



Volunteering and Social Engagement in Poland 2020–2024

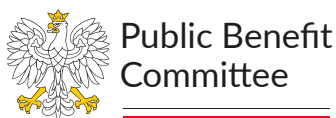
Research synthesis

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Public Benefit
Committee



National Freedom Institute
Centre for Civil Society Development



Government Programme
for Support and Development
of Systematic Volunteering
for 2018-2030
**Solidarity
Corps**

**FINANCED BY THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF FREEDOM –
CENTER FOR CIVIL SOCIETY DEVELOPMENT AS PART OF THE GOVERNMENT PROGRAMME
FOR SUPPORT AND DEVELOPMENT OF SYSTEMATIC VOLUNTEERING FOR 2018-2030**



This publication was created as part of the International Volunteer Year for Sustainable Development (IVY 2026), proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly. The IVY celebrations in Poland are coordinated by the National Freedom Institute – Centre for Civil Society Development.

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Editor in Chief of Wydawnictwo NIW-CRSO: dr Konrad Burdyka

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ISBN 978-83-972960-9-1

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Introduction

Volunteering in Poland has changed, especially during the celebration of the International Year of Volunteering for Sustainable Development in 2026. Social organizations often rely on volunteers for their activities. Many of us began our careers as volunteers. Crises such as floods or the war in Ukraine involve hundreds of thousands of volunteers, yet it is much more difficult to find people willing to selflessly help with daily non-governmental activities. Poland needs a coherent, modern, and responsive volunteer development strategy. This report is the first step in creating one. One of the National Institute of Freedom – Center for the Development of Civil Society’s goals is to promote volunteering and social activity. Such actions cannot be based on intuition or random experiences. Specific, reliable data is necessary. Poland still lacks comprehensive research on volunteering. This report introduces what volunteering looks like in Poland, what motivates and demotivates Polish men and women to participate in social activities, and the main areas of aid activities. We based the report on existing data, including publications, research, and analyses. The study’s conclusions are extremely interesting but also highlight major shortcomings in the research. It should be emphasized that this document will form the basis for the largest volunteering study to date. The main goal of NIW-CRSO is to increase Poles’ involvement in volunteering and build a culture of co-responsibility for the environment, encouraging systematic help. In times of increasing polarization and crises, I believe that volunteering can foster connection and build bridges.

Michał Braun,
Director of NIW-CRSO

The Purpose of the Report:



Based on the most recent social research data, this report presents the current state of knowledge regarding the motives and origins of Polish citizens' involvement in volunteering and social activities, as well as the reasons for non-involvement. The primary objective of the report is to provide answers to key questions regarding the factors that influence involvement (or lack thereof) in volunteering and social activities. It is divided into two main parts, each addressing one of the following questions:

1) WHAT DO WE ALREADY KNOW? – Mapping existing research and synthesizing results

Chapter 2. The Scale of Volunteering in Poland

Chapter 3. Volunteering in Institutions

Chapter 4. The Future of Volunteering: Children and Youth

2) WHAT IS MISSING? – Identifying Knowledge Gaps

Chapter 6. Major Knowledge Gaps About Volunteering

In addition to analyzing the available data, we focused on the motivations and factors fostering volunteering engagement, as well as the barriers to social engagement. The report aims to synthesize knowledge on this topic from the most recent sources – latest statistics, reports, studies, and scientific and commercial publications. The analysis covers the period from 2020 to 2024. During this time, prosocial behaviors of Polish citizens were influenced by the pandemic, the outbreak of war in Ukraine, and the migration crisis. We occasionally refer to older data and reports to demonstrate long-term trends and potential research directions.

The report takes a broad approach to the issue of volunteering, including: school, corporate, and institutional volunteering; campaign-based, and long-term; and direct and online forms. It also examines the barriers and motivations in relation to other forms of social activity, both formal

and informal, within and outside of organizations, including grassroots activism and other forms of citizen collaboration. The report aims to answer the question of what is known about volunteering in non-governmental organizations and other institutions. It collects existing knowledge about the needs of organizations and volunteer coordinators, as well as opinions and experiences related to volunteering.

The report contains a synthesis of research results published by the Central Statistical Office (GUS) and other public institutions, as well as companies and research institutes. Research on the third sector conducted by academics is another important source of knowledge, as is Instytut Spraw Publicznych (the Institute of Public Affairs), Fundacja Rozwoju Systemu Edukacji (the Foundation for the Development of the Education System), Stowarzyszenie KLON/JAWOR (the KLON/JAWOR Association), Fundacja Stocznia (the Shipyard Foundation), Fundacja Odpowiedzialnego Biznesu (the Responsible Business Foundation), and other organizations monitoring NGOs and volunteer sectors. The report also analyzes data from Polskie Archiwum Danych Społecznych (the Polish Social Data Archive), which stores quantitative research databases and is maintained by the Institute for Social Studies (University of Warsaw). Finally, we utilize Repozytorium Danych Społecznych (the Social Data Repository), which collects qualitative and quantitative results. The existing data reports have been enriched with analyses coming from the research conducted by our team in recent years.

The scale of volunteering in Poland



2.1. Research on Volunteering in Poland

For over a decade, three major research centers have been conducting regular research on volunteering in Poland: the Central Statistical Office (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, or GUS), Public Opinion Research Center (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, or CBOS), and the Klon/Jawor Association (Stowarzyszenie Klon/Jawor). However, each of these adopts a different definition of volunteering.

Volunteering is defined by the Central Statistical Office (GUS) as: “Activities undertaken voluntarily and without pay, intended to benefit individuals or groups of people outside of one’s household (and excluding the volunteer’s family members); it may also be undertaken for the benefit of society, the environment, a particular town, or a community. Volunteering means devoting one’s free time. An activity classified as volunteering should be like work in nature, meaning that one could receive payment (remuneration) for it, but the person performing the work neither expects pay nor receives it” (GUS 2023).

According to the Central Statistical Office, *organizational volunteering* – volunteering performed within an organization or institution – refers to unpaid work performed by a respondent as a member of an organization or as a supporter of a particular organizational activity. The term *organizations* may refer to civic organizations (such as associations, foundations, or committees), organizational units (public institutions, cooperatives, churches), as well as their associated activities, programs, and initiatives – including those of private companies.

GUS defines *individual volunteering* as unpaid work performed outside of organizational structures by individuals for other individuals. This can include helping friends, acquaintances, and neighbors; providing aid to strangers; or undertaking activities that benefit society, the environment, a particular town, or a community.

GUS reports published in 2016 and 2022 provide data on the level of Polish adults’ engagement in volunteering. The reports also describe

demographic and social profiles of those devoting their free time to various forms of volunteering, the types of unpaid work they perform, information about organizations it was performed for, the total number of volunteer hours devoted to this kind of work in Polish society (expressed in full-time equivalents), and an estimated economic value of this work.

GUS indicators are generally higher than other measures of volunteering used in Poland due to a broader definition that combines activities in the private sphere with activities in the public sphere.

According to the GUS definition, **a volunteer** is someone *who* “provides services to organizations, institutions, individuals outside the volunteer’s family, the broader community, or the natural environment, voluntarily and without remuneration. Providing these services is referred to as community service or volunteering.”

The Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS) has released its report *Polish Citizens and Their Activity in Civic Organizations* every two years since 1998. According to the CBOS definition, volunteering can include various forms of civic activity, such as donating money and gifts to charity, donating one’s own work or services to charity, providing volunteer work, as well as participating in strikes or demonstrations.

