

The Decline of Formal Volunteering in Australia (2001–2020): Insights from the HILDA Survey

Rong Zhu

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Towards a
National Strategy
for Volunteering



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The Decline of Formal Volunteering in Australia (2001–2020): Insights from the HILDA Survey¹

Rong Zhu²

Key insights

- Volunteering participation in Australia generally declined from 2001 to 2020, corroborating analysis of data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics' General Social Survey by Volunteering Australia.
- These declines in participation were most noticeable among Australians aged 45–60, women, and those without a university degree.
- Volunteers' hours of unpaid work per week, however, were either stable or increasing with some fluctuations across the sample or sub-samples.
- Quantitative evidence also suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected the provision of volunteer work in Australia.

1 I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers for very helpful comments. This paper uses unit record data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey. The HILDA Project was initiated and is funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services (DSS) and is managed by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research (Melbourne Institute). The findings and views reported in this paper, however, are those of the author and should not be attributed to either DSS, the Melbourne Institute or Volunteering Australia.

2 College of Business, Government and Law, Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia, and Institute of Labor Economics (IZA), Bonn, Germany. E-mail: rong.zhu@flinders.edu.au.

1 Introduction

As a widespread social activity, volunteering contributes fundamentally to the functioning of society. Many communities and not-for-profit organisations rely on unpaid labour for essential and productive resources. Approximately 6 million Australians commit their time, energy, and expertise to voluntary activities annually. Around 489.5 million hours of unpaid work were contributed by volunteers to the Australian society in 2020.³ In addition to the benefits for recipients, volunteers also benefit from unpaid labour supply in terms of their expanded social networks,⁴ increased self-esteem,⁵ better health,⁶ and greater subjective well-being.⁷ As volunteering provides substantial benefits to individuals, communities, and the country at large, it is important that all Australians encourage, support, and recognise it.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the prevalence and intensity of formal voluntary work provided through an organisation in Australia from 2001 to 2020, using long-run nationally representative data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey. I show that volunteering participation among Australians declined over the last two decades, which confirms the finding of Volunteering Australia using data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) General Social Survey (GSS).⁸ The decline in the rate of volunteering participation in Australia is also consistent with the recent significant reduction in volunteer numbers in the global volunteering sector.⁹ However, the amount of time volunteers devoted to unpaid work per week either remained stable or increased over the same period. Additionally, using data from the COVID-19 section of HILDA Wave 2020, this paper complements Biddle and Gray (2021) in providing quantitative evidence that the COVID-19 crisis discouraged Australians from undertaking voluntary work.¹⁰

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 discusses the HILDA data and variables. Section 3 presents the main findings of this analysis. Lastly, Section 4 concludes and discusses policy implications.

3 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020

4 Wilson and Musick, 1997

5 Olun et al., 1998

6 Kumar et al., 2012

7 These benefits are achievable when there is a fit between a volunteer and the volunteer role/organisation. See Magnani and Zhu, 2018; Appau and Awaworyi Churchill, 2019

8 Volunteering Australia, 2022

9 United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme, 2018; 2021

10 Biddle and Gray, 2021

2 Description of the HILDA Data and variables

This paper draws on individual-level data from the longitudinal Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey. The HILDA household survey was launched in 2001 and collects annual information on labour market dynamics, life events, health, and economic well-being for Australians aged 15 years and over. The data used in this study are the 20 Waves (2001–2020) of the HILDA unit record data. The total sample size for this analysis is 250,742, of which 201,920 observations come from non-volunteers and 48,772 observations come from volunteers.

Table 1: Summary statistics

All		Volunteer	
		No	Yes
Provision of formal voluntary work:			
Participation in volunteering (%)	19.45	0.00	100.00
Hours of volunteering per week	1.01	0.00	5.20
Age:			
Average age	44.89	43.65	50.00
Aged 15–40 (%)	44.33	47.64	30.63
Aged 41–65 (%)	39.30	37.46	46.96
Aged 66+ (%)	16.36	14.90	22.41
Gender:			
Male (%)	46.72	48.00	41.44
Female (%)	53.28	52.00	58.56
Education:			
Less than university education (%)	75.57	77.46	67.76
University education (%)	24.43	22.54	32.24
State/territory:			
NSW (%)	29.47	29.51	29.29
VIC (%)	24.80	24.31	26.82
QLD (%)	21.00	21.62	18.48
SA (%)	9.24	9.02	10.17
WA (%)	9.50	9.58	9.17
TAS (%)	3.21	3.23	3.11
NT (%)	0.67	0.65	0.79
ACT (%)	2.10	2.08	2.18
Observations	250,742	201,920	48,772

Note: Data are from HILDA Waves 2001–2020.

