

# BRINGING MEANING TO THE VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

Insights on What Motivates, Sustains, and Challenges Volunteers



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# Our sincere thanks

This report would not exist without the generosity, honesty, and thoughtfulness of the people who shared their time, experiences, and perspectives. Your contributions shaped every insight, reflection, and recommendation in these pages.

We are also deeply grateful to the organizations and networks that helped share the survey and encourage participation. Your support made it possible to reach such thoughtful respondents, and your commitment to building stronger communities inspires us every day.

Special thanks to our partners at Volunteer Canada for their collaboration, expertise, and shared vision for a volunteer sector that is inclusive, vibrant, and deeply rooted in the needs and values of the people it serves.

Finally, thank you to the volunteers whose voices guide this work. You reminded us that volunteering is not just about service, but about connection, purpose, and the many ways people show up for each other.

To everyone who reads this report and carries its lessons into practice, thank you for being part of the ecosystem of care that keeps our communities thriving.

The Volunteer Alberta Team



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**Anonymous Donor**

# Introduction

## CONTEXT & STUDY PURPOSE

Capturing learnings through both quantitative data and qualitative reflections, this study is the result of a collaboration between Volunteer Alberta and Volunteer Canada. It offers insights into how individuals today experience, define, and navigate volunteerism. Drawing from a survey study of 839 respondents, this report captures learnings from quantitative data and qualitative reflections.

This report uses quantitative survey data to show how respondents participated in volunteering over the twelve months prior to completing the survey: who they volunteered for, the activities they took part in, and their levels of engagement. We also provide a snapshot of respondents' demographic profiles to show that the majority were highly engaged, committed, and knowledgeable volunteers.

Open-ended questions invited participants to reflect on and articulate what volunteering means to them. Through close analysis of qualitative responses, this report demonstrates that beyond the act of freely contributing one's service, volunteering is also [a meaningful endeavour that offers opportunities for personal fulfillment, connection, and participation in community life](#).

Integrating quantitative and qualitative analysis, our ultimate goal is to affirm that people volunteer because it allows them to participate in community events, build connections, support important causes, grow professionally, and find purpose in their lives. [Volunteering can be deeply meaningful, and this report explores the conditions that help bring meaning to people's experiences](#).

Specifically, this report aims to:

- Provide insight into [volunteer participation](#)—why, how, and what people do when they volunteer.
- Identify key motivations and barriers to volunteer participation.
- Surface emerging perspectives and lived definitions of volunteering.
- Explore how volunteering impacts people's lives.
- Explore practical recommendations for fostering meaningful volunteer experiences.

We invite readers to consider how these findings inform, deepen, or challenge their own understanding of what makes volunteering meaningful. We hope to prompt dialogue, collaboration, and action on creating the conditions that make volunteering an integral part of our communities.

# The Survey

## SURVEY DETAILS

- 839 respondents in total
- Survey administered between September 2024 – December 2024)
- Participants were asked to reflect on their volunteering experience in the 12 months prior to completing the survey.
- Mixed-methods approach: primarily survey-based, with both closed and open-ended questions to capture quantitative trends and qualitative reflections

## DATA COLLECTION

This study relied primarily on volunteer-engaging organizations and their social media networks to share the survey. As a result, the sample largely reflects individuals already connected to formal volunteer structures. It does not constitute a representative cross-section of the Canadian population and may underrepresent people who are under-engaged, disconnected from traditional volunteer pathways, or who face systemic barriers to participation.

As we work to broaden our understanding of volunteerism, future research or other explorations will need to actively reach underrepresented groups.

## KEY LIMITATIONS

**Geographic Skew:** Two-thirds (66%) of respondents reside in Alberta. While this reflects Volunteer Alberta's network strength and local engagement, it narrows the national representativeness of the findings. Local context likely shaped respondents' experiences, access to opportunities, and definitions of volunteering.

**Engagement Bias:** The sample is made up of individuals who are already highly engaged in volunteering. Many logged significant hours and held multiple roles. As such, the experiences of occasional, first-time, or informal-only volunteers may not be fully captured.

**Cultural Homogeneity:** Over three-quarters of respondents (77%) identified as white/Caucasian. Although some racial and cultural diversity is reflected, perspectives from Indigenous peoples, newcomers, and racialized communities are limited—particularly important when discussing inclusion, belonging, and systemic access.

**Demographic Gaps:** A large portion of respondents are over 55 years old, with many identifying as retired. While these perspectives are critical, younger adults, students, and those juggling employment or caregiving responsibilities are comparatively underrepresented.

**Accessibility Constraints:** As a virtual survey, participation was limited to those with internet access and a certain level of digital literacy. It may have excluded people with diverse communication needs, neurodivergence, or limited access to technology.

## WHAT THIS STUDY OFFERS

While it does not reflect the full diversity of volunteer experiences, this study offers critical insight into how hundreds of highly engaged individuals understand and live out their contributions. Their experiences offer depth and clarity, even if they do not reflect every possible volunteer story. As we will continue to show, a large majority of this study's respondents are highly engaged individuals, and carry thoughtful and comprehensive perspectives on volunteerism. The focus of this report, therefore, is not to generalize, but to deepen. It highlights the perspectives, motivations, and values that inspire people to contribute to their communities.

Moreover, the findings echo those of other national research efforts. The growing relevance of informal volunteering, the demand for flexibility or alternative forms of engagement, and the desire for deeper meaning in volunteer work are not unique to this study but are affirmed by it. In this way, this report serves both as a standalone contribution and as a complementary voice in the broader landscape of volunteering research.



# Demographic Profiles & Data Snapshots



The following demographic snapshots offer important context for interpreting the findings in this report. The data reflects a strong presence of older adults, women, and individuals residing in Alberta. Many are long-time residents of Canada and are highly engaged in formal volunteer activities. These patterns suggest that the experiences captured here are more reflective of established volunteers with a high degree of connection to the nonprofit and voluntary sector.

As this report will show in later sections—particularly through qualitative data analysis—respondents hold deep and thoughtful insights on the importance of volunteering, as well as the factors that cause it to flourish or falter. Before turning to those insights, this section provides an overview of respondents' demographic profiles. These details help illustrate where participants come from, who they are, and some of the lifestyle factors that influence their ability—or inability—to take part in different forms of community engagement, volunteering, and contribution.

## MAPPING THE RESPONDENTS

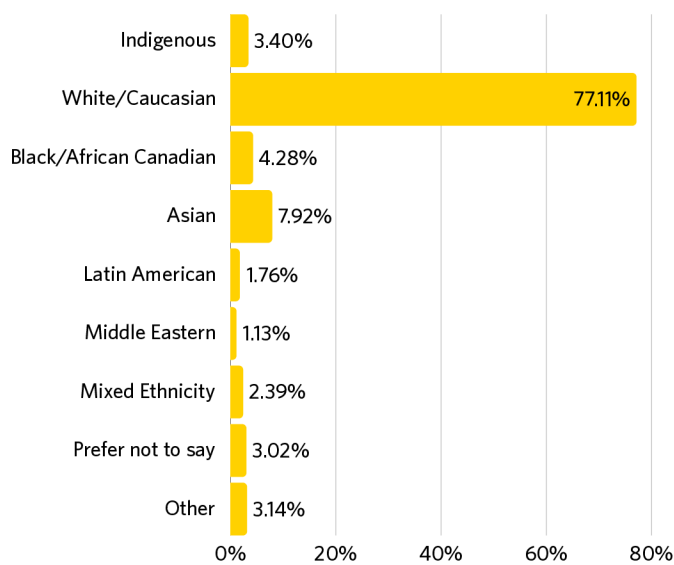
Province/Territory	# of Respondents	% of Respondents
Alberta	522	66.41%
Nova Scotia	105	13.36%
Ontario	69	8.78%
Manitoba	41	5.22%
British Columbia	21	2.67%
Other	28	3.56%

Municipality Type	# of Respondents	% of Respondents
Urban	447	56.87%
Suburban	144	18.32%
Rural	158	20.10%
Unsure	26	3.31%
Prefer Not to Answer	11	1.40%
Other	14	1.78%

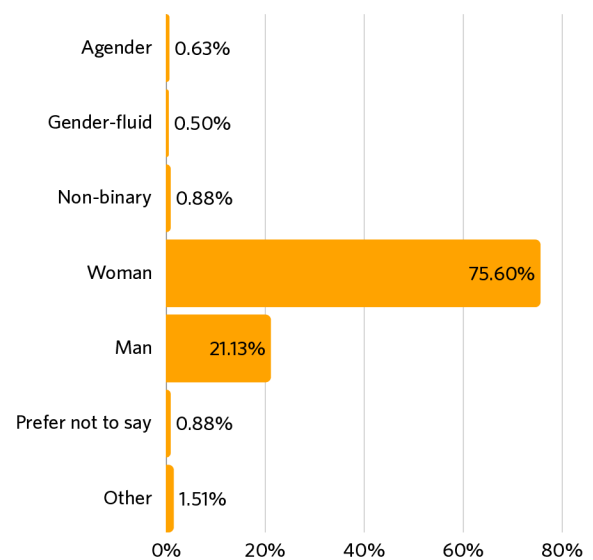
**Figure 1** Respondents based on province/territory

**Figure 2** Respondents based on municipality type

Most respondents resided in Alberta (66%), and in urban areas (57%). In terms of identity, the sample skews predominantly white (77%) and women (76%). Representation from Indigenous (3%), Black (4%), Asian (8%), and other racialized communities was present but limited.



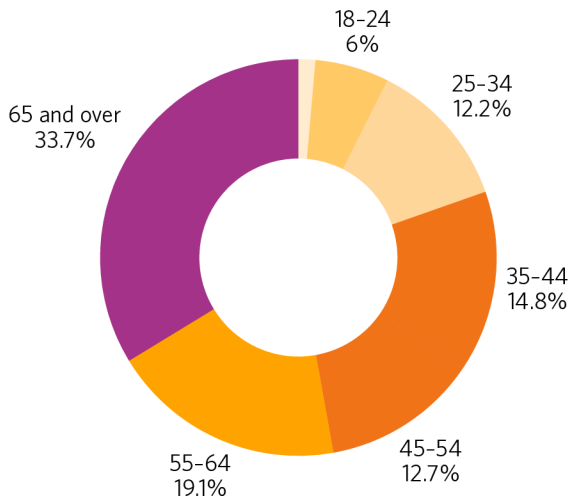
**Figure 3** Respondents' Race & Ethnicity



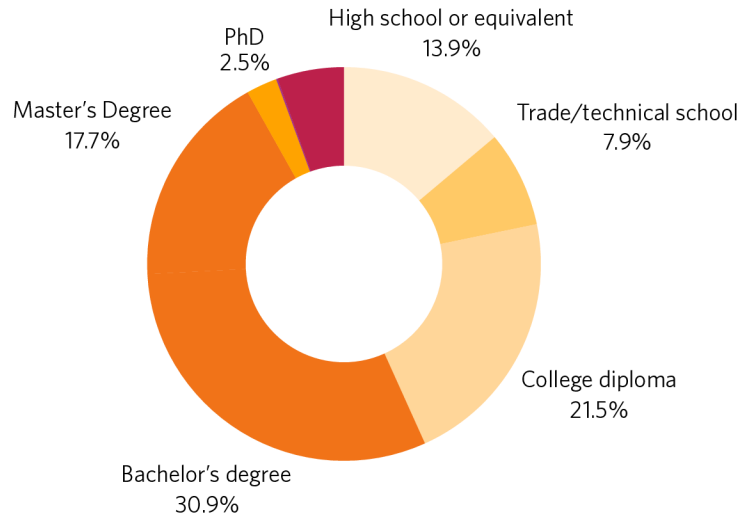
**Figure 4** Respondents' Gender Identity

