

Volunteering and Mental Health

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Background research: Dominic O'Neill

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Towards a
**National Strategy
for Volunteering**



About the Volunteering Research Papers Initiative

The Volunteering Research Papers aim to capture evidence on a wide range of topics related to volunteering and outline key insights for policy and practice. The Volunteering Research Papers are peer reviewed, and insights will directly inform the development of the National Strategy for Volunteering.

The Volunteering Research Papers are an initiative of the National Strategy for Volunteering Research Working Group.

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Key Insights

- Volunteering is associated with better life satisfaction, happiness, self-esteem, and perceived mental health.
- Volunteering supports mental health by increasing psychological and social capital. These factors encourage a positive emotional state, reduce stress, and create meaningful social roles—all of which correlate with reduced psychological distress.
- The mental health benefits of volunteering vary among groups. Mental health benefits are especially pronounced for older people, people experiencing lower levels of life-satisfaction, unemployed people, and people with chronic health conditions. Volunteering may also have distinct benefits for people with disability and people experiencing mental ill-health.
- Type of volunteering activity has not been found to affect mental health outcomes. Studies which examine mental health outcomes by type of volunteering have not found significant differences across sectors or role types.
- The extent to which a volunteer experiences mental health benefits depends on their motivation to volunteer and satisfaction with the volunteering experience.
- Volunteering can play a strong role in mental health recovery.
- In some situations, volunteering activity can have mental health risks. Volunteers experience slightly different mental health impacts than paid staff.
- Volunteers play a crucial role in Australia's mental health workforce.

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Understanding volunteering and mental health

This paper reviews the research landscape on the effects of volunteering on mental health. It draws upon local and international studies which apply qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research designs. This review focuses on the effects of volunteering on the mental health of volunteers and the contributions of volunteers in mental health services. The review concludes with a discussion of priorities for future research and the policy implications of the findings presented.

Mental health is understood in broad terms. Mental health is not only the absence of mental illness or disorder, but an integral and essential component of health. According to the World Health Organisation, mental health is “a state of well-being in which an individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.”³

Volunteering Australia defines volunteering as “time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain.”⁴ This includes both formal volunteering (undertaken through an organisation or group) and informal volunteering (taking place outside of an organisational or group setting), though most studies examine formal volunteering activities.

3 <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>

4 <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/resources/definition-of-volunteering/>

What we know about volunteering and mental health

Insight 1: Volunteering is associated with better mental health.

Volunteering correlates with improved life satisfaction, happiness, self-esteem, and perceived mental health. Volunteering has been found to improve self-assessed psychological wellbeing, self-esteem, happiness, and satisfaction with life.⁵ Across multiple studies, people who volunteered scored higher on these metrics than people who did not volunteer. Volunteering is also associated with lower symptoms of depression and anxiety, and lower indicators of suicide risk.⁶ The number of hours a person volunteers was also found to be significant, with those who contribute more than 100 hours a year experiencing stronger wellbeing benefits.⁷

Further, research from the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods found that people who continued volunteering after the initial outbreak of COVID-19 in Australia experienced a significantly lower loss of life satisfaction than those who stopped volunteering.⁸

Insight 2: Volunteering supports mental health by increasing psychological and social capital.

Research suggests that social interaction and sense of purpose are the key mechanisms linking volunteering activity to better mental health.⁹

Volunteering in the community creates opportunities for social interaction, and evidence suggests that giving support to others is a particularly beneficial form of social connection.¹⁰ Meeting and offering support to other people creates a positive emotional state and replaces stress-causing emotions, such as anger or loneliness.¹¹ Long-term stress has been linked to numerous mental health issues, including anxiety, panic attacks, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder.¹² Some studies indicate that social interaction is the primary reason that volunteering improves mental health.¹³

5 Chatterjee et al., 2018; Jenkinson et al., 2013; Post, 2011.

6 Magnani & Zhu, 2018; Rosato et al., 2019.

7 Kim et al., 2020; Windsor et al., 2008.

8 Biddle & Gray, 2021.

9 Chatterjee et al., 2018.

10 Krause et al., 1992.

11 Post, 2011.

12 *ibid*

13 Creaven et al., 2018; Pilkington et al., 2012.

Research also suggests that volunteering creates meaningful social roles and gives volunteers a sense of purpose.¹⁴ Psychological research has found that gaining or losing a social role has a significant impact on psychological distress.¹⁵ In qualitative studies, volunteers experiencing unemployment or entering retirement emphasised the benefits of playing a role in an organisation and in the broader community.¹⁶ Other studies have suggested that an increased sense of meaning, purpose, and belonging improve mood and increase happiness.¹⁷

Insight 3: Older people and people with lower life satisfaction experience the greatest benefits to mental health through volunteering.