HILDA respondents were asked how much time they spent on formal volunteer work or charity work (for example, canteen work at the local school; unpaid work for a community club or organisation) in a typical week in every wave. I calculate two indicators based on this information: one measuring participation in volunteer work and another measuring the number of volunteer hours per week (among volunteers). In the first variable, I examine the engagement in volunteer work, while the second one examines the intensity at which people volunteer.

Table 1 summarises the variables used in the analysis, including volunteer work provision as well as age, gender, qualification, and state/territory of residence. Approximately 19 per cent of observations come from HILDA respondents who provide formal volunteer work on a regular basis. During 2001–2020, volunteers worked an average of 5.2 hours per week. Furthermore, the average age of volunteers was 6.5 years older than that of non-volunteers. Around 37 per cent and 15 per cent of those who did not volunteer were aged 41–65 and 66+, respectively. In contrast, the two analogous figures for volunteers were 47 per cent and 22 per cent. Table 1 also shows that volunteers were more likely to be female and have higher education levels than non-volunteers. Lastly, the distribution of states/territories of residence was similar between volunteers and non-volunteers.

3 Empirical analyses

3.1 How have Australians changed their volunteering during 2001–2020?

Using the HILDA data, I describe the changes in (i) the participation in formal volunteering and (ii) the hours of formal volunteering per week performed by volunteers over the period of 2001–2020. First, I examine the patterns for the whole sample, and then I look at subgroups stratified by age, gender, education, and state/territory of residence.

Table 1 shows that during 2001–2020, the average rate of formal volunteering among Australians was about 19 per cent, as shown by the horizontal dashed line in the upper part of Figure 1. It is clear in Figure 1 that the participation rate fluctuated over time. An overall trend of declining voluntary work provision was observed, which is similar to the finding in Volunteering Australia using data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) General Social Survey (GSS).¹¹ As of 2020, the rate was 14.33 per cent, down from 23.2 per cent in 2001. The lower part of Figure 1 shows a more encouraging pattern. While there was a decreasing proportion of Australians who were willing to be volunteers, the average number of hours of unpaid work performed by volunteers increased over time with some fluctuations. In most years following 2006, the average weekly hours of volunteering were higher than the average for the two decades between 2001 and 2020.

11 Volunteering Australia, 2022

In both parts of Figure 1, there was a big drop in volunteering from 2019 to 2020. This is speculated to be a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which will be discussed in Section 3.2.