CBOS research uses the following questions:

- *There are many opportunities for social engagement in Poland. Do you devote your free time to work in any organization, association, movement, club, or foundation? This question refers to active participation in the work of such organization(s), not just being a member. (1998-2022, Polish Citizens and Their Activity in Civic Organizations)*
- *Have you ever voluntarily and without pay worked for the benefit of your community, church, neighborhood, village, or town, or performed community service for those in need of help? (2002-2022, Polish Citizens on Altruism)*

The differences in the percentages of people declaring they do volunteer work according to CBOS and GUS surveys stem from varying understandings of the concept of a volunteer. CBOS notes that **some respondents who engage in voluntary, unpaid social work do not identify with the concept of a volunteer or do not understand it**, confusing it with other social activities. Interestingly, in the Public Opinion Research Center survey, people over 50 are the least likely to call activities for the benefit of their local community *volunteering*, unlike the youngest respondents, who have a broader understanding of this term. The Central Statistical Office, on the other hand, defines volunteering much more broadly, including both formal and informal volunteering, as

well as activities performed for the benefit of acquaintances, friends, or neighbors.

The Klon/Jawor survey defines volunteering from the perspective of third-sector organizations and rooted in the context of their activities. Volunteers are described as: “individuals who are not members of an organization or its governing bodies, and who engage in its activities voluntarily and without remuneration, regardless of whether a formal volunteer agreement has been signed.” It is worth noting that, unlike the GUS and CBOS surveys, the Klon/Jawor survey uses a purposive sample representative of the sector, rather than a random sample representative of the population (Klon/Jawor 2025).

The Central Statistical Office conducted a survey in 2022 as part of the Economic Activity Survey (PNZ). It included 21,900 participants, aged 15-89. The data were collected using an electronic application, and through telephone interviews (CATI) with the participant. Respondents were asked about their involvement in the four weeks before the survey was conducted.

The CBOS survey sample consisted of approximately 1,000 adults, drawn from the PESEL (Universal Electronic System for Registration of the Population) register. The study used a mixed-mode approach, allowing respondents to choose their preferred method of participation. In 2024, 60.7% of interviews were conducted using CAPI (tablet or laptop interview), 24.9% via CATI (telephone), and 14.4% CAWI (self-administered online questionnaire). Respondents were asked about their involvement over the previous year.

The Klon/Jawor 2024 survey covered a representative sample of 1,012 foundations and associations operating in Poland (excluding volunteer fire departments). Conducted between September and November 2024, the study collected data through an online questionnaire completed by the organizations themselves. Organizations selected for the survey received email invitations, and the respondents were individuals in management positions who were familiar with the situation of their organizations.

2.2. Polish Volunteering in a Nutshell

GUS Data

The latest GUS data covers the first quarter of the year 2022 (December 13th, 2021 – April 3rd, 2022), which was the time the full-scale war in Ukraine started. This influenced the survey results, as many Polish citizens engaged in helping Ukrainian refugees.

Among Polish residents aged 15 to 89, an average of 28.4% had volunteered at least once in the four weeks before the GUS survey. Therefore, the percentage of people volunteering decreased by 6.6

percentage points when compared to the results of previous research – in the first quarter of 2016, it was 35%. However, depending on the week of the survey, the engagement rate ranged from 23.7% to 37.1%. It reached the highest level – 37.1% – between February 21st and March 20th, 2022. As mentioned before, the percentage of people involved in helping strangers or working with organizations increased largely due to the mass mobilization of Polish citizens in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The conflict began on February 24th, 2022, and resulted in the mass forced migration of Ukrainian refugees to Poland. The largest influx of migrants was recorded in March.

In Poland, volunteering is primarily individual, involving five times more people than volunteering in organizations or institutions (26.5% vs. 5%). Since it usually occurs outside of formal structures, this phenomenon becomes less visible. Often happening on a local level, it is harder to capture it in official statistics (particularly international ones). Polish volunteers mostly support acquaintances, friends, or neighbors (22%), and are much less likely to provide assistance to strangers or engage in activities benefiting the environment or local communities (5.8% and 1.9%, respectively).

Volunteering within an organization mainly occurs in the non-profit sector (3.4%) and, to a lesser extent, in public sector institutions (1.3%). Volunteers most frequently engage in associations and foundations (1.9%) and churches, parishes, and other religious organizations (1.5%). Notably, in 2022, 10% of volunteers reported participating in efforts to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Simple tasks benefiting the immediate community were performed the most often. These tasks include: paying bills, buying medicine, shopping, sweeping, cleaning stairwells, collecting, sorting, and disposing of garbage, as well as shoveling snow – 30.3% of volunteers declared doing this kind of job. Nearly a quarter of volunteers (23.3%) engaged in some kind of managerial tasks (primarily organizing exhibitions, sporting events, dance or music classes), as well as promoting and supporting volunteering.

Volunteers also frequently provided caregiving services (23.2%) for children, older adults, and the sick, including nursing and first aid. The least commonly reported activities were connected to farming, forestry, and fishing (3%). However, this may be related to the timing of the survey (winter), when fieldwork is more difficult. These percentages would likely be higher in the third quarter.

Socioeconomic Profile of Volunteers in Poland

In the first quarter of 2022, the highest proportion of individuals engaged in individual volunteering was among those aged 25–34 (29.4%) and 35–44 (31.2%). For organizational volunteering, the 15–24 age group dominated, with a participation rate of 18.6%. Overall, data from the

Visegrad Group (V4) countries, including Poland, indicate that the highest level of volunteer engagement occurred among younger generations (51.6%), and gradually declined with age to 25.2% among the oldest group. These results are consistent across all V4 countries.

In Poland during the first quarter of 2022, the average time devoted to volunteering increased with age. Individuals aged 65-89 spent an average of 13.1 hours per month volunteering. The younger groups (15-24 and 25-34) accounted for a significantly smaller proportion of total volunteering time compared to their share in the general population, whereas people aged 45-54 and 55-64 contributed proportionally more. These results suggest that volunteer engagement tends to decline among the youngest and oldest cohorts; therefore, taking actions to support their participation seems necessary.

During the same period, women volunteered slightly more often than men, both individually (26.8% versus 25.4%) and within organizations (5.8% versus 4.1%). Overall, women accounted for 50.5% of all individuals engaged in voluntary work within registered non-profit organizations in 2022.

Although men were marginally more active than women (31.1% versus 28.4%) in formal volunteering over the previous 24 months, women (72.8%) were more involved than men in all forms of volunteering or charitable giving (66.4%) – a statistically significant difference. The predominance of women in certain areas (e.g., rural women's associations, religious organizations, social and humanitarian help) and of men in others (e.g., employers' associations, political parties, hunting, rescue services) reflects the gendered diversification of volunteer involvement. Still, the non-profit sector in Poland is generally regarded as female-dominated.

Higher levels of education are associated with greater engagement in both individual and organized volunteering. Those with higher education were the most active (33.7% in individual volunteering; 8% in organized volunteering). Level of education had little impact on the amount of time spent volunteering, however, those with post-secondary or vocational secondary education devoted the most time (10.9 hours per month).

In the first quarter of 2022, the average time spent volunteering was longest among economically inactive individuals, 12 hours per month (for example, pensioners, people on disability pensions, parents on parental leave, etc.). The shortest average was reported among the unemployed (7.5 hours). In Poland volunteering – particularly in formal contexts – is strongly associated with household income; with higher-income households showing greater engagement. However, this relationship, does not apply to personal income levels. The findings support the observation that individuals with higher household incomes have more time and financial flexibility, enabling them to engage more actively in social initiatives.

The highest percentage of volunteers was recorded in large cities (with over 100,000 inhabitants – 29.5%), followed by small towns (up to 20,000 inhabitants – 28.8%), and rural areas (28.4%). Urban residents also devoted slightly more time to volunteering (10.3 hours per month) than those living in rural areas (9.2 hours). Studies on volunteering among young people aged 14-15 indicate that living in urban areas increases the likelihood of being a volunteer, which may be linked to the greater availability of institutions and volunteer programs in cities.

