

**COVID-19
IMPACTS ON VOLUNTEERING**

Managing High Turnover

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According to the most recent [Les Repères](#) poll, the vast majority (86%) of autonomous community action (ACA) organizations benefit from volunteer participation outside of their board membership, with an average of 59 volunteers (median of 20) per organization. In comparison, ACA organizations with paid employees (88%) have an average of 6 staff members (median of 4) paid via stable or recurring funding. As such, volunteers constitute an **important portion of people** involved in ACA organizations' operations.

The COVID-19 crisis had a direct impact on the **number of volunteers** able to contribute to community organizations, and on **how that contribution was organized**. Indeed, health measures (including lockdowns) cause significant challenges in recruiting and training volunteers as well as in organizing regular activities (see the Observatoire de l'ACA report entitled [Actions from Community Organizations in Times of Crisis: Essential, Yet Unrecognized](#)). As such, the crisis led to a **drop in regular volunteers' attendance**.

The crisis also created opportunities for the recruitment of **new volunteers**, even if this recruitment was limited due to changing availabilities based on the different phases of the crisis and health measures in effect.

Using data from a review of existing reports and studies, from a survey conducted by the *Institut de recherche et d'informations socioéconomiques* (IRIS) in the fall of 2020 and from focus groups with community organizations in the winter of 2021, this report covers the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on volunteering, based on data collected directly from community groups as well as their umbrella organizations.

LOSS OF VOLUNTEERS AS THE CRISIS BEGAN

According to the IRIS survey, **73% of community groups saw a drop** in the number of activists and volunteers during the first lockdown (April to June 2020). This period was one in which many people found themselves teleworking with children at home, due to schools and daycares being closed. To further complicate things, senior citizens were asked to self-isolate as the virus presents higher risks for them. In that context, a great deal of people had significantly less availability for volunteer commitments.

In contrast, some people experienced interruptions in their regular occupations and sought to **get more involved**. As a result, 27% of community groups saw an increase or no change in the number of activists and volunteers during this time period.

Given that many volunteers are part of **at-risk age groups for COVID-19** (see the [Portrait des bénévoles et du bénévolat](#) from the Réseau de l'action bénévole du Québec), some peoples' increased **vulnerability** to that risk was an obvious obstacle with regard to the drop in volunteers, and, more broadly, a **fear of exposure** to the virus.



We primarily offer our service through volunteers and most of them were at an age where they were feeling vulnerable and not willing to go out there and do the kinds of things they normally do, understandably.

Group in Montérégie



According to the IRIS survey, among community organizations who worked with activists and volunteers over the age of 65, 72% saw a drop in the number of people from this age group during the first lockdown (with an average drop of 24 people per organization), 5% saw an increase, and 23% saw no change. The proportion of community organizations that indicated they had received support from activists and volunteers over the age of 65 dropped from 63% before the crisis to 50% during the first lockdown (April to June 2020). However, when present, the 65+ age group still made up a significant proportion of the volunteer engagement, for an average of 41% of the total volunteers and activists prior to the crisis, compared to 46% during the first lockdown.

As such, while their participation did diminish during the first lockdown, it was comparable to the drop observed within other age groups across all volunteers (the proportion of volunteers aged 65+ compared to the total number of volunteers having remained stable).



DIFFICULTY MANAGING AN INITIAL WAVE OF VOLUNTEERS

During the first wave, the drop in regular volunteers' involvement was at least partially mitigated by the arrival of other volunteers who came to lend a hand in solidarity (see our report on community organizations' relationships with external parties entitled [Between Solidarity and Threat to Autonomy](#)).

We immediately saw volunteers over 65 withdraw, so suddenly there was a shortage of people to give services. The city quickly provided us with support from their staff, either who were teleworking or were unable to telework. Because of that, many of our core services were able to continue. *

Group in Outaouais


According to people reached by the Observatoire de l'ACA, the **government's call for volunteers** from March 26, 2020 created a **great deal of difficulty** for community organizations on the ground. As of the next day, the premier's cabinet reported in a [French-language press release](#) that Quebeckers had turned out in huge numbers following the call and that the web portal had received a staggering 12,000 registrations.

For many community organizations, this call—issued without having consulted the community sector—was made **far too early**. Indeed, at that point, community groups were still in the process of adapting and were not yet able to receive (background checks, verification of skills and interests), train, and onboard new volunteers, all while respecting health measures. Some community organizations reported having to manage the frustrations of potential volunteers whose services they had to refuse.

In addition, for community organizations who did receive additional volunteer support (including many educational staff), this help was **fleeting**. For those who took the time to become ready to receive new volunteers, it was too late, as economic activities resumed and people went back to work.