## MAPPING THE RESPONDENTS

**Figure 5** Respondents' Age (Years)

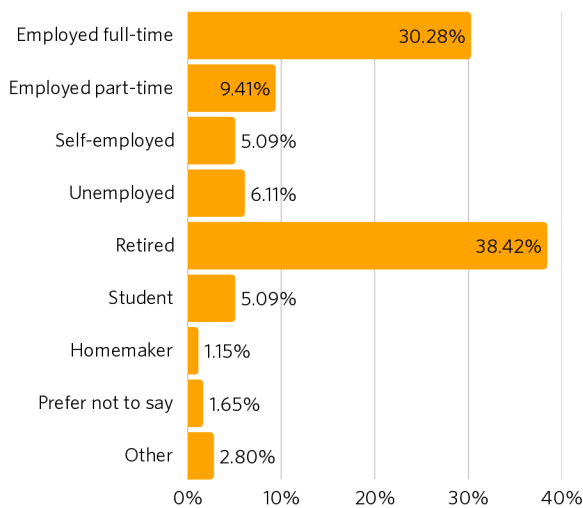


**Figure 6** Respondents' Highest Academic Attainment

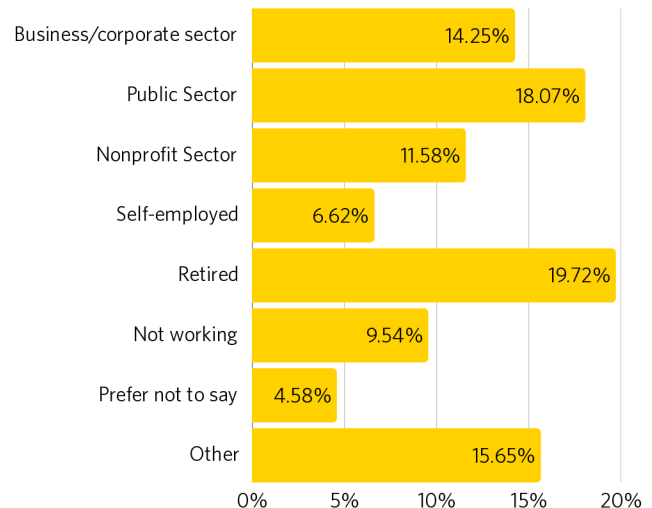


The majority of respondents were well-educated, with over 50% holding a bachelor's degree or higher. Age-wise, the sample skewed older: more than half (53%) were aged 55 or above, with one in three over 65. Reflecting this age distribution, nearly 40% of participants identified as retired.

Among those currently working, respondents represented a range of sectors, with notable presence in the public (18%) and nonprofit (12%) sectors, as well as business (14%).



**Figure 7** Respondents' Employment Status



**Figure 8** Respondents' Employment by Sector

## MAPPING THE RESPONDENTS

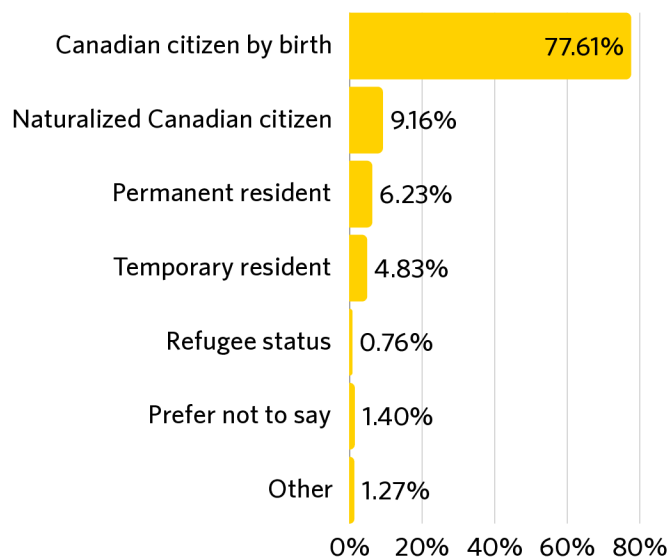
**Figure 9** Households With Children

Households with children	# of Respondents	% of Respondents
Yes	233	29.31%
No	562	70.69%

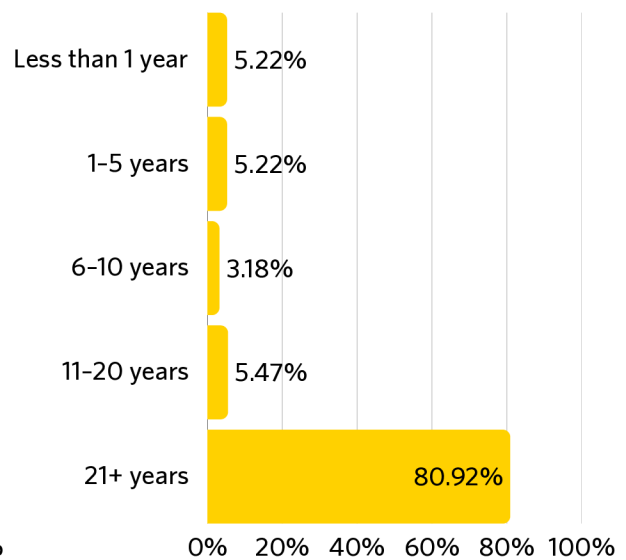
Most respondents do not have children living at home (71%), which likely contributed to their ability to more freely engage in volunteering.

The high proportion of Canadian-born respondents (78%) and those who have lived in Canada for over 20 years (81%) suggests that this dataset reflects the experiences of individuals who are well-established and likely familiar with traditional, Western models of volunteering. While this offers valuable insight into long-term civic engagement, it also means that the perspectives of newcomers, temporary residents, and those navigating systemic barriers are underrepresented.

**Figure 11** Citizenship/Immigrant Status



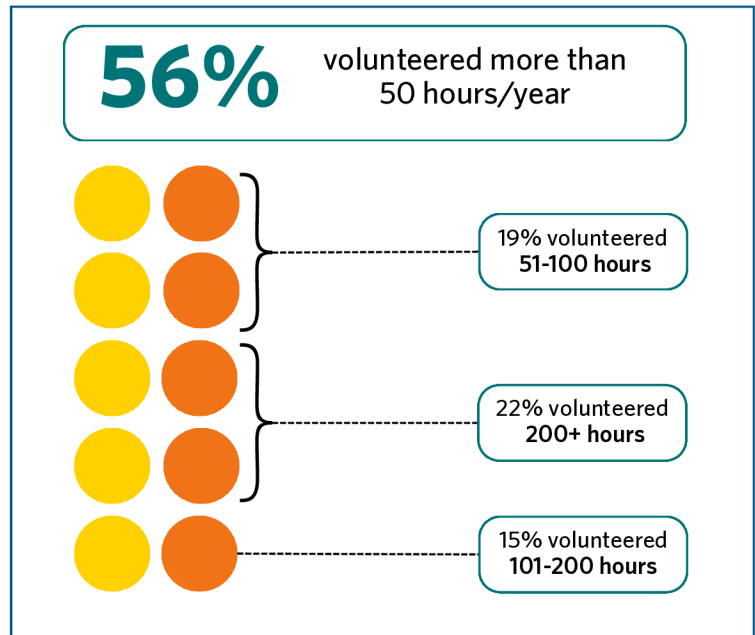
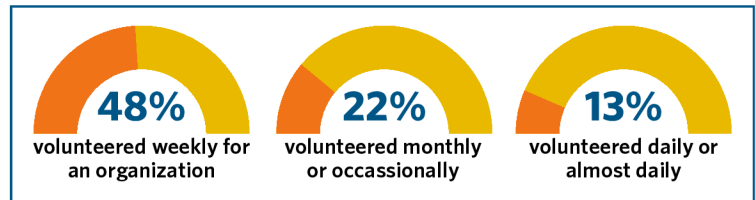
**Figure 12** Years of Living in Canada



## LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT

Among respondents that volunteered for organizations in the twelve months prior to completing the survey (N=769):

- 48% volunteered weekly and 13% volunteered daily or almost daily, indicating that over 60% were very regularly engaged.
- 22% volunteered monthly or occasionally.
- Only 1.3% volunteered rarely.
- 56% volunteered more than 50 hours/year:
  - 51-100 hrs: 19%
  - 101-200 hrs: 15%
  - 200+ hrs: 22%
- Only 13% volunteered under 10 hours.
- 92% (769) volunteered for organizations
- 95% (797) volunteered informally



## IN SUMMARY

This sample of survey respondents represents a case study of highly engaged individuals, offering valuable insights into what makes volunteering impactful. Their perspectives help illuminate the patterns, values, and opportunities that make volunteer experiences meaningful and sustainable

At the same time, the high levels of engagement reflected here—particularly in formal volunteering roles—likely draw on certain privileges, including available free time, prior experience, ability, and familiarity with Western models of formal volunteerism. This study recognizes that this sample represents one piece of a broader story, but one we hope future research, dialogue, and collaboration will continue to expand.

In the next section, we turn to the question of how our respondents define volunteering, and what their reflections reveal about the meaning of volunteering.

# What it Means to Volunteer

Volunteering is a widely used term, but its meaning is far from universal. There are well-established and widely accepted definitions of volunteerism used by organizations, governments, and agencies that outline parameters of what “counts” as volunteering. This study intentionally explores definitions not only to determine what volunteering looks like, but also to better understand what it means in people’s lives, and why it matters to them.

The following section begins by outlining commonly accepted definitions and the broader value of volunteering to take note of existing frameworks and discourses on volunteering. We then turn to the voices and perspectives of this study’s respondents. We explore qualitative survey responses through a thematic analysis of key terms, phrases, and concepts that emerged from open-ended questions. By making space for participants to define volunteering in their own words, we gain insight into the values, stories, and experiences that shape their understanding. *Their reflections reveal that volunteering is often a personal way of expressing care, connection, and contribution.*



## DEFINING VOLUNTEERISM

[Statistics Canada](#) distinguishes between:

- **Formal volunteering:** Unpaid service on behalf of a nonprofit or charitable organization.
- **Informal volunteering:** Helping others or contributing to the community outside of organizational channels (e.g., helping family, neighbors, or friends).

[The Government of Canada](#) defines volunteering as:

- “The time you give to strengthen your community and improve others’ quality of life as well as your own.”

[Volunteer Canada](#) recognizes a broad spectrum of engagement:

- Education & Awareness: e.g., attending webinars, sharing petitions
- Active Participation: direct involvement in services or causes
- Leadership: board membership, campaign leadership, and other decision-making roles

## THE VALUE OF VOLUNTEERING

In addition to defining what volunteering is, Volunteer Canada's (2017) Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement (CCVI) outlines the value of volunteerism as a force for civic participation, community resilience, organizational capacity, and personal fulfillment.

### According to the CCVI:

- **Volunteer involvement is fundamental to a healthy and democratic society:** It promotes civic engagement and active participation in shaping the society we want.”
- **Volunteer involvement strengthens communities:** It supports local knowledge, relationships, and collective responses to challenges—strengthening the social fabric through grassroots action.
- **Volunteer involvement builds organizational capacity:** Volunteers bring unique skills, perspectives, and energies that help nonprofits remain relevant, adaptive, and able to serve their communities.
- **Volunteer involvement is personal:** It fosters belonging, joy, and wellbeing. Volunteers engage based on their own preferences, values, identities, and motivations.
- **Volunteering is about building relationships:** It connects people to the causes they care about and creates opportunities to contribute meaningfully within a spectrum of engagement.

Together, these definitions point to just how wide-ranging volunteering can be, from formal roles in nonprofits to everyday acts of community care. Going further, Volunteer Canada also illustrates that volunteering is valuable for many reasons to different people.

Importantly, definitions, discourses and research influence what tends to be seen, supported, or celebrated in policies, funding, and public conversations about volunteering. Through this study, we wanted to invite people to share, in their own words, what volunteering means to them. In doing so, we hoped to complement existing frameworks, but also to enrich our understanding and discussions of volunteering by shedding light on what volunteering looks like from the ground, by those who volunteer.

## SURVEY RESPONDENTS ANSWERED THE FOLLOWING: HOW DO YOU DEFINE VOLUNTEERING?

(N=839)

When asked to define volunteering, survey participants offered thoughtful and deeply personal insights. Their answers expressed what volunteering means to them, to others, and to the communities they serve.

We learned that for many people, volunteering is more than a task: it's a story of finding community, a relationship, or a way of being in the world. Below are definitions of volunteering from respondents.

### VOLUNTEERING IS:



Offering your time willingly at no cost to help out with a cause, some initiative(s), or general tasks.

