



Tūao Aotearoa
Volunteering New Zealand

State of Volunteering Regional Report

**Volunteering in New Zealand's Regions
2023**

Arataki. Hāpai. Whakamana | Lead. Advocate. Recognise.

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Introduction

Volunteering across Aotearoa New Zealand is strong, as national statistics and the latest *State of Volunteering Report 2022* (SOV2022) indicate. Nevertheless, specific challenges face particular regions and contexts that may be hidden by the presentation of an aggregated, national narrative.

Volunteer Centres and Volunteer-Involving Organisations have long asked for more (and better) data around volunteering across New Zealand's regions and how it might differ between areas. As a result of the comprehensive design of the SOV2022 surveys and focus groups, VNZ is able to further interrogate the responses from participants and key stakeholders to provide a finer-grained account of how volunteering practices and challenges differ across regions.

This report functions as an important supplement to the core findings presented in the main SOV2022 Report. It focuses on key parameters in volunteering, including turnover rates, attitudes to the state of volunteering and volunteers' subjective experience ratings (among other indicators), and how these differ across regions.

Input was sought from key stakeholders at several stages of the project to gauge the kinds of information that would be useful to volunteers, volunteer managers, and key sector decision-makers.

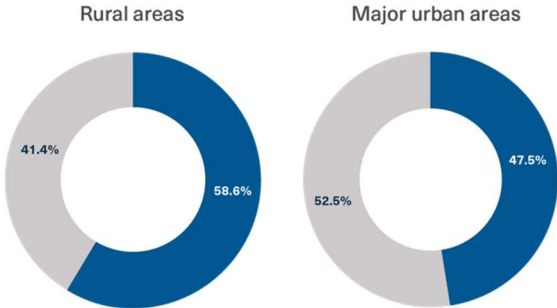
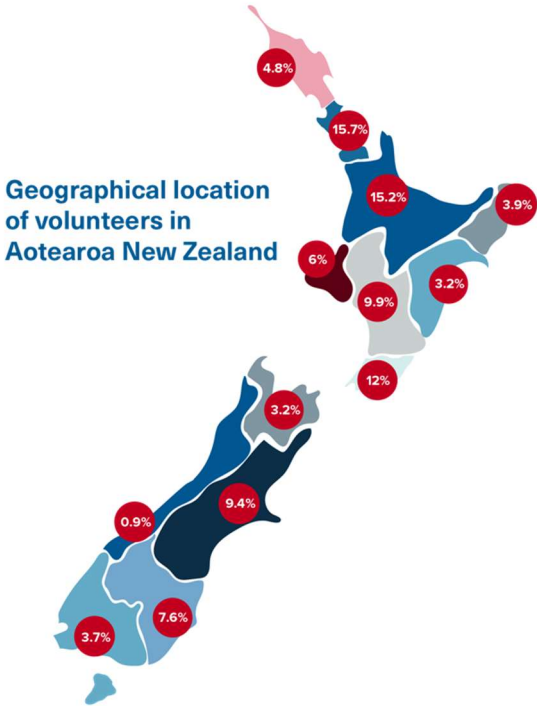
Method

A mixed-methods approach was employed involving quantitative and qualitative research techniques.

VNZ analysed survey responses from the two main SOV surveys - one that targeted volunteers' views and one that targeted the views of volunteer organisations - alongside responses from all the focus groups. These responses were then stratified by the regions available as options in the original SOV2022 surveys.¹ Using IBM's SPSS statistical software, VNZ looked for correlations and relationships between variables (e.g. whether being from a rural area is correlated with any additional challenges in recruitment) as well as analysing the magnitude of the difference in response rates to individual questions and whether these rise to the level of statistical significance. These techniques were already used for aspects of the SOV2022 Report and in other aspects of VNZ's work. NVivo software was used to analyse text-based responses and to systematically organise these into themes. Text-based responses from the SOV2022 surveys and transcripts from the focus groups were analysed.

