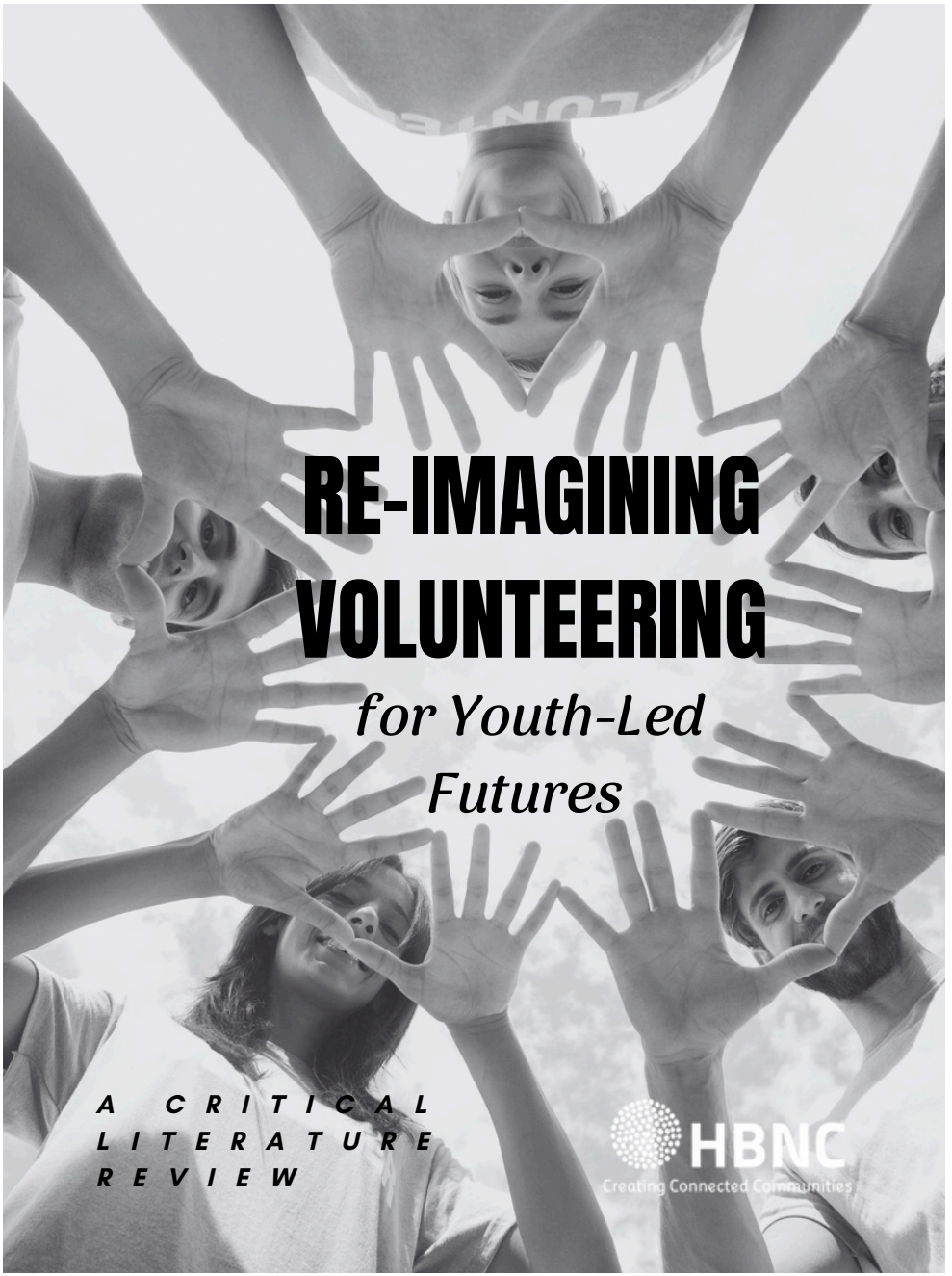


RE-IMAGINING VOLUNTEERING

for Youth-Led Futures

A CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

HBNC
Creating Connected Communities

We respectfully acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of Australia and pay our respects to Elders past and present.

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MEETING YOUNG PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth participation in volunteering across Australia, including Queensland, has become a growing focus of concern for policymakers, community organisations and volunteer peak bodies. While the perception of this decline is often framed as a lack of motivation or commitment among young people, this review argues that such narratives are overly simplistic and risk obscuring the structural, social and economic factors that shape contemporary youth engagement. While participation in formal, organisation-based volunteering has fluctuated and declined at certain points, particularly during and following the COVID-19 pandemic, evidence indicates that young people continue to contribute to their communities in significant and evolving ways.

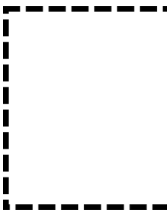
The Hervey Bay Neighbourhood Centre (HBNC) State of Youth Report 2025, demonstrates that young people are actively volunteering across Queensland and Australia, often through a combination of formal, informal, episodic and community-based pathways. Many young people engage in informal volunteering, peer support, mutual aid, advocacy, digital activism and short-term or project-based initiatives that are not always captured by traditional volunteering metrics. As a result, the evidence points to a misalignment between traditional volunteering models and the lived realities of young people today.

This literature review critically examines existing research on youth volunteering, with a focus on Queensland, and draws on Social Bonding Theory, Labelling Theory and broader sociological perspectives to explore how belonging, power, stigma and structural conditions influence youth engagement. The review identifies that much of the existing literature and policy discourse remains adult-led and continues to prioritise organisational needs and participation rates over young people's lived experiences. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are particularly underrepresented, despite strong cultural traditions of community contribution that may not align with mainstream definitions of "volunteering".

The review highlights that barriers to youth participation are largely structural and systemic, rather than motivational. These include cost-of-living pressures, employment and housing insecurity, rigid time commitments, complex onboarding processes, regulatory requirements and deficit-based perceptions of young people. While volunteering is frequently promoted as a pathway to employability, research shows that volunteer experience is not consistently recognised by employers, creating a disconnect between expectations placed on young people and labour market realities.

Importantly, this review argues that the perceived decline in youth volunteering reflects a misalignment between traditional volunteering models and the realities of young people's lives, rather than a withdrawal from civic contribution. Youth-led and youth-designed approaches emerge as critical to addressing this disconnect. When young people are meaningfully involved in the design, governance and delivery of volunteering initiatives, participation becomes more relevant, flexible and responsive to contemporary conditions.

The review concludes that the future of volunteering depends on the sector's willingness to reframe how volunteering is understood, measured and valued. By recognising informal and emerging forms of contribution, addressing structural barriers and genuinely sharing power with young people, volunteering can be repositioned as an inclusive and meaningful pathway for youth participation. Reframing volunteering for youth-led futures is essential not only for sustaining volunteer engagement, but for strengthening belonging, social cohesion and community resilience in a changing social landscape.



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VOLUNTEERING IS
NOT DISAPPEARING...







. . . IT IS EVOLVING.

YOUTH VOLUNTEERS DO NOT EMERGE BY CHANCE — THEY ARE SHAPED BY OPPORTUNITY, ACCESS AND TRUST.



This literature review provides a comprehensive overview of existing research on young people's involvement in volunteering, with a specific focus on Queensland.

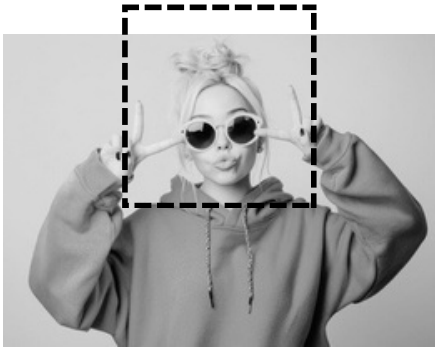
Across the literature, it is evident that volunteering has become a lower priority for many young people in recent years, reflecting broader social, economic and cultural shifts impacting youth engagement. In response to these changes, Volunteering Queensland (2024) released a report outlining key findings on the state of volunteering among young people in Queensland. One significant finding identified a ten percent decline in overall young people participating in volunteering between 2021 and 2024. This decline has raised substantial concern within the volunteering sector, as many not-for-profit organisations are experiencing increasing difficulty in attracting and retaining young volunteers.