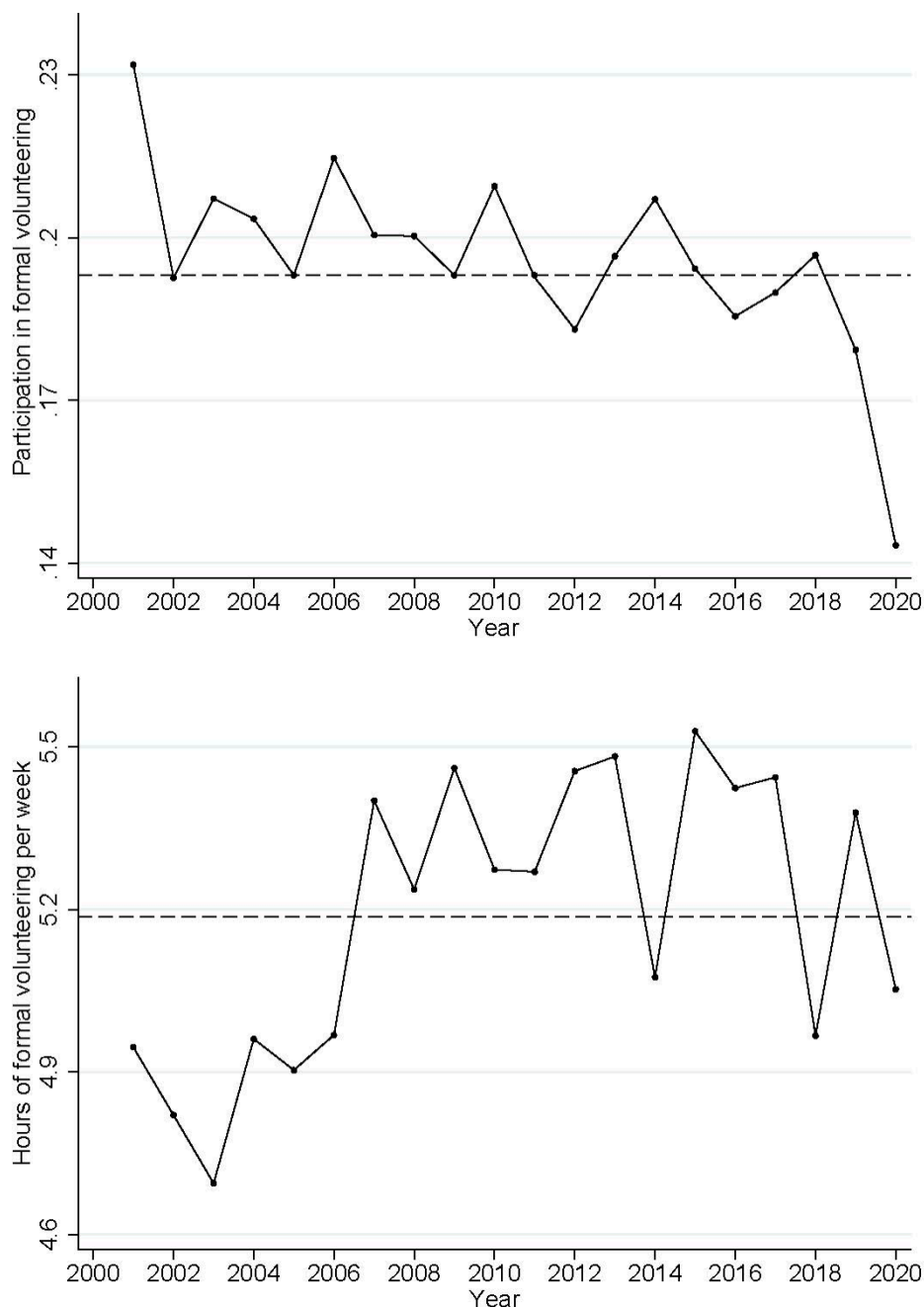


Figure 1: Formal volunteering among Australians

Figure 2 displays the prevalence and intensity of volunteer work among different age groups. I consider three different age ranges: (i) 15–40; (ii) 41–65; and (iii) 66 and above. The two older age cohorts had significantly higher participation rates than the youngest group. Since 2007, the oldest age group of 66+ has surpassed the 41–65 age group in participation rates. Participants in the 15–40 and 41–65 age groups were declining, while the rate among the oldest cohort gradually increased. Regarding volunteering intensity shown in the lower part of Figure 2, volunteers aged 66+ consistently worked more

hours during 2001–2020 than those aged 41–65. The youngest age group worked the fewest hours per week. Volunteering intensity was on the rise among the youngest age groups while staying stagnant among those aged 41–65. Volunteer hours of Australians aged 66+ had fluctuated the most over time, with the highest average hours per week observed in 2010. The high prevalence and intensity of volunteering among the seniors are consistent with the previous literature. According to Giving Australia (2016), people aged 65 years and over contribute more unpaid work than any other age group in Australia.¹²

