



Volunteerism in Saskatchewan and the Impacts of COVID-19

December 2022

About this report

The Saskatchewan Nonprofit Partnership (SNP) engaged Insightrix Research Inc. to conduct a survey to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted volunteerism in Saskatchewan, and to determine motivations for and barriers to volunteering.

The online survey was conducted through the Insightrix SaskWatch Research® Panel, ensuring a representative sample of the general population of the province was achieved. The survey was conducted in April 2022 with a sample size of 802 responses.

Refer to the *Volunteerism in Saskatchewan: Technical Report* for full data tables from the survey.

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport, Government of Saskatchewan, for their financial support of the survey.

We would also like to thank Volunteer Canada for sharing their expertise in the conceptual stage of the survey.

Saskatchewan Nonprofit Partnership

The Saskatchewan Nonprofit Partnership is an unincorporated partnership of organizations that collaborate towards the betterment of the nonprofit sector. Senior leaders of the following organizations serve as members of the Partnership:

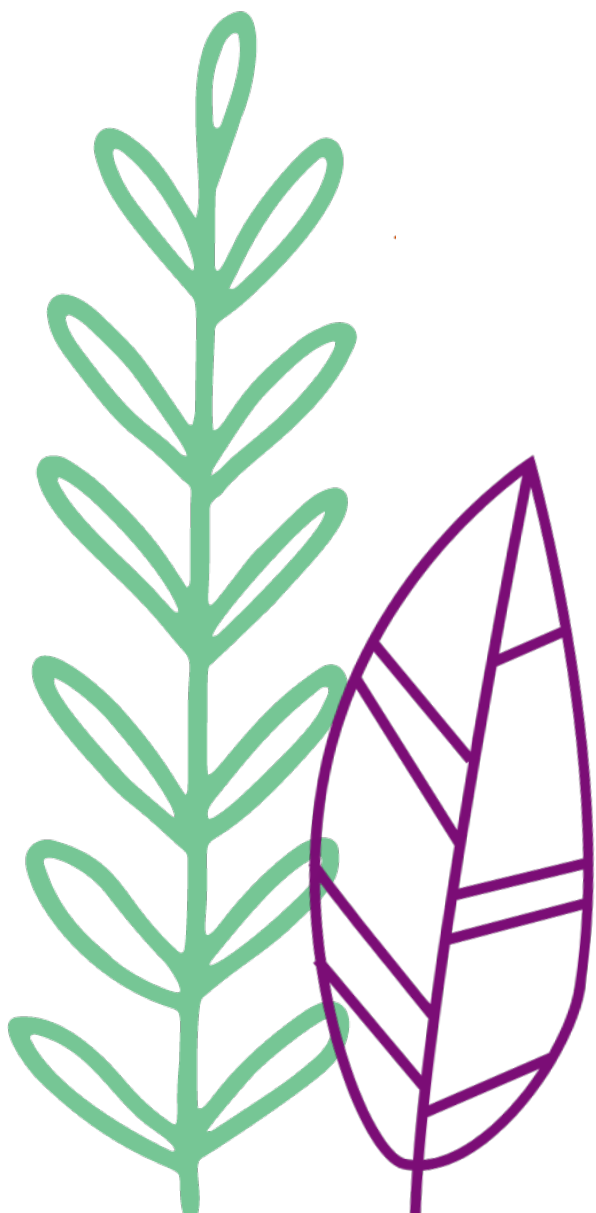
Boys and Girls Club of Saskatoon
CFS Saskatoon
Community Initiatives Fund
Family Service Regina
Heritage Saskatchewan
SARC
Saskatchewan Parks & Recreation Association

The mission of SNP is to benefit Saskatchewan's nonprofit sector through research, networking, public awareness, sector strategy development and thought leadership.



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Summary

The Saskatchewan Nonprofit Partnership (SNP) partnered with the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport, Government of Saskatchewan, to conduct a survey to understand attitudes, motivations and barriers to volunteering, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on volunteering in Saskatchewan. The online survey was undertaken in April 2022 by Insightrix Research Inc. through the Insightrix SaskWatch Research® Panel.

