

Mr David Gruen
Australian Statistician
Australian Bureau of Statistics

Dear Mr Gruen

The importance of official volunteering statistics and the Review of the General Social Survey

We are writing to you regarding the proposed discontinuation of the General Social Survey (GSS). We understand that a review is underway to explore other options for the GSS content, including the future of the volunteering questions.

The volunteering data generated by the GSS is relied upon by Volunteering WA (the peak body for volunteering in Western Australia), Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs), State and local government departments and the research sector.

Volunteers are an important part of the workforce in several government-funded services including community services, aged care, mental health and disability care. Volunteers are central to the delivery of emergency services response during natural disasters, emergency food relief, crisis mental health phone lines, community sports and the arts. In many of these areas, the workforce is predominantly volunteer.

Official volunteering data is essential to ensuring the government understands the nation's volunteer workforce and for the volunteering sector's ability to support the wellbeing of the Australian community into the future.

GSS 2020 data shows that one in four Western Australians – about 523,600 people over the age of 15 years - volunteer formally in our community. This highlights the importance of volunteering in our social fabric.

ABS GSS data has also revealed that formal volunteering rates have been declining over time. The ABS Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey found a further decrease in informal volunteering during the first year of the pandemic, from 25.9% before March 2020 to 20.6% in March 2021.

Volunteering WA participated in consultation undertaken by the ABS since 2015 regarding the future of data collection for the volunteering sector. As you are aware, the ABS published a number of papers on this matter which are summarised here <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/research/collection-volunteering-data-abs>.

The revised approach to the GSS adopted by the ABS as a result in 2019, meant that we have received only 25% of the data sample for each of two years, after a gap of over six years since the GSS 2014. This has adversely and severely impacted on the granularity of the data available at State and regional levels. We understood that this deficit would be rectified as the sample continued to grow, and are disappointed that data collection has now been placed on hold.

The ABS data is used to inform the WA State Government and volunteering sector of trends in volunteering. The Commonwealth Government funded Volunteer Management Activity program seeks to promote participation in volunteering by First Nations people, new migrants and people with a disability. ABS should be used to assess and inform this program.

ABS data has numerous advantages in being highly rigorous, credible, and capable of interfacing with other data sets (reflecting the diversity of data and impacts) and is provided at no cost to the sector, which has limited financial resources.

We understand that there may be some consideration to continue data gathering in the context of the labour market and economic participation.

It is noted that data on volunteering and volunteers has an equally important role to play in understanding and responding to society trends and impacts such as understanding motivations, diversity of volunteers, nature of volunteer roles, hours of participation, socio-economic status, connections to social, political and community groups and a greater understanding of the linkages between volunteering, life satisfaction and experience of loneliness.

WA is a national leader in volunteering research. Volunteering WA convenes an active Volunteering Research Committee to provide insight and linkages between academia and the voluntary sector. The Research Committee has representatives from Curtin University, Edith Cowan University, Murdoch University and University of WA. The Research Committee also expresses its interest in this matter and extends an invitation for further consultation on any changes.

We request that any consideration of the future of data gathering for the sector:

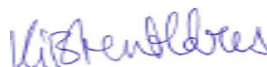
- Embrace the full suite of volunteer data (summarised in the earlier link);
- Facilitate increased granularity to support the use of Table Builder at levels useful for research;
- Become more a more stable, predictable and regular source of up to date data on volunteering; and
- Be developed after further consultation with the sector.

Thank you very much for your consideration. We look forward to hearing from you and are available to meet or discuss the issues raised as required.

Yours sincerely



Tina Williams
CEO
Volunteering WA



Prof Kirsten Holmes
Chair
WA Volunteering Research Committee

20 April 2022