

New ABS data highlights a downward trend in volunteering rates – but should we be worried?

Wednesday 1 July - For immediate release

The Australian Bureau of Statistics' General Social Survey data shows volunteering rates in Australia are declining for the first time in almost 20 years, with 75% of people surveyed saying they feel rushed or pressed for time.

Results of the survey released yesterday provide a snapshot of Australia's progress on aspects of wellbeing, such as life satisfaction and community participation, and reports that volunteering in Australia has fallen by 5% since 2010.

"The reported decline in formal volunteering is certainly concerning," said Adrienne Picone, CEO of Volunteering Tasmania.

"However, it is worth noting that the definition of volunteering used in the ABS research differs from our definition as Tasmania's Peak body. For example, the ABS did not collect data on digital participation, which, according to our State of Volunteering: Tasmania 2014 Report (SOVR 2014), accounts for 14% of Tasmanian volunteers."

"Failing to include these types of figures may not give an accurate view of the 'new age' of volunteering, which is starting to look quite different to the past," she said.

"The ABS General Social Survey provides vital longitudinal volunteering data but it only records those people that do unpaid work in a not for profit organisation," she said.

"Whilst the decline is alarming it still only captures the tip of the volunteering iceberg and doesn't reflect the enormous number of informal time donations that are happening every day, which we recognise as volunteering," she said.

According to the SOVR 2014, four out of five Tasmanians volunteered in 2014, donating a total of 7.1 million hours. The new ABS data states that Tasmania has the third highest rates of volunteering nationally, behind the ACT and South Australia.

"No matter what the wording of the question, and no matter which set of statistics you look at, there is no denying the importance of volunteering," said Ms Picone.

"For every dollar invested in volunteering, at least \$4 in benefits are returned to the community," she said.

Despite the reported decline, the ABS found volunteering and civic participation continue to play a very important role in Australian Society.

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