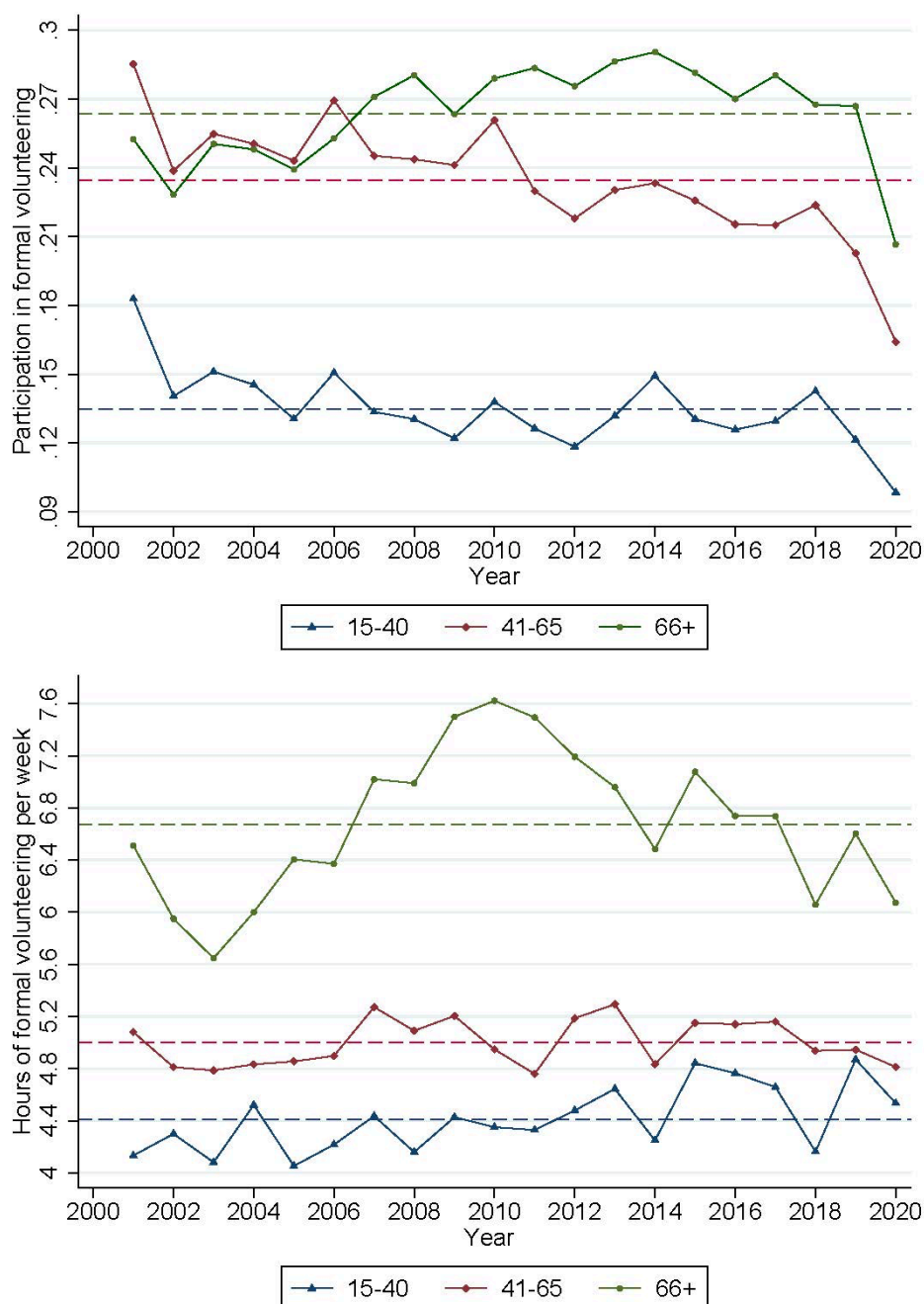


Figure 2: Formal volunteering among Australians by age group

¹² Giving Australia (2016). 2016 fact sheet – individual volunteering. Funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services. Older individuals also contribute significantly to volunteer services in the United States and countries in Europe (Erlinghagen, 2010; Tang, 2016; Eibich et al., 2022).

Next, I examine the changes in formal volunteering from 2001 to 2020 separately for men and women. Figure 3 shows that volunteering had declined for both men and women, but it was particularly pronounced among women. Both men and women were experiencing a similar change in volunteering intensity as shown in Figure 1: volunteer hours since 2006 have been largely higher than the average during 2001–2020 for both men and women.