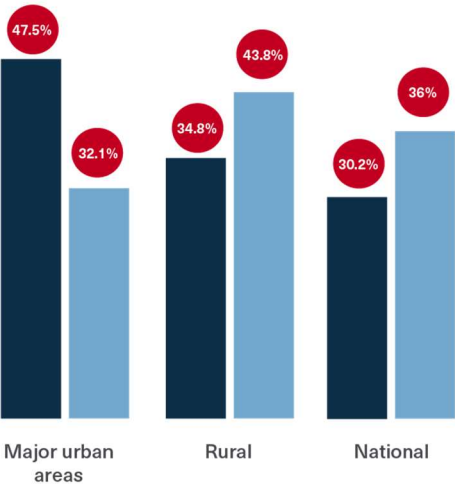
¹ These regional options have been used by VNZ since the start of the SOV, but we are in the process of reviewing these options to align them with Statistics New Zealand categories in future iterations. This will aid future data analysis and improve interoperability.

Summary of Volunteering across the Regions



Comparing rates of volunteering in rural and major urban areas

- % of people who volunteer
- % of people who do not volunteer



Formal & informal volunteering in rural and major urban areas compared to national average

- % who volunteer formally
- % who volunteer informally

Key Themes

Insights and findings from VNZ's analysis is grouped into four core themes:

- The Volunteer Experience and Landscape
- Recruitment and Retention
- Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion
- Digitisation

Summary of Key Findings

- Volunteers in the South Island of New Zealand rank the 'State of Volunteering' slightly higher than volunteers in the North Island.
- There are more volunteers in the South Island than the North Island as a proportion of the population, but the hours volunteered in an average month per person in the South Island are lower than those in the North Island.
- Turnover rates for volunteering organisations tend to be higher in large urban centres compared with smaller towns and rural areas.
- Rates of informal/direct volunteering are highest in rural areas compared to all other regions.
- Volunteer-Involving Organisations in larger urban centres are more likely than those in rural and small urban centres to have a diversity, equality, and inclusion policy in place.
- Non-Māori, non-Pacific volunteers of an ethnic minority background were less likely to say that they belonged or felt respected in rural regions and smaller urban areas compared to those volunteering in larger urban centres.
- Youth volunteers noted that they had greater opportunities to volunteer in larger urban centres compared to smaller and more rural areas.
- Recent migrants are most likely to volunteer in the large urban centres, and much less likely to volunteer in rural areas.
- There is no statistically significant relationship between digitisation and the use of technology across different regions of New Zealand.
- Reimbursement rates for volunteers' expenses are higher in the large and major urban centres (i.e. large cities) compared to rural areas and small urban centres (i.e. towns and small cities).

Key Themes

ONE: The Volunteer Experience and General Landscape

The majority of volunteers across Aotearoa New Zealand report positive, impactful, and fulfilling volunteer experiences. This satisfaction should not be taken for granted, however, and it is incumbent on organisations and the sector as a whole to proactively understand how the volunteer experience differs in subtle or major ways for different people, across different regions.

Rates of volunteering

Figures from Statistics New Zealand (2021) show that, on average, the percentage of those who volunteer in rural areas are higher than in urban centres of all sizes and higher than the national average.² 58.6% of people in rural areas volunteer, compared to the national average of 50.7%. Those in major urban centres (Auckland, Christchurch, and Wellington) had volunteering rates below the national average (at 47.5% compared with the national average of 50.7%).

Among those who volunteered in the previous four weeks, rates of informal/direct volunteering (i.e. volunteering performed outside of a formal organisation, directly for someone else) are 36.0% nationally.³ Rates of informal/direct volunteering differ across the regions. Rural areas have significantly higher rates of informal/direct volunteering (at 43.8%) compared with small, medium, and large urban centres. The major urban centres have informal/direct volunteering rates significantly below the national average (at 32.1%).