Saskatchewan is well known for its high level of volunteer participation, both formal and informal, with participation levels consistently higher than other provinces and territories. Subsequent to the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 most volunteer activities were cancelled, leading to a significant decrease in participation rates.

As health restrictions have been removed and programs re-open, volunteer participation has returned to pre-pandemic levels. However, participation rates had been declining prior to the pandemic and are currently 35% lower than five years ago, an indication that factors other than the pandemic are also influencing the level of volunteer engagement.

Organizations are reporting difficulty in attracting new volunteers and/or re-engaging individuals who had volunteered with them prior to the pandemic. A recent Statistics Canada report confirms these challenges are being experienced by the nonprofit sector across the country. Data indicates that a majority of organizations are facing challenges related to volunteerism, with 67% reporting a shortage of new volunteers, half reporting challenges with retention, 42% reporting that volunteers aren't able to commit long term, and one quarter reporting volunteer burnout and stress¹.

These challenges are impacting organizations in a number of ways. 35% reported a reduction in programs and services offered while 17% have cancelled programs, 28% reported that paid employees are working more hours, and 21% reported employee burnout.

¹ Statistics Canada. (November 25, 2022). Canadian Survey on Business Conditions, fourth quarter, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221125/dq221125b-cansim-eng.htm>

Summary

Data for organizations in Saskatchewan indicate that challenges related to recruitment and retention of volunteers are only slightly less than national findings, while higher rates are reported for increased employee hours, employee burnout, and a reduction in programs and services. If these challenges persist, and at the same time that the nonprofit sector is faced with labour market challenges for paid positions, inflation, increased demand for services, and reduced revenues, the capacity of organizations to provide programs and services may be significantly compromised.

The pandemic resulted in many people re-assessing their priorities, with family, health and work taking precedence. Recent inflation rates have created financial pressures for some, while others feel less connected to their community and have less interest in and time available for volunteering. Among those who have volunteered in the past there is great uncertainty as to whether they will return to volunteering in the future, or if they will return to the same organizations or seek new opportunities.

Other factors influencing volunteerism that are not directly attributable to the pandemic include an aging population and associated health concerns, lack of awareness as to how to find volunteer opportunities, and time constraints.

The pandemic did serve to increase the level of awareness of community issues and the important role of volunteers in responding to those issues. Some also indicated they had more time available and increased their time volunteering during the pandemic.

As individuals consider their future volunteer involvement, it appears that there is a shift in the types of volunteer activities they are interested in, with increased interest in environmental, arts and culture,, social services, and health-related activities. Interest in contributing to sports and recreation activities remain steady, however there is a notable decrease in interest in fundraising activities, which may impact organizations' abilities to regain financial stability.

Summary

Participation in informal volunteering activities appears to be increasing. This may be due to a number of factors, such as:

- Individuals can choose when they volunteer rather than follow the set times and schedules of organizations;
- It may offer one-time or short-term opportunities that people feel they have the time to do;
- Lack of interest in the types of volunteer opportunities offered by organizations, or a perception that organizations are not responding to local social issues;
- It may offer a more direct connection with people they are helping; or
- Activities may be done as a group with friends or family.

Older adults are more likely to express a decreased interest in volunteering in the future compared to other age groups. As this is the group who contribute significantly more hours, organizations that have depended upon older volunteers are likely to experience decreased engagement.

With more than one-quarter of nonprofits in Saskatchewan being entirely volunteer-run, and a majority of organizations having fewer than 25 paid employees, volunteers play a critical role in providing community leadership and programming. Without volunteers, some organizations may cease to exist, while others may be unable to respond to the increased demand for their services.

Nonprofits and charities provide essential services in their communities. If challenges with volunteer engagement persist, they will need to secure financial resources to increase employee numbers to offer programs, or they may need to reduce or cancel programming. Ultimately it will be Saskatchewan residents who will suffer as a result of reduced access to services.