BACKGROUND

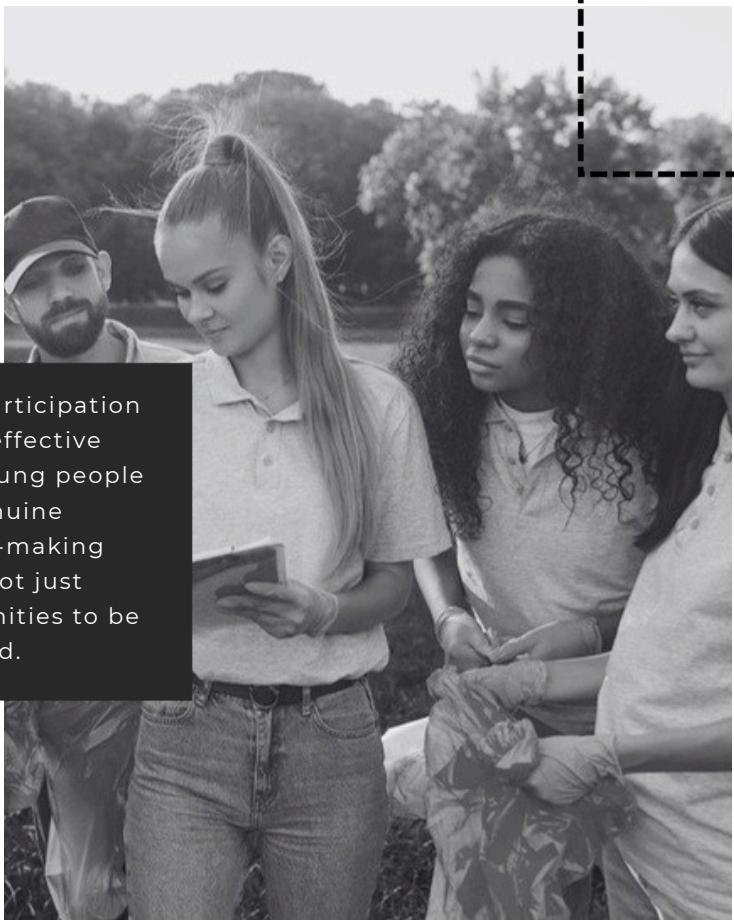
The reduction in youth participation has also generated wider concern among community leaders, policymakers and service providers, prompting critical questions about how volunteering can be reimagined to better align with the lived realities, motivations and priorities of young people. This review seeks to centre the voices of young people in order to develop a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to declining participation, while also recognising young people as key stakeholders in shaping future volunteering models.

Informed by this literature, the researcher has developed a methodology designed to capture both qualitative and quantitative data from young people. This approach aims to generate practice-informed and youth-driven insights that can support innovative and responsive volunteering initiatives. Data will be collected through a review of existing studies, alongside youth-centered methods including surveys, focus groups, motivational interviewing and community engagement.

By intentionally meeting young people where they are, this review aims to inspire communities, organisations and policymakers to explore new and flexible approaches to youth volunteering. With direct input from young people, the resulting recommendations seek to inform the development of a trial framework that has the potential to be adapted and implemented across Queensland.



YOUTH-LED.



Youth participation is most effective when young people have genuine decision-making power, not just opportunities to be consulted.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

This review draws on Social Bonding Theory, Labelling Theory, Durkheim and broader sociological perspectives to examine youth volunteering from a bird's-eye view. Together, these theoretical frameworks support a deeper understanding of the structural, social and relational factors that influence young people's engagement in volunteering, as well as the barriers that may discourage participation.

Social Bonding Theory provides insight into how connection, belonging and attachment to community institutions can shape young people's willingness to engage in pro-social activities such as volunteering.

In contrast, Labelling Theory, which originates from criminology, is used in this review to explore how negative assumptions, stereotypes and institutional responses can influence how young people are perceived and treated within volunteering and organisational spaces. When applied beyond criminology, Labelling Theory offers a valuable lens for understanding how stigma and unconscious bias may impact young people's confidence, sense of belonging and continued participation.

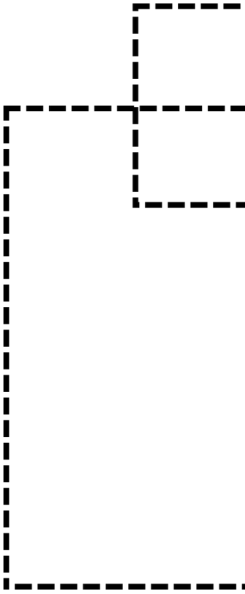


By examining these theories collectively, the review adopts a macro-level perspective that situates individual experiences within broader societal pressures, expectations and power dynamics. This theoretical framing informs both the identification of key barriers to youth volunteering and the development of recommendations that are responsive, strengths-based and grounded in social work values.

METHODOLOGY

This study is consistent with reflexive and participatory research practices, shared generational experiences between the researcher and participants can enhance relational depth, foster trust, and support more open and genuine dialogue. This alignment has the potential to strengthen both data quality and participant engagement, particularly within youth-focused contexts.

Emerging literature suggests that the positionality of young researchers remains an underexplored element within youth-focused studies. While there is extensive scholarship on youth engagement, fewer studies critically examine how a young researcher's lived experience and social positioning may contribute to the creation of safe, authentic spaces that encourage meaningful disclosure and testimony from young people.



In addition to youth identity, the researcher brings close to ten years of professional experience working alongside young people across diverse practice settings, including the criminal justice system, program design and development, homelessness services, and complex mental health and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community contexts. This professional background informs a strengths-based, trauma-aware and ethically grounded approach to data collection, while remaining attentive to power dynamics and the need for cultural safety.

Data will be collected through a review of relevant literature, alongside youth-centered methods including surveys, focus groups, collaborative approaches and youth storytelling. These methods have been selected to prioritise accessibility, inclusivity and the meaningful participation of young people throughout the research process.

YOUTH INCLUSION THE DEVELOPMENT OF A GRASSROOTS YOUTH RESPONSE

Involving young people in the research process was central to the underpinning values of both the researcher and the host organisation. From the early stages of research development, intentional discussions were held to explore how youth participation could move beyond consultation and toward meaningful involvement and shared decision-making.

As the review progressed, the research itself became a catalyst for the establishment of a youth-led community response group. This group was formed not only as a mechanism for gathering richer and more authentic data, but also to ensure that young people remained at the forefront of shaping how youth-focused volunteering projects are designed, led and evaluated. The alliance brings together young people aged approximately eighteen to their late twenties, with the intention of creating a collective space where youth can influence research directions, contribute lived experience, and co-create solutions.

There is further potential for this youth-led group to evolve into multiple pathways, including leadership development, project ownership and mentorship opportunities supported by relevant community leaders and organisations. Establishing strong and sustainable foundations for this group is recognised as critical to its ongoing development and impact.

Incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth perspectives was also identified as a priority within this research. Existing literature suggests that Indigenous youth perspectives are often underrepresented within volunteering research and practice, contributing to a lack of culturally responsive volunteering pathways.

In response, young people connected to the local Butchulla Country have expressed interest in supporting the development of the youth-led group. This engagement provides a respectful and culturally grounded foundation to ensure that youth volunteering initiatives are shaped in ways that meaningfully include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and align with principles of cultural safety and self-determination.

SURVEY DEVELOPMENT IMPLEMENTATION AND DISTRIBUTION

The researcher has fostered strong community relationships over time, building respectful and trusting rapport with young people across the Fraser Coast community. These established relationships enhance the researcher's capacity to access young people and support authentic engagement throughout the data collection process. Peers and young people within the community have expressed interest in actively supporting the research by assisting with the promotion and distribution of the youth survey, strengthening community ownership of the research.