While volunteers from rural areas have rates of informal/direct volunteering well above the national average, this does not come at the expense of the rate of those who volunteer with organisations. Rates of formal/organisational volunteering remains above the national average for rural volunteers (at 34.8%) compared with the national average of 30.2%.⁴

Volunteer hours

However, while the number of people from rural areas are involved in formal and informal volunteering at above-national levels, their hours of volunteering are lower than the national average. The national average number of hours volunteered over the previous four weeks is 15.9 hours for formal/organisational volunteering and 11.8 hours for informal/direct volunteering.⁵ For rural volunteers, the average number of hours volunteered over the previous four weeks is 12.8 hours for formal volunteering (compared to the national average of 15.9 hours) and 10.0 hours for informal volunteering (compared to the national average of 11.8 hours).⁶

² Statistics New Zealand 2022, Wellbeing Supplement (2021): Volunteering

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Statistics New Zealand 2022, Wellbeing Supplement (2021): Volunteering

Those in small urban areas (i.e. small towns outside the rural areas) have the highest number of volunteering hours, at 23.7 hours for formal volunteering and 13.5 hours for informal volunteering.⁷ The North Island reports a higher number of volunteer hours compared to the South Island, though more South Islanders are involved in volunteering than North Islanders as a percentage of the population.

The Value of Volunteering

Beyond these core statistical figures, further analysis shows that volunteers outside the main urban centres of Auckland, Hamilton, Wellington, Christchurch, and Dunedin are more likely to agree or strongly agree with the statement that their volunteer work is having a positive impact on their communities and that they are able to connect with the communities they serve.

Volunteers from the main urban centres are marginally more likely than those outside these centres to agree or strongly agree with the statement that they feel like their experiences and skills are valued by the organisation than volunteers from these urban centres.

Despite these subtle differences, there was no statistically significant difference between volunteers across Aotearoa New Zealand's regions agreeing or strongly agreeing (or disagreeing or strongly disagreeing) with the statement that they enjoy volunteering for their organisation.

There is some variation in how volunteers rank the 'State of Volunteering' in New Zealand regions. On average, volunteers in the South Island rate the 'State of Volunteering' slightly higher than those in the North Island. The mean difference, however, was less than 0.5 points on a 10-point scale. There was no statistically significant pattern in how the 'State of Volunteering' was ranked when broken down into more specific groups, such as by cities or rural-urban divide.

Age of volunteers

Over half of survey respondents on our original SOV2022 Volunteer Survey were 65 years of age or older, with another 18.3% over the age of 55. Volunteers in the small urban centres and rural areas showed the highest proportion of volunteers aged 65 years or older, with 77.0% of respondents fitting into this category. Volunteers in the main urban centres showed the lowest proportion of volunteers aged 65 years and older, with 37.1% of respondents in this category. The South Island has a slightly higher proportion of volunteers over the age of 55 compared with the North Island, though the South Island also has a higher proportion of volunteers under the age of 35.

Even accounting for sampling bias in our original survey respondents, these broad figures highlight the general challenge of ageing volunteers facing volunteer-involving organisations

⁷ Ibid

across Aotearoa New Zealand - an issue that has been raised consistently by organisations in our *State of Volunteer Reports* for several years.⁸

Volunteer South's response

Volunteer South is taking a broad concept of volunteering and is keen to ask the community: "Volunteering – what's it to you?"

CE Sues Russell says all the unpaid work happening in the community is larger than is reflected in volunteering statistics. Volunteer South wants to start conversations with people to find out what volunteering means to them and how it can be more accessible and inclusive.

"We are in the business of providing support to ensure volunteering "the glue" continues to hold communities together. Volunteers want greater flexibility, short-term and spontaneous roles, but we need to ensure best practices still exist within these," says Sues.

Volunteer South plans to use different ways to engage people in consultation. They are working with Otago Polytech students who are designing a promotional campaign around "Volunteering - what's it to you?"

The findings from this Regional Report show that 77% of respondents in small towns and rural areas are over the age of 65. Sues says this does pose a challenge for towns such as Gore and Invercargill with aging populations.