Volunteerism in Saskatchewan

Saskatchewan is well known for its high level of volunteer engagement. For the past two decades Statistics Canada surveys on volunteer participation in Canada have consistently identified Saskatchewan as the province with the highest participation rate of individuals age 15 and older. The most recent publication highlighting results from the 2018 General Social Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating reported that 55% of the province's population age 15 and older participated in formal volunteer activities, while 80% were engaged in informal volunteer activities².



*"It is what we do in Saskatchewan.
It's a Saskatchewan thing."*

A survey of the nonprofit sector in Saskatchewan conducted in 2017 estimates more than 344,000 Saskatchewan individuals contribute 14 million hours annually, averaging approximately 41 hours per person. An additional 52,000 individuals volunteer on Boards of Directors, providing leadership and governance at an organizational and community level³.

Individuals participate in a widely diverse range of volunteer activities, and through an equally diverse range of organizations (formal volunteering), or by helping people or communities directly without involvement in an organization (informal volunteering).

Nationally, Statistics Canada reports that six types of organizations benefit from the highest average hours contributed by formal volunteers:

- hospitals;
- religious organizations;
- sports and recreation;
- arts and culture;
- law, advocacy and politics; and,
- environment.

² Statistics Canada. (April 23, 2021). Volunteering Counts: Formal and informal contributions of Canadians in 2018. . Retrieved from:

<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/75-006-x/2021001/article/00002-eng.pdf?st=a1wMYxaz>

³ Saskatchewan Nonprofit Partnership. (2018). A profile of the nonprofit sector in Saskatchewan: An overview. Retrieved from:

http://www.sasknonprofit.ca/uploads/1/0/5/2/105211035/snp_overview_report_-_nov2018.pdf

Volunteerism in Saskatchewan

The most common types of formal volunteer activity are:

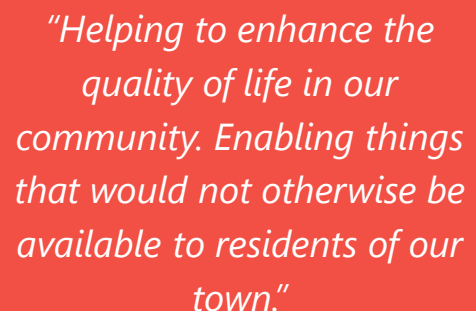
- organizing events;
- fundraising;
- sitting on a committee or board;
- teaching, educating, or mentoring; and,
- collecting, serving or delivering food.

While iGens (those born 1996 and up) volunteer participation rate formally and informally is highest (52% and 78% respectively), their formal annual volunteer hours average only 82 and informal hours 99. Matures (born 1918-1945) participation rates are less (32% and 58%) however their average formal annual volunteer hours are 222 hours and informal hours 176. Baby Boomers (born 1946-1965) contributed the most total volunteer hours due to their population combined with their high number of volunteer hours.

Many individuals choose to volunteer both formally and informally. In Saskatchewan 50% of volunteers combined formal and informal activities, while 5% volunteered only formally and 31% only informally.



"A fulfilling way to build a stronger community."



"Helping to enhance the quality of life in our community. Enabling things that would not otherwise be available to residents of our town."

Volunteerism in Saskatchewan

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the nonprofit and charitable sector across Canada. An Imagine Canada survey report indicates that 78% of charities have modified their operations while 7% ceased operations temporarily. 48% of organizations indicated an increase in demand for services, with 36% reporting a lack of capacity to meet the demand. Impact also varies by organization type, with 71% of arts, culture and recreation organizations experiencing a significant revenue decline. Organizations with revenues less than \$150,000, and those that rely on earned income experienced the greatest financial pressure and are slower to recovery⁴.

In an effort to understand how the pandemic has impacted volunteering, and potential implications for nonprofit organizations in SK, this survey was undertaken to 1) understand attitudes and perceptions about volunteering; 2) determine key motivators and barriers to volunteering; and, 3) understand the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on volunteer motivations, attitudes and behaviours.