The survey was informed by existing studies related to youth volunteering and was subsequently reviewed and simplified to ensure it was clear, accessible and youth-friendly. It was designed to be accessed via an online link to reduce participation barriers and support ease of engagement. With the support of young people across the Fraser Coast, a strong response rate is anticipated.



CRITICAL ANALYSIS

This section critically examines key gaps and limitations within the existing literature on youth volunteering. While current research provides useful insights into participation trends and organisational outcomes, it often fails to capture the depth and diversity of young people's lived experiences.

In particular, the literature demonstrates limited youth voice, the underrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, minimal youth-led volunteering opportunities, and a range of structural and systemic barriers that shape young people's engagement with volunteering (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2019; Kragt & Holtrop, 2019; Seymour et al., 2017; Nursey-Bray, Kamal & Di Giacomo, 2020).

MEASURING PARTICIPATION THROUGH OUTDATED MODELS RISKS MISUNDERSTANDING AN ENTIRE GENERATION.

LIMITED RESEARCH CAPTURING YOUNG PEOPLE'S LIVED EXPERIENCES OF VOLUNTEERING

A significant limitation within the literature is the absence of young people's unique and individual perspectives. Much of the existing research on volunteering is adult-led and prioritises organisational perspectives, participation rates and skill development outcomes, rather than exploring how young people themselves experience and understand volunteering (Kragt & Holtrop, 2019; Walsh & Black, 2015). As a result, young people are frequently positioned as subjects of research rather than active contributors.

An examination of youth-oriented platforms further highlights this gap. Despite young people being highly active users of digital and social media spaces, there is limited contemporary Australian content in which young people articulate their experiences of volunteering in their own words (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2019). Where youth perspectives are visible, they are often dated and fail to reflect current social, economic and cultural contexts (Walsh & Black, 2015). This lack of contemporary youth-authored insight reinforces the importance of collecting primary data to ensure that young people's lived experiences are meaningfully captured (Seymour et al., 2017).

UNDER-REPRESENTATION OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER YOUNG PEOPLE

The underrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people within volunteering research represents a critical gap (Kragt & Holtrop, 2019). Even within youth-focused studies, Indigenous youth perspectives are often absent, reflecting broader systemic barriers to participation in both research and volunteering spaces (Walsh & Black, 2015). Existing literature frequently acknowledges the difficulty of engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, yet offers limited guidance on culturally safe and youth-led approaches (Nursey-Bray et al., 2022).

In response to this gap, the research prioritises the ethical and meaningful inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. This approach is guided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members and emphasises culturally safe environments, relational engagement and the ethical use of perspectives (Tilke & Hand Heart Pocket, 2019). Including Indigenous youth voices is essential for the development of volunteering initiatives that align with principles of self-determination, cultural safety and equity (Nursey-Bray et al., 2022).



YOUTH-LED.



Community contribution is no longer confined to organisational membership.

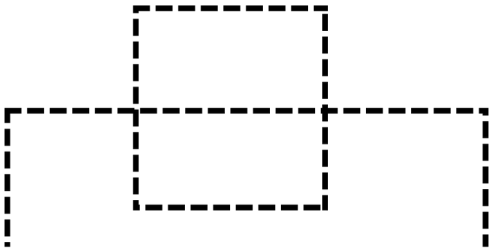
MINIMAL AVAILABILITY OF YOUTH-LED VOLUNTEERING OPPORTUNITIES

Although youth participation is frequently referenced in volunteering discourse, genuinely youth-led volunteering opportunities remain limited (Seymour et al., 2017). The term “youth-led” is often applied broadly, with many initiatives retaining adult control over decision-making, program design and outcomes, rather than transferring meaningful power to young people (Seymour et al., 2017). Volunteering Australia (2025) identifies a small number of initiatives operating under youth-led models, including Oaktree, Minus18, Seed Mob and Youth Insearch.

These initiatives share a strong emphasis on collective purpose, focusing on issues such as poverty reduction, LGBTIQIA+ advocacy, Indigenous climate justice, cultural protection and resilience-building (Hilder & Collin, 2022). This highlights the importance of shared purpose and values-driven engagement in motivating young people’s participation and reinforces the disconnect between traditional volunteering models and the social priorities of contemporary young people (Kragt & Holtrop, 2019).

STRUCTURAL AND SYSTEMIC BARRIERS TO YOUTH VOLUNTEERING

Beyond gaps in representation and leadership, the literature identifies a range of structural and systemic barriers that influence young people’s decisions to engage in volunteering (Kragt & Holtrop, 2019; Nursey-Bray, Kamal & Di Giacomo, 2020). These barriers are shaped by organisational practices, labour market expectations and broader societal change, rather than reflecting individual disengagement or lack of motivation (Millora, 2020; Walsh & Black, 2015).



VOLUNTEERING AND EMPLOYMENT PERCEPTIONS

Employability remains a key motivator for young people's participation in volunteering (Walsh & Black, 2015; Carter, 2019). However, volunteering is not consistently recognised by employers as a meaningful employability asset. Research drawing on LinkedIn data indicates that only 41 per cent of hiring managers consider volunteer experience to be equally valuable as paid employment (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2019). This disconnect undermines the perceived value of volunteering and may discourage young people from engaging in unpaid roles despite the development of transferable skills, networks and workplace competencies (Carter, 2019; Hyde & Knowles, 2013).

SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION AND CHANGING YOUTH REALITIES

Young people in the twenty-first century are navigating increasing cost-of-living pressures, housing instability, limited employment opportunities and rapid social change (Amin & Lim, 2024; Monash University, 2024; WACOSS, 2016). These conditions significantly shape young people's capacity to commit time and energy to unpaid roles such as volunteering, particularly when financial security and survival needs must be prioritised. Literature that fails to situate volunteering within these broader social and economic contexts risks oversimplifying youth disengagement and reinforcing deficit-based assumptions about motivation and commitment (Millora, 2020; Walsh & Black, 2015).

> YOUTH LEADERSHIP REQUIRES A TRANSFER OF POWER, NOT JUST THE APPEARANCE OF INCLUSION.

THE RISE OF INDIVIDUALISM

Sociological theory further supports this analysis. Emile Durkheim's work in Le Suicide provides a foundational framework for understanding shifts in social cohesion, collective engagement and community attachment (McFarlane, 2024). Durkheim's discussion of increasing individualism, weakened social bonds and social fragmentation offers a valuable lens for examining how broader societal change may influence young people's engagement with collective and community-based activities such as volunteering (McFarlane, 2024; Walsh & Black, 2015).

DISCRIMINATION, UNCONSCIOUS BIAS AND LABELLING

Experiences of discrimination and unconscious bias within volunteering and organisational spaces also emerge as significant barriers for young people (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2019). Drawing on Labelling Theory, this review highlights how negative assumptions about young people's reliability, motivation or capability can shape organisational responses and exclusionary practices (White & Perrone, 2015). Such experiences can undermine young people's confidence, sense of belonging and willingness to engage over the long term. Applying Labelling Theory beyond its criminological origins enables a critical examination of stigma, power and institutional language within volunteering contexts, revealing how seemingly informal attitudes can reproduce structural exclusion (White & Perrone, 2015; Nursey-Bray et al., 2022).



WHEN YOUNG PEOPLE HELP DESIGN SOLUTIONS, THOSE SOLUTIONS LAST LONGER.

RED TAPE ACCESS BARRIERS (Red Tape Trauma)

Administrative and governance requirements present further barriers to youth participation (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2019; Kragt & Holtrop, 2019). Processes such as probative checks, including Working with Children Blue Card requirements, complex onboarding procedures, extensive documentation demands and inflexible organisational expectations can discourage young people before they have the opportunity to meaningfully engage (Nursey-Bray, Kamal & Di Giacomo, 2020). Conceptualised in this review as “red tape trauma”, these cumulative barriers highlight how well-intentioned safeguarding and governance systems may unintentionally exclude young people from volunteering opportunities, particularly those navigating instability, disadvantage or limited adult support (Millora, 2020; Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2019).