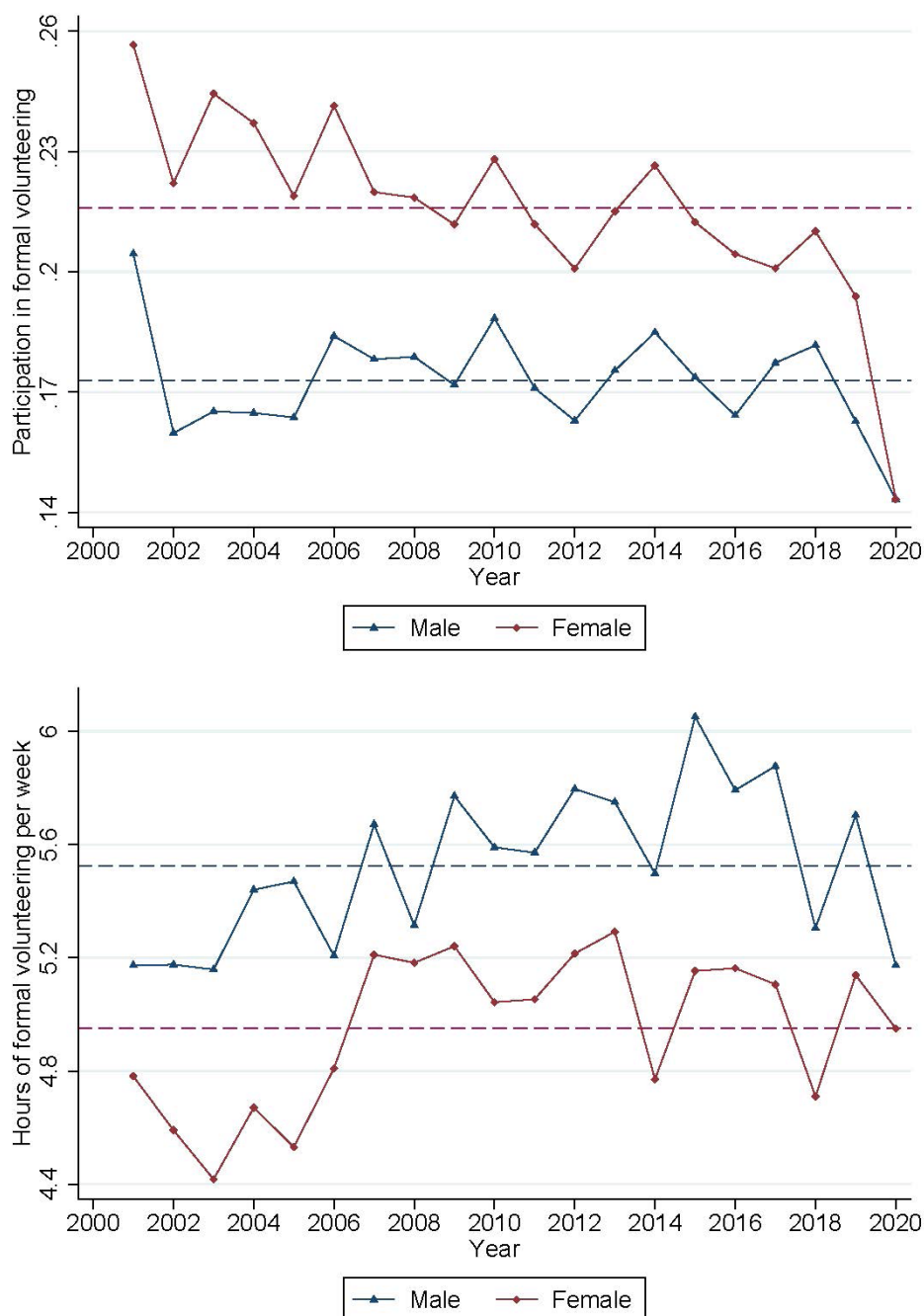


Figure 3: Formal volunteering among Australians by gender

In Figure 4, I observed that university educated individuals had largely stable rates of volunteering participation before the COVID-19 pandemic. Participation rates among less educated Australians, however, were on the decline over time. While individuals with university education were more likely to participate, they worked consistently fewer hours per week than those with less education.