The act of offering time, skills, or resources to help others or contribute to a cause

About contributing to the well-being of others, addressing needs, fostering positive change, growing as individuals, building connections, empathy, and a sense of purpose.

### VOLUNTEERING LOOKS LIKE:



Helping animals find forever homes.

Helping others that are less fortunate or those in serious need of community assistance.

Educational support, environmental protection, community service, disaster relief and other fields aiming to improve society.

### VOLUNTEERING LEADS TO:



A sense of purpose, it builds connections, and strengthens communities.

Meeting others, growing together with the country, and feeling joy through contribution.

Personal growth, builds community connections, and often aims to create a positive impact on society, addressing needs that might otherwise go unmet.

## KEY THEMES

A deeper thematic analysis reveals that, in addition to the notion of freely offering one's time or labour, many respondents described volunteering in relation to broader personal values. Many respondents volunteered because doing so held some deeper meaning for them or it led to personally impactful outcomes. **Two themes particularly emerged from how respondents defined volunteering.**

First, volunteering was most commonly described as the act of offering one's time, skills, or service without financial compensation, often to support others, causes, or communities. Many respondents emphasized organizational involvement, aligning with more formal understandings of volunteerism. However, as we'll explore later, participants also identified a wide range of less formal or relational contributions that they consider volunteering.

Second, many respondents spoke to the emotional and values-based dimensions of volunteering, which this study calls the heart of volunteering. For many, volunteering is a meaningful expression of care, purpose, and connection. It reflects a desire to contribute to something larger than oneself and to grow personally through acts of service.

### Theme 1. Acts of Volunteering

In describing what volunteering means to them, respondents first identified that volunteering generally involves acts of unpaid service, time, energy, or labour to support other people, broader communities, and specific causes. While the means varied, many emphasized that volunteering typically happens through the structures and opportunities provided by organizations or agencies.

Core Actions		Key Phrases
<b>Offering Time, Skills, and Energy Freely</b>	➔	"Giving of my time and talents without remuneration." "Performing work or service without monetary gain."
<b>Helping and Contributing to Support Others, Causes, &amp; Communities</b>	➔	"Helping people, organizations, or communities." "Helping others enjoy what you enjoy." "To help others or contribute to a cause."
<b>Engaging Through Formal &amp; Informal Means</b>	➔	"Supporting nonprofit organizations, events, or causes through unpaid service." "Volunteering is doing something or rendering service willingly for people or organizations."

## Theme 2. The Heart of Volunteering:

Diving more deeply, respondents often went beyond simply describing volunteering as the act of offering time, energy, or service. Many attributed personal values and meaning to why they volunteer: to grow as individuals, to find or fulfill a sense of purpose, or to give back to their communities. Some were motivated by having been supported themselves, while others were driven by a belief in community action as a pathway to better futures and the greater good of society.

Heart/Values	Key Expressions
Personal Growth and Fulfillment	"Finding purpose," "Learning and growing as a person," "Feeling good about making a difference."
Social and Emotional Connections	"Connecting with others," "Creating bonds of friendship," "Belonging to something bigger than myself."
Emotional Rewards and Joy	"Receiving smiles and gratitude" "Feeling joy and pride."
Betterment of Community	"Volunteering fosters a sense of community and contributes to the greater good of society"
Giving Back and Paying Forward	"Repaying the kindness I received," "Contributing to a better future," "Honoring community values."
Living Out One's Identity and Values	"Volunteering reflects who I am," "It's part of my life purpose and personal beliefs."
Recognizing Privilege and Social Responsibility	"Using my opportunities to help others," "Acknowledging my ability to contribute."

### Focusing on The Meaning of Volunteering

Together, these reflections portray volunteering as a source of meaning and purpose. As we will continue to explore, understanding what volunteering means to people, and why they contribute can help organizations and volunteer-engaging groups design roles, supports, and strategies that feel engaging and impactful.

# Unpacking Volunteer Participation

Volunteering doesn't happen in just one way. It shows up in countless forms, from sitting on nonprofit boards to shoveling a neighbour's sidewalk. This section explores the broad spectrum of how people participate in volunteering: what they do, who they do it for, and how they understand their contributions. We share both qualitative reflections and quantitative data that show what volunteering looked like for our respondents. What kinds of activities did they do? Who did they support and in what ways did they contribute?

We begin the section by offering a spectrum of volunteer participation that visualizes different ways to volunteer. As our respondents shared, volunteering takes many forms. Some are structured and formal, while others are spontaneous, relational, and deeply rooted in community care. The graphs and charts that follow offer data snapshots of the varied sectors, and organizations that participants got involved with over the course of twelve months.

Lastly, this section invites a reflection on what the realities of informal volunteering might mean for volunteer-engaging organizations. If people are contributing time and care in ways that fall outside formal roles, how might organizations respond? Rather than seeing informal volunteering as separate or competing with formal programs, organizations can begin to recognize it as part of a larger ecosystem of community care.



## DIFFERENT WAYS TO ENGAGE

As discussed in the previous section, volunteering either involves “formal” (structured roles through organizations) or “informal” (acts of care rooted in community or relationships) activities. Our findings affirm that many people think about volunteering beyond simply offering services to an organization, as valuable as those opportunities are.

For survey respondents, volunteering is also found in simple gestures of care and giving a neighbourly helping hand.



Helping a senior neighbor get groceries is as much volunteering as running a fundraising campaign.



One can be a service volunteer who does tasks that serve an organization's purpose. This could include working on the women's guild in a church, repacking eggs at a food bank, helping to build a playground, designing a program for a choir concert, etc.

Of course, there are many things that we do that are not related to organizations. My husband and I shovel the walk of a neighbour who has mobility issues. People volunteer during extreme weather events.



One of the reasons that volunteering is under-measured is that many people don't see what they're doing as 'volunteer' activities. I spoke to a woman not long ago who told me she didn't have time these days for volunteer work because she was so busy at her church.

I asked her what she did at the church and she said she poured the coffee at the reception after church each Sunday, sent birthday cards to all the children in the church and was the chair of the women's group. All of those activities are volunteering in my opinion. She had just never thought of it that way.

## FORMS OF PARTICIPATION

The table below offers one way to describe the different ways people can experience and participate in volunteering activities:

**Table 2.1** *Forms of Participation: What kinds of activities do you consider as volunteering? (N=839)*

Type	Description	Examples	Typical Context
<b>Formal Volunteering</b>	Structured roles within organizations, often with defined responsibilities and time commitments	Sitting on boards, event volunteer shifts, providing mentorship through a nonprofit	Registered nonprofits, institutions
<b>Semi-Formal Volunteering</b>	Coordinated but flexible roles, sometimes short-term or project-based	Mutual aid groups, community-led initiatives, pop-up events	Community associations, networks
<b>Informal Volunteering</b>	Unpaid help given directly to individuals or within one's community, outside formal channels	Helping a neighbor with errands, childcare, cooking for others	Everyday life, kinship and local care
<b>Relational/Community Care</b>	Deep, ongoing support embedded in relationships, kin-work, or cultural practices	Caring for elders, emotional support, organizing healing spaces	Families, cultural communities

## QUANTITATIVE DATA

Now that we've explored how people define volunteering and the meanings they attach to it, we turn to the quantitative side of the story. The following data offers snapshots of how survey respondents participated in acts of volunteering over the twelve months prior to completing the survey. We present an overview of both formal and informal volunteering activities, including the types of organizations they supported, and the variety of ways they contributed or showed up for their families, friends, neighbours, and communities.

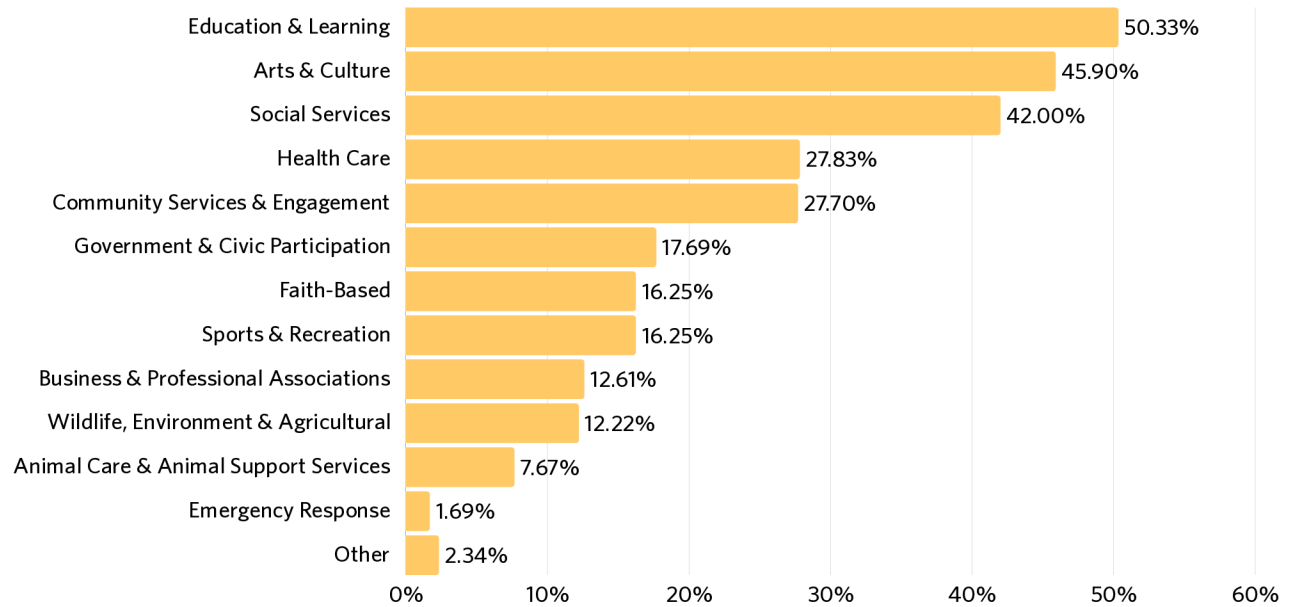
We begin with formal volunteering: the activities done through an organization or group, often with defined roles, responsibilities, and structures. In our sample, 92% of respondents (769 out of 839) reported volunteering in this way within the past year. To better understand the scope of formal volunteering, we asked respondents about the types of organizations they supported and the kinds of activities they were involved in.

In the tables below (Table 2.2 and Table 2.3), we summarize the types of organizations and subsectors respondents volunteered for, followed by an overview of the specific roles and activities they took on. The accompanying charts (Chart 2.1 and Chart 2.2) visualize the distribution of respondents across different sectors and activities.

**Table 2.2** *Organizations & Subsectors Volunteered For. Thinking about the past twelve months, what kind of group(s) or organization(s) did you volunteer for? Select all that apply. N=769*

Subsectors	Examples	% of Respondents
Education & Learning	Schools, libraries, mentorship programs, Scouts, Girl Guides, etc.	50.33%
Arts & Culture	Festivals, arts centres, performing arts, theatres, museums, etc,	45.90 %
Social Services	Food bank, shelters, seniors support, housing support, disabilities, etc.	42.00%
Health Care	Hospitals, hospices, patient care, therapies, etc.	27.83%
Community Services & Engagement	Service clubs, hobby groups, community associations, community leagues, community centres, mission thrift stores, etc	27.70%
Government & Civic Participation	Municipal advisory committees, government councils, social justice groups, political campaigns, etc.	17.69%
Faith-Based	Religious groups, churches, etc.	16.25%
Sports & Recreation	Sports clubs, sport associations, golf course, etc.	16.25%
Business & Professional Associations	Condo boards, businesses, professional networks, etc.	12.61%
Wildlife, Environment & Agricultural	Wildlife rehabilitation, environmental organizations, conservation, tree-planting, horticulture, etc.	12.22%
Animal Care & Animal Support Services	Animal shelters, animal food bank, pet therapy, etc.	7.67%
Emergency Response	Volunteer firefighters association, emergency services, etc.	1.69%
Other	International airport, unlisted organizations, crisis centre, etc.	2.34%

**Chart 2.1** Organizations Volunteered For: Thinking about the past twelve months, what kind of group(s) or organization(s) did you volunteer for? Select all that apply. N=769



## KEY INSIGHTS

### Organizations volunteered for

The data reveals that the most commonly supported sectors were Education & Learning (50%), and Arts & Culture (46%), which are vital to supporting community life, local cultures, and different pathways for learning. As indicated in table 2.2, accompanying initiatives and institutions in these sectors include schools, mentorship programs, scouts, festivals, theatres, and museums. These trends support what many of our respondents have shared in their reflections about the importance they attach to the betterment of their communities, fulfilling personal passions, belonging and connecting with others.

