identified above present opportunities for organisations, policy makers, and social educators to design volunteering activities that attract and engage young people, and allow them to harness the benefits that volunteering can bring for themselves and their communities.

8. WELLBEING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE, WELLBEING FOR ALL

Volunteering organisations across Australia face a range of difficulties when attempting to engage with young people.² This is genuine cause for concern, given the important role that volunteering can play in Australian civic and social life. Further, such difficulties can lead to the perception that young people are disengaged or are not interested in volunteering. However, as our research highlights, this is not the case.

Young people have a complex relationship with volunteering. Drawing on three years of data from the Australian Youth Barometer, we have found that there are important associations between young people's anxiety, wellbeing and experiences of volunteering. Further, our findings suggest that young Australians have an understanding of what volunteering entails that extends beyond accepted definitions, and view volunteering as part of a broad array of social and political participation. Young people can be deeply engaged with the issues that interest them, and many turn to volunteering as a way of expressing agency and making change. However, they do so in ways that are not always visible within traditional models of volunteering. Young Australians recognise the benefits that volunteering brings, but also perceive a number of barriers that prevent them from engaging as much as they would like.

For volunteering organisations, policy makers, social educators, and those seeking to engage young people, we present these recommendations on how to engage young people in volunteering in the ways and spaces that are appropriate to them.

1. ***Acknowledge the particular ways that young people understand and participate in volunteering.*** Young people are not disengaged or uninterested in volunteering: many want to give back to society and are seeking meaningful ways to make a difference. Those seeking to engage with them need to recognise the particular ways that young people enact volunteering, and meet them in the (face-to-face and virtual) spaces where they live.
2. ***Understand young people's motivations for volunteering.*** Our research suggests that anxiety may be a factor in why young Australians participate in volunteering. This opens a range of possibilities for volunteering, alongside other supports, to be used to mitigate young people's feelings of anxiety, while also bringing a range of benefits to young people and their communities.
3. ***Understand the barriers to young people's participation.*** For many young people, volunteering often involves negotiating a complex array of competing demands. By mitigating these barriers, organisations can support and empower young people to participate in volunteering in the ways and to the extent that they desire.

By taking the perspectives of young people into account, volunteering organisations, policy makers, and educators can better engage with young people, and empower them to have positive impacts on both themselves and their communities.

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