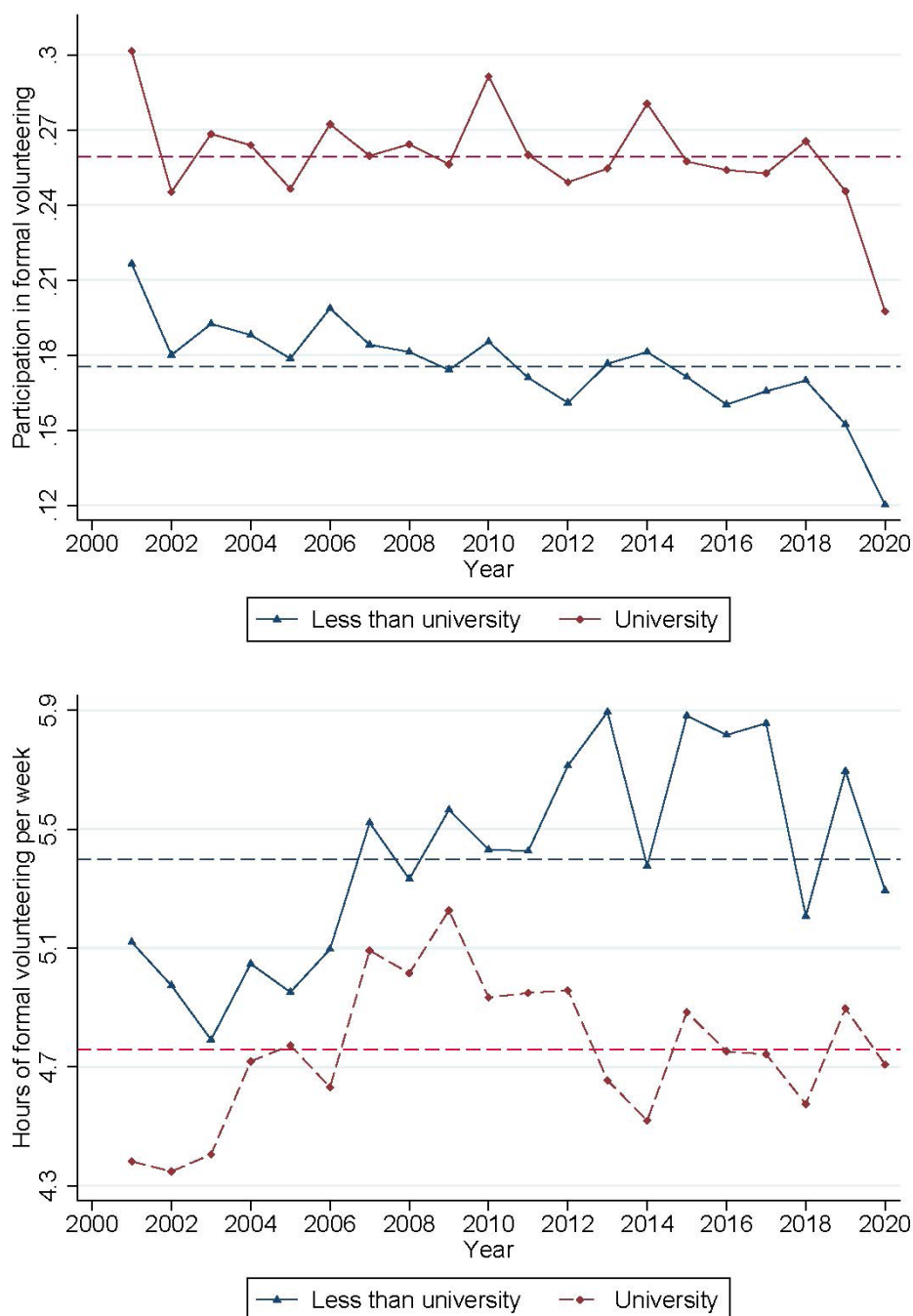


Figure 4: Formal volunteering among Australians by education level

Lastly, Figure 5 shows the prevalence and intensity of formal volunteering in each state/territory in Australia. All eight states and territories except the ACT saw a slight decline in participation rates over time. The large variations in the participation rates in the ACT may be attributed to the small number of observations in this territory. In contrast, the number of weekly volunteer hours had remained largely stable and had only experienced very slight increases up until 2019, although there were some variations in each jurisdiction. Additionally, the majority of states showed a decrease in participation and intensity of formal volunteering during 2019–2020.