CBOS Data

According to CBOS research from the past 10 years, between 4% and 15% of adult citizens have volunteered. In 2023, 8% of respondents reported volunteering. In 2020, 21% of respondents reported doing some kind of unpaid work for organizations, which was very close to the global average.

A CBOS survey conducted in February 2022 found that nearly 63% of respondents had engaged in voluntary and unpaid work for individuals outside their families. However, when participation was measured over the course of a year, the share of active volunteers dropped significantly, to 16%. This figure also represented a 10-percentage-point decline from 2020, likely reflecting the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

When the definition of volunteering is limited to work performed for social organizations, CBOS data indicates an engagement rate of 40% at the beginning of 2022. This marks a slight increase over the years, except for a unique level of engagement in 2020: 20% in 2008, 32% in 2012, 37% in 2016, 40% in 2018, 43% in 2020, and 40% in both 2022 and 2023.

Since 1998, CBOS has monitored the percentage of adult Poles involved in civic organizations every two years. The survey takes into account participation in the works of organizations, not just memberships, combining membership (and *member volunteering*) with volunteering done by individuals outside the organization. In 2022, as in the previous years, respondents devoted their time most often to working in charities helping children (13.6% in 2022 and 11.3% in 2024) and adults in need (11.3% in 2022 and 12.9% in 2024) including people with disabilities, older people, individuals living in poverty, and the homeless. Approximately one-tenth of respondents (9.8% in 2022 and 10.5% in 2024) are involved in organizations that support education and training. A similar number of people participated in sports organizations, associations, or clubs (9.2% in 2022 and 8.5% in 2024).

The compound indicator of community service involvement calculated by CBOS includes both voluntary and unpaid work for the local community and people in need (26% in 2019, 16% in 2021, and 20% in 2023, 16% in 2021, and 26% in 2019) as well as participation in civic organizations (40%). This indicator reflects the overall scope of community service

activities undertaken by Polish citizens in the 12 months prior to the survey.

The latest CBOS survey (2024) shows that in 2023, social activists represented 44% of adult Poles, which is comparable to the 45% recorded in 2021, but it is lower than in 2019, a record year in this area (51%). In this group, 16% reported working both for a civic organization (up from 11% in 2021) and directly with people in need. Over a quarter of respondents (29%, up from 24% in 2021) were engaged in civic activities solely within civic organizations, while 4% were active only outside such organizations (5% in 2021).

A separate CBOS study of young people (*Youth*, 2021) showed that over a quarter of surveyed students (27%) reported participating in informal groups or organizations.

Klon/Jawor Data

The most recent data on organizational volunteering, as presented in the Klon/Jawor report and related studies (including research conducted in 2024 by the Institute for Research on Cultural Organizations in cooperation with the National Institute of Volunteering), provides an up-to-date picture of this phenomenon in Poland. The main source of quantitative information in the report *Systematic Volunteering, or Once Again on Social Engagement* (published in 2025 and based on 2024 research), is the Volunteer Service System (System Obsługi Wolontariatu – SOW), which contains data from the fourth quarter of 2024.

As of November 12, 2024, quantitative data from the Volunteer Service System recorded 2,437 organizations benefiting from volunteer engagement, including 168 organizations that work with regular volunteers. A total of 21,762 volunteers were registered in the system amounted to, 72.2% (15,717) of whom were women. Notably, 76.6% (16,680) of the registered volunteers were minors.

The percentage of organizations engaging volunteers has remained stable for the past decade at approximately 60%. Volunteers have become more frequently involved in foundations and organizations with permanent paid staff and larger budgets, particularly in rural areas. Despite the consistently high proportion of NGOs utilizing volunteer support (62% in 2024, 61% in 2021, 64% in 2018), the average number of volunteers per organization has changed over time – falling from 15 in 2002 to 5 in 2021, then rising again to 8 in 2024.

The number of regular volunteers – those cooperating with organizations at least once a month – remains stable. On average, each organization can count on the regular support from two volunteers. According to data from 2022, 46% of regular volunteers devoted 1–5 hours per month, 26% contributed 6–10 hours, and 15% volunteered for more than

11 hours per month. At the same time, nearly one in three associations and foundations organizing volunteering (31%) did not have any regular volunteers. Therefore, volunteering in those organizations only occurs on an occasional or *ad hoc* basis.

The results of the report, *We Trust, but... Polish Women and Men About Non-Governmental Organizations* (Klon/Jawor Association), show the important context of the development of volunteering in organizations. According to 2023 data, 63% of Polish citizens declare trust in non-governmental organizations, which represents a 7 percentage point increase compared to 2020. The greatest level of trust (75%) is expressed by individuals who have had personal contact with NGOs – as members, volunteers, donors, or beneficiaries. Among those who have not had contact with NGOs, the level of trust is lower (52%), indicating a vicious circle of exclusion. A lack of trust discourages participation in volunteer activities, and conversely, a lack of participation perpetuates distrust. Although the percentage of Polish people who believe that NGOs are prone to abuse and nepotism has dropped significantly over the past two decades (by 26 percentage points), 37% of respondents still hold this view. While 41% of respondents believe that NGOs effectively address local problems, only 36% see their impact on national issues – a figure that has slightly declined since 2020.

The percentage of people who had contact with an NGO in the previous year increased from 16% in 2020 to 24%. This increase is the result of a wave of social engagement in the first months of the war in Ukraine, among other things. Still, Polish citizens who are professionally active, live in cities, and with higher education are more likely to have contact with non-governmental organizations.

As many as 51% of adult citizens declared that during the previous year they had financially supported an NGO, with 35% of them doing so more than once. Only 4% of respondents donated funds monthly. Therefore, planning activities based on donations may prove difficult for many organizations.

The *Condition of Non-Governmental Organizations* study shows that two-thirds of NGOs operate in the sports, education, or cultural sectors. Only 7% specialize in social welfare, and 4% in environmental protection, despite growing prominence on these issues in public debate.

Since 2016, the overall level of engagement in social and volunteer activities has remained relatively stable:

- 40–45% of adult respondents report participating in social activities each year (CBOS).
- 8% report volunteering annually (ranging from 4% to 15%) (CBOS).

- 23.7% to 37.1% of respondents aged 15–89 who volunteered in the four weeks before the survey; on average, 28.4% volunteered at least once. (GUS).
- Among those who volunteered in the past four weeks, 22% supported acquaintances, friends, or neighbors (GUS).
- 3.4% of respondents aged 15–89, who volunteered in the past four weeks, did so for the non-profit sector (GUS).
- 60–64% of Polish NGOs use of volunteer support.

2.3. Volunteering in Polish Cities and Regions

We conducted a detailed analysis of reports from four cities and metropolitan areas – Krakow (Kraków), Warsaw (Warszawa), Poznan (Poznań), and Tricity (Gdańsk, Gdynia, Sopot; Trójmiasto) – as well as from two regions: Lesser Poland and West Pomerania. This allowed us to compare the results regarding volunteering activity in Polish cities and regions.

There is a significant challenge in conducting a comprehensive analysis, rooted in the methodological differences between studies, particularly in terms of sampling methods and respondents' age and profile. For example, studies conducted in cities were based on representative samples of residents, while regional studies focused solely on individuals already engaged in volunteering (see Table 1).

Table 1. Reports on the state of volunteering in cities and regions of Poland analyzed in detail in this study

	Research year	Age of respondents	Profile of respondents
Tricity	2009	adults and minors from secondary school age	residents
Krakow	2020	adults	residents
Warsaw	2025	aged 18 and up	residents
Poznan	2021	adults and minors	residents
West Pomerania	2024	adults and minors	volunteers only
Lesser Poland	2024	adults and minors	volunteers only

Gdansk-Gdynia-Sopot (Tricity)

Based on: Buczyńska, A., Buczyński, P., Dębski, M., Kisiel, B. (2009). Potencjał wolontarystyczny mieszkańców w Trójmieście. Regionalne Centrum Wolontariatu w Gdańsku.