Volunteer South has identified key groups, including youth, migrants and employees and mental wellbeing, for greater support in volunteering. Young people and newcomers find it harder to slot into established organisations. They may prefer to volunteer in a group, or for one-off projects.

The lower turnover rate of volunteers (6.2% in Southland) is a positive attribute of semi-urban New Zealand, she says.

"It's not necessarily that there are fewer opportunities, but that people link in to something they're passionate about and stay committed," says Sues.

⁸ See, in particular, SOV2017, SOV2018, SOV2020, and SOV2022

TWO: Recruitment and Retention

Rates of volunteer turnover

Organisations working in social services (a broad category that includes health and social care provision, welfare support, refugee services, and homeless support, among others) report among the highest rates of volunteer turnover compared to organisations not involved in social service provision. Based on SOV2022 data, the average turnover rate (i.e. the percentage of volunteers who left the organisation in the previous 12 months) for organisations working in social services was 23.2% compared to 7.1% for organisations not involved in social service provision. These figures do not differ drastically between regions and cities across Aotearoa New Zealand.

On average, volunteer turnover rates are higher for organisations engaging volunteers in New Zealand's largest cities (i.e. Auckland, Hamilton, Wellington, Christchurch, and Dunedin) when compared to New Zealand's smaller towns and cities. However, this difference is not linear and was not statistically significant when comparing small cities with small towns. For example, turnover rates for Gisborne (a small city with a population of approximately 37,000) did not differ significantly from turnover rates in Waipū (a small town in Northland with a population of less than 3,000). The key difference seems to obtain only between New Zealand's main cities *and* other locations.

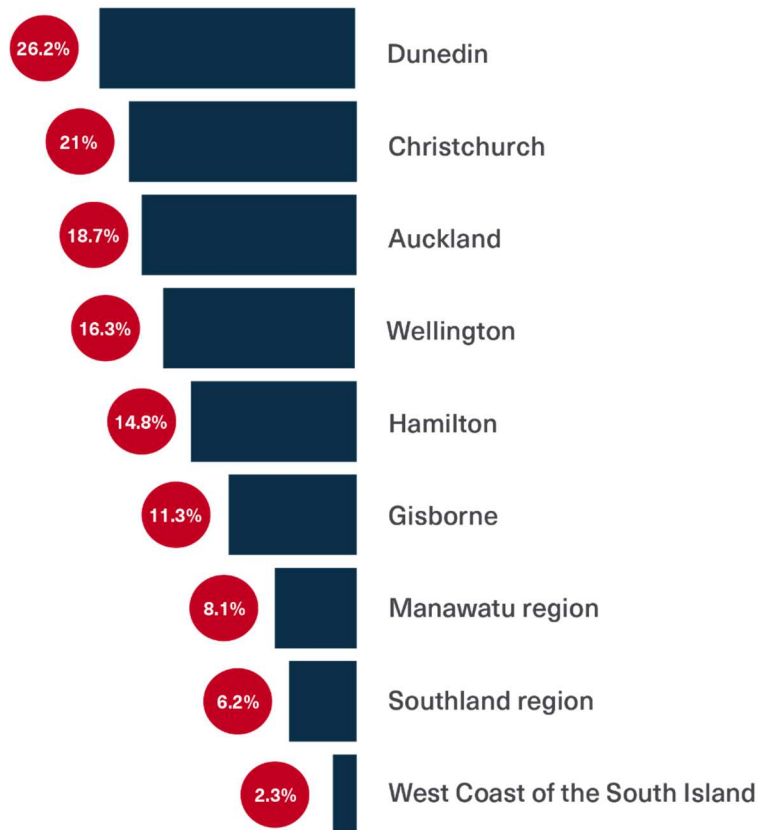
The average turnover rate for organisations in Auckland was 18.7%; 14.8% in Hamilton; 16.3% in Wellington; 21.0% in Christchurch; and 26.2% in Dunedin⁹. The average turnover rate for Gisborne was 11.3%; 6.2% across the Southland Region; 8.1% across the Manawatu Region; and 2.3% for the West Coast of the South Island.¹⁰