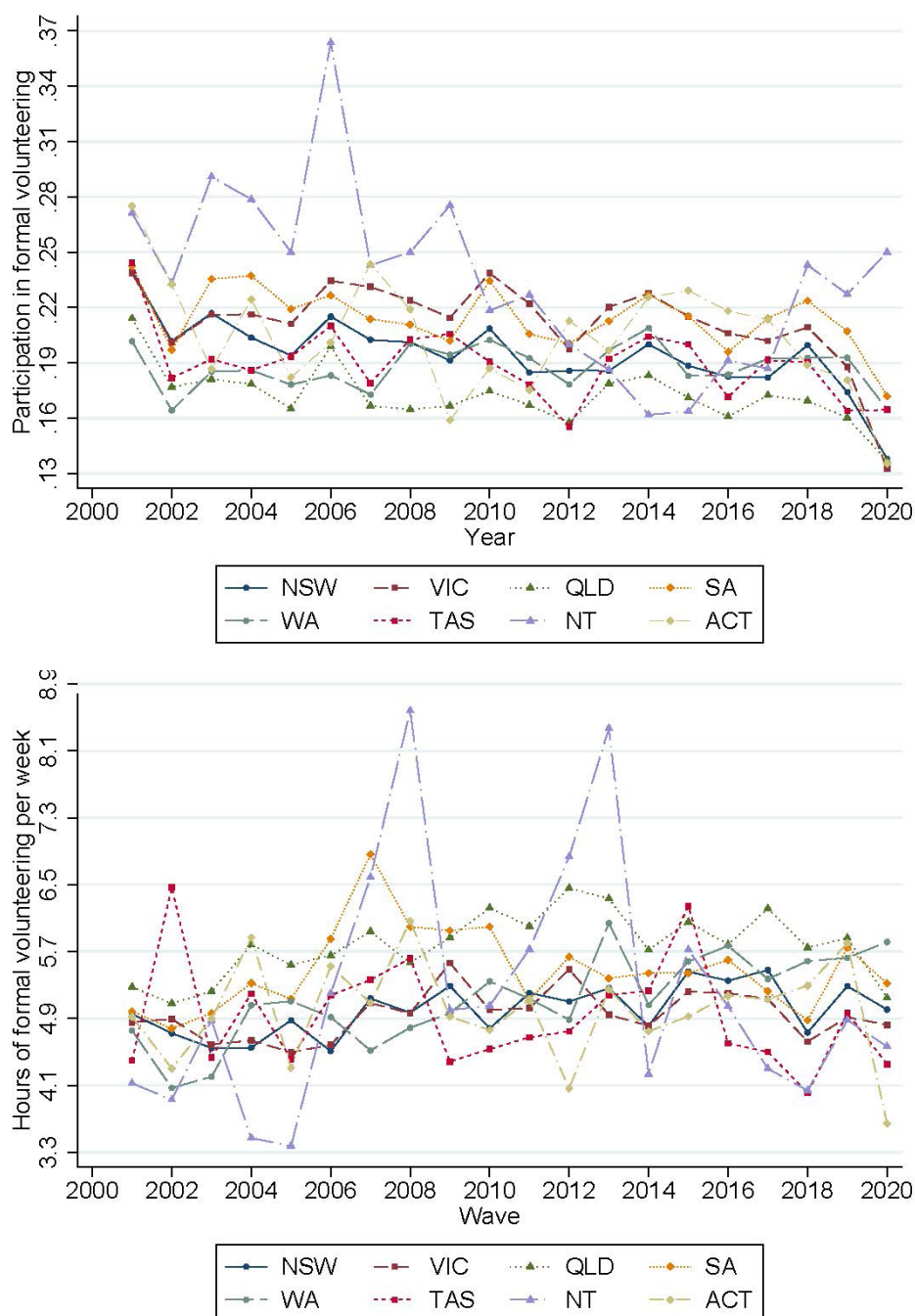


Figure 5: Formal volunteering among Australians by state/territory

3.2 How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the provision of volunteer work?

The COVID-19 section of Wave 2020 of HILDA provided information about Australians' participation and frequency of voluntary activities relative to those before the Coronavirus crises. Specifically, in terms of "volunteering or undertaking charity work", the original question asked was: "Thinking about the past four weeks, do you now do this 'much more', 'a little more', 'a little less', 'much less', 'about the same' as you did before the Coronavirus crisis?" Those who did not contribute to volunteer work could choose a response of "unprompted: not applicable (do not usually do this)". The answers in HILDA allow a straightforward evaluation of COVID-19's impact on Australian volunteerism.