A comprehensive study on volunteering was conducted in Tricity, an urban area consisting of the cities of Gdansk, Gdynia, and Sopot. The study included people who were actively involved in volunteering

(4.3%), but also those who had never volunteered (75.9%), or had withdrawn (19.8%). A total of 2,953 people were surveyed. The research questions referred to the participants' entire lives, not just the last four months, two years, or previous year. This broad approach allowed to capture residents' diverse attitudes toward community service and their experiences.

The decision to withdraw from volunteering was a particularly interesting aspect of the study. The most commonly cited reason for the decision was lack of time, though other reasons were mentioned, including the need to take care of one's own health and well-being, negative experiences, uninteresting offers, physical limitations, and the feeling of not being invited to participate in volunteering activities. It is worth emphasizing that the longer a person was inactive as a volunteer, the less likely they were to re-engage. This is important given the increase in occasional volunteering after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Maintaining the social potential mobilized during that period is time-sensitive, since longer breaks make it more difficult for volunteers to return.

The study also showed that some individuals tried to get involved but had never managed to volunteer (6.4% of respondents). Therefore, there is a group of people who could potentially get involved, but they have not yet found a suitable form of activity or have had no access to the necessary information.

Responses to the following questions: *Have you ever volunteered?* and *Have you ever worked voluntarily and free of pay for the benefit of your community, church, neighborhood, village, or city, or done social work to help those in need?* produced different results. The findings suggest that the society's intuitive understanding of volunteering is largely limited to charitable activities, overlooking broader forms of civic engagement. While 23% of respondents answered positively to the first question, as many as 56.1% did so to the second one. Therefore, one of the study's key findings is that volunteering is often perceived as primarily helping those in need. This limits its perceived accessibility and attractiveness.

As many as 43.7% of Tricity residents do not feel well-informed about volunteering opportunities in their city. Furthermore, 20.2% declared a complete lack of knowledge in this area. Only 23.8% of respondents believed themselves to be knowledgeable in available forms of engagement, and 12.2% of respondents were unable to provide a clear answer. Information about volunteering opportunities can come from social connections. If you know someone who volunteers, you have an easy and direct access to information, thus reducing the cost of entry. In the study, respondents often indicated that they had active volunteers in their circle (44.6%). This may influence their perception of the phenomenon itself. Unfortunately, the report did not offer analyses showing the relationship between volunteering involvement, knowledge about volunteering, or reasons for withdrawal, and having friends who are actively involved.

The form of involvement also plays a significant role – 53.3% of people prefer occasional volunteering, while only 23.4% prefer regular involvement.

The Tricity research provides valuable insight into attitudes, motivations, and barriers to engagement. The types of offers and their availability are crucial for development, as are education and information. We should change the way we talk about volunteering, shifting the emphasis from altruistic dedication to presenting volunteering as a civic activity.

This study gave rise to new research questions:

- When people start volunteering?
- At what age do they stop volunteering?
- Why do people give up on volunteering? Many declare a lack of time, but the question of what changed in their lives to cause this remains unanswered.
- What is the impact of social relationships on volunteering?
- Why do people not engage today? Have the reasons they gave 15 years ago changed, or are they still the same?

Krakow and Lesser Poland

Based on: Wit, H., Latko, P., Chlebicki, M. (2021). Społeczeństwo obywatelskie w Krakowie. Raport z badania. Fundacja Socjometr Laboratorium Rozwiązań Społecznych.

The 2021 *Civic Society in Krakow* study explored different forms of social engagement among the city's residents. The survey included 600 participants. Twenty-three percent of respondents declared that they had been involved in local community activities within the past two years. However, only 16% were members of any organization, and just 8% were actively involved. Regarding unpaid social work in the past year, 11% engaged rarely, 20% frequently, and 69% did not engage at all.

The most active group, in terms of social work and participation in local activities, was aged 35-55. This may be related to having children and participating in school initiatives, but the study did not explore this further. People over 56 were the most likely to become formal members of an organization. A similar percentage (approximately 8-9%) across all age groups had inactive memberships.

Residents' knowledge of local NGOs could be improved – 42% were unable to name any.

In 2021, an evaluation was also conducted on the cooperation between non-governmental organizations and the Krakow City Office (UMK). Of the surveyed NGOs, 61.3% reported collaborating with the city, primarily in the areas of education, culture, and civic engagement. This cooperation included activities supporting people with disabilities, helping those in difficult life situations, and initiatives related to leisure time. There was less interest in areas such as environmental protection, health, sports, and the integration of foreigners.

Organizations with prior experience cooperating with UMK rated the city's approach to relations with the third sector significantly more favorably. For instance, the average score for officials' attitudes towards NGOs was 3.6 among organizations that had worked with the city, compared to 2.9 among those that had not. Similar differences appeared in the assessments of joint projects and the city's overall contribution to the development of civil society. These results suggest that genuine engagement fosters a more positive perception of municipal institutions.

According to NGOs, the most important areas of residents' activity were support for people with disabilities (87%), seniors (86%), and the functioning of the Participatory Budget (84%). Regarding civic and social engagement, 67.3% of NGO representatives believed that informal civic initiatives should be treated equally to formal organizations in their dialogue with the city.

Despite these results, organizations did not feel influential when it came to decisions made by the city. 45.3% of NGO representatives did not believe that public consultation processes changed the actions of the Municipal Office in any way. Even among city officials, only 43% believed that consultations had a real impact – indicating a structural deficit of trust and effectiveness in the civic dialogue.

Based on: Dąbrowski, A., Jaśkiewicz, P., Stępnik, K. (2024). Badanie kondycji wolontariatu w małopolskich organizacjach pozarządowych. Kraków.

Non-Governmental Organizations

This report on the state of volunteering in Lesser Poland non-governmental organizations was developed based on surveys of volunteers (N=189) and NGO representatives (N=285). The findings suggest that volunteering is a significant and often integral part of organizational activities. Among NGOs, internal (68%) and campaign-based (58%) volunteering predominate, meaning that organizations typically engage their own volunteers for short periods, such as for one-off events.

At the same time, 42% of organizations working with volunteers report a need for more long-term and stable volunteer engagement. Furthermore, NGOs often collaborate with only a few external

volunteers – 41% indicated collaboration with one to five such individuals, which is a result consistent with nationwide research.

The organization's board members are most often responsible for volunteer management (74%). However, few NGOs had a training coordinator, and nearly half of the respondents admitted that the volunteer managers had not completed any training to prepare them for the role.

The most frequently cited challenges in volunteer management were high turnover (volunteers burn out quickly), the need to foster volunteer autonomy, and challenges arising from generational differences. Nevertheless, previous cooperation with volunteers received a relatively high average rating of 4.37 on a six-point scale.

In light of research showing that negative experiences are a common reason for volunteers to discontinue their involvement, the lack of management training may be crucial. There is also a noticeable absence of extensive inter-organizational cooperation. As many as 60% of NGOs do not engage in joint activities to promote or develop volunteering, which may limit its scale and impact.

Overall, the findings suggest that although volunteering is appreciated and recognized as valuable, the sector could benefit from a more professional and systematic approach to its development.