One explanation for these turnover rates is that bigger cities come with more choices for volunteer roles, and 'shopping around' is not an uncommon practice among prospective volunteers. This is an important pull factor for volunteers wanting to leave the organisation, and which in turn inflates the annual turnover rates being reported by organisations. Conversely, smaller towns and cities are likely to have fewer volunteer organisations and fewer options for formal volunteering roles, reducing the pull factor of other potential roles, and resulting in lower turnover rates.

⁹ The higher rate in Dunedin may be partly attributable to the high student population in the city. Organisations reported that student volunteers tended to volunteer on and off due to academic and exam commitments, with many resigning and then rejoining a few months later, thus causing discrepancies in retention figures.

¹⁰ These figures have a margin of error of +/- 3.2% at the 95% Confidence Interval.

Turnover rates for volunteers



Choice of volunteer activities

Data from focus group interviews with several volunteers and volunteer managers seem to confirm this explanation. One volunteer noted that the choice of volunteer organisations and activities in large cities (especially Auckland) can be overwhelming. One participant talked about how she tried out no fewer than five different organisations in the span of 6 months:

“There is honestly so much choice. I only stayed at my first volunteer job for a month before trying [five other organisations], staying for a combination of a few weeks to several months. It was easy to move around with so much choice and volunteer opportunities around.”

(Focus Group Participant, Auckland)

Another volunteer talked about signing up to be involved in two organisations in the first week and choosing which one to stick with at the end of her first month in the city:

“I’m not sure if it’s something people do, but I signed up to volunteer at [Organisation 1] and [Organisation 2]. I liked the look of both but only had time for one, so I wanted to give myself all the information before choosing one. In the end, I went with [Organisation 2] and left [Organisation 1] after around a month.”

(Focus Group Participant, Christchurch)

A volunteer manager based in Wellington commented that the wide array of choices can be a challenge for volunteer-involving organisations:

“With social media and online advertisements for volunteer positions, it is getting harder and harder to retain volunteers. Lots are always on the lookout for greener pastures and more interesting roles and we’re always needing to keep up and make sure our work remains, you know, exciting and impactful.” (Volunteer Manager, Wellington City)

These insights provide not only an explanation for regional-level variation in retention rates across New Zealand, but they also highlight the ways in which volunteers place high emphasis on their volunteer experience. This provides both challenges and opportunities for volunteer organisations.

The SOV2022 surveys and focus groups targeted current volunteers, and this sampling method has natural limitations. While the available evidence suggests a healthy volunteering environment across the regions, a more comprehensive sampling method that engaged with recent or former volunteers may yield additional insights not captured in our present sample.¹¹