Table 2: Formal volunteering reported in HILDA Wave 2020 relative to before COVID-19

All		Age			Gender		University Education	
		15–40	41–65	66+	Male	Female	No	Yes
Much more (%)	2.21	2.08	2.17	2.53	1.82	2.56	2.01	2.59
A little more (%)	5.34	5.03	5.70	5.33	4.89	5.74	4.64	6.70
About the same (%)	68.70	73.57	70.23	56.24	73.76	64.13	70.11	65.96
A little less (%)	8.49	7.34	8.63	10.57	7.80	9.11	7.82	9.78
Much less (%)	15.26	11.98	13.27	25.33	11.72	18.46	15.42	14.96
Total (%)	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00
Observations	5,431	2,304	1,982	1,145	2,576	2,855	3,580	1,851

Note: Data are from HILDA Wave 2020.

Table 2 shows the distribution of responses from respondents who contributed to volunteering before the COVID-19 pandemic. Out of 5,431 respondents, only 2.21 per cent did more volunteer work and 5.34 per cent did a little more. By contrast, the proportion of people who reduced their volunteer work was significantly higher. In particular, 8.49 per cent reported "a little less" and 15.26 per cent reported "much less". Of the 31.30 per cent of Australians who reported a change, 23.75 per cent reduced their volunteer work, while 7.55 per cent increased it. Consequently, the COVID-19 crisis had a negative impact on the formal provision of voluntary work in Australia. The finding here is consistent with that of Biddle and Gray (2021), which shows that the proportion of adults undertaking voluntary work has fallen very substantially in Australia since COVID-19. Table 2 displays additionally the distributions of respondents' answers by age group, gender, and education level. There is a similar pattern of answers in each subgroup as in the overall sample.

4 Conclusion

In this study, I examine long-term data about Australians from 2001 to 2020 and find evidence of a decline in the rate of participation in formal volunteerism over time. Over the same period, the hours of unpaid work per week among volunteers remained stable or increased, though with fluctuations. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has been found to adversely affect voluntary work provision in Australia.

The trend of volunteering participation found in this study contradicts Australia's endeavour of supporting and encouraging unpaid work. Volunteering is a voluntary and autonomous behavior done for intrinsic motivation and/or extrinsic reasons, so attracting and retaining volunteers necessitates promoting the benefits of volunteering. Policymakers can provide information and decision support regarding volunteering through the use of television and the internet, and informational campaigns can be conducted to promote both the intrinsic and extrinsic benefits of voluntary work (e.g., a broader social network, an improved sense of self-awareness, and improved health and subjective well-being). Also, policymakers should consider how organisations can be supported to provide more volunteering opportunities. To retain voluntary workers, volunteer involving organisations should also make efforts towards offering more flexible arrangements, improving support from supervisors and volunteer coordinators, and providing volunteers more autonomy and voice. Promoting a well-supported volunteering ecosystem is in the interests of both volunteers and society as a whole.

What has contributed to the declining trend of participation in volunteering among Australians requires further exploration. There are two broad explanations. First, volunteering-related individual characteristics (e.g., age, education, occupational status) may have changed over time. Second, even with the same observed individual characteristics, there may be unobserved factors resulting in reduced participation in volunteering among Australians. The decomposition and counterfactual approach used in my previous work of Mavromaras and Zhu can be employed to decompose the changes in participation rates during the past two decades in Australia.¹³ Counterfactual participation rates are created representing what the rate of participation in volunteering in 2020 would have been if each observed factor had remained at its 2001 levels. Using multi-stage decompositions, the total change between 2001 and 2020 can then be disentangled into the contributions of (i) the change in each of the observed individual characteristics of Australians and (ii) any remaining unobserved or unexplained effects. I leave these aspects for future research.

13 Mavromaras and Zhu, 2015

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