Volunteers

Based on the data collected for this report, it can be concluded that the experiences of volunteers in Lesser Poland are diverse. However, many indicators suggest a high level of commitment and strong intrinsic motivation in the group. Nearly one-third of the respondents have been engaged in volunteering for over a decade. Most of them cooperate with a single organization, but almost half (44%) are involved in several places simultaneously. Volunteering takes the form of both long-term and short-term (event-based) engagement. The dominant model is internal volunteering, which is volunteering carried out within the organization with which the volunteer cooperates. An interesting finding is the percentage of employee (corporate) volunteering is relatively low and written agreements meant to formalize the cooperation are rarely signed. In fact, 26% of volunteers report never having signed such an agreement.

People who volunteer often do not have children (44%), are in a good or very good financial situation (66%), and are professionally active (69%). They are generally satisfied with their professional situation. The surveyed group often felt that their work was interesting and the tasks they performed were meaningful and required constant skill improvement. Sixty-one percent of respondents stated they devoted one to twenty hours of free time per week, and 52% typically reported doing everything they had to and still having some free time left.

The study showed that volunteering mostly involved working with children and youth in areas of culture as well as social welfare. The motivations of volunteers were primarily altruistic. Volunteering was associated with many challenges, with balancing family life and professional work as a main one. Intergenerational differences and bureaucracy were mentioned, as well as loss of motivation. Finally, commuting and the difficulty in finding offers fitting to volunteer's preferences turned out to have an influence on engagement levels. Despite this, as many as 80% of respondents planned to continue or increase their involvement, while 12% said they would rather reduce it – mostly due to a lack of time or a shift in priorities. Among those who withdrew from volunteering, lack of time, insufficient knowledge about re-engagement possibilities, and the belief that organizations can manage without their help were the main reasons given.

On the other hand, from the perspective of NGOs, volunteer turnover, insufficient training of coordinators, and limited communication were problematic. Although most organizations assessed collaboration with volunteers positively, there is a need for better management, professionalization, and assistance in developing soft skills. It is also important that volunteers can reach for adequate support. Particularly in youth volunteering, engagement is strongly linked to family attitudes and aid (parents' involvement and commitment to pro-social values).

According to the authors, volunteering in Poland is strongly motivated by the willingness to help others, but further development requires better institutional preparation, clearer communication, as well as an emphasis on the benefits from this activity.

Poznan

Based on: Poznań (2021). Diagnoza trzeciego sektora i wolontariatu.

Interesting insights into attitudes toward volunteering come from a survey conducted among Poznan residents (N = 384). Only 32.8% of respondents said they had not engaged in any unpaid and voluntary work for their local community – such as their parish, neighborhood, town, or for people in need – during the past 12 months. Among those who had not volunteered, some expressed potential interest: 49.6% would be willing to get involved if they were confident that their efforts would not go to waste, 24.1% expected tangible benefits from participation, and 23.7% would consider volunteering if it provided an opportunity to acquire new skills. Concurrently, nearly one in four respondents admitted that none of these factors would motivate them to act. Overall, 63.8% declared their willingness to volunteer in their free time, and 48.7% expressed interest in e-volunteering.

Part of the study addressed those with volunteering experience exclusively. Participants were asked about their motivations. The most frequently mentioned reason was a desire to help others (declared

by 60% of respondents). A sense of meaning and satisfaction was the second most mentioned reason (48%), and almost a third of volunteers (approx. 30%) said they wanted to feel a part of a community. Motivators such as the opportunity to participate in special events (18%) or social recognition (12%) were indicated significantly less frequently. Regarding time spent volunteering, nearly half of the respondents declared they devoted one to five hours per week, comparable to results from other cities. Volunteers acknowledged a need to improve their skills. 57.9% said they would participate in training, particularly in the area of psychology, first aid, law, and caring for people with special needs.

West Pomerania

Based on: Kukiela, K., Bagińska, E. (2024). Diagnoza wolontariatu na Pomorzu Zachodnim. Raport z badań.

This survey was conducted among volunteers and volunteer coordinators (N = 102). It was distributed via links on the association's website, social media (Facebook), and in direct emails.

Respondents aged 40-49 constituted the largest group (35%). This is a stage of life often associated with greater professional and personal stability, which can foster better social engagement. Most respondents (76.5%) were female. As many as 48% of respondents lived in larger cities with populations ranging from 150,000 to 500,000, and 69% were college graduate. Furthermore, 73% were professionally active.

The vast majority of participants (92%) were involved in working for the benefit of local communities, demonstrating a strong connection to their immediate surroundings and willingness to improve the quality of life in their neighborhoods. Volunteering on a local level meant that the activities were more relevant to the actual needs of residents. 66.7% of respondents devoted between one and five hours per week to working for others.

Volunteers evaluated the atmosphere and working conditions within their teams positively. 86.3% considered in-house communication to be good or very good, and as much as 96% positively assessed the atmosphere. Furthermore, 73% of respondents reported feeling appreciated for their work.

Warsaw

Based on: Sójka, D. (2025). Aktywność mieszkanek i mieszkańców Warszawy w wolontariacie. Raport z realizacji badania.

The study involved 654 respondents, 70% of whom were women, 28% of whom were men, and 2% did not indicate their gender. This gender imbalance may have been caused by the research method – women are more likely to participate in online surveys.

Respondents were almost evenly divided into those with volunteering experience (52%) and without (48%). Non-volunteers mentioned two primary barriers for participating: lack of time and concern that they would need to be systematically involved. Those considering volunteering often perceived it as an additional duty. Among skeptics, the prevailing belief was that volunteering meant unpaid work without any benefits.

The motivations of volunteers revolved around five main needs: helping others, being needed, having an impact, making a difference, curiosity and a desire to meet new people. Therefore, the ability to influence one's immediate environment seemed to be an important issue. The question is whether volunteering strengthens the agency of people who lack it, or whether it attracts those who already feel influential in their daily lives. Study results do not provide a clear answer.

Respondents learned about the possibility of volunteering from family, friends, or NGO websites. Social media's role in this process remains unclear. While it is effective in maintaining engagement, it also plays a significant role in attracting new people. The process leading up to the decision to engage in volunteering was not examined in detail in the report.

Barriers for continuing volunteering after previous experience, cited most frequently, were lack of time and the need for consistency. Additional problems included: no training for volunteers, poor flow of information, lack of reimbursement, and little prestige associated with being a volunteer.

For comparison, the Warsaw Barometer shows that in 2024, 14% of Warsaw residents devoted time to unpaid work or helped the city of Warsaw at least once in the past year. Additionally, 22% helped in their neighborhood. As many as 60% devoted their free time to helping friends and acquaintances. 12% of Warsaw residents volunteered for a non-governmental organization, and 60% of these were one-time initiatives. Family members or friends connected respondents with organizations in 40% of cases. Advertisements at school or work, or media coverage, were effective in the case of 15% of respondents.

People in Warsaw did not engage for the following reasons: lack of time (49%), health problems (25%), preoccupation with family life (20%), or

simply lack of interest in volunteering (19%). Since this was a multiple-choice question, the percentages do not add up to 100%. All studies confirmed that personal recommendations and invitations remained the most important channel for NGOs to recruit volunteers. This communication model significantly limits the ability to reach outside of specific communities. Although organizations used social media and collaborated with institutions that unite volunteers, direct contact seemed to be the primary recruitment method.

When identifying reasons for giving up volunteering or not engaging at all, all studies point to a lack of time. However, this issue requires further analysis and a closer look to better understand what a *lack of time* means in this context.

Key findings from city and regional studies:

- A lack of access to raw data and full versions of the questionnaires used in the studies significantly hinders comparability and in-depth analyses.
- There is a need to standardize the methodology and set of questions used to study volunteering activity in cities and regions. A core set of recommended questions should be developed to enable comparisons between studies, especially publicly funded ones.
- Analyses conducted at the local level are often limited to simple frequency distributions, sometimes broken down by basic demographic categories. There is a lack of more advanced analyses that would allow for the identification of correlations and relationships between variables.
- The most frequently cited barrier to volunteering is a lack of time. However, this is a very broad concept that may conceal various underlying causes. Future studies should explore this issue and attempt to break it down into specific components.
- The findings indicate that the social environment (particularly family and friends), may play a key role in motivating individuals to volunteer. More attention should be devoted to analyzing social networks and their influence on different forms of engagement.