Social Services (42%), Health Care (28%) and Community Services & Engagement (28%) also drew substantial participation, further signifying that many respondents acted on their values to support wellness, care, and perceptions of social responsibility in very concrete ways—often through the delivery of essential services.

Although lower in overall percentages, areas such as Faith-Based Volunteering (16%), Sports & Recreation (16%), Business & Professional Associations (13%), and Environmental & Agricultural Volunteering (12%) still represent important forms of participation, often tied to identity, lifestyle, and personal values.

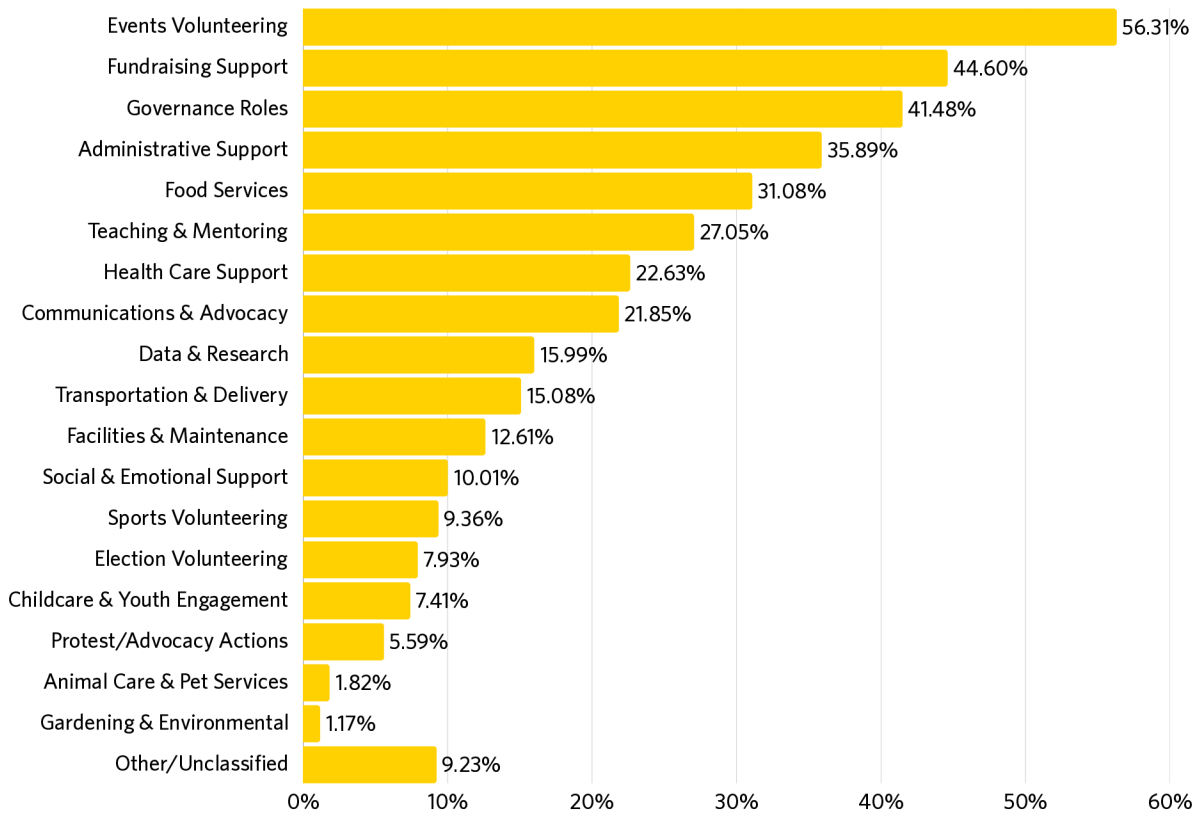
**Table 2.3** *Formal Volunteering Activities: What activities did you volunteer to do? Select all that apply. N=769*

<b>Activities</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Examples</b>	<b>% of Respondents</b>
<b>Events Volunteering</b>	Planning, coordinating, or supporting events including logistics, ushering, ticketing, security, and setup/teardown	Ushering at theatre, setting up community festivals, ticket scanning, managing booths at local events	56.31%
<b>Fundraising Support</b>	Helping with fundraising initiatives, sales, raffles, or donation drives	Bake sales, auctions, bottle drives	44.60%
<b>Governance Roles</b>	Serving in formal leadership, strategy, or oversight roles	Board membership, committee work, executive positions in associations	41.48%
<b>Administrative Support</b>	Providing office support or backend logistics	Take phone calls, organize files and documents, creating work templates	35.89%
<b>Food Services</b>	Preparing, sorting, or distributing food items	Prepare meals, school lunch programs, food hampers, food banks.	31.08%
<b>Teaching &amp; Mentoring</b>	Educating or guiding others, often in structured settings	Reading with kids, Boys & Girls clubs, youth mentorship	27.05%
<b>Health Care Support</b>	Providing health-related support or care	Hospice greeter, patient navigation, blood-donor clinics medical appointment support	22.63%
<b>Communications &amp; Advocacy</b>	Creating content or engaging in public-facing roles	Blogging, social media, grant writing, public presentations	21.85%
<b>Transportation &amp; Delivery</b>	Transporting people or goods	Driving to appointments, food delivery	15.99%

**Table 2.3** *Formal Volunteering Activities: What activities did you volunteer to do? Select all that apply. N=769*

Activities	Description	Examples	% of Respondents
<b>Data &amp; Research</b>	Supporting research, analysis, or information gathering	Survey administration, policy work, grants reviewer	15.08%
<b>Facilities &amp; Maintenance</b>	Physical tasks related to cleaning, organizing, or maintaining spaces	Cleaning venues, garbage pickup	12.61%
<b>Social &amp; Emotional Support</b>	Providing connection, companionship, or peer support	Crisis line, senior visits, grief support	10.01%
<b>Sports Volunteering</b>	Supporting athletic events or recreational programs	Coaching, refereeing, running youth sports clinics	9.36%
<b>Election Volunteering</b>	Supporting elections or political campaigns	Door-knocking, outreach, campaign support	7.93%
<b>Childcare &amp; Youth Engagement</b>	Supervising or engaging children or youth	Bible camp, youth group, Boys and Girls Club	7.41%
<b>Protest/Advocacy Actions</b>	Participating in protests or civic engagement activities	Protest movements, advocacy work	5.59%
<b>Animal Care &amp; Pet Services</b>	Caring for or supporting animals and pet therapies	Dog walking, pet fostering, animal shelter support	1.82%
<b>Gardening &amp; Environmental</b>	Stewarding green spaces or engaging in sustainability	Gardening, planting trees, invasive species control	1.17%
<b>Other</b>	Unique or ambiguous responses that did not fit clearly into other categories	Assorted tasks, unique local programs, miscellaneous roles	9.23%

**Chart 2.2** *Formal Volunteering Activities: What activities did you volunteer to do? Select all that apply. N=769*



## KEY FINDINGS & INSIGHTS

### Volunteer Activities

The data highlights that many respondents supported the operational backbones of organizations. Fundraising Support (45%), and Governance Roles (42%) were two of the top three activities, with a strong showing in Administrative Support (36%). Beneath the logistics, the data also tells a story of care and support. From Food Services (31%) and Teaching & Mentoring (27%) to Health Care Support (23%) and Social & Emotional Support (10%), these volunteers showed up for others, meeting wellbeing needs, and helping with the provision of social services.

High levels of involvement in events volunteering (56%) likely signifies that participating in events is one of the key ways that volunteers show up for their local communities through arts & culture events, sports events, and for various community engagement initiatives.

## INFORMAL VOLUNTEERING

We now turn to an overview of how the respondents informally engaged in volunteering activities that were not coordinated through an organization but instead done directly for individuals, families, or within one's communities. In our sample, 95% of the respondents (797 out of 839) reported that they volunteered informally.

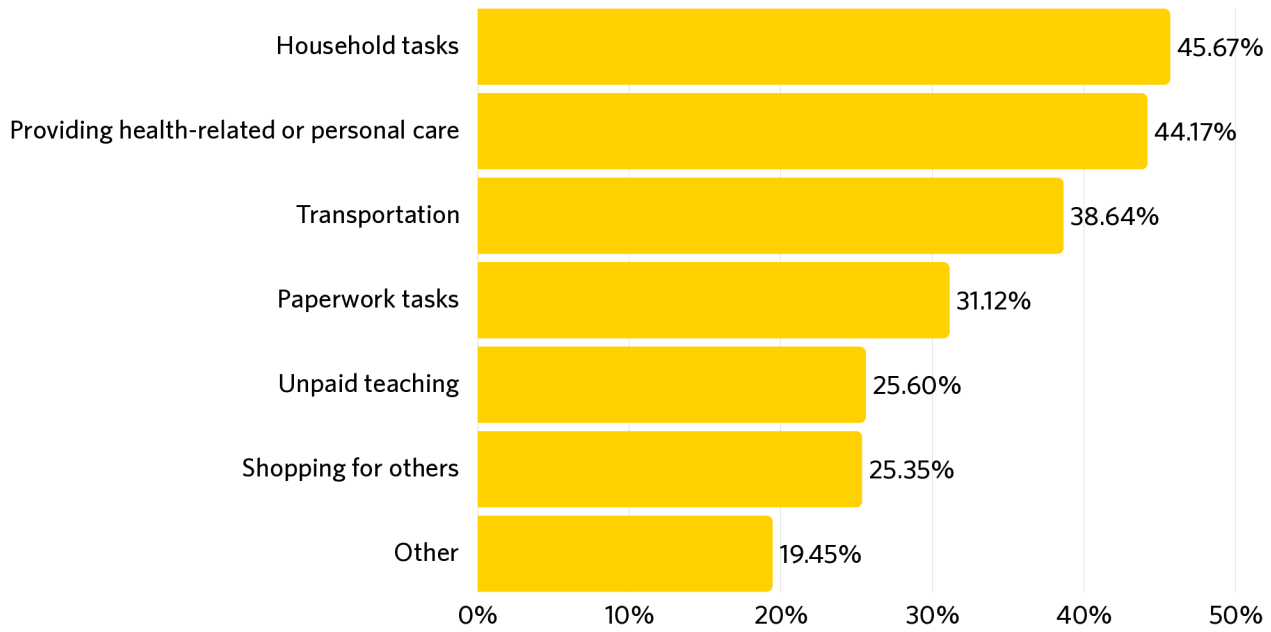
We asked respondents about the kinds of unpaid tasks they had performed for others over the past year. These ranged from household chores to personal care, transportation, and emotional support. We then asked who they offered these tasks to. Both datasets are summarized and visualized by the tables and charts below.

