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# Volunteering in Canada: Challenges and opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic

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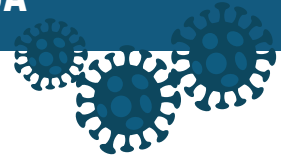
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## Volunteering in Canada: Challenges and opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic

by **Tara Hahmann, Valerie du Plessis** and **Patric Fournier-Savard**

Through charities, non-profits and community organizations, volunteers in Canada are providing essential services to vulnerable groups on the front-line of the current COVID-19 pandemic. They are providing shelter and services to the homeless, and to women and children fleeing violence; help for isolated seniors; mental health services for children; ongoing and emergency food and other provisions within communities.

Canadians are also acting directly to support those around them, without the involvement of organizations or groups. This type of informal volunteering has always been a part of the Canadian fabric and is increasingly visible in the current context. Recent media reports have highlighted numerous examples of individuals taking direct action to help others during the pandemic, including picking-up and dropping-off groceries and other supplies in the community, cooking meals, sewing non-medical masks, sharing information and offering emotional support via online social media platforms.

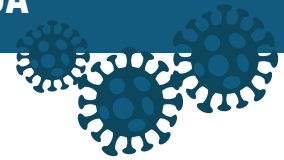
This article is based on data from the General Social Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating (GSS GVP), which was conducted on a sample of persons aged 15 and over, totalling 16,149 respondents in 2018. While these data are from prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, they provide insight into challenges and opportunities facing volunteerism in the current situation.

### Over 12.7 million Canadians, aged 15 and older, volunteered for charities in 2018

In 2018, over 12.7 million people volunteered for charities, non-profits and community organizations – accounting for 41% of Canadians aged 15 and older. They devoted more than 1.6 billion hours to their formal volunteer activities, a volume of work equivalent to almost 858,000 full-time year-round jobs<sup>1</sup> (Table 1).

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1. Assuming 40 hours of work per week for 48 weeks.



**Table 1**  
**Formal volunteers and volunteer hours by generation<sup>1</sup>, population aged 15 and older, Canada 2018**

	iGen (Born 1995 and up) <sup>†</sup>	Millennials (Born 1981 to 1994)	Gen X (Born 1966 to 1980)	Baby Boomers (Born 1946 to 1965)	Matures (Born 1918 to 1945)	Total
<b>Total population</b>	<b>3,430</b>	<b>7,754</b>	<b>7,179</b>	<b>9,331</b>	<b>3,149</b>	<b>30,843</b>
Number of volunteers	1,800	3,137	3,156	3,596	1,001	12,691
Volunteer rate	52	40*	44*	39*	32*	41
<b>Total hours volunteered</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>351*</b>	<b>376*</b>	<b>550*</b>	<b>221*</b>	<b>1,647</b>
Full-time year-round job equivalents <sup>2</sup>	77,331	182,962	195,799	286,605	115,319	857,813
Average hours volunteered per year	82	112*	119*	153*	221*	130

\* significantly different from reference category (p < 0.05)

<sup>†</sup> reference group

1. Refer to [Methodology](#) section for definition of “generations” and associated age ranges.

2. Assuming 40 hours of work per week for 48 weeks.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, Giving, Volunteering, and Participating, 2018.

## Baby Boomers and Matures more likely to be top volunteers<sup>2</sup>

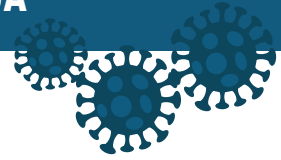
In 2018, Matures (40%) and Baby Boomers (32%) were more likely than iGen (19%) to be top volunteers, spending 132 hours or more on volunteer activities.

With many baby boomers now struggling to keep businesses alive or working from home and, in some cases, caring for elderly parents, this group likely has less time for volunteering during the pandemic. At the same time Matures, who would normally be contributing the most formal volunteer hours, are among those at highest risk in the current COVID-19 context and in many cases, more likely to be self-isolating. In other words, those who were among the most dedicated unpaid workers in the charitable sector going into the pandemic are now among those most impacted by the current situation and themselves in need of support.

## iGen had the highest rate of formal volunteering across all generations

Although iGen were less likely than other generations to be top volunteers, they were significantly engaged in formal volunteer activities going into the pandemic. As schools have transitioned to online learning and extra-curricular activities have been cancelled, some iGen may be in a position to increase their community contributions through formal volunteering, a potential opportunity for charities in need of volunteers. In 2018, iGen contributed an average of 82 unpaid hours to charitable organizations and had the highest volunteer rate (52%), highlighting an important connection to the work of charities, non-profits and community groups.

2. Refer to [Methodology](#) section for definition of “top volunteers”.



## Some organization types likely more impacted than others by suspension of volunteering due to the pandemic

While the importance of the unpaid hours, energy and kindness of volunteers is evident across Canada during this time of crisis, all volunteer causes have been impacted by the pandemic to varying degrees. Hospitals, for example, have had to suspend many volunteer programs to protect the health of those involved. Religious, sports and recreation, as well as arts and cultural gatherings and events have been cancelled, with some activity moving online. Social services have had to quickly implement social distancing and other health protection measures in the face of increasing demand for their services.