2.4. Summary: Factors Influencing the Level of Volunteering in Poland

The tradition of volunteering in post-communist countries, including Poland, differs significantly from that in other parts of Europe. During the communist era, *community service* was a state-imposed duty rather than a voluntary act. This distorted the idea of freely helping others and gave social work an ambivalent meaning for many years. The activities of the third sector were tightly controlled by the authorities at that time, which limited the development of independent civic initiatives. It was only after the political transformation of the 1990s that non-governmental organizations – and with them, modern forms of volunteering – could develop freely.

This historical context helps explain why some respondents in CBOS surveys who report voluntary, unpaid community work do not necessarily identify as volunteers. Culturally, the concept of volunteering is still not fully embedded in Poland, where mutual family or neighborly support is often seen as a natural social obligation rather than volunteer work. As in many other European countries, Poles are more likely to engage in informal volunteering – such as helping individuals or local communities directly – than in formal volunteering arranged by organizations or institutions. In early 2022, more than five times as many people were involved in individual volunteering as in organized volunteer programs.

Volunteering is also more common in urban areas, likely due to the greater number of opportunities available in cities. A clear correlation exists between household income, education level, and volunteering rates. People with higher incomes and education are more likely to participate in both formal and informal volunteering, as well as in donor-led activities.

Although Poland – like other Central and Eastern European countries – has traditionally had lower volunteering rates than the EU average or those of Western European nations, there are visible upward trends, especially during times of crisis and among young people. Today, volunteering in Poland is characterized by a predominance of informal forms of engagement and a strong link between civic participation, income, and education.

According to the studies cited above, a number of individual-level challenges and barriers that limit the development of engagement and volunteering in Poland can be identified.

- **Lack of time:** The most frequently cited reason for not engaging in volunteering, particularly visible among people with family responsibilities or irregular working hours. However, more in-depth data is needed to better understand reasons for this declaration and for designing volunteer programs suited to individual needs.

- **Fear of the requirement for regular commitment:** Volunteering is often associated with constant and systematic engagement, which discourages some potential volunteers.
- **Low social prestige and misunderstanding of the idea of volunteering:** In Poland, volunteering is sometimes equated with unpaid community work, leading to its perception as a *waste of time*, *exploitation*, or *cheap labor*. Many people do not identify as volunteer, preferring labels such as activist or community worker.
- **Lack of knowledge and information about offers:** Nearly half of Poles do not know the name of any organization offering volunteering opportunities, and 29% do not know how to apply. The communication and distribution of information about available opportunities is ineffective.
- **No invitation or encouragement:** More than two-thirds of respondents indicated that they did not engage in volunteering because they were not asked. This may explain why people in Poland often help others in their immediate surroundings when asked directly.
- **Volunteering is idealized:** The widespread belief that volunteering is only for people with a *calling* or special predispositions discourages many from getting involved.
- **Not enough systemic psychological and physical support:** There are few studies on the negative effects of volunteering, such as burnout or physical and mental fatigue. The lack of systemic support in this area can lead to withdrawal from volunteering.
- **Low quality or limited offers:** Sometimes, volunteer offers are too limited, uninteresting, or not aligned with the organization's mission, which lowers their quality. Beneficiaries often prefer regular, long-term support, but school or corporate volunteer groups tend to focus on one-time events.
- **Unreliable declarations and *doing it one's own way*:** Some people declare a willingness to help but later do not follow through, or they want to act independently, regardless of the organizer's needs. This creates difficulties for coordinators.

The dynamic interaction of many factors influences the level of volunteering in Poland. Despite challenges such as a lack of time, a low perceived value of volunteering in the labor market, and the idealization of this activity, there is growing awareness of its importance and strong potential for further development. The future of volunteering in Poland depends on continuing the efforts to promote its diverse forms, ensuring that volunteers and coordinators get professional support, and creating a culture in which volunteering is seen as a natural and valuable part of social life that is accessible to everyone.

2.5. Key Findings

- **Definition and research methodology diversity:** In Poland, three main institutions conduct research on volunteering: the Central Statistical Office (GUS), the Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS), and the Klon/Jawor Association. Each institution adopts a different definition of volunteering, which leads to different results. The GUS uses the broadest definition, which includes both formal volunteering and individual help given to friends, neighbors, or family members outside one's household. CBOS focuses on activity within civic organizations and unpaid work for the community or people in need. Klon/Jawor does research on volunteering only in the context of third-sector organizations.
- **Dominance of individual (informal) volunteering:** In Poland, individual volunteering, performed outside of organizational structures (helping friends, acquaintances, or neighbors), is much more common than organizational volunteering. According to GUS data from the first quarter of 2022, five times more people are involved in individual volunteering (26.5%) than in similar work in organizations or institutions (5%).
- **Overall level of social engagement in Poland:**

 - In the first quarter of 2022, during the four weeks preceding the survey, **an average of 28.4% of Polish people aged 15-89 were engaged in some type of volunteering work** (GUS).
 - Over the last 10 years, between 4% and 15% of adults volunteered annually, and in 2023, 8% declared that they worked as volunteers (CBOS). When using a broader definition of *community activists*, which includes work for the local community and civic organizations, they accounted for 44% of Polish adults in 2023.
 - Klon/Jawor reports show **that 60-64% of Polish non-governmental organizations rely on volunteers**. The average number of volunteers per organization increased from five in 2021 to eight in 2024.
- **Impact of crises:** Events such as the outbreak of war in Ukraine (February 2022) had a significant impact on the rise of volunteer engagement. GUS recorded **the highest level of volunteering (37.1%) between 21 February and 20 March, 2022**, mainly due to the Polish mobilization in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The wave of social engagement during the first months of the war also contributed to the increase in declared contacts with NGOs over the past year (from 16% to 24%).
- **Volunteers and their socio-demographic profile (GUS, first quarter of 2022):**

 - **Age:** Individual volunteering is most common among people aged 25 to 44. Organizational volunteering is dominated by the youngest

age group (15-24). Older adults (65-89) devote the most time to volunteering (an average of 13.1 hours per month).

- **Gender:** Women are slightly more likely than men to volunteer, both individually (26.8% versus 25.4%) and through organizations (5.8% versus 4.1%).
- **Education and income:** Higher education levels and household income correlate with greater engagement in volunteering, particularly formal volunteering.
- **Place of residence:** The highest share of volunteers is in large cities (over 100,000 residents – 29.5%).