### TASKS PERFORMED

**Table 2.4** *Informal Volunteering Activities: What activities did you volunteer to do? Select all that apply. N=797*

Type	Examples	% of Respondents
Household tasks	Cooking, cleaning, gardening, shoveling the driveway	45.67%
Providing health-related or personal care	Emotional support, counselling, providing advice, visiting the elderly, or unpaid babysitting	44.17%
Transportation	Volunteering to drive to appointments and carpooling	38.64%
Paperwork Tasks	Doing taxes, filling out forms, writing letters and emails	31.12%
Unpaid teaching and mentorship	Coaching, tutoring, homework or reading support	25.60%
Shopping for others	Running errands, picking up groceries, supply runs	25.35%
Other	Throwing out litter in the community, connecting neighbours with local resources	19.45%

**Chart 2.3** *Informal Volunteering Tasks. In the past 12 months, did you help anyone with the following tasks? Please select all that apply. N=797*



## KEY INSIGHTS

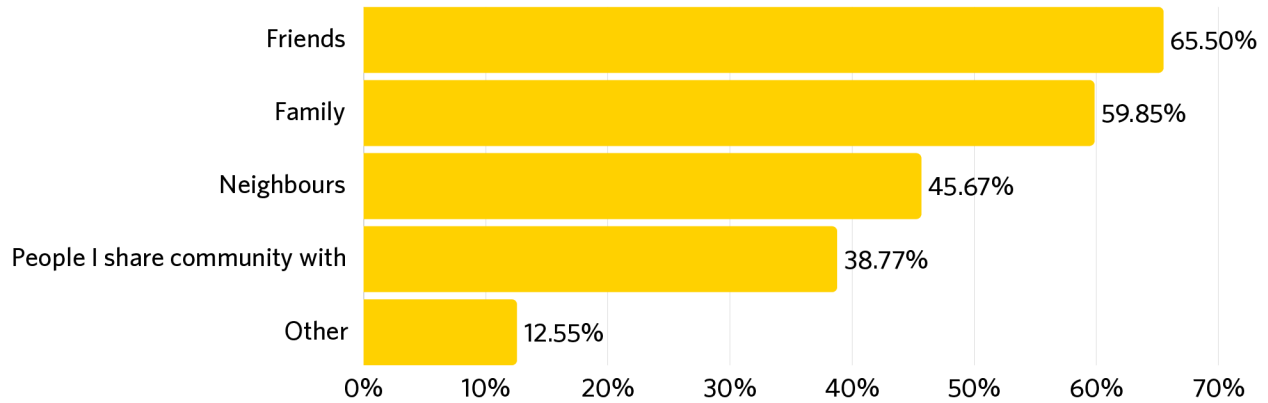
### Informal Volunteering Tasks

The most frequently reported informal volunteering activities were household tasks (46%), health-related or personal care (44%), and providing transportation (39%). Nearly one-third of respondents (31%) also provided assistance with paperwork or administrative support, such as filling out forms, managing banking, or writing letters. These trends suggest that respondents supported others in highly practical ways, which likely mirrors how most Canadians naturally show up for people in their lives.

Over one in four respondents also reported engaging in unpaid teaching, tutoring, or reading support (26%) and shopping for others (25%), highlighting the educational and caregiving roles that many people take on informally.

Together, these insights demonstrate how informal volunteering sustains daily life. It fills gaps where systems may be inaccessible, under-resourced, or unable to respond to specific needs, particularly for folks navigating disability, illness, or other wellbeing needs. Just as importantly, it affirms the typical ways people care for one another, whether through errands, emotional support, guidance, or mentorship.

**Graph 2.4** Groups receiving unpaid help. Who did you offer unpaid help to in the past twelve months? N=797



## KEY INSIGHTS

### Groups receiving unpaid help

A majority of respondents provided informal care to people in their direct networks such as friends (66%) and family (60%). A notable portion of respondents (39%) also reported helping people they share a sense of community with, such as cultural, religious, or LGBTQ+ groups. This suggests that informal volunteering is not only interpersonal, but also communal, rooted in shared identity, belonging, and collective care. People listed in the “other” (13%) category included strangers, loose acquaintances, and even the family members of friends.

## SUMMARIZING VOLUNTEER PARTICIPATION

The data above on formal and informal volunteering offers a snapshot of the different ways that people can participate in volunteering and engage with their communities. From structured roles in organizations to everyday acts of support, these activities include everything from serving on boards and organizing events to running errands, providing emotional care, or helping someone navigate a form.

Together, these contributions make up the ecosystem of care that sustains our communities. While volunteering also offers personal growth and a sense of purpose, the different ways it shows up in our neighbourhoods, religious places, and households nourish the forms of care, connection, and support that hold communities together.

## A REFLECTION: VOLUNTEER-ENGAGING ORGANIZATIONS & THE REALITIES OF INFORMAL VOLUNTEERING

Importantly, this study invites a broader understanding of contribution and volunteer participation as something that often happens outside of formal structures. While formal roles remain essential, a significant portion of support happens informally through relationships, and in response to everyday needs. This raises an important tension:

**If much of our contributions happen beyond formal structures, what should organizations do about the realities of informal volunteering?**

While informal volunteering doesn't replace the critical services delivered by food banks, senior support programs, or health organizations, it does challenge us to rethink the assumptions, language, and structures that have long shaped how we define and manage volunteer engagement.

Rather than undermining formal volunteerism, this study invites organizations to see themselves as part of a broader ecosystem of care—one in which formal and informal contributions coexist, complement, and strengthen each other.

### Reflection Questions:

What roles might community groups, organizations and nonprofits play in celebrating or supporting the different ways that people contribute to their communities?

What might organizations take away or learn from the realities of informal volunteering to complement or improve their own volunteer engagement practices?

What shifts in mindset or strategy are needed to embrace informal contributions without taking away from the purpose of formal volunteer programs?

### THINGS TO CONSIDER

**Acknowledging informal volunteering:** Recognizing that people support and contribute to their communities in diverse and meaningful ways only helps to amplify the value of volunteering and giving time to one's community.

**Celebrating community care:** Sharing diverse examples of relational, grassroots, or community care alongside stories of formal volunteering broadens our narratives of what volunteering looks like. This strengthens the sense of pride and purpose that people attribute to acts of volunteering.

**Valuing the unseen:** Many roles involve emotional labour or unseen forms of support. For example, volunteers who pour coffee at a church reception, welcome newcomers at an event, or offer a listening ear to someone in distress are performing invaluable acts of hospitality and care. These small gestures can foster feelings and experiences of trust, belonging and safety. Naming and affirming these gestures sends the message that even small acts of kindness and generosity are valuable forms of contribution.

**Learning from informal practices:** The trust and warmth that anchor informal acts of care can inform how organizations might design their formal programs, making them more inclusive, human, and reflective of the communities that people come from.

**Acting as a connector:** By supporting people in communities with resources, tools, and knowledge to foster their initiatives in mutual aid and community care, organizations can help empower individuals to become more engaged and invested in their communities. Sharing resources and providing people with different forms of support also builds relationships, mutual trust, and feelings of connectedness.



# Motivational Drivers & the Positive Impacts of Volunteering

As discussed, people volunteer for many reasons: to help others, to give back, to stay connected, to learn, to serve a purpose, or simply because it's part of how they were raised. Some are driven by values or identity, others by practical opportunities to build skills, meet people, or make a tangible difference. The following section builds on earlier reflections about what volunteering means and why it matters, but shifting the focus now on what motivates people to participate, and what they gain as a result.

Drawing largely on quantitative data, this section first explores the key motivations that led respondents to volunteer both formally and informally over a twelve-month period, highlighting a range of personal drivers (such as growth and learning) and socially-facing motivations (like helping others and building social connection). The focus then turns to the impacts respondents personally reflected on, from increased confidence and learning, to strengthened community ties and a sense of fulfillment.

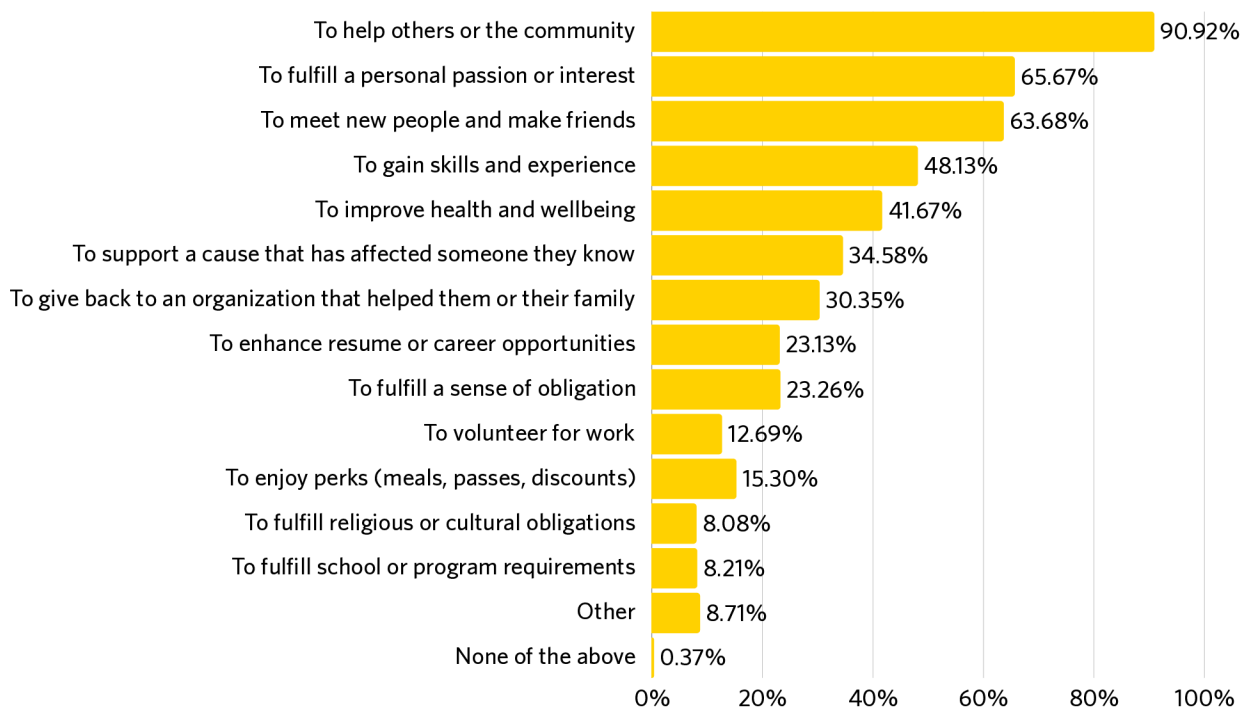
Together, this section helps to paint a fuller picture of the volunteer experience and why volunteers might choose to give their time and how it affects them in return. The section concludes by introducing the Positive Impact Spectrum, a framework that captures the range of benefits (personal, social, and communal) that emerge from acts of volunteering.

## MOTIVATIONAL DRIVERS FOR FORMAL VOLUNTEERING

Respondents were presented with a list of possible reasons for volunteering with organizations and asked to select all that applied. Chart 3.1 shows the percentage of respondents who selected each motivation and Table 3.1 provides an analysis of key trends.

96% (804 out of 839) of total respondents selected at least one motivation, and 97% (778 out of 804) of participants that responded to this question selected multiple motivations.

**Chart 3.1** *Formal Volunteering Motivations: What reasons might you have to volunteer with organizations or groups? What usually motivates you to volunteer? Select all that apply. N= 804*



## KEY FINDINGS & INSIGHTS

### Formal Volunteering Motivations

Overall, social and community-oriented motivators (e.g., helping others or the community, meeting new people and making new friends, supporting a cause) ranked highly for this set of respondents. More personal motivators such as fulfilling passions or gaining skills also make up key motivating drivers for why respondents volunteer or might want to volunteer for organizations.

A more detailed breakdown is provided in table 3.1, but key trends can be categorized into 4 major themes: care and contribution to others; social connections; personal fulfillment, passion, growth and practical benefit; and obligation and responsibility.

