Why is Volunteer Impact Important?

'**Volunteer Impact**' → the effects of volunteering

- Volunteering always has many effects – even if we're only interested in a few
- There are different types of effect → *direct vs. indirect, volunteer vs. community*
- Different effects are important for different people

The effects of volunteering are important for many reasons, including...

- Help us understand the **value of volunteering** & find **ways to improve**
- Provide **evidence** to recruit volunteers and/or attract funding
- Volunteering isn't an unqualified good: we need to **mitigate the downsides**

Anybody here for another reason?

Volunteer Impact Masterclass
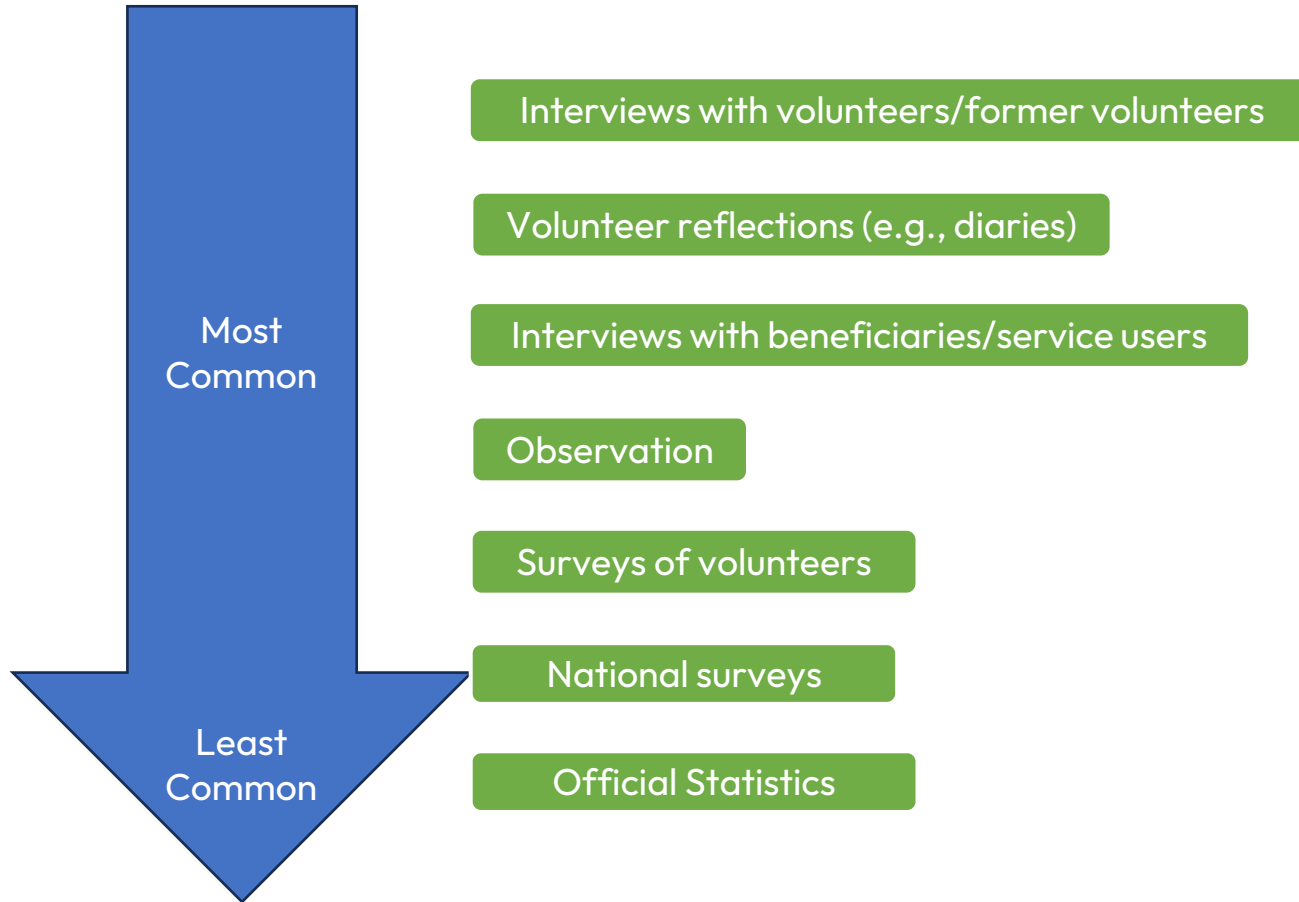
How is impact typically measured?