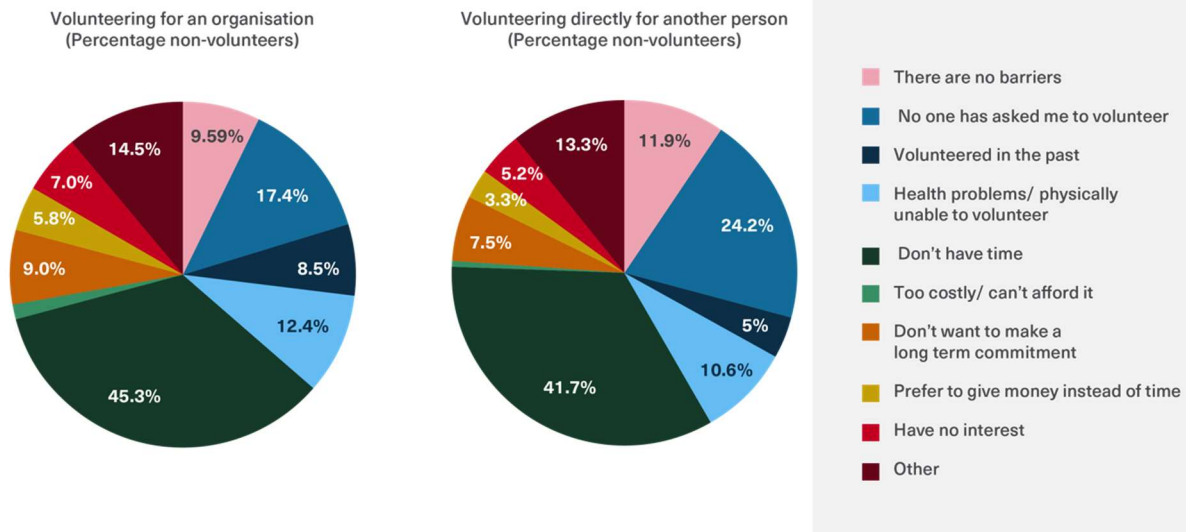
Reasons for not volunteering

Some figures from Statistics New Zealand help to shed light on the barriers facing volunteers across the regions, and how this might impact on recruitment and retention. People in the Canterbury Region are most likely to report that they do not volunteer because of a lack of time, with 50.2% of the population stating this as a reason.¹² At a national level, 45.3% state that they do not volunteer because of a lack of time

¹¹ A more comprehensive sampling methodology is being developed in preparation for the State of Volunteering 2024 Report.

¹² Statistics New Zealand 2022, Wellbeing Supplement (2021): Volunteering

Barriers to volunteering among New Zealand's Regions



Volunteer-Involving Organisations' proactiveness in attracting volunteers is also important for recruitment, as highlighted by figures across the regions and as emphasised by findings from VNZ's SOV2020, SOV2022 and other work. 25.5% of people nationally state that they do not volunteer with an organisation either because they have not been asked to do so or because they do not know how to get involved.¹³ This barrier to formal volunteering is especially prominent in the Wellington Region, with 31.2% of people stating that they do not volunteer with an organisation either because they have not been asked to do so or because they do not know how to get involved.

¹³ Statistics New Zealand 2022, Wellbeing Supplement (2021): Volunteering

THREE: Digitisation

Insights about digital technology uptake is an important proxy for organisational resilience and efficiency, with organisations relying upon online systems more likely to be effective and efficient. Data from the main SOV2022 Report, for example, showed that organisations who used digital and electronic systems to manage their work were much less likely to report that COVID-19 had had a significant negative impact on their work.¹⁴

There is a common view that urban volunteer-involving organisations are more likely than rural organisations to use digital technologies. However, we found no significant differences between the uptake of digital technologies across the regions. Rural regions were no less likely to use digital technologies compared to urban regions, and no region/city had statistically significantly higher rates of digitisation once other confounding variables have been adjusted and accounted for.

A larger organisation in a rural region was more likely to report comprehensive use of digital technologies compared to a smaller organisation in an urban region. After adjusting for confounding variables, the main statistical factor that correlates with digital technology uptake is the *size* of the organisation rather than whether they were rural or urban as such.

¹⁴ SOV2022, p. 25

New system provides consistent volunteer experience

A shift from manual rostering through spreadsheets and doodle polls to a fully automated online volunteer management system has resulted in streamlined administration, seamless training and communications and a consistent volunteer experience for Good Bitches Baking.

Good Bitches Baking (GBB) has more than 3000 volunteers in 30 chapters, and Operations Manager Natasha Meynell said the growth of the organisation drove a need to streamline operations. Each month, rostering was carried out in each chapter by matching volunteer availability with recipient needs using Doodle Polls and spreadsheets and many hours.

“This was efficient enough in small chapters but incredibly time-consuming in larger chapters, some of which had several hundred volunteers,” she said.

The new system was custom-designed and built to reduce the time spent managing the roster and to provide all volunteers with a consistent and well-resourced volunteer experience. The Head and Roster Bitches have been positive about the simplification of the rostering process and the additional communication tools they have now.