THE NEW WAVE OF VOLUNTEERING

A prominent theme emerging from the literature is the perception that volunteering is no longer experienced in the same way by young people (Kragt & Holtrop, 2019; Millora, 2020). Traditional models of volunteering often fail to reflect contemporary youth realities, contributing to disengagement and declining participation. As society evolves, particularly in relation to economic pressures, identity, technology and social expectations, volunteering frameworks that remain static risk becoming increasingly disconnected from young people's lives (Millora, 2020; Nursey-Bray et al., 2022).

For organisations seeking to meaningfully engage young people, this shift highlights the need for critical reflection, adaptation and innovation. Rather than viewing declining participation as a lack of motivation among young people, the literature suggests that volunteering itself may require significant reimagining to remain relevant (Kragt & Holtrop, 2019; McLennan, Whittaker & Handmer, 2015). This includes reconsidering how volunteering is framed, promoted and structured, and whether existing models align with young people's values, capacities and desired outcomes (Millora, 2020).

In this context, the concept of a "rebrand" reflects more than a change in marketing; it signals the need for a broader cultural and structural shift within the volunteering sector (Kragt & Holtrop, 2019). While recommendations to address these issues are explored later in this review, this section emphasises the importance of sector-wide critical thinking to ensure volunteering evolves alongside the changing social conditions that shape young people's engagement (Nursey-Bray et al., 2022).

Volunteering in the twenty-first century is increasingly informal, episodic and embedded in everyday life.


SELF-
DETERMINATION
BEGINS WITH
RECOGNITION.

THE FUTURE OF VOLUNTEERING DEPENDS ON ADAPTABILITY.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the critical analysis and youth-informed insights presented throughout this review, the following recommendations are proposed to support Volunteering Queensland, community organisations and government stakeholders to strengthen youth engagement in volunteering. These recommendations recognise the need for structural, cultural and relational change, rather than placing responsibility on individual young people.



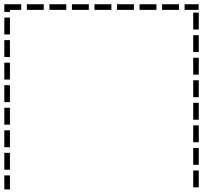
REFRAMING VOLUNTEERING AS AN EMPLOYMENT PATHWAY

Volunteering should be more consistently recognised and promoted as a valuable employability pathway, particularly for young people who face barriers within formal education or employment systems (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2019; Carter, 2019). Strengthening the recognition of volunteering by hiring managers, recruitment agencies and employers has the potential to significantly increase youth engagement, given that employability is a key motivating factor for young people's participation in volunteering (Carter, 2019; Smith et al., 2010). Clear and consistent messaging that positions volunteering as a meaningful contributor to skill development, work readiness and career pathways may encourage broader uptake among disadvantaged and marginalised young people (Walsh & Black, 2015; Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2019).

INCREASING YOUTH VISIBILITY IN VOLUNTEERING SPACES

There is a clear lack of visibility of young people within mainstream volunteering spaces and promotional material (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2019; Kragt & Holtrop, 2019). Public representations of volunteering frequently centre older adults, reinforcing a symbolic perception that volunteering is primarily an activity for older generations. This symbolic exclusion can unintentionally discourage young people from seeing themselves reflected within volunteering environments or perceiving volunteering as accessible or relevant to them (Walsh & Black, 2015).

In response, volunteering organisations are encouraged to adopt inclusive representation and marketing strategies that visibly centre young people, highlight diverse youth participation and normalise young people's presence across a broad range of volunteering roles (Kragt & Holtrop, 2019; Volunteering Queensland, 2011).



ACKNOWLEDGING AND RESPONDING TO CULTURAL SHIFTS

Volunteering has changed significantly over time, yet many organisational frameworks remain rooted in traditional models that no longer align with contemporary youth realities (Kragt & Holtrop, 2019; Maher, 2015). Economic pressure, time scarcity, digital engagement and shifting social values have reshaped how young people interact with community participation and unpaid work (Monash University, 2024; Amin & Lim, 2024).

Rather than attributing declining youth participation to a lack of motivation, the literature encourages organisations to critically reflect on these broader cultural and structural shifts and adapt volunteering models accordingly (Millora, 2020; Nursey-Bray et al., 2022). Developing a shared understanding of how social conditions have changed across generations may reduce generational disconnect and support more flexible, responsive and youth-inclusive volunteering strategies (Kragt & Holtrop, 2019).

FLEXIBILITY, UNDERSTANDING AND STRENGTH-BASED PRACTICE

Flexible and strengths-based approaches are essential for supporting sustained youth participation in volunteering (White & Perrone, 2015; Seymour et al., 2017). Young people benefit from environments that recognise existing skills, lived experience and capacity, rather than focusing solely on deficits, risk or compliance requirements. Research indicates that positive reinforcement, empowering language and realistic expectations can strengthen confidence, sense of belonging and long-term engagement among young people (Hilder & Collin, 2022; White & Perrone, 2015).

Flexibility in scheduling, role design and participation requirements is particularly important for young people balancing employment, study, caring responsibilities and financial stress (Nursey-Bray, Kamal & Di Giacomo, 2020; Monash University, 2024). Without adaptable and youth-responsive structures, volunteering opportunities risk remaining accessible primarily to those with existing privilege and support, reinforcing inequity rather than inclusion (Kragt & Holtrop, 2019).

YOUTH-LED AND YOUTH-DESIGNED APPROACHES

The concept of “youth-led” volunteering requires clearer definition and stronger implementation (Seymour et al., 2017; Hilder & Collin, 2022). While many organisations incorporate youth consultation through advisory groups or feedback mechanisms, genuine youth leadership involves young people holding meaningful decision-making power across project design, delivery and evaluation (Seymour et al., 2017).

In this research, youth leadership is embedded through the involvement of young people at every stage of the project, including governance, creative direction, community engagement and data collection. The project is underpinned by strong relationships between the researcher and young people, alongside a youth advisory group comprised of motivated community members with access to broader youth networks. Additionally, creative components such as videography are youth-produced, further reinforcing authenticity and relevance.

This approach demonstrates how youth-led models can foster innovation, trust and community ownership while aligning closely with young people’s values and aspirations (Hilder & Collin, 2022; Seymour et al., 2017).

YOUTH-LED MARKETING AND COMMUNICATION

Marketing and communication strategies should be youth-designed and youth-delivered wherever possible (Seymour et al., 2017; Hilder & Collin, 2022). Youth-led storytelling, digital content creation and peer-to-peer promotion have been shown to increase relevance, authenticity and credibility, while also challenging traditional narratives about who volunteers and what volunteering looks like (Hilder & Collin, 2022). Leveraging platforms, language and communication styles already used by young people can significantly enhance reach and engagement, particularly among cohorts who may not traditionally access or feel represented within volunteering opportunities (Kragt & Holtrop, 2019).



YOUTH-LED.



Volunteering is promoted as employability, but not consistently valued as such.

BARRIERS ARE RARELY ABOUT WILLINGNESS; THEY ARE ABOUT ACCESS.

CAPACITY BUILDING AND TRAINING FOR ORGANISATIONS

To support the implementation of these recommendations, targeted training and capacity-building opportunities for not-for-profit organisations are required (Adam, 2017; Walsh & Black, 2015). This includes professional development focused on youth engagement, trauma-informed practice, cultural safety, unconscious bias and youth-led governance models (Adam, 2017; Tilke, 2019). Learning from successful national and international examples of youth-centred and youth-led volunteering initiatives may further support organisations to adapt, innovate and respond to changing youth realities (Seymour et al., 2017; Hilder & Collin, 2022).

Together, these recommendations aim to support a shift toward inclusive, responsive and youth-informed volunteering systems which recognise young people as active contributors, leaders and partners in community development (Walsh & Black, 2015; Kragt & Holtrop, 2019).