⁴ Imagine Canada. (August 2021). Imagine Canada's Sector Monitor: The uneven impact of the pandemic on Canadian charities. Retrieved from: <https://www.imaginecanada.ca/en/research/sector-monitor>

Motivations and Barriers

People are motivated to volunteer for a wide variety of reasons, with those reasons changing according to age, life stage, family circumstances, and other factors. Generally, individuals who are aware of community issues are far more likely to volunteer, with the majority of survey respondents indicating they volunteer to contribute to their community and/or because of an interest in a particular cause (75% and 72% respectively).

*"It is something that I try to do;
mostly through our kids sports teams "*

Recognizing there are personal benefits derived from volunteering, individuals also volunteer to improve their own well-being (36%), to meet new people (31%), and to improve their job prospects (11%).

*"Do I have the time?
Would it be relevant experience for my resume?"*

Examining reasons for volunteering within age groups, there are some differences:

- Those 18-34 are far more likely to volunteer to improve their job prospects through skill building and gaining experience, as well as meeting people that may lead to employment opportunities.
- Volunteering that supports their children's activities is most common among those 35-54.
- Older individuals are seeking volunteer opportunities where they can contribute their talents, knowledge, and experience.



Motivations and Barriers

A lack of time (53%) and an inability to commit to long-term obligations (42%) represent the two greatest barriers to volunteering, particularly for those age 54 and under. Time constraints were noted by not only non-volunteers but also by active volunteers, indicating they might like to contribute more if they could.

"I wish my health allowed me to do more volunteering."

"[I've] volunteered 30+ years, time for younger people to step up."

Health concerns related to COVID-19 was noted as a third barrier by one-quarter of respondents and was cited highest by potential volunteers, while 15%, primarily those age 55+, indicated other health concerns as a challenge.

"Inflation is so high I have to work two jobs."

Financial costs of volunteering were noted by one-quarter of those age 18-34 and by one-fifth of those age 35-54 as a challenge. While interest in volunteering is highest among younger individuals, they were also more likely to indicate time and a lack of knowledge of how to get involved as barriers.

Of those currently volunteering 40% felt they were doing their part and were not looking for additional opportunities. Non-volunteers were more likely to cite time, a lack of interest in current opportunities, and health concerns not related to COVID-19 as reasons for not volunteering.

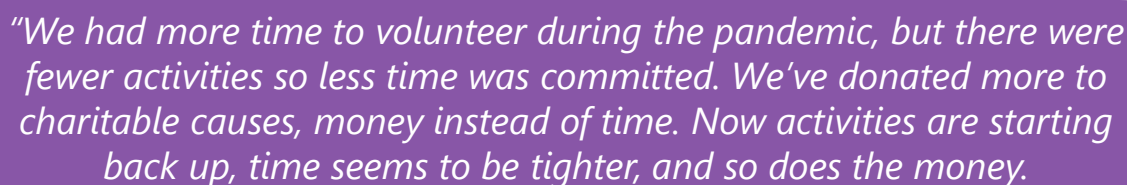
"I no longer want to volunteer my time for an organization that I was getting tired of volunteering for."

Volunteer Engagement and Impact of the Pandemic

With the declaration of the pandemic in March 2020 and subsequent mandatory public health restrictions, volunteerism in Saskatchewan was significantly impacted, with effects still continuing more than two years later. Health restrictions resulted in organizations cancelling programming including volunteer programs, implementing alternative program delivery methods, and the cessation of fundraising and community events.

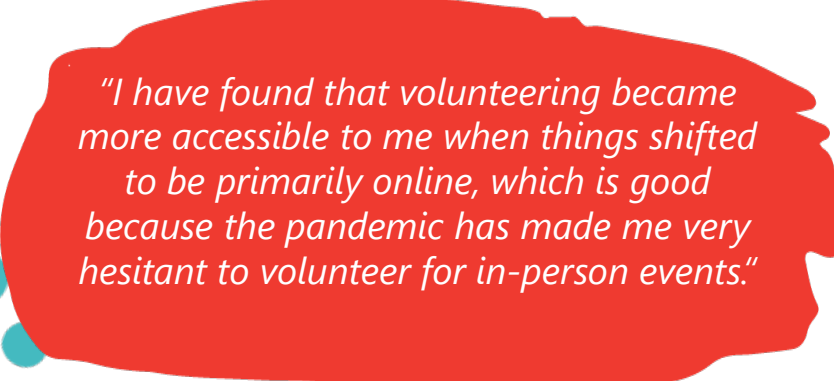
Volunteer participation rates fell significantly during the pandemic, from 2018 rates of 70% to only 17%. As of April 2022 participation rates had returned to pre-pandemic levels of 46% but are still 35% less than levels seen prior to 2018.