- **Key barriers:** Lack of time is the most frequently cited reason. Other important reasons include lack of interest (reported by 27% of respondents – one of the highest results in the EU), fear of the need for systematic involvement, negative experiences, and insufficient knowledge about available opportunities.
- **Volunteer motivations:** The main motivations include the desire to help others (60% in Poznan), a sense of meaning and satisfaction (48%), and the need to belong to a community (around 30%).
- **Limited engagement in formal volunteering from an international perspective:** Poland lags behind the EU average in terms of formal volunteering participation rates, as do other V4 countries. According to OECD data, formal volunteering activity in Poland (5.64% of the population aged 15 and over in 2022/23) is the lowest among all OECD countries, and significantly below the average (22%). In the 2019 World Giving Index, Poland ranked 104th out of 126 countries in terms of time devoted to volunteering.
- **High engagement in informal volunteering in an international perspective:** Despite low formal engagement, Poland has a relatively high level of informal volunteering (22.1% according to EU-SILC 2022), ranking 8th among European countries.
- **Communism legacy influences the perceptions of volunteering:** In post-communist countries, including Poland, the tradition of state-imposed social work conflicted with the concept of voluntary engagement. *Community work* became an ambivalent term for many years. This may explain why some respondents do not identify with the term.
- **Low level of knowledge and trust in NGOs at the local level:** Regional studies (e.g., Tricity and Krakow) reveal a low level of public awareness of volunteering opportunities (43.7% in the Tricity felt uninformed) and local NGOs (42% in Krakow could not name any). Despite a general increase in trust toward NGOs in Poland (63% in 2023), 37% of Poles still believe that they may be grounds for abuse.
- **Need for professional coordination and promotion of volunteering:** Research results suggest that for volunteering in Poland to

continue developing, better institutional and communication preparation is essential, as well as stronger promotion of the benefits of volunteering. There is also a need for improved volunteer management and coordinator training, as negative experiences are one of the main reasons for withdrawal.

- **Recommendations for future research:** Standardizing methodologies and question sets in volunteering research (particularly at the local and international levels) would enable better comparability of results and ongoing monitoring of the state of volunteering. Future studies should also explore several issues that are currently addressed only superficially, such as the *lack of time* barrier and the influence of social relationships on volunteer engagement.

Volunteering in Organizations and Institutions

3

3.1. Volunteering in Non-Governmental Organizations

NGOs form a natural environment for volunteering. In Poland, they initiate volunteer activities and act as intermediaries between volunteers and those they support. According to the 2024 *Condition of Non-Governmental Organizations* report by the Klon/Jawor Association, around 62% of organizations engaged volunteers in their activities. However, only some maintained regular, long-term cooperation. As previously mentioned, one in three organizations working with volunteers did not have a single permanent volunteer. This may reflect the irregular nature of Polish NGOs themselves as well as the preferences of volunteers, who are increasingly interested in short-term or occasional involvement rather than ongoing commitments.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a dual impact on the sector. On the one hand, many NGOs had to temporarily or permanently abandon some or all of their activities. On the other hand, there was an *explosion* of social solidarity, often expressed through informal, neighborly assistance. Overall, the availability of volunteers working with NGOs declined, with 36% of organizations reporting fewer volunteers. The largest decreases were observed among organizations active in social services, social welfare, and culture – areas the most affected by restrictions and event cancellations. At the same time, 12% of NGOs attracted more volunteers, and nearly one in four launched new initiatives during this period.

As Lewandowska-Bratek (2017) noted, effective volunteer management depends on several factors, including clearly defined roles, efficient internal communication, opportunities for leadership competence development, and the use of incentive systems, such as certificates or volunteer skill development paths. The absence of these factors often leads to high turnover, a feeling of lack of agency among volunteers, and reduced trust in the organization.

In practice, many Polish NGOs lack the formal structures necessary for the professional coordination and management of volunteers. Few have designated volunteer coordinators, standardized recruitment and training procedures, or evaluation and motivation systems. According to research by the 2018 Good Network Foundation (*Volunteering in Poland*), as many as 45% of volunteers described their engagement as *unorganized* or *occasional*, indicating a low degree of institutionalization within NGOs. Limited staffing and financial instability are also problems for sustained cooperation with volunteers, as confirmed by the 2025 Klon/Jawor's findings.

As a result, non-governmental organizations often play a smaller role than they could in promoting and developing volunteering, especially at the local level and among young people. Strengthening their role would require greater institutional support, including financial assistance (e.g., grants for volunteer coordination), as well as competence building (training, sharing best practices, developing clear management standards).

In the context of NGO research, volunteering is often understood as active participation in the organization's activities, but not necessarily membership. According to Polish law, volunteers can work for non-governmental organizations, legal entities, and organizational units operating under the laws governing the relationship between the state and the Catholic Church and other religious institutions (if their statutory goals include activities benefiting the citizens). Volunteers may also work with associations of local government units, social cooperatives, joint-stock companies, and limited liability companies. Other areas include public administration and its subordinate units (excluding commercial activities), non-profit sports clubs, and healthcare entities.

According to 2025 Klon/Jawor report, the percentage of non-governmental organizations using volunteer support increased from 47% in 2002 to 62% in 2024. Despite this increase, the average number of volunteers per organization decreased from 15 in 2002 to just 5 in 2021, and then increased again to 8 in 2024. This means that while more NGOs are using volunteers, this does not necessarily mean that the number of active volunteers increased during that period.

Based on data from the Central Statistical Office (GUS, 2023), 5% of Polish citizens aged 15-89 were engaged in volunteering within organizations or institutions in the first quarter of 2022. This figure is significantly lower than the share of individual volunteers (26.5%) and represents a decrease of 3.5 percentage points compared to 2016. The GUS estimates that in the first quarter of 2022, volunteers in Poland devoted approximately 80 million hours to their work, equivalent to the annual workload of 613,600 full-time employees. On average, each volunteer contributed over 50 hours of unpaid work in the first quarter of 2022. This represents an 8.5% increase when compared to 2015.

According to CBOS (2024), when volunteering is strictly defined as unpaid work for social organizations, the level of engagement reached 40% at the beginning of 2024. This means an interruption in the steady growth observed since 2008. In 2015, nearly half (49%) of all volunteer hours were contributed to typical non-governmental organizations, such as associations and foundations (GUS, 2016). By 2022, 95.1% of registered non-profit organizations reported using voluntary work, a 2.5% increase since 2014. Of the 3.1 million people performing unpaid work in 2022, 72.1% (2.2 million) were organization members which is an 18.6% decline compared to 2014 (GUS, 2022).

The war in Ukraine had a significant impact on volunteering in Poland, leading to a surge in civic engagement. The share of people helping strangers and volunteering through organizations or institutions reached 37.1% between February and March of 2022. Many Polish NGOs quickly responded to the needs of Ukrainian refugees by including them as recipients of support and by receiving substantial financial and technical assistance from international partners. This mobilization strengthened the public image of the non-governmental sector. Currently, 63% of Poles express trust in NGOs, exceeding the level of trust in central government institutions. The share of citizens who have had personal contact with NGOs also increased from 16% in 2020 to 24% in 2022.

Volunteers were most frequently engaged by foundations, social welfare and service organizations, entities with permanent staff and strong financial resources, and regional organizations. The greatest share of volunteer labor value was found in organizations active in social and humanitarian aid, followed by religious organizations. A positive balance of volunteer work value over work volume was also noted in organizations focused on sports, tourism, recreation, and hobbies. Popular areas of volunteer involvement included education and social assistance, while activities related to state, law, and politics were the least common.

Typical volunteer activities include helping children with schoolwork, supporting the elderly, caring for animals, and protecting the environment. In hospices and palliative care settings, volunteers often assist patients and their families with tasks that require training. They also contribute to charity events and fundraising initiatives, such as Wielka Orkiestra Świątecznej Pomocy (Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity). During the refugee crisis, volunteers focused on supporting language learning, helping children with schoolwork, providing administrative support, and offering translation services.

Volunteering in organizations is more common among young people, particularly students. According to data from the Central Statistical Office (GUS, 2022), the highest rate of volunteer engagement was observed among individuals with a higher education (36.7%). Higher education, a better financial and professional situation, and a strong religious commitment are positively correlated with volunteering activity.

Women accounted for just over half (50.5%) of all NGOs' volunteers. Their participation was notably higher in rural women's associations (81.3%) and faith-based social organizations (62.4%). In contrast, men were more frequently involved in employer organizations (76.1%) and political parties (74.3%).