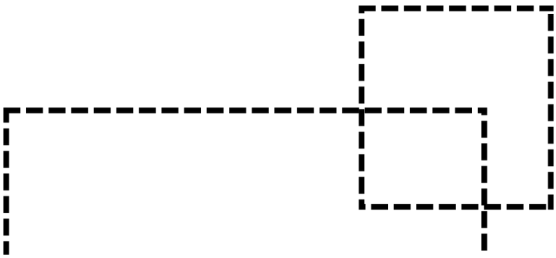
LABELLING THEORY

Theoretical frameworks provide a lens through which the decline in youth volunteering can be more deeply understood, while also supporting critical reflection on how volunteer-driven organisations can create more inclusive and accessible environments for young people. During the course of this research, the researcher became increasingly aware of the prevalence of negative narratives surrounding young people's engagement in volunteering.

When the researcher informally asked community members the question, "Why don't you think young people are choosing to volunteer?", responses were immediate and often deficit-focused. Common reactions included statements such as "they are lazy," "they don't want to," and "you're in for a big job." These comments were frequently delivered without reflection and highlight how deeply embedded negative assumptions about young people have become within community discourse. These observations directly informed the decision to apply Labelling Theory as a key theoretical framework within this review.

Labelling Theory originates within criminology and examines how social labels and institutional responses shape individual identity and behaviour (White & Perrone, 2015). The theory suggests that when individuals are repeatedly assigned negative labels—particularly by those in positions of authority—these labels can be internalised, influencing how individuals see themselves and how they are treated by others (White & Perrone, 2015). Over time, this process can contribute to exclusion, disengagement and reduced opportunities for participation.

White and Perrone (2015) commonly illustrate Labelling Theory through youth crime, demonstrating how young people labelled as "delinquent" or "troublemakers" may begin to embody these identities, particularly when labels are reinforced by institutions. Rather than addressing structural barriers or contextual factors, responsibility is shifted onto the individual, often resulting in further marginalisation.



When applied to youth volunteering, Labelling Theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how negative assumptions about young people's reliability, motivation or capability can translate into exclusionary organisational practices (White & Perrone, 2015). These assumptions may manifest through restrictive policies, heightened scrutiny, limited responsibility or dismissive attitudes, all of which can discourage young people from engaging or remaining involved.

Research suggests that age-based discrimination and unconscious bias continue to act as deterrents to youth participation in volunteering (Nursey-Bray et al., 2022). Young people may be labelled as "unreliable" or "uncommitted" without consideration of the structural realities they are navigating, including financial pressure, employment instability and competing responsibilities. These systemic factors are often overlooked, while individual behaviour is problematised.

An example of this dynamic emerged during a volunteer-sector meeting attended by the researcher, where an organisational representative stated, "I have a whole group of people that don't believe young people can do this." This statement reflects the very labelling processes described within the theory. While the organisation expressed a desire to increase youth engagement, the language used revealed an underlying mistrust that directly contradicts inclusive practice.

Applying Labelling Theory in this context highlights the significant role organisations play in either empowering or excluding young people. It emphasises that meaningful youth engagement begins with critically examining language, assumptions and institutional culture. Shifting toward inclusive, strengths-based narratives is essential for creating volunteering environments where young people feel valued, capable and welcomed.



SOCIAL BONDING THEORY

Social Bonding Theory focuses on the role of social connection, attachment and involvement in reducing deviant behaviour and promoting pro-social engagement (Akers & Sellers, 2013). Originally developed by Travis Hirschi (1969), the theory proposes that engagement in criminal or harmful behaviour is more likely when an individual's bond to society is weak or disrupted. Hirschi identifies four key elements of social bonding: attachment, commitment, involvement and belief. The stronger these elements are within an individual's life, the more likely they are to conform to social norms and engage in positive, lawful behaviour. Conversely, weakened bonds across these elements may increase the likelihood of disengagement and unlawful activity.

Within the context of this research, Social Bonding Theory provides a useful framework for understanding how volunteering can function as a protective and preventative mechanism for young people. Volunteering can be understood as a pro-social activity that strengthens social bonds by fostering connection, purpose and belonging, particularly for young people navigating periods of social, economic or personal instability (Akers & Sellers, 2013).

Volunteering offers practical opportunities for the four elements of social bonding to be developed and reinforced. Through volunteering, young people can build attachments to peers, mentors and community members; develop commitment through responsibility and shared goals; increase involvement in structured and meaningful activities; and strengthen belief in social norms related to contribution and community wellbeing. According to Social Bonding Theory, strong bonds to family, peers, community and institutions act as protective factors that support positive behaviour and social integration (Akers & Sellers, 2013).

From this perspective, volunteering holds particular value for young people who may experience limited connection to traditional institutions such as education or employment. When accessible and inclusive, volunteering can provide alternative pathways to belonging, purpose and positive identity formation. As such, Social Bonding Theory supports the position that youth volunteering has the potential to contribute not only to individual development, but also to early intervention and community-based crime prevention.

YOUTH-LED.



Young people stay where they feel seen, heard and valued.

EMILE DURKHEIM'S LE SUICIDE AND CONTEMPORARY YOUTH EXPERIENCES

Contemporary research highlights the increasing pressures faced by young people within the current social and economic climate. The Monash University Annual Report (2024) identifies several key barriers impacting young people, including rising cost-of-living pressures, constant social and global change, housing and food insecurity, and ongoing employment instability. These conditions contribute to heightened uncertainty and reduced stability during a critical period of identity formation and transition into adulthood.

Durkheim's sociological theory, as outlined in Le Suicide, provides a valuable framework for understanding how such societal changes can affect individual wellbeing and social connection. Durkheim argued that rapid social transformation, particularly under capitalism, weakens collective norms and shared values, resulting in a state of anomie characterised by uncertainty, disconnection and reduced social cohesion (McFarlane, 2024). When applied to contemporary youth experiences, this theory helps contextualise the cumulative pressures young people face as they navigate complex decisions related to identity, belonging, relationships and future pathways within increasingly individualised and highly scrutinised social environments.



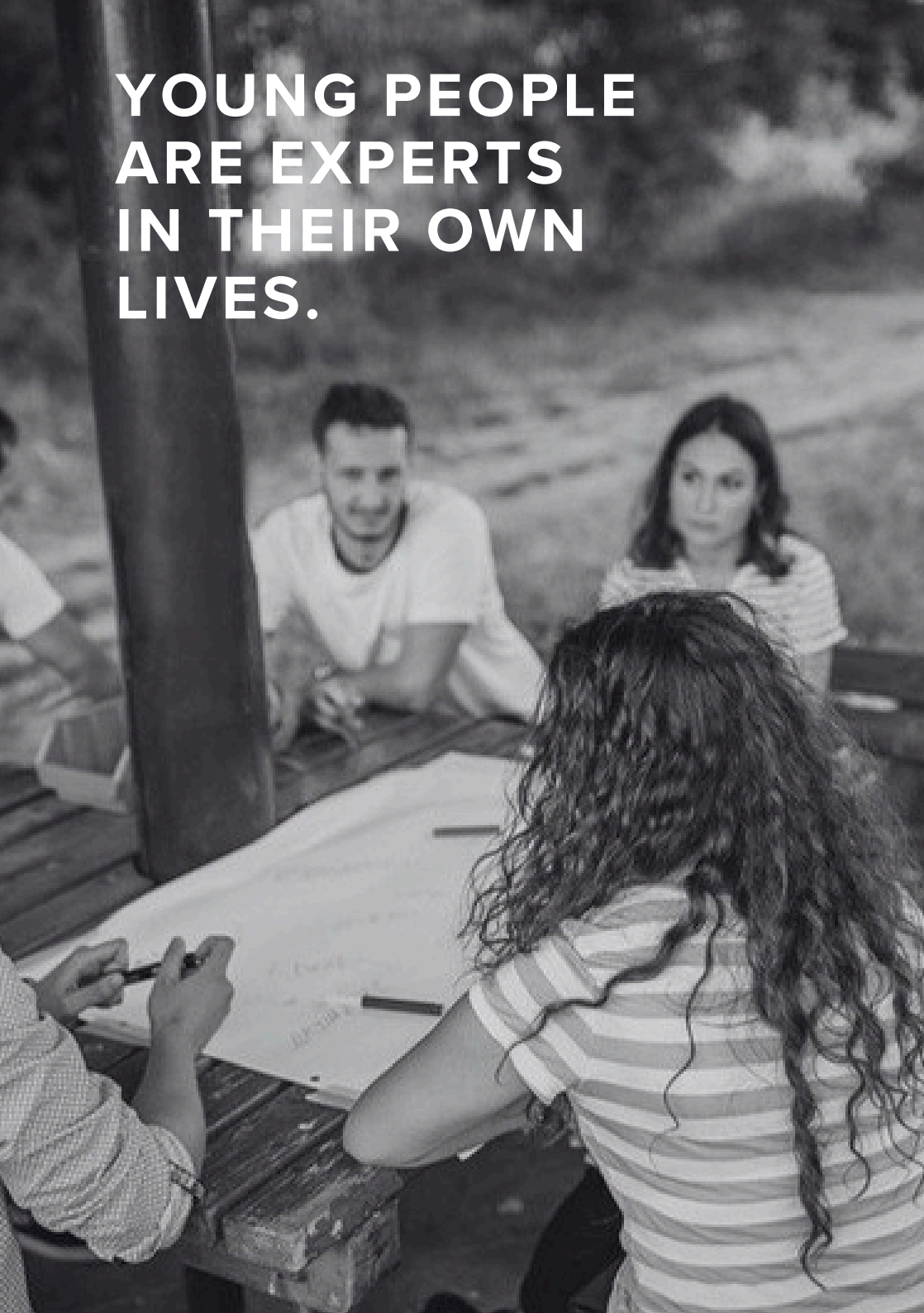
Durkheim also reflected on the strength of community and social cohesion prior to industrialisation and the rise of capitalism. He observed that earlier societies were structured around strong family units and clearly defined social roles, where individuals often worked within family systems and contributed to shared community functions such as farming, trade or local services. Social norms, religious institutions and communal rituals played a central role in reinforcing collective values and providing individuals with a clear sense of purpose and belonging. In many cases, key aspects of life—including occupation, religion and social role—were largely predetermined, reducing uncertainty and reinforcing social stability.