Specific types of formal volunteer activities were impacted differently, with participation levels for governance and administration the least effected. Volunteer participation associated with the delivery of programs has fallen to half of previous rates, while fundraising activities, the most affected, have decreased to only one-third of rates prior to 2018.



"We had more time to volunteer during the pandemic, but there were fewer activities so less time was committed. We've donated more to charitable causes, money instead of time. Now activities are starting back up, time seems to be tighter, and so does the money."

Informal volunteering appears to have been the least effected and rates are returning more quickly to pre-pandemic levels than other formal activities. And as many programs shifted to virtual formats, online volunteering increased by 24%. VolunteerConnector data indicates that 41% of posted volunteer positions in the past year were for activities that could be done remotely.



"I have found that volunteering became more accessible to me when things shifted to be primarily online, which is good because the pandemic has made me very hesitant to volunteer for in-person events."



Volunteer Engagement and Impact of the Pandemic

While some were able to either maintain or increase their time spent volunteering, more than half decreased their time due to the pandemic. Almost two-thirds of those decreasing their time are adults 55+, the age group that typically contributes the most hours.

Looking forward six months, a majority expected to either maintain previous levels of engagement or increase their time volunteering. Only 10% expected to decrease their time due to health issues including COVID-19, aging, or a lack of time.

"Priority goes to the volunteer organizations my children are a part of. Less time will be spent on the volunteer duties that don't directly correspond with my children's well-being."

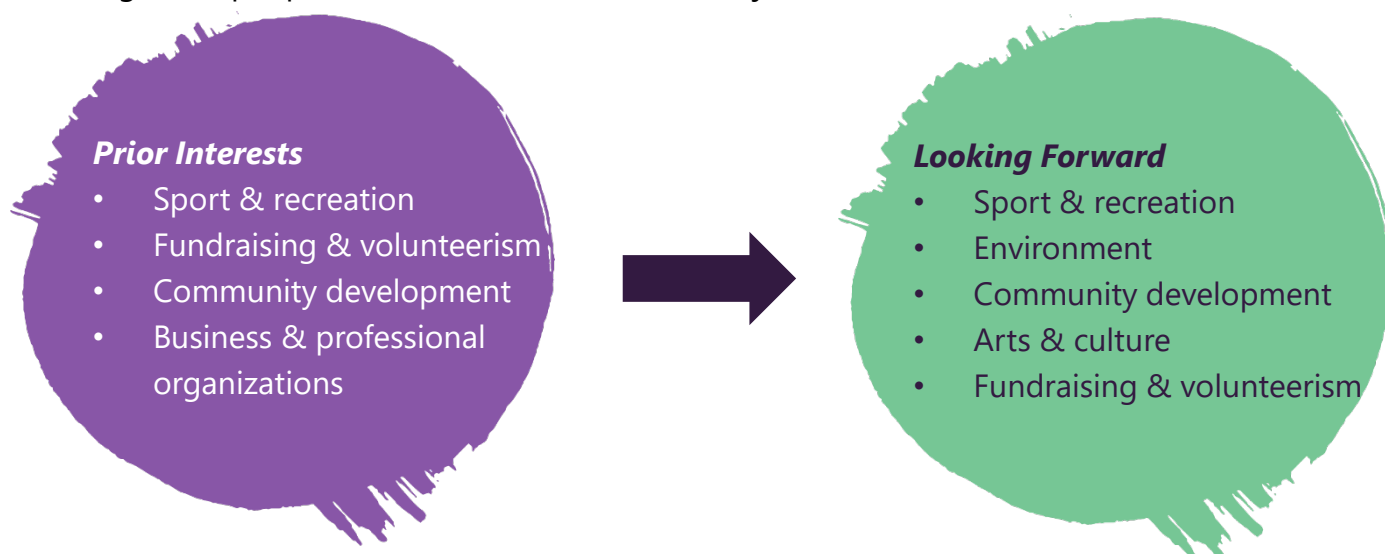
The pandemic has had profound effects on individual well-being, with many re-assessing their priorities including their level of volunteerism. Approximately one-third report a decrease in connection to their community, and 41% are less comfortable volunteering.