Natasha says, “We recognised the introduction of a new, purely online system would be a huge change for many of our volunteers who were used to a very simple, manual process. Before and during the system rollout, we explained what was happening, why and when, and what our people would need to know and do to use the new system.”

To ensure volunteers were well supported, different types of training tools – including step-by-step guides, video tutorials, video calls, a technical help-desk and a web page – were provided.

Most of the existing GBB volunteers adapted easily to the new system although a few opted out to begin with. Some of these returned later and were supported to give it another go and new volunteers are very positive about how easy the system is to use.

FOUR: Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion

Volunteers identifying with a minority ethnicity (i.e. non-Pakeha/European) were more likely to volunteer in major and large urban centres, with the exception of Māori who are more likely to volunteer in medium and small urban centres. Recent migrant volunteers were most likely to volunteer in major and large urban centres but less likely to volunteer in medium urban centres and significantly less likely to volunteer in small urban centres and rural areas. Where recent migrants volunteer, they are significantly more likely to volunteer informally rather than through an organisation.

Analyses show that non-Māori, non-Pacific minority ethnic volunteers in all regions are less likely to agree or strongly agree with the statement that they are treated fairly and respectfully, and significantly less likely to agree that they feel like they belong in the organisation they volunteer with compared with volunteers outside this category. The relative difference between how non-Māori, non-Pacific minority ethnic volunteers and other volunteers respond to these statements is especially stark in rural areas and the small urban centres. In these regions, a majority of non-Māori, non-Pacific minority ethnic volunteers disagree or do not agree (i.e. are neutral) with the statement that they feel like they belong in the organisation they volunteer with.

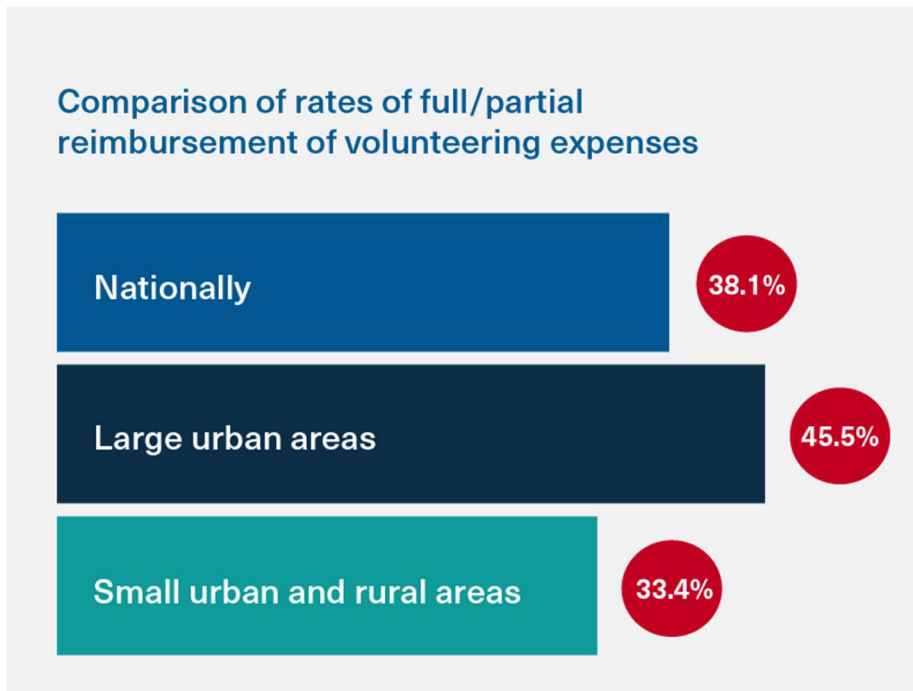
How youth volunteers report their volunteering experience in our focus groups differed by region. In the major urban centres, youth volunteers reported that they felt like they generally had good opportunities to volunteer with organisations and that they were generally treated with respect. Youth volunteers in rural areas reported finding it harder to engage in formal volunteering and that it often took time before they were able to find an organisation that respected the contributions they could make.