A longitudinal study of households in the United Kingdom found that the relationship between volunteering and mental wellbeing became stronger as respondents aged.¹⁸

Volunteering was most strongly associated with mental wellbeing in people over 70 and was not associated with mental wellbeing for people under 40.¹⁹ Some mental health outcomes, like trajectories of depression, have only been linked with volunteering among older people.²⁰

An Australian study which used data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey found that volunteering had a stronger effect on mental wellbeing among people experiencing lower levels of life-satisfaction.²¹ Volunteering is also particularly effective in improving the subjective wellbeing of people with chronic health conditions.²²

There is also some evidence that volunteering is particularly beneficial to the mental wellbeing of people with disability. In an interview-based study, people with disability reported that volunteering empowered them to achieve goals and contributed significantly to their sense of self-worth.²³ A similar effect has been found for people experiencing mental ill-health.²⁴ However, additional research is needed to explain the differential benefits observed among these groups.

14 Gray & Stevenson, 2020.

15 Wilson & Musick, 1999.

16 Armour & Barton, 2019.

17 Greenfield & Marks, 2004.

18 Tabassum et al, 2016.

19 *ibid*

20 Kim & Pai, 2010.

21 Magnani & Zhu, 2018.

22 Okun et al., 2011.

23 Yanay-Ventura, 2019.

24 Read & Rickwood, 2009.

Insight 4: Type of volunteering activity has not been found to affect mental health outcomes.

Studies which examine mental health outcomes by type of volunteering have not found significant differences across sectors or role types.

A recent meta-analysis on the mental health effects of volunteering found no robust evidence that the type or intensity of volunteering affected outcomes.²⁵ Further, a study which examined the effect of different volunteer role types—fundraising, committee work, coaching, providing personal care—found no significant difference in psychological wellbeing benefits between roles.²⁶

Insight 5: The extent to which volunteers experience mental health benefits depends on their motivation to volunteer and satisfaction with the volunteering experience.

Satisfaction with the volunteering experience is associated with higher perceived wellbeing and social connectedness.²⁷

There is also some evidence that volunteers with “other-oriented” motivations experience stronger benefits. One study found that people who volunteered in service-oriented organisations, namely in health, education, religious groups, human services, public/social benefits, and youth development organisations, experienced greater mental health, life satisfaction, social wellbeing, and lower rates of depression.²⁸ Similarly, although benefits were apparent regardless of motivation, those with values-based motivations to volunteer report greater wellbeing and social connectedness than those who volunteer for other reasons, such as personal development or career motivations.²⁹

Insight 6: Volunteering can support mental health recovery.

For people experiencing mental ill-health, participation in volunteering can support recovery. Volunteering can be a component of social prescribing programs, in which primary care providers link patients with non-medical sources of support within the community.³⁰ A qualitative study of a pilot social prescribing scheme in the UK which included volunteering found that 82% of patients visited health care professional less frequently the in six months after scheme than in the six months before it.³¹ The value

25 Jenkinson et al., 2013.

26 Windsor et al., 2008.

27 Stukas et al., 2016.

28 Yeung et al., 2018.

29 Stukas et al., 2016.

30 <https://www.centreforwelfarereform.org/uploads/attachment/339/social-prescribing-for-mental-health.pdf>

31 Chatterjee et al., 2018.

of social prescribing is acknowledged in the recent Productivity Commission Report on Mental Health.³² Further, based on in-depth interviews with users of mental health services with severe mental disorders, volunteering can help to rebuild self-identity and the sense of living a 'normal life' during the recovery process.³³

Volunteering within the mental health sector, including in advocacy and education roles, can also contribute to mental health recovery. A study of the Mental Illness Education ACT program found that volunteer consumer mental health educators experienced significant benefits, including the unique value of peer support, the personal meaning gained from educating others about mental illness, the benefits of validation and catharsis through telling their story, and the development of new skills.³⁴

Insight 7: In some situations, volunteering activity can have mental health risks. Volunteers experience slightly different mental health impacts than paid staff.

Despite its benefits, volunteers engaged in high-intensity work environments can also be exposed to mental health risks. These adverse mental health effects may be different for volunteers than for paid staff. In a review of the mental health outcomes for volunteers in disaster settings, volunteers were found to be more likely to report identification with victims as friends and family, role confusion, and a lack of post-disaster social support.³⁵ Research has also found that crisis support volunteers working in community-based organisations often have limited training and their support needs are at risk of being overlooked.³⁶

The mental health effects of volunteering might depend on the broader social environment in which people volunteer. A cross-national study found that, in general, unemployed people who volunteered reported greater subjective wellbeing, happiness, and life satisfaction than those who did not.³⁷ This effect was stronger in countries with generous welfare benefits. However, in countries with less generous benefits, people who volunteered frequently had lower mental health outcomes than those who did not volunteer.³⁸ While Australia was not included in the study, based on the OECD net replacement rate in unemployment data used by the researchers, its unemployment benefits would be considered less generous.³⁹ Ensuring that volunteers have the

32 <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/mental-health/report/mental-health.pdf>, p. 397.