CONNECTION IS A PROTECTIVE FACTOR — BUT ONLY WHEN ACCESS IS REAL.

In contrast, contemporary society has shifted away from these collective structures toward increased individualism and scientific rationalism. Traditional community anchors such as extended family networks, religious institutions and shared labour have weakened, while individuals are increasingly expected to construct their own identities and life pathways. Durkheim described this shift as creating conditions of “excessive freedom” and heightened expectation, where individuals are faced with an overwhelming number of choices and an increased risk of dissatisfaction or perceived failure (McFarlane, 2024).

For young people today, these pressures are further intensified by digital environments and social media, where choices, achievements and identities are continuously documented, compared and evaluated. As noted in contemporary research, young people are required to navigate complex decisions around education, employment, identity and belonging within highly visible and evaluative social spaces (Monash University, 2024). Success and failure are often framed publicly, contributing to increased pressure, self-surveillance and social comparison.

From this perspective, a disconnect emerges between the realities young people are navigating and the expectations often placed on them within traditional volunteering models. These models may reflect assumptions shaped by earlier generations, whose social conditions differed significantly. Policy and education-focused research increasingly emphasises the need for youth-centred, flexible and responsive approaches that acknowledge contemporary youth realities and reduce barriers to participation (Monash University, 2024).


YOUNG PEOPLE
ARE EXPERTS
IN THEIR OWN
LIVES.

CRITICAL THEMES AND GAPS IN YOUTH VOLUNTEERING

LIMITED CAPTURE OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S LIVED EXPERIENCE IN VOLUNTEERING RESEARCH

Identifying literature that directly captures the voices of young people who volunteer, or who choose not to volunteer, proved challenging. Existing research consistently highlights that young people's lived experiences are underrepresented within volunteering policy, research and practice frameworks (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2019). As a result, the perspectives of those most affected by declining participation are often absent from the early stages of volunteering design and decision-making.

This raises a critical question: how can volunteering organisations expect increased youth engagement when the frameworks intended to attract young people are developed without meaningful youth input? As discussed within the theoretical frameworks section of this review, the contemporary realities of young people's lives frequently do not align with the expectations embedded within traditional volunteering models. Without adaptation or reframing, these models risk remaining disconnected from young people's priorities, capacities and lived experiences.

The limited visibility of youth perspectives also contributes to a broader representational gap within volunteering spaces. As the adage suggests, "you can't be what you can't see." The Queensland Family and Child Commission (2019) identifies multiple barriers to youth volunteering, including limited consultation with young people and a lack of youth-informed design within volunteering frameworks. When young people are excluded from policy development, research processes and program design, opportunities to create inclusive and relevant volunteering pathways are significantly reduced.

In response to this gap, the current review intentionally prioritises youth participation by creating opportunities for young people to contribute to the development of research questions, discussion topics and interpretations of volunteering experiences. The limited inclusion of young people's voices within existing literature reinforces the need for youth-centred and participatory approaches that value lived experience as a foundation for effective volunteering frameworks (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2019).

UNDERSTANDING OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER YOUNG PEOPLE VOICES IN VOLUNTEERING

A consistent gap identified across the literature is the limited inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives within youth volunteering research. While community contribution and collective responsibility are deeply embedded within many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures through kinship systems and community connection, these practices are not always recognised or framed as “volunteering” within mainstream research and policy contexts.

Kragt and Holtrop (2019) highlight that volunteering research in Australia predominantly focuses on structural trends and organisational outcomes, resulting in minimal attention to culturally specific practices and lived experience perspectives. Similar to the broader underrepresentation of young people’s voices, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people’s experiences are frequently absent or marginalised within the existing evidence base.

The lack of culturally grounded research reinforces the need for participatory and inclusive research approaches that prioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people’s voices and ways of contributing to community (Kragt & Holtrop, 2019). In response, this research intentionally seeks to foreground cultural safety, self-determination and respectful engagement to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth perspectives meaningfully inform volunteering frameworks, research and practice.



LIMITED AVAILABILITY OF GENUINELY YOUTH-LED VOLUNTEERING OPPORTUNITIES

It became evident early in the research process that there is a significant disconnect between young people and the ways their lived experiences of volunteering are represented and acted upon. This gap exists not only at the community level, where young people's voices are often unheard, but also within top-down decision-making processes where youth perspectives and needs are rarely embedded into volunteering frameworks. As a result, volunteering initiatives risk being developed for young people rather than with them.

Evidence-based youth development research demonstrates that youth-led approaches are consistently associated with stronger engagement, increased relevance and improved program effectiveness when young people are meaningfully involved in decision-making and research processes (Seymour et al., 2017). Despite this evidence, there remains a limited availability of genuinely youth-led volunteering opportunities. Seymour et al. (2017) argue that many programs described as "youth-led" in practice offer minimal youth influence, with decision-making power frequently retained by adult professionals.

In response to this gap, the researcher was motivated to establish a community-minded, youth-led group committed to participating across all stages of the research process. Young people are actively involved in the reference group, marketing and videography, the co-design of educational tools, attendance at stakeholder meetings, and the communication of research outcomes. This approach intentionally positions young people at the forefront of the project, demonstrating the value and effectiveness of authentic youth-led practice in volunteering contexts (Seymour et al., 2017).



PERCEPTIONS OF VOLUNTEERING AS A PATHWAY TO EMPLOYMENT

Volunteering is frequently promoted to young people as a pathway to skill development, employability and future work opportunities. For many young people, particularly those facing barriers within formal education or employment systems, volunteering is viewed as a practical strategy to gain experience, build confidence and demonstrate capability. However, existing research highlights a significant disconnect between how volunteering is positioned to young people and how it is subsequently valued within the labour market. Despite the emphasis placed on volunteering as an employability pathway, only 41 per cent of hiring managers consider volunteer experience to be equally valuable as paid employment (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2019).

As a result, young people are often required to meet multiple expectations before they have even entered the workforce. These expectations frequently include completing formal education, accumulating volunteer experience and demonstrating paid work experience simultaneously. Such standards do not align with the lived realities many young people face and can result in young people being scrutinised or perceived as lacking effort when, in reality, they have limited opportunities to meet these competing demands. Carter (2019) highlights that young people are increasingly pressured to demonstrate experience and capability early, often before they have access to stable employment pathways.

