

Swiss Volunteering Survey 2020

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Summary

The Swiss Volunteering Survey 2020 provides information on the current state of voluntary activity. It is already the fourth Volunteering Survey the Swiss Society for the Common Good (SSCG) has published since 2006 with the support of the Migros Culture Percentage, the Beisheim Foundation, the Federal Statistical Office and 30 other partner organisations. For the latest edition of the Swiss Volunteering Survey, in 2019 some 5,000 people answered detailed questions about their social engagement. Participants were selected randomly by the Federal Statistical Office from population registers and represent the Swiss residential population from the age of 15. The most important results can be summarised as follows.

- Volunteering is a broad field. Not only does the Swiss Volunteering Survey show how much voluntary work is being done in Switzerland, but also that there are many different forms of engagement and areas of activity, and that the respective motives, potential, challenges and support measures can differ greatly.
- The Swiss population are very socially engaged: 39 percent of the population from the age of 15 do formal voluntary work within clubs and organisations; 46 percent carry out informal voluntary work outside the context of clubs or organisations by working as carers, looking after or providing assistance to others, or helping out with events and projects. Donations are another form of voluntary activity: 71 percent of the population donate money, 7 percent give blood.
- Switzerland is a country of clubs and associations. The fact that so many volunteers come from clubs, associations and non-profit organisations can partly be explained by their high membership rates. Three-quarters of the Swiss population above the age of 15 are members of a club, association or non-profit organisation, with 61 percent of the population playing an active role in them. Sports clubs have the most members, followed by games, hobby and leisure clubs, cultural associations and religious communities, churches and church-affiliated organisations.
- The number of volunteers has remained astonishingly stable. The past ten years have seen neither a marked decline nor a clear increase in voluntary activity. There has not been an obvious rise or fall in the proportion of people making donations or carrying out formal or informal voluntary work. However, what is true of voluntary work in general does not apply to the different areas of voluntary work. While there has been a decrease in formal volunteering in sport, interest groups and public service, there are now more volunteers in games, hobby and leisure clubs, cultural associations, and social and charity organisations.
- The social profile of those performing formal voluntary work may change in the coming years. A disproportionately high number of men, people aged between 45 and 74, and residents of rural areas and German-speaking Switzerland belong to clubs, associations and non-profit

organisations. Better educated people, higher earners, Swiss passport-holders and parents of children aged over six also display greater-than-average engagement. However, the potential of these population groups seems to be increasingly exhausted. Women, younger people, residents of French- and Italian-speaking Switzerland, city dwellers, and foreigners living in Switzerland are very willing to perform more formal voluntary work in future.

- Although voluntary work is by definition unpaid, the Swiss Volunteering Survey also looked into various forms of non-profit activity which were compensated either financially or materially. Recognition for the work most often came in the form of gestures such as lunch or dinner invitations. One in five people who carry out formal voluntary work receive financial compensation beyond their expenses. Men are more likely to receive financial compensation, and the payments are higher than those made to women. Honorary roles are generally more likely to be financially compensated, especially if these are political or public in nature. Strictly speaking, voluntary work that is financially compensated in the form of fees, fixed remunerations or attendance fees should be considered as a not-for-profit commitment and not as voluntary work, even if the survey respondent views and characterises it as such.
- Informal voluntary work often takes the form of unpaid care work, and the people who are supported and cared for are often relatives or acquaintances of the helper. Unlike formal voluntary work, informal voluntary work is more often done by women. Many informal volunteers are retired and care for their grandchildren as well as their elderly parents. Established moral obligations mean that this kind of care work, which takes place within the family, cannot strictly be considered voluntary work, even if the survey respondents subjectively viewed and characterised these services as voluntary work. The Volunteer Survey therefore distinguishes between informal voluntary work in the strictest sense and informal voluntary work in a broader sense.
- Helping out in the neighbourhood is a widespread phenomenon. During the course of a year, 72 percent of the population from the age of 15 perform small tasks in their neighbourhood such as helping with minor chores, emptying letter boxes and watering plants. Neighbourhood help is as common in the city as it is in the countryside.
- The willingness to donate and the size of the donation increase with age and available income. Proportionate to their respective incomes, though, high-earners are no more generous than people with low incomes. Older people donate very often to help young people and children, to fight disease, and to care for the sick.
- The internet and the sharing economy offer promising new forms of voluntary activity. Internet volunteers are often young men who live in cities. A great deal of internet volunteering happens within the framework of formal volunteering in clubs and organisations, though a good third of it is done online only. With regard to the sharing economy, younger people are not alone in showing a great willingness to share personal items such as books, tools, their car or even their apartment. However, the more personal an item is, the less likely someone is to want to share it.
- People who carry out formal voluntary work want to get involved with others to make a difference, help them, better themselves while doing so, and develop their knowledge and skills all while having fun. Financial compensation, on the other hand, is rarely mentioned as a motivating factor; the challenge, variety and responsibility involved are stronger incentives.

The great majority of people who hold a voluntary post are satisfied with their voluntary work and would return to the role in future.

- The reasons for ending a voluntary commitment are primarily personal in nature – most notably the difficulty of juggling voluntary work with a job or family. Other reasons for stopping include excessive bureaucracy or a lack of time, recognition or team spirit.
- Although many people are already volunteering in one form or another, there is still unexploited potential: the fundamental willingness to begin or renew a voluntary commitment is present. The conditions for starting (or restarting) voluntary work are: sufficient time, a good cause, flexibility and a functioning team. An engagement in social, charitable, environmental and animal protection organisations seems to appeal particularly to those new to volunteering.
- The idea of helping is central to informal volunteering. The focus is on social contact – often intergenerational – and on the sense of being needed and giving something back. But it is also about developing one’s own knowledge and experience, fostering contact networks, enjoying different experiences and having fun. A sizeable number of volunteers would like more support from other relatives or the government in their work as caregivers.
- Voluntary activity encourages trust in other people: people who carry out voluntary work are significantly more trusting of others than those who don’t. Those who volunteer in clubs, associations and organisations are particularly trusting. Volunteering also has an effect on people’s trust in political institutions, but not on their trust in science and the media.
- The broad presentation of volunteering and voluntary work in the 2020 Survey makes it clear how strong the engagement of the Swiss population is, as well as how varied the forms of engagement and the motivations behind it can be. But it also shows that the boundaries it shares with gainful employment on the one hand, and caregiving in the immediate family on the other, are fluid. There is a need here for a more in-depth discussion on how voluntary work is characterised and defined in future.