33 Pérez-Corrales et al., 2019.

34 Read & Rickwood, 2009.

35 Thormar et al., 2010.

36 Howlett & Collins, 2014.

37 Kameråde & Bennett, 2018.

38 *ibid*

39 <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=NRR>.

appropriate support, both in their voluntary work and in broader society, is crucial to realising the benefits of volunteering to mental health.

Insight 8: Volunteers contribute extensively to the mental health workforce.

Volunteers contribute extensively to the provision of mental health services. According to the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission, 64,811 people volunteered for mental health and crisis intervention charities and not-for-profits in 2019.⁴⁰ The volunteer hours that have supported Lifeline's crisis helpline increased from 19,764.62 per month in 2019 to 23,940.80 per month in 2021, peaking at 25,682 in August 2021.⁴¹

The contributions of the volunteer workforce were recognised in the recent Productivity Commission Inquiry into Mental Health. The report identifies major volunteer involvement in suicide prevention, perinatal anxiety and depression, supporting new parents, targeting loneliness and social isolation, identifying and responding to family violence, and providing a range of services through neighbourhood houses and community centres.⁴²

Future research priorities

Youth volunteering and mental health

Most studies on the mental health benefits of volunteering use samples of older populations. Consequently, research on the mental health benefits for working aged people, and especially for young people (aged 15-24), remains scarce. This also makes it difficult to explain why volunteering appears to have a stronger effect on mental wellbeing in older people. For example, some studies have suggested that volunteering fulfils the role function of paid work and provides a sense of purpose post-retirement.⁴³ Research which more effectively separates age from other theoretically significant factors could improve our understanding of how the mental health effects of volunteering might vary among age groups.

People with disability and people experiencing mental ill-health

Qualitative research indicates that people with disability and people experiencing mental ill-health may experience unique mental health benefits of volunteering. Further research on this, particularly quantitative research which compares the benefits across groups, could provide greater clarity.

40 <https://www.acnc.gov.au/node/6191054>

41 Data on volunteer hours provided to Volunteering Australia by Lifeline Australia

42 <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/mental-health/report/mental-health.pdf>

43 Griffin & Hesketh, 2008.

Informal volunteering

Most of the studies reviewed here focus on formal volunteering, which takes place within an organisation or group.⁴⁴ However, the key theories and mechanisms examined in the literature suggest that the same benefits should be experienced by those volunteering informally in the community. A notable exception to this is a 1992 study by Krause, Herzog, and Baker, which found that people who provided 'informal assistance' to others experienced a greater sense of personal control in life, while those who volunteered formally did not.⁴⁵ Further comparative research is needed to interrogate this result. Research which focuses on informal volunteering, and which compares the benefits of formal and informal volunteering, is also needed to more accurately explain why volunteering improves mental health outcomes, and which aspects of the volunteer experience lead to greater benefits.

44 Some studies used indicators which could include informal volunteering activities. For example, Griffin & Hesketh (2008), Rosato et al. (2019), and Windsor et al. (2008), simply asked respondents whether they undertake 'voluntary work.' All other studies (with possible exceptions for the studies examined in meta-analyses and review articles) used a measure which captures only those who volunteered through an organization or group.

45 Krause et al., 1992.

Policy implications

Based on available research, the following measures would support the realisation of the mental health benefits of volunteering.

1. The effective promotion and resourcing of volunteering is vital.
 - Given its benefits to mental health, public campaigns which promote volunteering opportunities across sectors could encourage mental health awareness and proactivity.
 - Programs should also be resourced to accommodate a larger number of volunteers, and to remove barriers to inclusion, particularly for people with disability, recently arrived migrants, First Nations people, and people from low socioeconomic backgrounds.
2. Efforts to promote volunteering in the sector should consider the satisfaction and motivations of volunteers.
 - The sense that volunteer work has impact and leadership which promotes learning and innovation have been found to be significant determinants of volunteer satisfaction.⁴⁶
 - As volunteer motivations also correlate with greater satisfaction,⁴⁷ organisations should consider the motivations of volunteers in their programs.
3. Further opportunities for people recovering from mental ill-health are needed.
 - The use of volunteering in social prescribing programs require developed relationships between general practitioners and volunteer involving organisations.
4. Further training and support programs can help to protect the mental health of volunteers.
 - This is particularly important for volunteers in high-risk settings, such as emergency management or crisis intervention.
5. The contributions of volunteers in the mental health workforce should be recognised and supported.
 - Information on the numbers of volunteers and the roles they occupy in the sector should be included in data collection efforts in the mental health sector.

46 Benevene et al., 2020; Henderson & Sowa, 2019.

47 Finkelstein, 2008.

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