Major challenges confronting research about volunteer impact

- **Defining & measuring impact**
- **Measuring volunteering**
- **Causality conundrum**

Addressing the challenges: research designs

What can <u>we</u> do?

How are volunteer impacts typically measured?

Most Common → Least Common

- Interviews with volunteers/former volunteers
- Volunteer reflections (e.g., diaries)
- Interviews with beneficiaries/service users
- Observation
- Surveys of volunteers
- National surveys
- Official Statistics

All of them work & all have flaws

What matters is **trade-offs**: which flaws are acceptable for our priorities?

Challenges: Defining & Measuring Impact

Major challenge to much research stems from failure to clearly **define** & sometimes even **measure** impact – or **volunteering**!

- Bekkers and Verkaik (2015) reviewed 400 articles mentioning 'effects of volunteering'; fewer than 10% contained both the measure of volunteering & it's theorised impact!

Must also be clear about the **nature** of the impact we're interested in – different types need to be measured in different ways:

- **Direct**: deliberate or intended consequence of volunteering
- **Indirect**: impacts besides the deliberate/targeted, potentially unintended

A pre-requisite to valid identification of volunteer impact is a clear definition & measure of it, and of the volunteering thought to cause it!

Challenges: Measuring Volunteering

'Volunteering' is **multi-faceted** & **complex**: it is <u>**impossible to measure perfectly**</u>

We aren't aiming for perfection: we're aiming **to learn something important** &

sacrifice complexity to achieve it

Key is to be **clear about those sacrifices** & their **implications for our research**

In essence, researchers take **3 approaches to measuring 'volunteering'**:

1) **Instance specific**: defined by participation in program, activity, event
2) **Generalised**: defined by researcher for use in broad reach data collection
3) **Membership count**: defined by 'membership' of organisation, programme etc.

Challenges: Measuring Volunteering

Most volunteer impact research uses **instance specific** from a sample of volunteers defined by participation in a specific activity, organisation, event

- ❑ *E.g., evaluation study, interview with participants in European Solidarity Corps*

Evidence of impact from **opinions, experiences, recollections of volunteers**

- ❑ *Interviews, focus groups, diaries, online forms, volunteer-surveys*

These approaches have numerous **advantages**:

- Clarity of definition: what is meant by 'volunteering' can be **clearly defined** and **accurately recorded** in a way that **captures diversity** of activities, roles, contexts etc.
- Efficiency: **certain** data is collected from **relevant volunteers** & they are easy to recruit
- Causal validity: able to prompt and/or draw **clear links** with **impact of interest**

Challenges: Measuring Volunteering

The **drawbacks** include:

- Difficulty of comparison with **non-volunteers** or volunteers from other events, orgs etc.

- Data analysis limited to whatever was **directly collected**

- Numerous sources of **bias** which threatens **accuracy** and/or **generalisability**

  - ❑ **Selection:** sample has something in common that might not apply to other people
    - Volunteers are (statistically speaking, at least) weird – most people don't volunteer!
  - ❑ **Recall:** ability to remember what we did, how it affected etc. is flawed in varying ways
    - Age, how important volunteering was, mental health
  - ❑ **Response** or **social desirability:** responses shaped by desire to please
    - Someone who's just volunteered is unlikely to tell the organiser it was rubbish
  - ❑ **Attribution:** people focus on immediate or prompted potential cause of something
    - 'Do you think this volunteering programme has improved your self confidence?'

Challenges: Measuring Volunteering

Most common alternative for academics are **generalised measures**

❑ *Most common form: 'Have you volunteered for an organisation in last 12 months?'*

Impact identified based on **associations between characteristics in data**

❑ *Correlation between volunteering & voting in elections*

Main **advantage**: used in **large surveys of nationally representative samples**

- Allows **generalisation** from the survey data to larger populations
- Allows **comparisons** that can identify impacts e.g., with non-volunteers, volunteers for different types of organisations, volunteers who differ by age, gender, health
- Easier to study **indirect impacts** of volunteering or those **not experienced by volunteer**
- Less susceptible to **attribution** & **response** bias

Challenges: Measuring Volunteering

Drawbacks:

- National surveys suffer from **social desirability** & **selection** bias

- '**Imposes homogeneity on diversity**' (Mohan 2024): requires considerable **simplification** of volunteer experiences, motivations, activities, contexts etc.