This disconnect is particularly concerning given the range of transferable skills volunteering can offer, including teamwork, communication, responsibility and confidence. Volunteering is widely positioned as a mechanism through which young people can build networks and workplace competencies (Carter, 2019), yet these contributions are not consistently recognised or valued within recruitment processes. For young people, this creates a contradictory and exhausting experience: they are encouraged to volunteer to improve employability, only to encounter labour market expectations that privilege paid experience over unpaid contribution. This tension reinforces the need for greater alignment between volunteering frameworks, employer perceptions and youth employment pathways.

YOUTH-LED.



Consultation without influence is not participation.

REIMAGINING VOLUNTEERING: THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW WAVE OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Emerging evidence suggests that declining youth participation in traditional volunteering does not reflect apathy, but rather a misalignment between existing volunteering models and the ways in which young people engage with community contribution today. This misalignment signals the need for a fundamental reimagining of volunteering to better reflect contemporary youth values, capacities and modes of engagement.

The literature indicates that a substantial "rebrand" of volunteering is required to ensure its accessibility and sustainability for future generations. As younger Australians navigate rising living costs and financial instability, their capacity to engage in unpaid activities like volunteering is increasingly constrained (McManagan & Kassis, 2023). Without innovation and the implementation of evidence-informed recommendations, traditional volunteering structures risk becoming increasingly disconnected from the realities of the twenty-first century. This risk is significant, given the critical role volunteering plays in Australia's social and economic landscape, with an estimated annual contribution valued at $43 billion (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

As discussed throughout this review, meaningful youth involvement at both grassroots and strategic levels has the potential to strengthen organisations and enhance relevance. However, Kragt and Holtrop (2019) argue that Australian volunteering research and practice have not kept pace with changing participation patterns, reinforcing the need to critically reassess how volunteering is conceptualised, promoted and structured. Without such reflection and reform, both volunteer organisations and young people are likely to continue experiencing disengagement and missed opportunities.

Reimagining volunteering must therefore extend across all aspects of the sector, including models and frameworks, marketing and communication strategies, community partnerships, and government support mechanisms. By embracing more inclusive, flexible and youth-responsive approaches, volunteering can be repositioned as a meaningful, accessible and valued form of participation. The following section outlines recommendations aimed at supporting this transition.



RECOMMENDATIONS

STRENGTHENING RECOGNITION OF VOLUNTEERING EXPERIENCE WITHIN EMPLOYABILITY PATHWAYS

Given that employability is one of the primary motivators for young people to engage in volunteering, leveraging this motivation presents a critical opportunity to increase youth participation. Contemporary research highlights that young people are navigating increasing employment instability, cost-of-living pressures and heightened expectations to demonstrate work-readiness early, often before accessing stable employment opportunities (Monash University, 2024).

In response, this review recommends the development of a state-wide or nationally recognised volunteering certificate or credential, facilitated through peak bodies such as Volunteering Queensland or at a national level. A formalised credential would allow employers and recruitment agencies to more easily recognise, verify and value volunteering experience as evidence of transferable skills, workplace readiness and civic contribution.

Such an initiative is particularly significant for young people facing disadvantage, including those who experience barriers to formal education or paid employment. As identified by Monash University (2024), ongoing employment instability and structural pressures disproportionately impact young people, limiting access to traditional pathways into work. A recognised volunteering qualification could therefore provide an accessible and equitable pathway to skill recognition, confidence-building and labour market participation, with the potential to create meaningful and life-changing employment opportunities.

REFRAMING VOLUNTEERING FOR CONTEMPORARY ENGAGEMENT

Research has highlighted the symbolic underrepresentation of young people within the volunteering sector, not only in participation but also in how volunteering is visually and culturally portrayed. Volunteering websites, campaigns and organisational materials frequently centre older volunteers, which can unintentionally signal that volunteering is an activity reserved for older generations. This symbolic exclusion may discourage young people from seeing volunteering as accessible, relevant or designed for them.

Symbolism plays a critical role in fostering inclusivity and shaping perceptions of belonging. When young people cannot see themselves reflected in volunteering spaces, narratives or imagery, engagement is less likely to occur. In response, the researcher has developed a youth-focused marketing concept aimed at repositioning volunteering as relevant, accessible and aligned with the contemporary realities young people are navigating. This approach not only seeks to increase visibility of young people within volunteering spaces but also to present volunteering as dynamic, flexible and responsive to current social, economic and cultural contexts.

By intentionally centering youth representation and lived experience within branding and promotion, volunteering organisations can challenge outdated perceptions and create pathways that invite young people to engage in meaningful and empowering ways.

YOUTH-LED.

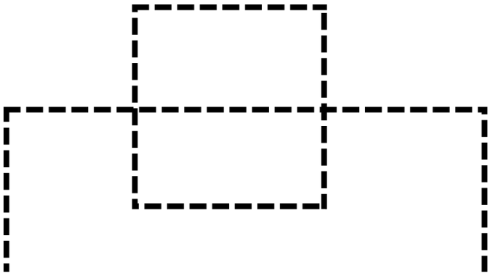


THE IMPACT OF ORGANISATIONAL LANGUAGE ON YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND INCLUSION

As discussed throughout this review, the language and labels used within volunteering contexts can either empower or marginalise young people. Drawing on Labelling Theory, this section highlights how organisational language, expectations and assumptions influence young people's willingness to engage, as well as their likelihood of being retained within volunteering spaces. Evidence from youth-led activist organisations demonstrates that when young people are afforded genuine leadership, agency and trust, they are capable of driving meaningful social change (Hilder & Collin, 2022).

During the researcher's examination of youth-led volunteering initiatives across Queensland, four prominent examples were identified. However, closer analysis revealed a disconnect between how these initiatives were presented and how they operated in practice. In several cases, initiatives appeared youth-led at a surface level—through youth-friendly branding or websites—yet decision-making power and structural control remained with adults. Additionally, participation requirements such as rigid time commitments failed to align with the lived realities of young people navigating employment, education and financial pressures.

This misalignment illustrates how initiatives may symbolically appear youth-led, while organisational language and expectations ultimately reinforce exclusion. Research on contemporary youth activism emphasises the importance of genuinely centering young people's voices, leadership and lived experience, rather than positioning youth involvement as tokenistic or consultative (Hilder & Collin, 2022). For volunteering frameworks to become more youth-responsive, empowering language must be matched by authentic action and structural change.

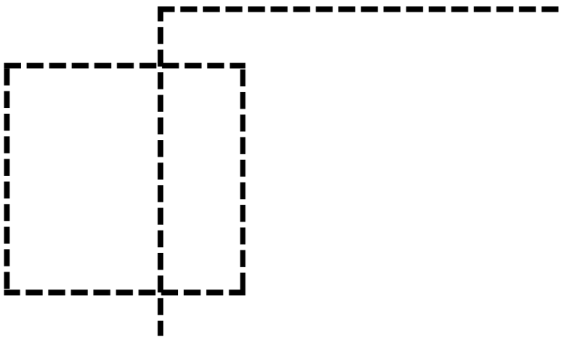


STRENGTHENING YOUTH PARTICIPATION THROUGH MEANINGFUL INCENTIVES

Due to the realities of young people's livelihoods, access to volunteering opportunities is often dependent on the availability of family, community and financial support. As highlighted throughout this review, the current social and economic climate has left many young people with little choice but to prioritise financial security over unpaid commitments (Monash University, 2024; Amin & Lim, 2024). For young people navigating housing insecurity, cost-of-living pressures and employment instability, volunteering can become an inaccessible option rather than a meaningful opportunity.

In response, practical incentives should be understood as enablers of participation rather than rewards. Supports such as fuel vouchers, food vouchers, transport assistance or reimbursement of out-of-pocket costs may significantly reduce structural barriers and allow young people to engage in volunteering without compromising their financial stability. These supports acknowledge the broader conditions shaping young people's lives and align with strengths-based, equity-focused approaches to youth participation (Auld, 2004; Walsh & Black, 2015).