## OVERVIEW: MOTIVATIONAL DRIVERS FOR FORMAL VOLUNTEERING

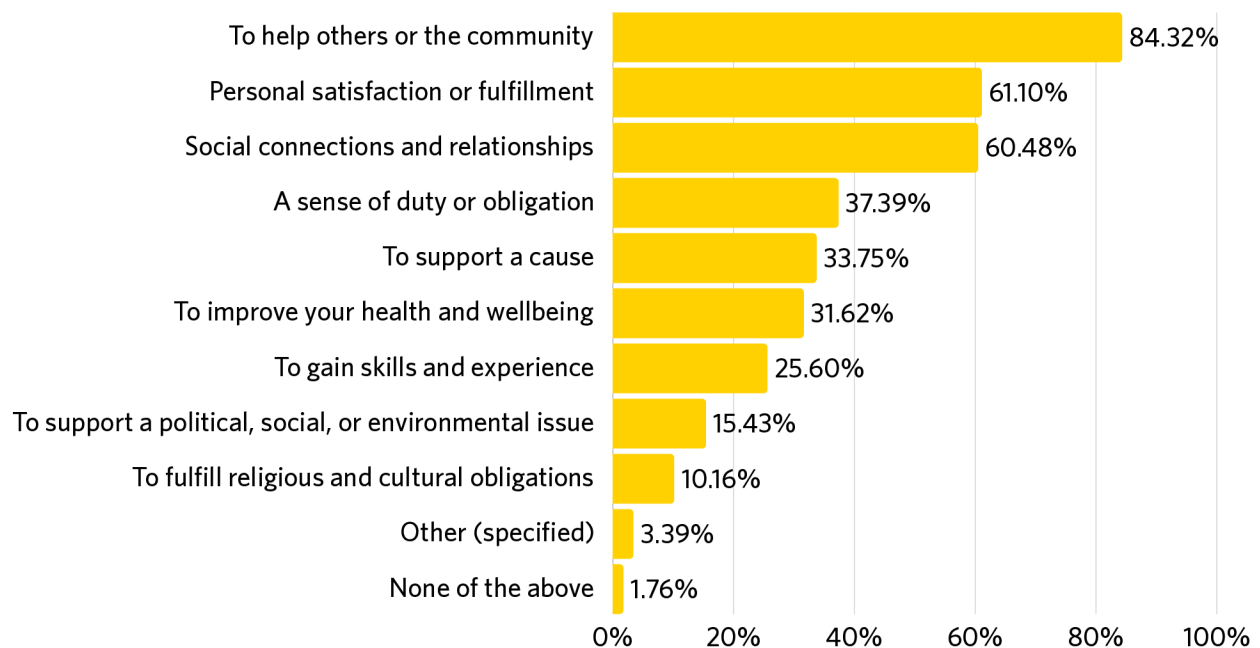
**Table 3.1** Overview and summary of key motivational drivers for formal volunteering. N=804

Themes	Summary	Key Findings
Care and Contribution to Others	The most commonly reported motivations reflect a desire to care for others, support meaningful causes, and give back to those who once offered them support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To help others or the community (91%)</li> <li>To support a cause that has personally affected someone they know (35%)</li> <li>To give back to an organization that helped them or their family (30%)</li> </ul>
Social Connections	Volunteering provides relational and emotional benefits for many. As discussed in previous sections, it's not just about giving. Volunteering is about belonging and connecting with others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To meet new people and make friends (64%)</li> </ul>
Personal Fulfillment, Passion, Growth and Practical Benefit	<p>Many respondents reported personal motivations for volunteering in formal settings. It offered pathways to learn, take care of one's health, build skills, and gain experience.</p> <p>For 6 out of 10 respondents, volunteering was a way to engage with their passions or interests. A small number also reported being motivated by minor perks like free meals and event passes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To fulfill a personal passion or interest (66%)</li> <li>To gain skills and experience (48%)</li> <li>To enhance resume or career opportunities (23%)</li> <li>To improve health and wellbeing (42%)</li> <li>To enjoy perks like free meals, passes, or discounts (15%)</li> </ul>
Obligation and Responsibility	A few respondents noted feelings of duty, whether spiritual, cultural, or professional. For these individuals, volunteering is an expression of responsibility.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To fulfill a sense of obligation (23%)</li> <li>To fulfill religious and cultural obligations (8%)</li> <li>To fulfill school or program requirements (8%)</li> <li>To volunteer for work (13%)</li> </ul>

## MOTIVATIONAL DRIVERS FOR INFORMAL VOLUNTEERING

Respondents were also asked to select from a list of reasons for why they engaged in informal volunteering. Chart 3.3 presents the percentage of respondents who selected each motivation, while Table 3.3 outlines key themes and patterns from the responses. Of the 797 people who responded to this question, 95% (758 respondents) selected at least one motivation for informal volunteering. 93% (707 out of 758) of those selected multiple motivations.

**Chart 3.2** *Informal Volunteering Motivations: Why might you participate in informal volunteering? Select all that apply. N= 797*



## KEY FINDINGS & INSIGHTS

### Informal Volunteering Motivations

As further demonstrated by table 3.2 below, motivation trends for informal volunteering mirrors those of formal volunteering. Similar to their motivations for volunteering in more structured settings, the top reason for why respondents informally gave their time was to help others and contribute to their communities in some way. Volunteering for personal satisfaction or fulfillment also ranked second at 61%, which is very similar to the trend in formal volunteering motivations at 66%.

Interestingly, a higher proportion of respondents claimed to have volunteered their time informally out of obligation (37%), than they did in formal volunteer roles at 23%. This seems to signal that a higher majority of individuals would be inclined to volunteer in formal roles out of personal satisfaction, than because they felt obligated to do so.

## OVERVIEW: MOTIVATIONAL DRIVERS FOR INFORMAL VOLUNTEERING

**Table 3.2** Informal Volunteering Motivations. Why might you participate in informal volunteering? Select all that apply. N= 797

Themes	Summary	Key Findings
<b>Community Care &amp; Social Responsibility</b>	Similar to motivational drivers for formal volunteering, altruistic motivators and the desire to help others rank highly for why respondents volunteered informally.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 84% volunteer informally to help others or their community</li> <li>• 34% support a cause that has affected someone they know</li> <li>• 15% engage to support broader social or environmental issues</li> </ul>
<b>Social Connections and Relationships</b>	Unsurprisingly, many respondents volunteered their time in informal ways for the sake of relationships and social connections in their lives. This is comparable to 64% of respondents who said that they volunteered for organizations to meet new people.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 60% cite social connections and relationships as a key motivator</li> </ul>
<b>Personal Rewards, Growth and Feelings of Fulfillment</b>	A majority of respondents also claimed to volunteer informally for personal reasons.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 61% do it for personal satisfaction or fulfillment</li> <li>• 31% say it improves their health and wellbeing</li> <li>• 26% cite gaining skills and experience</li> </ul>
<b>Feelings of Duty and Obligation</b>	Compared to formal volunteering, a larger proportion of the respondents reported that they were motivated to informally volunteer their time out of obligation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 37% say they volunteer informally out of a sense of duty or obligation</li> <li>• 10% cite religious or cultural obligations</li> </ul>

### SUMMARIZING MOTIVATIONAL DRIVERS

The quantitative data presented above shows key trends and broader insights into why study respondents generally chose to volunteer their time to organizations, community groups, as well as their neighbours, friends, and family members. The respondents were generally motivated to fulfill personal values, support important causes, connect with others, and for personal satisfaction.

Below, we examine qualitative data to deeply understand the benefits and positive impacts that volunteering had on our respondents, in their own words.

## THE BENEFITS OF VOLUNTEERING

The following reflections, drawn directly from survey responses, capture the diverse ways volunteers described how volunteering benefitted or positively impacted them. Some speak to personal growth and learning, others to the joy of connection and belonging, and others to the satisfaction of making a visible difference. Together, these reflections show that the effects of volunteering are multi-layered and often overlap, impacting the volunteer's own life while also strengthening the communities they serve.

These reflections were gathered from an open-ended question asking respondents about the kinds of impact that volunteering has had on their lives.

### IN THE WORDS OF RESPONDENTS:

Positive Impacts of Volunteering. Gathered from qualitative responses to the question: How has volunteering impacted your life? What have been some positive impacts? N=839

"It makes me feel helpful, admired, appreciated and thankful I can giveback."

"I like to feel like I am supporting others so their day is a bit better and they know someone cares and values them."

"Volunteering gives my life meaning and connects me to others."

"It has been an amazing gift to me. I have met so many beautiful people and heard different stories, life experiences, it expands your knowledge of this world. We can learn so much from others."

"Very fulfilling to be able to create opportunities to engage people, impact their lives and bring a positive experience to them or help them."

"My volunteering has been rewarding because my impact is noticeable, recognized and appreciated. The work keeps my mind engaged and enables ongoing social interactions with peers and others."

"I was raised by parents who volunteered and who expected me to start my own volunteering as soon as I was out on my own. It has been a great way to feel a part of any community I have lived in and helped me meet people. I learned management skills before women were able to find paid management work so I was ready when paid management employment became available to women."

"Volunteering has positively impacted my life in many ways. I've met many lovely people, it brings me joy. I've learned new skills. As a retired person I feel included and like I'm still contributing to society."

## THE BENEFITS OF VOLUNTEERING: A SPECTRUM OF POSITIVE IMPACTS

As shown by the reflections above, volunteering generates a wide range of outcomes and impacts that are often interconnected, with personal, social, and community benefits reinforcing one another. These themes form the foundation of the Positive Impact Spectrum, presented below, which maps how the impacts of volunteering cut across personal, interpersonal, and community levels.

Although this spectrum is not exhaustive of the many benefits that volunteering has on people’s lives, it does give us an idea of how the impacts of volunteering can ripple from personal benefits to more wide-reaching impact in communities. Importantly, these levels of impact are not mutually exclusive of each other, and can even be experienced all at once: volunteering for a community event can satisfy a personal interest, lead to meeting new people, and bring a whole community together.

Level of Impact		
Personal	Interpersonal	Community
Key Areas		
Identity, Growth, Wellbeing	Relationships, Belonging, Connection	Community Life, System Change, Social Good
Impact		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased confidence, resilience, and self-worth</li> <li>• Skill development (communication, leadership, problem-solving)</li> <li>• Sense of purpose and fulfillment</li> <li>• Mental and emotional health benefits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making new friends and connections</li> <li>• Belonging to different teams, peer groups, and cohorts of volunteers</li> <li>• Shared experiences and collaboration with like-minded individuals</li> <li>• Learning from and with others</li> <li>• Feeling appreciated and recognized</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tangible community impact (e.g. events, services, supports)</li> <li>• Increased empathy and understanding across differences</li> <li>• Helping to build inclusive, caring communities</li> <li>• Strengthening civil society and collective wellbeing</li> </ul>

## A REFLECTION ON WHY PEOPLE VOLUNTEER

This report has shown that there are many reasons to volunteer, from deeply personal motivations like joy, fulfillment, and growth, to socially oriented ones like helping others, building community, or advancing a cause. The better we understand people's motivations, the better we can create volunteer experiences that keep people engaged and inspired. The greater the number of ways someone can feel fulfilled, connected, or valued, the more likely they are to remain engaged.

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**Conversely, when motivations are misunderstood, overlooked, or mismatched with volunteer roles, even the most committed individuals can lose interest or feel disconnected from the work.**

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Understanding why someone volunteers can help with finding a balance between meeting a volunteer's preferences and the needs of an organization or community. It starts with asking questions, really listening, and keeping an open conversation going about their interests and goals. Checking in regularly, whether through simple conversations or more formal evaluations, can help make sure the experience stays meaningful for everyone involved.

### Questions to Consider

- How well do we understand the range of motivations that bring people to our organization or cause?
- Are our volunteer roles designed in ways that satisfy people's personal and socially focused motivations?
- How often do we check in with volunteers to see if their needs, interests, or motivations have shifted?
- What systems or practices do we have to adapt roles in response to volunteers' motivations?

### Barriers to Participation

The discussion so far has focused on the motivations, positive impacts, and the kinds of experiences that draw people to volunteering. When motivations are supported, volunteers are more likely to thrive, but understanding and appealing to people's motivations alone do not guarantee people's ability to volunteer.

In the next section, we turn to the challenges respondents identified, offering insight into what gets in the way of people's ability or desire to volunteer, and how organizations might address those barriers to offer appropriate and meaningful supports. As we will see, life commitments, accessibility issues, and organizational practices can all limit people's ability to contribute in ways that feel satisfying or impactful.

# Challenges & Barriers to Volunteering

While much of this report highlights the motivations and meaningful impacts of volunteering, it is equally important to understand the barriers and challenges people encounter along the way. This section explores what respondents indicated as the limits to how often or how meaningfully they engaged in volunteering. Drawing on both quantitative data and open-ended reflections, it examines the practical constraints, barriers, and interpersonal dynamics that influence the volunteer experience.

Quantitative data reveals general trends in what respondents identified as the key challenges and barriers to volunteering (more often) that they experience, as well as their perceptions of the kinds of supports they need to volunteer more fully. Qualitative analysis deepens the discussion by also identifying the negative impacts that volunteering can have on people who volunteer.