When Legault issued the call, I wanted to cry. On top of everything else, we found ourselves having to welcome new people with very good intentions, but we had to manage them. Many of them were actually able to help, it was great, but after June 30, when schools opened back up, we had the opposite problem: everyone left! It was a lot to deal with. *

Group in the Laurentides



While the government's call for volunteers was appreciated as a gesture, for many, this action only heightened **confusion between community action and volunteering**. ACA organizations need qualified paid staff to fulfill their missions, which include (ironically) training volunteers.

This lionization of volunteer action at the expense of all other concrete actions that support a community organization's mission was a perfect example of the government's negligence of its **responsibility to provide better financial support** for short-staffed community organizations during the crisis (see our report entitled [*Financial Support for Community Organizations in Times of Crisis: An Inadequate Response*](#)).

Many community organizations also saw the government's call for volunteers, made during the premier's closely watched daily press briefings, as an attempt to gain **political capital** on the backs of work done by the *Fédération des centres d'action bénévole* and its members, who had already made use of the platform jebenevole.ca to manage pairing available volunteers to community organizations. Some media (e.g., [*Radio Canada*](#)) even suggested that the platform had been created as part of the crisis, at the government's behest.

CYCLICAL VOLUNTEER PARTICIPATION

Community organizations the Observatoire de l'ACA met with noted a **cyclical aspect** to volunteer implication based on the health measures in effect during the different phases of the crisis. As such, they were forced to manage volunteer turnover throughout the crisis. These changes increased their **workload** in terms of recruitment, training and onboarding, in a context that already demanded a great deal from their teams.

Different types of people were available at different periods and had different comfort levels with various protective measures. In the early days of the crisis, as previously mentioned, some workers left jobless by the first lockdown lent a hand to community organizations as volunteers. Afterwards, starting in September 2020, community organizations noted a return of older or more COVID-averse volunteers who had been reassured by the implementation of protective measures.

I guess we have about 200 volunteers within different programs. So, some didn't feel comfortable coming, which is completely understandable, but we also had a lot of new people wishing to volunteer their time. And it's interesting as the rules or regulations around opening and closing changed, we would have new people coming in or people leaving. It's been an interesting year. But we have a whole new batch of people that are connecting with us on a volunteer basis that didn't know about us before so that's really nice.

Group in Montréal



In some cases, community organizations made use of localized management strategies for volunteers **on the basis of geographical proximity** in order to facilitate the work for the entire network of community organizations and ensure that everyone's energies were well-directed.

The crisis also caused **issues in activist outreach** (see our report on community organizations' associative and democratic life entitled [Significant Challenges in Maintaining the Spirit of ACA](#)), which extended to volunteers. By limiting activities for socialization and recognizing activist and volunteer contributions, this period made it difficult for volunteers to solidify and expand their involvement.

REORGANIZATION OF ACTIVITIES

In addition to its contributions to associative life (see our report on community organizations' associative and democratic life entitled [Significant Challenges in Maintaining the Spirit of ACA](#)), volunteering plays a very important role in ACA organizations' **operations**, whether in support roles (reception, note-taking and files, etc.) or, at times, as a primary actor (food distribution, transportation, etc.).

Moreover, as approximately one in three volunteers are tasked with fundraising responsibilities (according to the *Réseau de l'action bénévole du Québec's* 2018 [Portrait des bénévoles et du bénévolat](#)), volunteer involvement has important effects on community organizations' funding. A great deal of **fundraising** depends on volunteers. Many of these activities were cancelled due to the COVID-19 crisis, leading to losses of revenue for ACA organizations (see our report on community organizations' funding entitled [The Financial Precarity of Community Organizations Exacerbated](#)) and a drop in volunteer mobilization.

The drop in volunteers was especially difficult for **community organizations whose activities, even in part, depend on volunteers**, such as food security or medical transportation.

I'm the only employee, it's really just a group of volunteers. We ended up with two volunteers under 70. We provide medical transportation, we had only one volunteer who could do the transportation. And we didn't have the funds to buy appropriate PPE. We suspended our services until September and referred people to other organizations. *

Group in Lanaudière

Community organizations adapted to overcome obstacles to volunteer involvement. For many of them, **tasks normally carried out by volunteers fell on staff members**. This contributed to the staff being overworked throughout the crisis. One might imagine that this void left by volunteers caused some community organizations to recruit additional staff. This was confirmed by the IRIS survey, which found that 18% of community groups had to hire additional staff, whether on a temporary or permanent basis, during the first lockdown (April to June 2020).

Impact of Activity Reorganization on Staff in Community Organizations during the First Lockdown (April to June 2020)

75% of community groups had to **reorganize** tasks and activities for some or all of their staff.

17.5% of community groups had to **increase work hours** for some or all of their staff.

18% of community groups had to **hire additional staff** on either a temporary or permanent basis.