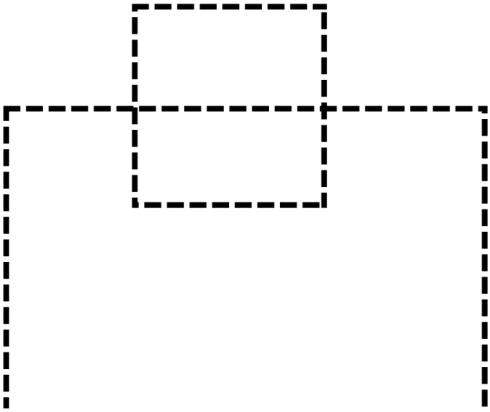
Importantly, providing incentives does not undermine the values of volunteering. Instead, it reflects a willingness to meet young people where they are and adapt participation models to contemporary realities. By recognising young people's time, contribution and lived experience, volunteering organisations can foster inclusion, retention and long-term engagement, contributing to more sustainable and youth-informed volunteering systems.

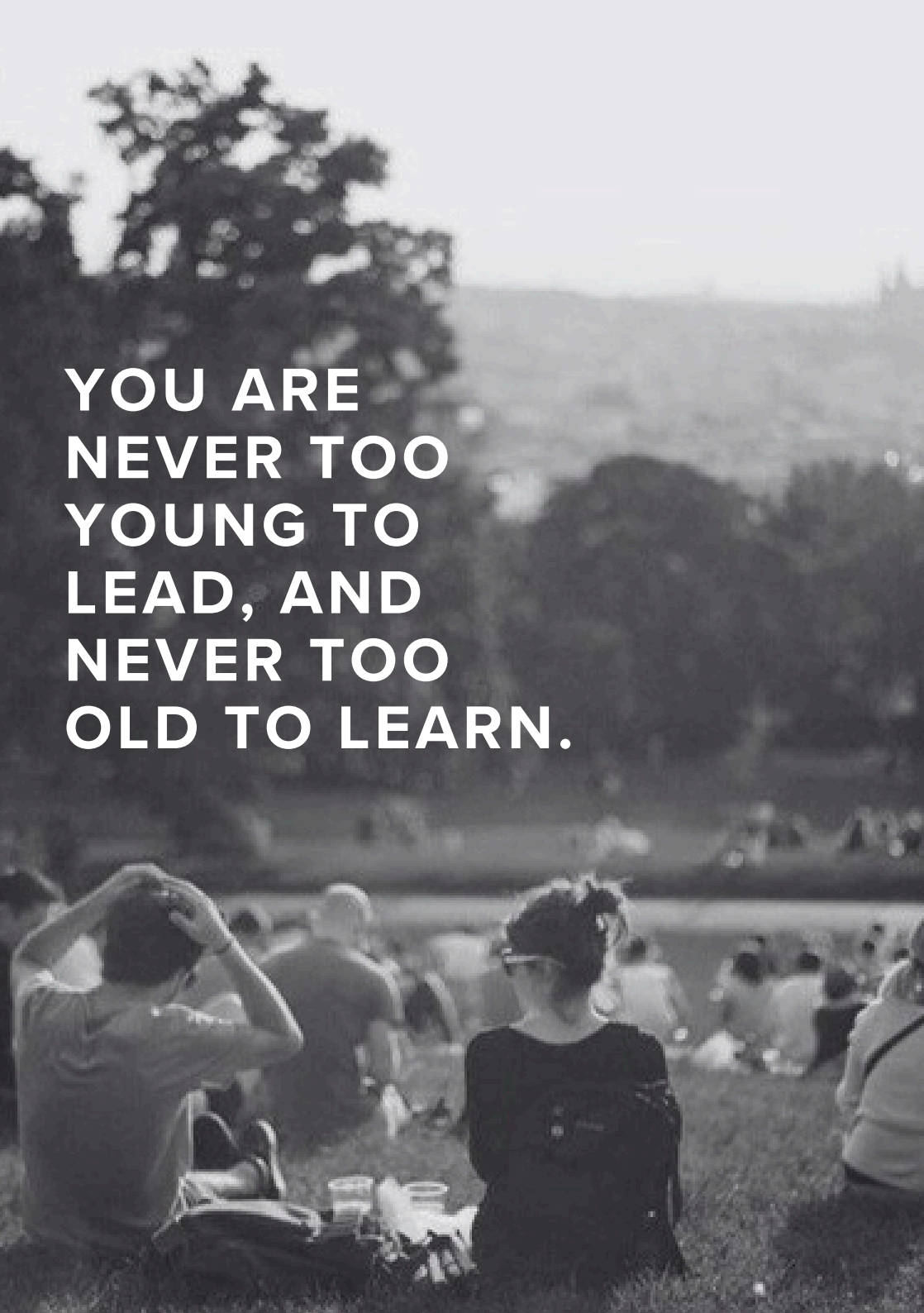


CHANGING INTERGENERATIONAL CONDITIONS AND YOUTH DISADVANTAGE

Emerging evidence suggests that contemporary young people are the first generation to experience poorer economic conditions than their parents at comparable life stages. Rising housing costs, wage stagnation and increasing living expenses have significantly reshaped the transition to adulthood, reducing financial security and increasing uncertainty (Amin & Lim, 2024). These structural pressures directly influence young people's capacity to engage in unpaid activities such as volunteering, particularly when organisational expectations remain grounded in historical assumptions that no longer reflect current social and economic realities.

Recent national data indicates that Australians aged 30–34 are the first generation in more than four decades for whom home ownership is no longer the norm (Amin & Lim, 2024). Younger cohorts, including Generation Z and emerging Generation Alpha, are observing these trends and entering adulthood with an awareness that their futures are increasingly unpredictable, unstable and shaped by ongoing economic pressure. As a result, young people are often required to prioritise paid work, education and financial survival over voluntary participation, despite maintaining strong civic values and a desire to contribute to their communities (Amin & Lim, 2024).




YOU ARE
NEVER TOO
YOUNG TO
LEAD, AND
NEVER TOO
OLD TO LEARN.

CONCLUSION

This review was undertaken in response to the documented and ongoing decline in youth participation in volunteering and the growing concern among community leaders, policymakers and volunteering organisations that, without meaningful reform, traditional volunteering models may continue to lose relevance. Rather than positioning young people as disengaged or disinterested, this review has demonstrated that declining participation is shaped by a complex intersection of structural, social and economic barriers that significantly influence young people's capacity to volunteer in the contemporary context.

Through critical analysis, the review has highlighted the extent to which current volunteering frameworks often fail to align with the lived realities of young people. Barriers including cost-of-living pressures, employment instability, limited youth-led opportunities, systemic gatekeeping and deficit-based perceptions of young people have been shown to restrict access and reinforce exclusion. Importantly, the review has also demonstrated that the absence of youth voices within policy development, research and organisational decision-making continues to limit the effectiveness and sustainability of volunteering initiatives.

The findings strongly suggest that when young people are meaningfully involved in decision-making processes, research design and leadership roles, both young people and organisations benefit. Youth-led and participatory approaches foster relevance, trust, innovation and shared ownership, challenging traditional top-down models that no longer reflect the social climate young people are navigating. In the context of increasing uncertainty and competing priorities, young people require volunteering opportunities that are flexible, inclusive, strengths-based and responsive to their realities.

Ultimately, this review argues that the future of volunteering depends on the sector's willingness to adapt, listen and evolve. By meeting young people where they are, valuing their contributions and embracing innovative, youth-informed approaches, volunteering has the potential to remain a vital mechanism for community connection, social cohesion and positive change. If supported through responsive policy, organisational reform and genuine youth partnership, volunteering may not only survive, but emerge as a powerful solution to many of the social challenges facing communities today.


WHEN
YOUNG
PEOPLE
IMAGINE
FREELY,
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WHEN YOUNG PEOPLE LEAD, PARTICIPATION FOLLOWS.