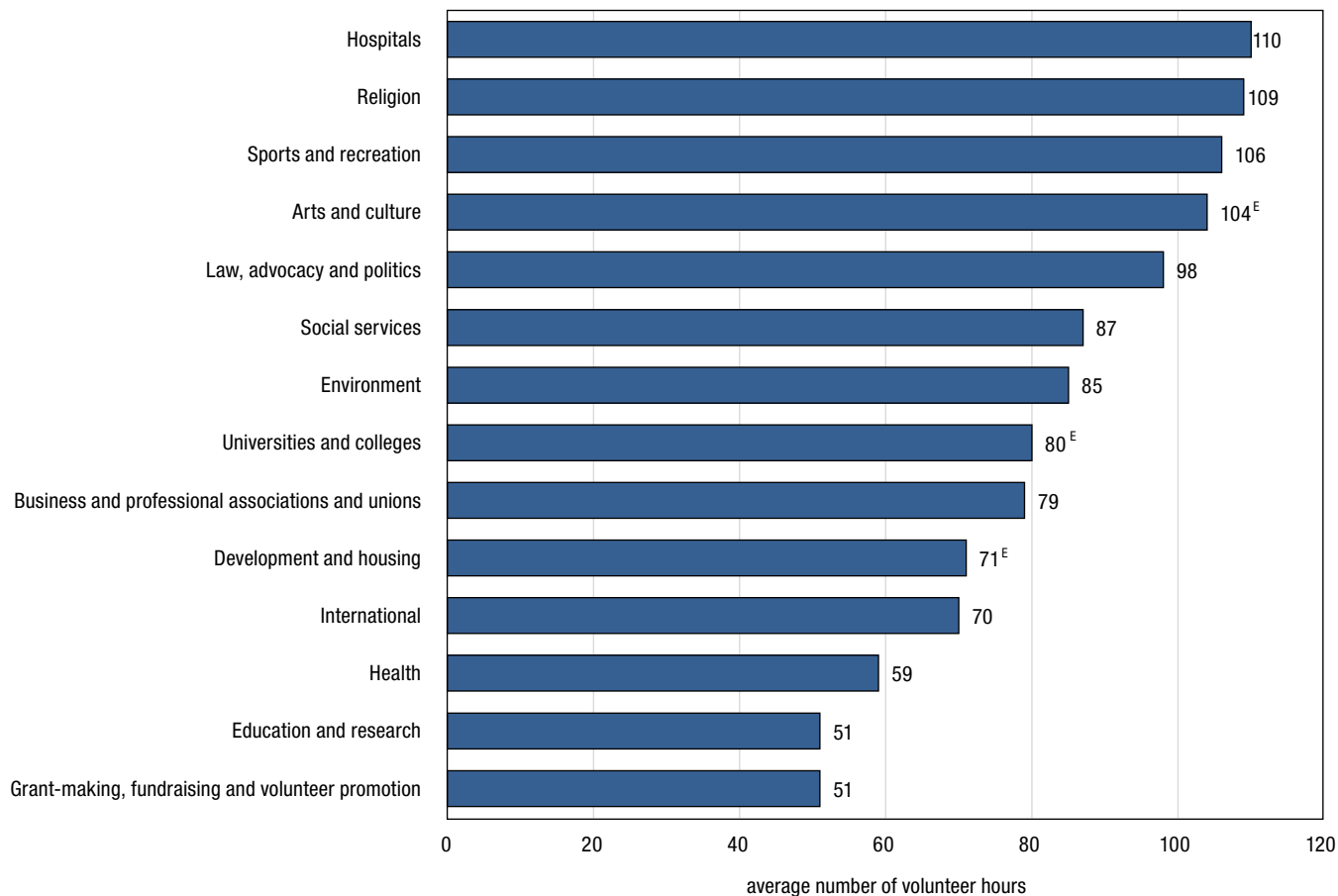
Formal volunteers, who volunteered on behalf of specific organization types, dedicated more than 100 hours, on average, to arts and culture (104<sup>E</sup> hours), sports and recreation (106 hours), with religion (109 hours), and hospitals (110 hours) benefitting from the most hours on average in 2018. Formal volunteers gave about half as many hours to education and research (51 hours), grant-making, fundraising and volunteer promotion (51 hours), and health (59 hours) (Chart 1).



**Chart 1**

**Average annual volunteer hours, by organization type, formal volunteers aged 15 and over, Canada, 2018**

Organization type



<sup>E</sup> use with caution

**Note:** Categories are not mutually exclusive.

**Source:** Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, Giving, Volunteering, 2018.

## Almost three-quarters of Canadians were engaged in informal volunteering in 2018

In 2018, over 22.7 million people volunteered informally – accounting for 73% of Canadians aged 15 and older. They devoted roughly 3.4 billion hours to their volunteer activities, a volume of work that represents over 1.7 million full-time year-round job equivalents (Table 2).