We lost some volunteers because they were over 70. We told ourselves we couldn't deviate [from the guidelines] and there were volunteers who didn't want to come in anyway. So, staff from the phones, the front desk, and follow-ups, had to take care of things that volunteers used to do. *

Group in the Laurentides



As volunteer activities returned to in-person formats, community organizations implemented **protective measures**. All of the issues related to health risks experienced by workers also apply to volunteers (see our report entitled [Health Risk Management Within Community Organizations](#)), including anxiety about exposure to the virus, stress related to uncertainty, differences in risk perception, and respect of health measures.

In addition to mitigating health risks, volunteers experienced strains on their **mental loads** due to increases in distress and support needs of people connected with their community group (see our report on the impacts of the crisis on populations entitled [Increase in Isolation and Distress](#)), which required additional support and accompaniment.

Volunteers had to adapt to maintain their regular tasks, and also got involved in **new tasks related to the pandemic**, such as maintaining ties between members and participants in activities (see our report on community organizations' accessibility entitled [Staying in Touch with Populations during a Crisis](#)) and mitigating health risks (see our report entitled [Health Risk Management Within Community Organizations](#)).





I had a ton of support because I had 82 volunteers, but on average they were between 70 and 82 years old. Some didn't volunteer or didn't feel able to offer support over virtual channels or the phone. But I still had a group of 11 volunteers who really stepped up and said, "We're not gonna stay at home and do nothing. We're going to call people, the ones we know, and make sure they're OK." *

Group in Laval



Organizations also implemented **remote activities** that could be carried out by volunteers who could not participate in person. However, this participation was affected by issues related to the **digital divide** (see our report on the impacts of the crisis on populations entitled [Loss of Access to Information and Resources](#)). Adjusting to volunteering online also led to other challenges for community organizations, including equipment and training needs. For many, it was more difficult to recruit new volunteers remotely.



But all of a sudden, our volunteers became a whole new layer of learners. We couldn't just expect them to continue their tutoring online, because not only their students didn't know how to use it, they didn't know how to use it as well. So, it all became multiple layers of serving people with two part-time staff...

Group in Montérégie





VERY LIMITED EMERGENCY FUNDS FOR VOLUNTEERING

On April 1, 2020, the Quebec government announced that it would double the budget line for its **volunteer support program** (*Soutien à l'action bénévole - SAB*) administered by MNAs, injecting an additional \$10 million into the program. This increase speaks to the importance of volunteering and issues encountered by community organizations to maintain adequate volunteer involvement.

According to the IRIS survey, at the end of 2020, only 11% of community groups had obtained support from these SAB funds, distributed at the discretion of MNAs, for an average amount of \$3,848. For umbrella organizations, only 4% received support through SAB funds.

Many testimonials underlined the confusion surrounding the mechanisms of allocation of these funds. A failure to understand the community sector on the part of certain political actors was mentioned as one reason why some funds were not always allocated in accordance with regional priorities, including the SAB (see our report entitled [Financial Support for Community Organizations in Times of Crisis: An Inadequate Response](#)).

As such, ACA organizations received little emergency funding to support volunteer involvement and the adaptation of activities that volunteers perform, despite how essential these activities are to community organizations' operations, and the significant disruptions they experienced as a result of the crisis

SUPPORTING VOLUNTEER INVOLVEMENT REQUIRES RESOURCES

Volunteering is one strength of autonomous community action that naturally follows from community organizations' roots within their community and their role in supporting civic involvement.

However, volunteers need training and support from community workers in order to organize their actions. Volunteers cannot replace the professional resources needed within community organizations.

Contrary to the myth perpetuated by the government, in particular during the COVID-19 crisis, a call for volunteers is not a miracle solution to the chronic under-funding of the community sector and state disengagement.

Community organizations need additional resources to adequately support volunteers and offer a recruitment, training and involvement environment that is able to nourish their personal growth (e.g., self-confidence, empowerment and self-determination, etc.) and civic engagement (e.g., collective action, mutual aid, etc.).

DATA SOURCES

The Observatoire de l'ACA is a large-scale **action research project** that seeks to document the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on Quebec's autonomous community action (ACA) organizations.

The data used in this report are drawn from **analyses** conducted in summer 2021 from:

Qualitative component

15 focus groups conducted from November 3, 2020 to February 24, 2021 (97 participants)

Quantitative component

Online survey carried out by IRIS from October 23 to December 14, 2020 (740 organizational respondents)

Documentary component

Consultation of reports and analyses produced by governmental sources, the ACA movement and the research community during the COVID-19 pandemic, up until July 2021

Translator's note: Citations that are followed by an asterisk were translated into English from French. The original citations can be found in the [French version of this report](#).

To learn more:



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