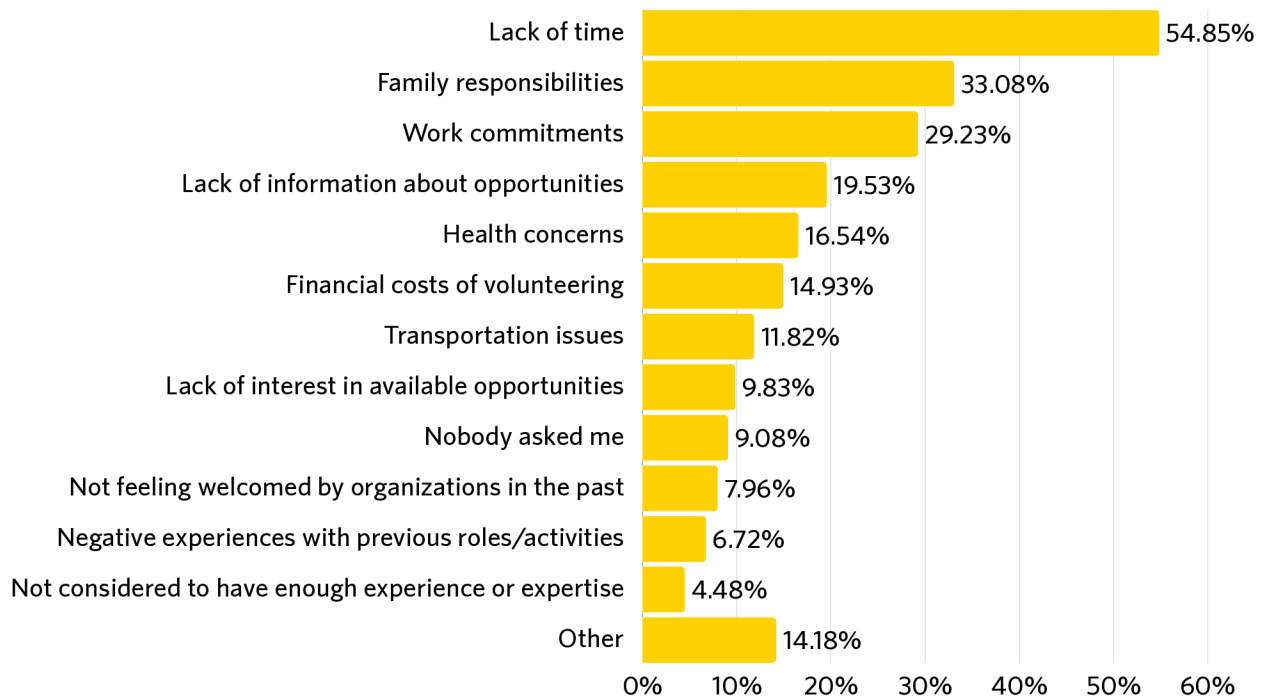
By surfacing these realities, the goal is to help identify opportunities to remove obstacles, foster inclusion, and design roles and supports that make volunteering more accessible, sustainable, and rewarding for everyone.



## ACCORDING TO THE NUMBERS

Even when people want to give their time, many encounter barriers that make volunteering difficult or unsustainable. To better understand these challenges, respondents were asked what prevents them from volunteering more often.

**Figure 1** Barriers. What prevents you from volunteering (more often)? Select all that apply. N=804



## KEY INSIGHTS & OTHER BARRIERS

Taken together, a majority of respondents saw conflicting priorities and a lack of time or capacity as major barriers to their ability to volunteer for organizations, compared to 9% of respondents saying that they were not interested in available opportunities. This signifies that even for highly committed volunteers who (based on demographic profiles) likely have the free time to volunteer, are still challenged by conflicting life demands.

The data also highlights that life constraints such as health and financial costs can make volunteering challenging for some, and even more were identified by the respondents through additional comments. Several comments identified the lack of support or accommodations they received from organizations, while others pointed to broader systemic issues such as the lack of “public resources and paying jobs to alleviate crunches on volunteer organizations.”

## OVERVIEW: BARRIERS TO FORMAL VOLUNTEERING

### TIME CONSTRAINTS AND LIFE RESPONSIBILITIES

The majority of respondents are not disengaged due to a lack of interest, but because of competing priorities in their daily lives. The high percentages for time, family, and work commitments reflect the ongoing challenge of integrating volunteering into already busy schedules.

**55%** of respondents indicated that lack of time was a main reason they don't volunteer more.

**33%** identified family responsibilities as a limiting factor.

**29%** selected work commitments as a barrier to further engagement.

### ACCESS AND AWARENESS

This was one of the more frequently selected barriers, pointing to gaps in access to information or visibility of opportunities.

**20%** of respondents reported that they did not know where or how to get involved in volunteering.

### FINANCIAL AND HEALTH BARRIERS

Volunteering is often perceived as freely given, but participation can carry real costs in transit fares, meals, childcare, and physical or emotional health needs.

**15%** of respondents selected financial limitations—including things like transportation or missed work—as a barrier to volunteering.

**17%** indicated that health concerns (physical or mental) limited their participation.

### EXCLUSION AND NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES

Though cited by a smaller proportion, the impact of not feeling welcomed or included is significant. These experiences signal deeper issues of representation, recognition, and belonging. Some individuals shared negative past volunteer experiences, feeling overlooked or disconnected. This common barrier highlights gaps in information and opportunity visibility.

**8%** of respondents reported that they did not feel welcomed in volunteering environments.

**7%** of respondents reported that they had negative experiences with previous roles.

**5%** responded that they were not considered to have enough experience or expertise.

## BEYOND THE NUMBERS

Open-ended responses on the negative impacts of volunteering provided deeper insight into how people experience barriers and challenges. Of 839 total responses, 269 specifically addressed negative impacts.

**Negative Impacts of Volunteering.** Gathered from qualitative responses to the question on volunteering barriers, and the question: How has volunteering impacted your life? What have been some negative impacts? N=269

*Frequency: 123 out of 269 (46%) total responses.*

<b>LIFE BALANCE &amp; BURNOUT</b>	As identified earlier, managing time and life commitments is a key barrier to people’s ability to volunteer. In addition to this, high levels of commitment can also lead to burnout and negatively affect people’s wellbeing.	
<b>Key Phrases</b>		
“Balancing volunteering with other responsibilities can be challenging, leading to stress or burnout if not managed well.”	“Volunteering has also led to me getting burnt out. When you volunteer for something, people expect you to be able to volunteer for everything and that’s not sustainable.”	
“Volunteering can take a toll on my available time and sometimes not allocating to self/family when needed.”	“The past couple of years though have been very hard, our organization doesn’t have enough volunteers, so those that do are being overworked and are feeling like they are not getting things done”	

*Frequency: 81 responses out of 269 (30%)*

<b>WELLBEING IMPACTS OF VOLUNTEERING</b>	As fulfilling as volunteering can be, it can also be emotionally, mentally, and physically demanding. For several participants, high-impact roles in crisis, advocacy, and emergency environments were particularly difficult, even leading to compassion fatigue.		
<b>Key Phrases</b>			
“Working with vulnerable populations or in crisis situations can be emotionally challenging, potentially leading to compassion fatigue.”	“Being deeply invested in the well-being of others can take an emotional toll. Dealing with challenges like declining membership, organizational changes, or unmet community needs can be disheartening and stressful.”	“Dealing with critical individuals gives me stress. Not having enough volunteers so I take on too much gives me stress.”	
“Volunteering, especially in areas like healthcare or social justice, can sometimes be emotionally draining. Witnessing suffering or injustice can be difficult, and it has occasionally led to feelings of helplessness.”	“Negative aspects are few, but sometimes there is conflict with other people, taking up too much personal time, expenses (travel, contributions), physical demands, stress of making presentations or doing work that might be stressful.”		

## BEYOND THE NUMBERS

Frequency: 46 out of 269 (17%) total responses.

<b>POOR ENGAGEMENT &amp; SUPPORT</b>	Several respondents expressed their frustrations with how organizations engaged, prepared, and supported volunteers. They pointed to unclear expectations, lack of role preparation, insufficient recognition, and leadership that was disorganized or dismissive.
<b>Key Phrases</b>	
"On the negative side, I have stopped working with organizations because of their condescending 'we don't care about you' attitude."	"The only negative would be organizations that never call you back when they say they are looking for volunteers or poor volunteer managers who don't make volunteering fun."
"Some negatives have been volunteering for unorganized events or for team leads who aren't always supportive."	"Leaders are disorganized or expectations are unclear."
	"Not welcomed, not prepared for me, no acknowledgment of my service/time."

Frequency: 19 out of 269 (7.1%) responses.

<b>FINANCIAL BARRIERS</b>	While less frequently mentioned, some respondents faced tangible financial costs tied to volunteering. These included travel and fuel expenses, out-of-pocket spending on events, special insurance requirements, and lost income opportunities.		
<b>Key Phrases</b>			
"The cost of travel to a volunteer activity and sometimes extra auto insurance is required."	"Some financial burden when trying to spend time and go to events with Mentee."	"Sometimes the negative part can be... the cost of gas or having to spend my own money."	"There's also the opportunity cost — volunteering takes time I could be using to earn money."

## LIFE DEMANDS, LIVING COSTS, AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The reflections and data above demonstrate that many people are unable to volunteer because of various life demands and the rising costs of living. These pressures can limit not only the time people have available, but also their ability to absorb the financial costs that sometimes come with volunteering.

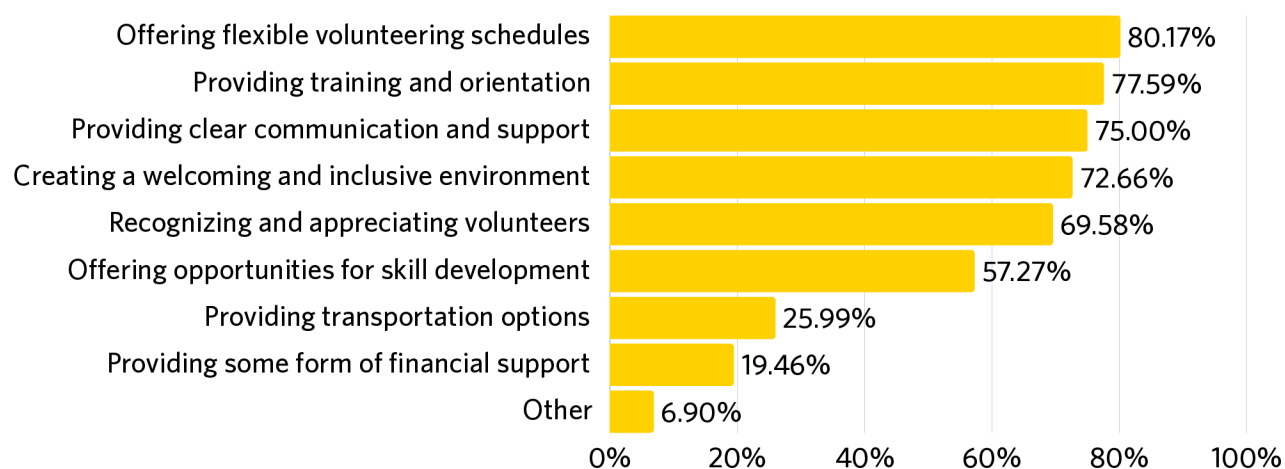
Such barriers may be even more pronounced for newcomers, low-income individuals, and other equity-deserving or vulnerable populations who may still be actively contributing through informal care, mutual aid, or community support, but whose experiences are not significantly represented in this dataset. Similarly, these marginalized populations may be facing more systemic and organizational barriers that are not fully accounted for in this study. This gap in representation points to a need for further research that captures and supports the experiences of underrepresented groups and populations.

## SUPPORTS NEEDED

Having identified the barriers that prevent people from volunteering, we now highlight the kinds of support that respondents believe would make volunteering more sustainable, meaningful, and accessible.

Their responses identify a number of structural and organizational supports that enable participation in different volunteering activities, and the relationship-based supports that help volunteers feel valued and meaningfully engaged.