- That simplification assumes **common understanding of 'volunteering'…**
  - ❑ *Most people don't use the word 'volunteering' to describe their activities*
  - ❑ *Common understandings of 'volunteering' vary between cultures & over time*

- …and how we choose to do it can **substantially affect results**
  - ❑ *Higher volunteering rates if you prompt specific activities*

Challenges: Measuring Volunteering

Most common for economists & civil servants is '**membership count**'

❑ *E.g., How many members of Action Aid Ireland + Birdwatch Ireland etc.*

Impact evidenced by **association between aggregated statistics**

❑ *Correlation volunteer membership & crime; volunteer hours as paid labour*

Advantages include:

- It is (relatively) **easy & cheap** to access and analyse such data
- Enables study of **volunteering & impacts** using statistics **valued by policymakers**
- Can recognise **membership of different organisations**
- Easier to study **indirect impacts** of volunteering or those **not experienced by volunteer**
- Not at all affected by **recall, attribution or social desirability** bias

Challenges: Measuring Volunteering

Drawbacks:

- **Simplification:** will not capture diversity of experiences within organisations

- Accuracy: not every organisation **defines 'members'** in the same way; not every member will be **active** & many people **join more than one** organisation

- Research **limited to fields** about which other aggregated statistics are available – which isn't true for many impacts we are interested in

- **Ecological Fallacy:** relationship at aggregate level doesn't necessarily indicate causal effect of volunteering at individual level

Challenges: Causality Conundrum

Final challenges relate to how we can **identify the causal effect of volunteering,** i.e., how do we know volunteering **caused** the impact we identify?

➤ Does volunteering make people happier, or are happier people more likely to volunteer – or both?

➤ Does having more volunteers reduce crime, or do people volunteer in neighbourhoods with low crime? Or is it both?

'Proving' causality is extremely difficult – **especially for volunteering** – and this issue is ignored in most research

Challenges: Causality Conundrum

Many characteristics identified as **benefits** of volunteering also **encourage** it

❑Volunteering associated with improved **mental health**, **educational qualifications**, **income**, **political engagement** and **social capital**

❑Superior **mental health, educational qualifications, income, political engagement** and **social capital** are all associated with increased likelihood of volunteering

Challenges: Causality Conundrum

Many of the **drivers** and **impacts** of volunteering are also **related to each other**
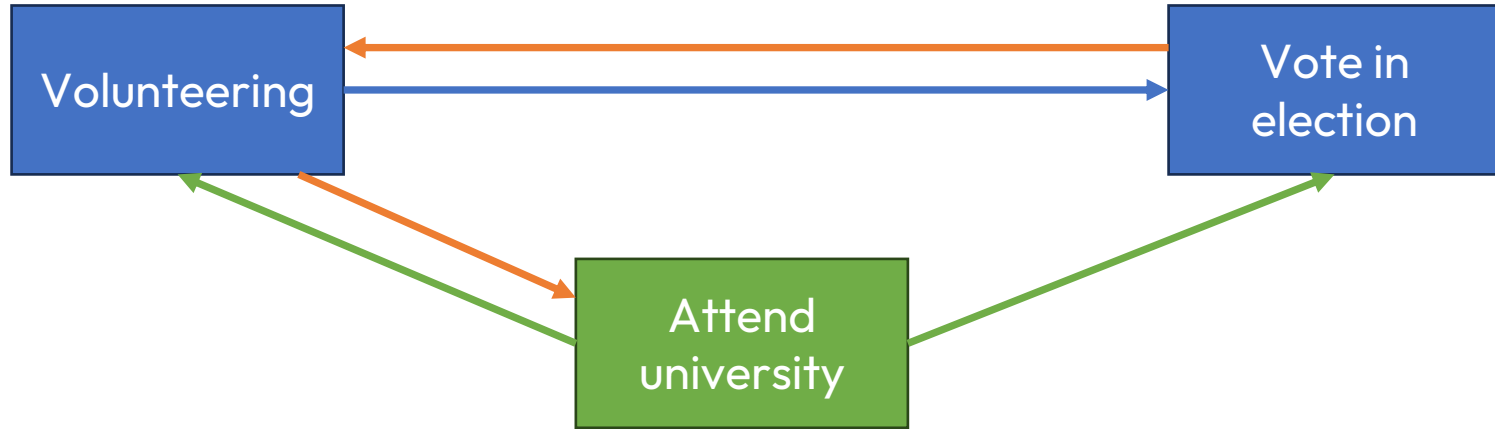
How can we be confident that **volunteering caused the impact,** rather than **both volunteering and the impact** being caused by **something else**?