"The past couple years have been emotionally taxing. I'm exhausted. Volunteer opportunities will be put on the back burner for some time, now, while I recover."



Volunteer Engagement and Impact of the Pandemic

Along with changing priorities, the types of organizations that people are interested in volunteering with in the future have also shifted. Data from VolunteerConnector shows that in the past year the predominant types of roles that individuals applied to were support for Indigenous peoples, the environment, and social justice.




Overall, of current and potential volunteers, 44% expect to return to organizations they volunteered with in the past, while 30% are interested in new opportunities. However, half are unsure if they will volunteer at all, with interest in volunteering in the future lowest among older adults. Of those not currently volunteering, 69% indicate they are interested, particularly among those age 18-34. Interest is highest among those who have volunteered previously.

"I think it's opened my eyes more to vulnerable populations and when I am ready to volunteer again, I'll seek out opportunities there first."

Organizational actions, or lack of actions, in response to the pandemic may have influenced some of the decrease in volunteering, with half reporting that the organizations they volunteered with did nothing differently. In comparison, those that implemented safety measures, restructured volunteer roles or provided other changes were more likely to maintain volunteer engagement.

Looking Forward

While the level of interest in volunteering is encouraging, it is likely that organizations will continue to experience challenges related to volunteer engagement. There are many questions as to when, or even if, volunteer participation will return to previous levels.



"I think the pandemic has shifted my priorities in life but I am not sure if it is a temporary shift or a permanent one."

"I was wanting to reduce my volunteering before the pandemic came along."

"Everything slowed down/came to a stop with the pandemic, and truthfully I enjoyed the slower pace of things, so I may not be super keen to jump into something that will keep me super busy."

The survey results indicate there are shifts occurring, perhaps permanently, and organizations may need to re-assess their expectations of volunteers and the types of opportunities they provide.

VolunteerConnector reports almost 10,000 more applications to volunteer this year than in 2021, while organizations are reporting more difficulty in attracting volunteers. There is not a clear reason for the discrepancy, but it may be due to the changing interests, priorities and demographics of individuals seeking to volunteer.

Understanding both the motivations and barriers of the individuals they are hoping to engage can inform the design of volunteer roles and recruitment efforts. Based on the insights provided through the survey responses the following are offered for consideration by organizations.

Looking Forward

- Design roles that provide tangible benefits for both the organization and the volunteer.
- Offer a variety of volunteer roles that provide a range of options in time commitment, activity type and location (on-site and online).
- Ensure the organization is welcoming and inclusive to encourage a diversity of participation.
- Identify one-time and short-term opportunities.
- Identify projects that offer skills-based volunteering opportunities.
- Implement on-site health and safety protocols to alleviate concerns of being in contact with others.
- Provide online volunteer opportunities.
- Allow flexibility in tasks and scheduling.
- If possible, provide solutions to barriers that prevent volunteer participation (e.g. transportation costs).
- Use social media to communicate opportunities to younger age groups.
- Post opportunities on online platforms (e.g. VolunteerConnector).
- Craft communications that appeal to specific audiences versus one generic message.
- Engage current volunteers to help spread the word when recruiting.
- Develop partnerships with post-secondary institutions that promote volunteering and community engaged learning.
- Volunteering provides an opportunity for individuals to re-engage with their community, reduce isolation, and enhance personal wellbeing.