**Table 2**  
**Informal volunteers and volunteer hours by generation<sup>1</sup>, population aged 15 and older, Canada 2018**

	iGen (Born 1995 and up) <sup>†</sup>	Millennials (Born 1981 to 1994)	Gen X (Born 1966 to 1980)	Baby Boomers (Born 1946 to 1965)	Matures (Born 1918 to 1945)	Total
			thousands			
<b>Total population</b>	<b>3,430</b>	<b>7,754</b>	<b>7,179</b>	<b>9,331</b>	<b>3,149</b>	<b>30,843</b>
Number of volunteers	2,667	5,933	5,404	6,806	1,845	22,654
			percent			
Volunteer rate	78	77	75	73*	59*	73
			millions			
<b>Total hours volunteered</b>	<b>262</b>	<b>713*</b>	<b>711*</b>	<b>1341*</b>	<b>322</b>	<b>3,350</b>
			number			
Full-time year-round job equivalents <sup>2</sup>	136,458	371,354	370,313	698,438	167,708	1,744,792
			hours			
Average hours volunteered per year	98	120	132	197*	175*	148

\* significantly different from reference category (p < 0.05)

<sup>†</sup> reference group

1. Refer to [Methodology](#) section for definition of "generations" and associated age ranges.

2. Assuming 40 hours of work per week for 48 weeks.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, Giving, Volunteering, and Participating, 2018.

## iGen were more likely than Baby Boomers and Matures to volunteer informally going into the pandemic

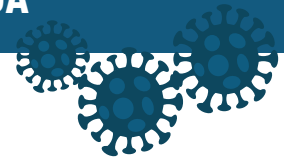
The rates of informal volunteering, which include the provision of direct help to people outside the household and community improvement not on behalf of a group or organization, were higher than that of formal volunteering across generations going into the pandemic. The informal volunteer rate for iGen (78%) was significantly higher than that of Baby Boomers (73%) and Matures (59%), which may reflect different volunteer type preferences for younger versus older generations.

This large, unpaid, informal workforce of caring Canadians is an asset to the volunteer sector and the country, as individuals reach out to help and support friends, neighbours and those most at risk of health complications related to the coronavirus.

As baseline data, collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, this new information will help the volunteer sector to understand better the impact of the pandemic moving forward. It may also provide insight about organization types that may benefit most as authorities are implementing confinement measures and developing pathways to de-confinement.

## Methodology

This article is based on data from the 2018 General Social Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating (2018 GSS GVP). The 2018 GSS GVP interviewed individuals 15 years and over in Canada's ten provinces and was conducted from September to December 2018. The survey excludes residents of the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut, as well as full-time residents of institutions.



**Comparability with previous iterations:** The 2018 GSS GVP offered for the first time an Internet option to survey respondents. This new approach to data collection was in recognition of the need to adapt to the changing use of technology and the ever present demands on Canadians' time. It is impossible to determine with certainty whether, and to what extent, differences in a variable are attributable to an actual change in the population or to changes in the survey methodology. However, there are reasons to believe that the use of an electronic questionnaire had an impact on the estimations. Because of these changes it is **not** appropriate to compare results from GSS GVP 2018 with previous iterations. Analysis and associated documentation is ongoing and will be available on Statistics Canada web site.

**Generations:** Generations are groups of people who experience the same significant societal events, or similar cultural experiences, within a time period. There is no agreed upon name and designated age range for this, but, for the purpose of this article, the following specifications are used with corresponding generational proportions in 2018 provided:

**iGen:** 1995 and up (15 to 22 years of age) – 11%

**Millennials:** 1981 to 1994 (23 to 37 years of age) – 25%

**Gen X:** 1966 to 1980 (38 to 52 years of age) – 23%

**Baby Boomers:** 1946 to 1965 (53 to 72 years of age) – 30%

**Matures:** 1918 to 1945 (73 to 100 years of age) – 10%

Analysis that compares generations should be interpreted with caution. This is because it is not known how a generation would have, or will behave, when it reaches the same age group as the generation it is compared to. For example, it is not known how the Millennials will behave when they reach the Baby Boomers' age cohort, nor how the Baby Boomers behaved when they were the age of Millennials.

**Formal volunteers:** Persons aged 15 and older who did any activities without pay on behalf of a group or organization, at least once in the 12 months preceding the survey. This includes any unpaid help provided to schools, religious organizations, sports or community associations to name a few.

**Top volunteers:** Top volunteers are defined as the 25% of volunteers who contributed the most hours. In 2018, these people volunteered 132 hours or more in the 12 months preceding the survey.

#### **Informal volunteers:**

- *Direct help:* This refers to help given by those aged 15 and older on one's own; that is, not through a group or organization, in the 12 months preceding the survey. It includes help given to friends, neighbours and relatives, but excludes help given to a person living in one's household. This may include health-related or personal care support, teaching or coaching, help with paperwork, shopping, driving, cooking, cleaning or maintenance-related tasks.
- *Improving the community:* Informal volunteering also includes help given, in the past 12 months, by those aged 15 and older to improve the community directly through activities that are not on behalf of a group or organization such as maintaining a public space, participating in public meetings, producing or disseminating information to make others aware of an issue, organizing or coordinating a group or an event, helping to develop an economic or social project for their community, or in some other capacity.