Volunteer Organisations from the major urban centres were more likely to report that they had a diversity, inclusion, and equality strategy in place. Of those that did not have a diversity, inclusion and equality strategy in place, those from small urban centres and rural areas were least likely to say that they have concrete plans in place to create one.

Rates of reimbursement of expenses

Rates of reimbursement show a small degree of difference across the regions. The overall national figures show that 61.9% of organisations do not reimburse their volunteers for any out-of-pocket expenses incurred while volunteering, while 38.1% of organisations reimburse some or all of their volunteers' out-of-pocket expenses.¹⁵ When this figure is analysed further, we find that there are two strong correlations connected to the likelihood of an organisation reimbursing their volunteers: one variable is organisational size (i.e. larger organisations tend to be more likely to reimburse their volunteers) and whether an organisation operates in a major/large urban centre or a small urban centre/rural area.

Even once we have adjusted for organisational size, we find that organisations based in major/large urban centres have higher rates of full or partial reimbursement of their volunteers' out-of-pocket expenses (at 45.5%) compared with organisations in small urban centres or rural areas (at 33.4%).



Recommendations for further research

1. Better understanding the experience of minority volunteers

Our analysis has shown that the volunteer experience of recent migrants and minority ethnic volunteers (in particular, non-Māori, non-Pacific volunteers) differ across regions. There are barriers to the effective participation of minority groups, reflected in their responses to feelings of belonging and being respected.

Further research could run targeted surveys and engagements with minority ethnic volunteers to understand their experiences in more detail, including whether they have personally had negative experiences while volunteering or whether it is based on a broader perception about the safety of volunteering in certain contexts.

2. Conceptions of volunteering and community across the regions

Surveys about volunteering habits tend to assume a uniform definition of formal and informal volunteering. However, we know that conceptions of volunteering differ across cultures.¹⁶ We also know that different regions have different demographic profiles. This may mean that respondents' understandings of volunteering may differ across regions in a way that affects how we make comparisons in our data. For example, a different cultural understanding of volunteering may mean that respondents vary in how they answer the question of how much informal/direct volunteering they have performed in the previous months.

Conceptions of 'community' are also worth investigating further, given how they influence volunteering.¹⁷ As the data shows, rates of informal volunteering are lower in the main and large urban centres compared to smaller urban centres and rural areas. One explanation for this may be because of larger centres having a different or more diffused sense of community.

Further research could investigate the ways in which cultural and social norms impact on how volunteering is conceptualised across different regions of New Zealand, including how the idea of community is conceived by different people.

3. Exploring motivation for joining and leaving an organisation:

The analysis has shown significant variations in turnover rates across regions. This provides a valuable source of data for the sector to better understand the complex dynamics at play in motivating volunteers to leave or stay with an organisation. Further research could delve deeper into these findings with the aim of identifying factors that positively or negatively influence volunteer retention across New Zealand.

¹⁶ Contributions of Tūao Māori report 2022

¹⁷ SOV 2022 and Recent Migrant Volunteering report

4. Regular regional insights:

Regular, comprehensive, high-quality data about volunteering is essential for championing the community and voluntary sector. The sector should look to create a system for regular data collection and analysis to allow regional insights to be shared and acted upon. A uniform data standard should be agreed and implemented by the sector, which would better enable VNZ to understand and support the sector's needs.

Conclusion

The state of volunteering in Aotearoa New Zealand remains strong, though there are challenges that are more pronounced within particular regions. The volunteer experience is not always uniform, with important lessons and insights to be gained by seeing how these differ across the regions. This report functions as a supplement to the primary *State of Volunteering in Aotearoa New Zealand* Report, highlighting further challenges and opportunities to ensure that the sector can continue to support and empower volunteering and mahi aroha across all of New Zealand.