Addressing the Challenges: Key Principles

Don't aim for perfection. The purpose of research is to tell us something important we wouldn't otherwise know

Be explicit about the **specific impact** you are investigating & make certain you **observe/measure it directly**

Be explicit about the **way you measure volunteering** and how **sacrifices involved** affect your research & findings

Exploit **advantages of different ways** of measuring volunteering & impact

Use **lessons from previous research**: how they measured volunteering, minimised selection bias, overcame causality conundrum etc…

Addressing the Challenges: Research Designs

Research design: strategy for collecting, organising & analysing data

Many challenges – causality conundrum in particular – can't be 'solved' but are being mitigated by researchers using different research designs

Panel Studies

- Collection of same data from **same individuals over time**
- Provides far greater confidence about volunteer effects by **directly observing change in the characteristic of interest within the same people**
  - ❑ *In my research, I compared the interest in politics of the same young people before and after volunteering to identify its effect on their political engagement*
- Can be used with national surveys, volunteer reporting, interviews – almost anything!

Addressing the Challenges: Research Designs

Comparative designs

- Comparative research uses **comparison to attribute (potential) causation**
  - ❏ *E.g., Compare mental health of volunteers with non-volunteers*

- Commonly employed in quantitative & survey-based research but less so in interviews & very rarely used in volunteer evaluation studies
  - ❏ *Could interview non-volunteers & compare with volunteers to identify impact*

- Combined with **panel design** can be powerful way of identifying volunteer impact & accounting for influence of confounding factors
  - ❏ *E.g., Compare mental health of volunteers & non-volunteers at time1, time2, time3 & see how trajectories differ*

Addressing the Challenges: Research Designs

Data Matching

- This one is very rare – but has serious & growing potential

- Involves matching of **similar** individuals across **different sources of data**

- Can **compensate** for our inability to measure all the characteristics we're interested in, to compare over time or between non/volunteers, or small sample size

- Cost of **specificity & precision** about the volunteers we study or attribute impacts to
  - ❏ *Interview a volunteer who is female, 24, with a degree, good mental health about their experience of participating in European Solidarity Corps*
  - ❏ *Identify 24-year-old women with degrees & good mental health who volunteered in Eurobarometer to learn other things about them e.g., income trajectory*

Addressing the Challenges: Research Designs

Quasi-Experiments

- Barely used but most effective tool for overcoming causality conundrum

- **Approximate experimental circumstances** based on access to 'treatment'

- Builds on **comparative and panel design**: compare two otherwise (almost) identical people/communities who differ only in terms of volunteering ('treatment')

  ❑ *Taylor (2023) used quasi-experimental design to study the effect of the UK's National Citizen Service: matched young people based on gender, ethnicity, education, family socio-economic class, region, religion but who differed in terms of NCS participation*

  ❑ *Found differences in political interest, knowledge, efficacy & anticipated participation stemmed purely from NCS*

It's Easy for Me to Say...

Of course, there's another big challenge: **cost**

Any of these research designs would increase the time, expertise & money required to identify impact

So, what can we do? Collaborate!

Academics & practitioners are rubbish when it comes to collaborating to study of volunteering, but we have shared goals & can reduce each others' costs

SO WE'RE NOT GOING TO DISCUSS IT?

It's Easy for Me to Say...

It's not straight-forward...

- Goals need to align: we need publications, you need results & the right results

- Timelines need to align: can take years to prepare a publication

- Resources need to align: skills, data, expertise

But we all have a shared interest in producing quality research on volunteering

What else can we do?

University of Exeter

Challenges with Identifying the Effects of Volunteering

Thank you for listening!

To find out more:

Email me: S.Fox2@exeter.ac.uk

Sign up to my newsletter (drop me an email)