**Figure 1** Needed Supports. In what ways do you feel nonprofits can best support volunteers? Select all that apply. N=812



## KEY INSIGHTS

These findings suggest that meaningful volunteer engagement creates conditions for volunteers to participate in volunteering opportunities. Flexibility, preparation, and clear communication address practical needs, while inclusive environments and recognition support emotional connection and belonging. Opportunities for growth ensure that volunteering remains personally rewarding, while practical supports like transportation and financial assistance help remove barriers for those facing structural or economic challenges.

In short, the supports volunteers ask for reflect the same themes that emerged throughout this study: the importance of recognizing personal motivations and practical life constraints, fostering relationships built on trust and respect, and reducing systemic or organizational barriers that limit who can participate.

## OVERVIEW: SUPPORTS NEEDED

### FLEXIBLE SCHEDULING

The strong preference for flexible schedules reinforces that time remains the most significant constraint for many volunteers.

**80%** of respondents indicated that having flexible schedules would support their ability to volunteer.

### TRAINING, CLARITY, AND COMMUNICATION

Volunteers want to know what's expected of them and feel supported in their roles. This finding suggests that effective onboarding and continuous communication are essential to fostering a sense of competence and confidence.

**78%** of respondents selected training and orientation as a needed support.

**75%** emphasized the importance of clear communication and ongoing support in their roles.

### WELCOMING ENVIRONMENTS AND RECOGNITION

The emphasis on inclusion and appreciation signals that volunteers are more likely to stay when they feel seen, valued, and part of a supportive culture.

**73%** identified the importance of a welcoming and inclusive environment.

**70%** said they wanted to feel recognized and appreciated for their contributions.

### OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN AND GROW

For many, volunteering is about personal development. This suggests an opportunity for organizations to frame volunteering as a space for mutual benefit, where people contribute and develop.

**57%** of respondents expressed interest in opportunities to learn or develop new skills through their volunteering.

### LOGISTICAL AND FINANCIAL SUPPORTS

For many, volunteering is about personal development. This suggests an opportunity for organizations to frame volunteering as a space for mutual benefit, where people contribute and develop.

**26%** of respondents cited transportation as a helpful support.

**19%** identified financial support (e.g., reimbursement, stipends, or covering costs) as something that would help them volunteer.



# Bringing Meaning to the Volunteer Experience

If you think of an avid volunteer in your life, chances are they'll tell you they keep showing up because of the friends they've made, causes that deeply matter to them, skills they've gained, or opportunities that helped them find work they care about. They may also speak honestly about how volunteering can be time-consuming, stressful, or sometimes not the right fit. Yet despite these challenges, they continue because it matters to them for various reasons.

This final section brings together the key learnings, ideas, and insights from across the report. While these findings do not capture every story, they reflect aspirations and challenges that will feel familiar to many volunteers. Here, we distill our learnings into common themes and core conditions that make volunteering meaningful, rewarding, and worth returning to.

## ELEMENTS OF MEANINGFUL VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCES

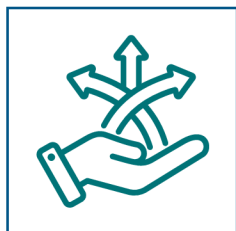
Meaningful volunteer experiences are built on a blend of purpose, respect, clarity, flexibility, and connection. Volunteers often look for roles where their time and skills are used thoughtfully and in ways that align with their passions or growth. They want to be respected, valued, and communicated with clearly, and they thrive when opportunities adapt to the realities of their lives.

They also seek genuine connection and belonging, where relationships with staff, peers, and community make the work feel worthwhile. When organizations create these conditions, they not only attract volunteers but inspire them to stay, contribute fully, and carry the impact of their work into the wider community.

Elements	Summary
<p><b>Purposeful Volunteering</b></p>	<p>Many people do simply want to help, and even fill some free time, but a meaningful and fulfilling experience connects volunteers to their passions, interests, personal growth, community, or clear impact.</p> <p>"Volunteering is doing what I can to help in a meaningful way."</p>
<p><b>Respect and Recognition</b></p>	<p>Respondents emphasized the importance of being respected by staff, treated as equals, and included in decision-making when possible. Many spoke about feeling undervalued or invisible in previous roles.</p> <p>"A welcoming environment is most important for me"</p>
<p><b>Clarity and Communication</b></p>	<p>Volunteers appreciate knowing what is expected of them, and why. Good onboarding, training, and communication about goals or changes were repeatedly mentioned as signs of a healthy volunteer culture.</p> <p>"I want clear instructions and to understand the goals so I know what I'm doing matters."</p>
<p><b>Flexibility and Accessibility</b></p>	<p>The most valued programs offered a range of options to suit different lives, needs, and capacities. Volunteers want to be able to engage on terms that respect or even accommodate their personal priorities and barriers.</p> <p>"Flexible schedules mean I can still contribute when life gets busy."</p>
<p><b>Connection and Belonging</b></p>	<p>Finally, the strongest experiences were ones where people felt they were part of a community. Relationships with staff, peers, or those being served were central to why many people volunteered.</p> <p>"The most rewarding volunteer work made me feel valued and like I belonged."</p>

## ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO CREATE MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCES

The barriers and challenges this report has identified show that people's ability to engage in volunteering is shaped by life circumstances, pressures, and needs for access to different forms of support. Volunteer engagement should be about creating conditions so that everyone can and want to volunteer.



### Designing for flexibility

Rigid schedules, in-person requirements, and one-size-fits-all roles don't work for most modern lives. Volunteers need options that match their availability, location, energy, and capacity, which can look like having events at accessible locations, remote admin work, or family-friendly tasks.

*Ask: Can someone contribute without rearranging their life?*



### Ensuring Inclusion

Physical accessibility, cultural safety, and emotional belonging all matter. It helps not to simply assume a space or role feels accessible or affirming. When, or if possible: ask, assess, and adapt.

*Ask: Are we aware of the barriers that might hold someone back from participating?*



### Respecting emotional labor

Volunteering often requires emotional work, especially in caregiving, advocacy, crisis support, or relational roles. That labor deserves recognition, reflection, and support structures. Burnout happens not just from overwork, but from under-care.

*Ask: Are we supporting people who support others?*



### Encouraging Meaningful Feedback

Safe opportunities for volunteers to share what's working, what is hard, and what they would change are signs of a healthy volunteering culture. Feedback should be seen as an integral aspect of volunteer engagement be treated as an ongoing and valued practice that informs program development and fosters mutual trust.

*Ask: Do our volunteers feel heard, or just managed?*

## VOICES OF VOLUNTEERS

The perspectives and insights we gathered from respondents are not simply data points. These are the voices of real people, sharing what volunteering means to them, what challenges they face, and what fulfills them when giving their time to others, causes, and communities. Their words remind us that it is volunteers themselves who bring meaning to the act of volunteering.



Knowing that my efforts are making a tangible difference in the community provides a deep sense of fulfillment.



Volunteering has given me a sense of pride in my community, that I am part of this community, not just living here.



It's not just about helping others; it's also about learning, growing, and connecting with your community in meaningful ways.



Volunteering is how I show up for the kind of world I believe in.



The best experiences made me feel like I belonged—like I mattered.



Volunteering introduced me to new friends, helped me gain life skills, and made me feel valuable.



I have met so many beautiful people and heard different stories, life experiences, it expands your knowledge of this world.



It makes my life worthwhile, it gives my life purpose.

# Conclusion

This report offers insight into the perspectives, values, motivations, and aspirations of 839 individuals who shared how they understand and experience volunteerism. Their reflections reveal that volunteering is, at its core, a personal act that is often rooted in values, identity, and a desire to contribute.

Throughout the findings, we learn that volunteers sustain essential services, they provide care and connection to people, animals, and the environment. They support institutions, build relationships, and help sustain the cultural heartbeats of their communities.

As organizations and systems continue to adapt to shifting social, economic, and cultural conditions, the role of volunteerism remains vital. This insight report offers moments of reflection and an invitation to organizations to assess their practices, processes, and approaches to better understand the role(s) that they play in shaping volunteer experiences.

The purpose of this report has been largely analytical. Future work will involve developing and sharing tools and resources that provide organizations with tangible and concrete processes or practices for activating the ideas, learnings, and insights captured through this study.

## NEXT STEPS

This report represents Phase 1 of a multi-phase research insights series. While this phase has centered on the voices of individuals who volunteer, future reports will expand the lens to explore:

- Organizational perspectives on volunteer engagement, including emerging challenges and adaptations in recruitment, retention, and recognition
- Concrete resources and practices that support meaningful, inclusive, and sustainable volunteer involvement

Together, these phases aim to offer a more comprehensive and responsive understanding of volunteerism that is grounded in both lived experience and institutional realities. As we look ahead, the question is not simply how to involve more volunteers, but how to create the conditions where volunteering feels purposeful, possible, and genuinely valued.

# GLOSSARY OF TERMS

## RESEARCH & ANALYSIS TERMS

### **Coding (Qualitative Analysis)**

Labeling segments of text data (e.g., open-text survey responses) with categories or themes that capture meaning.

### **Frequency Analysis**

Counting how often specific codes or responses appear to identify common patterns.

### **Mixed-Methods Research**

Combining quantitative (numbers) and qualitative (text/narrative) data for deeper insight.

### **Qualitative Data**

Non-numerical data that provides descriptive insights.  
*Example: Volunteer stories about why they started volunteering*

### **Quantitative Data**

Numerical data that can be counted, measured, and analyzed statistically.  
*Example: Percentage of volunteers citing "lack of time" as a barrier.*

### **Respondent**

A person who completes a survey or participates in a study.

### **Sample**

The group of people who take part in the study, representing a larger population.

### **Theme**

A recurring idea, pattern, or concept that emerges during qualitative analysis.

## VOLUNTEERISM CONCEPTS

### **Accessibility (in Volunteering)**

Ensuring that volunteer opportunities are inclusive and open to people with different abilities, backgrounds, schedules, and resources.

*Example: A volunteer noted they could participate only because the organization offered virtual opportunities and flexible hours.*

### **Community Care**

Everyday acts of support and solidarity within a community, often outside formal organizations.

*Example: Helping a neighbour with snow shoveling after a storm.*

### **Formal Volunteering**

Structured activities done through an organization, group, or institution. Roles are usually defined, with expectations, responsibilities, and training.

*Example: Serving as a board member for a local nonprofit.*

### **Informal Volunteering**

Unpaid acts of service outside formal organizational structures, often based in personal relationships or community ties.

*Example: Driving an elderly friend to medical appointments.*

### **Intersectionality (in Volunteerism)**

Recognizing that people's volunteer experiences are shaped by overlapping identities (race, gender, class, ability, age) and systemic advantages or barriers.

### **Kin-Work**

Care and support provided to family members or chosen family, often unpaid and unrecognized as volunteering in traditional definitions.

*Example: Caring for a sibling with a disability.*

### **Mutual Aid**

People working together to meet each other's needs, often without formal hierarchy, emphasizing reciprocity and collective care.

*Example: A local network organizing food drop-offs during a snowstorm*

## BARRIERS, SUPPORTS, AND IMPACTS

### **Barriers to Volunteering**

Ensuring that volunteer opportunities are inclusive and open to people with different abilities, backgrounds, schedules, and resources.

*Example: In this study, common barriers included lack of time, family responsibilities, and work commitments.*

### **Burnout**

Emotional, mental, or physical exhaustion caused by prolonged commitments, leading to reduced motivation and involvement.

### **Contribution**

Any act of giving time, skills, resources, or care to benefit others, whether through formal volunteering or informal support.

### Emotional Labour in Volunteering

The unseen effort of managing emotions — one's own and others' — in order to provide others with care and positive experiences.

*Example: Volunteers greeting guests warmly at an event while managing personal stress.*

### Highly Engaged Contributors & Volunteers

Volunteers who give large amounts of time, often weekly or across multiple roles.

*Example: A local network organizing food drop-offs during a snowstorm*

### Impact Spectrum

A framework describing the range of volunteering's positive effects — from personal benefits to community-level change.

*Example: Driving an elderly friend to medical appointments.*

### Organizational Supports

Practices, resources, and structures that help volunteers feel welcome, equipped, and valued.

*Example: Flexible schedules, mentorship, and training opportunities.*

### Personal Impact

The individual benefits of volunteering, such as confidence, skill development, and well-being.



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