The key challenge to the growth of organizational volunteering in Poland is the information gap. Nearly half of Poles (44%) cannot name any organization that offers volunteer opportunities, and 1/3 do not know how to apply (29%). There is also a noticeable gap between citizens' willingness to engage in volunteering and non-governmental organizations expectations. In addition, volunteering is sometimes viewed negatively – as unpaid labor, a waste of time, or even competition for paid employment.

However, from the perspective of NGOs, volunteering represents an important human resource, effectively doubling their workforce compared to paid staff. In the first quarter of 2022, the estimated value of one hour of volunteer work was PLN 22,90 PLN. The value of volunteering within organizations was higher, at PLN 25,10 PLN per hour, reflecting the more specialized nature of the tasks performed.

The Klon/Jawor Association's latest report, *Systematic Volunteering, or Social Engagement Once Again* (2025) provides new input on volunteering in its. The report focuses predominantly on systematic volunteering. The study is based on qualitative data collected in 2024 and quantitative data drawn from the Volunteer Service System (SOW). The report emphasizes the importance of presenting existing best practices coming from experienced organizations. This kind of data can help raise awareness of systematic volunteering and inspire changes to volunteers offers. The report mentions the five-stage volunteer recruitment process at the SLOT Art Festival, which includes an evaluation phase as an example of a formalized recruitment process for campaign volunteers.

Systematic volunteering: Klon/Jawor data from 2022 shows that 46% of systematic volunteers devoted one to five hours per month to their organizations, 26% between six and ten hours, and 15% devoted over eleven hours.

According to *The Condition of Volunteering in Lesser Poland NGOs* report (Urząd Marszałkowski Województwa Małopolskiego, 2024), collaboration between organizations and volunteers varies depending on the type and level of formality of engagement. The most common forms are long-term volunteering (42%) and campaign-based (58%) volunteering. Despite various systemic (formal and legal) and personal challenges, the data show that volunteers in Lesser Poland are eager to contribute to their local communities. They are often involved in organizing events, festivals, campaigns, celebrations, conferences, and sports competitions; supporting promotional activities; participating in charity events and fundraisers; and carrying out simple office tasks. Many respondents also mentioned activities related to environmental protection and animal care.

The main needs identified by volunteers (UMWM, 2024) include opportunities to develop interpersonal skills, exchange experiences, and receive specialized support through training, workshops, and courses. Volunteers also emphasized the importance of assistance in creating and promoting volunteer opportunities. Encouragingly, over 80% of respondents plan to continue or expand their engagement: 62% intend to maintain their current level of activity and 18% wish to increase it.

It is also worth noting that the knowledge base on volunteering in Poland continues to expand, as reflected by the growing number of publications and practical guides for volunteer organizers and coordinators published between 2018 and 2024. Examples include *How to Prepare a Volunteer Program?* (Warsaw, 2018); *Get Skilled in the Law: A Guide to the Legal Aspects of Volunteering* (Wilk, 2019); *Good Volunteering Step by Step* (Volunteer Center Association, 2021); *Volunteering at School in Accordance with the Law: Vademecum...* (Komosa, 2022); *Volunteer Safety: A Guide for Volunteer Organizers* (Broniewska, 2024), and *Your Path to Volunteering* (Orlen Foundation, 2024). This indicates the need for development and acquiring new skills among people cooperating with or organizing volunteers.

3.2. Employee Volunteering – Between CSR and Engagement

In recent years, employee volunteering has gained increasing attention and is gradually becoming an integral part of corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies. In Poland, this concept emerged after the political transformation of the late 1980s and early 1990s. This was largely due to the influence of Western corporations introducing new management and marketing standards.

Employee volunteering refers to activities in which employees, with the consent and often support of their employer, engage in initiatives that benefit local communities, non-governmental organizations, or public institutions. These initiatives are usually project-based and may include renovation projects,

orphanages assistance, fundraising campaigns organization, and environmental events. Companies support such actions by providing employees with work time, materials, transportation, and sometimes even additional leave.

According to a 2019 report by the Responsible Business Forum, 16% of the largest Polish companies participate in employee volunteering program. A 2021 study by the Academy of Philanthropy Development and the BNP Paribas Foundation, among other sources, estimates that nearly 20% of large enterprises currently offer such programs. Companies highlight numerous benefits of employee volunteering, such as stronger team integration, the development of soft skills, higher motivation, and an improved corporate image as a socially responsible business.

At the same time, there are new expectations, especially among younger generations. The PwC report *Workforce of the Future: What Workers Want* (2021) shows that Generation Z expects employers to demonstrate authentic social engagement and provide opportunities to contribute to the common good. Employees want to participate in choosing initiatives and prefer flexible forms of participation. As many as 40% of employees say they would participate in volunteering if their employer provided suitable conditions, even if it was only for two to three hours per month.

In practice, however, employee volunteering is often limited to one-off events or image-oriented initiatives that are not integrated into a company's long-term strategy. These types of actions often fail to engage a large group of employees. A lack of awareness among both employers and employees can also lead to misconceptions, such as equating volunteering with unpaid labor or viewing it solely as a marketing tool.

Available data suggests that the number of companies in Poland implementing employee volunteering programs is growing steadily, although these initiatives are still mainly the domain of large enterprises. Detailed data covering the full spectrum of organizations, from corporations to microenterprises, is difficult to obtain and so far, remains unavailable.

Historically, the trend has shown steady growth. In 2008, only 2% of the largest Polish companies organized employee volunteering. By 2012, the figure had risen to 6%; and by 2019, it was estimated that between 14% and 18% (most likely 16%) of the top 500-1,000 companies had such programs in place (Fundacja Odpowiedzialnego Biznesu – Responsible Business Foundation 2019).

Among medium-sized companies (50-250 employees), awareness and engagement in employee volunteering remain relatively low. In 2019,

only 15% of these companies were familiar with the term. This indicates that medium-sized enterprises were at a stage similar to that of large companies found themselves roughly a decade earlier. At that time, the vast majority of medium-sized companies did not run any volunteering programs, and only 8% were interested in implementing one. Employee volunteering initiatives are most common in the largest enterprises, often operating on a national scale. In 2019, 53% of these enterprises carried out volunteering activities across Poland. Most companies collaborate with external partners, typically non-governmental organizations.

In 2019, an average of 22% of employees in companies with volunteering programs participated in them. More than half of the companies surveyed in 2022 reported that over 100 employees were regularly or occasionally involved in volunteering (FOB, 2019).

The studies *Employee Volunteering for Ukraine* and *Employee Volunteering of the Future* (Szimanek 2022a, 2022b) present an extensive overview of corporate involvement in employee volunteering in Poland, particularly in the context of the response to the humanitarian crisis sparked by the war in Ukraine.

The latter report, *Employee Volunteering of the Future* (published April 2022), provides insight into employee volunteering in 2021. The research presents challenges and suggests recommendations for the future, even before the war in Ukraine gained momentum. In 2021, large private market companies primarily conducted employee volunteering, often for a period longer than five years. The main areas of their activity were social welfare, education and upbringing, and environmental protection. Non-governmental organizations, local communities, and children and youth were the main beneficiaries. Volunteers were usually women (73%). Employees without management roles were more likely to be engaged. On average, employees participated in volunteering activities once a year. Their key motivation was to do something good for others. Most companies collaborated with external partners, primarily non-governmental organizations.

The report emphasizes that time is the most valuable, yet scarce, resource for employee volunteering. Social work benefits everyone: recipients (knowledge, skills, changing attitudes), employers (team integration, responsibility strengthening, positive image), and volunteers (satisfaction from helping, a sense of influence, and skill development).

The report outlines a vision of future employee volunteering. Based on eight pillars, it emphasizes values (respect, empathy, cooperation, responsibility), social value (responding to authentic needs, strengthening local communities), and promoting systemic problem-solving and empowering beneficiaries ("give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime"). Strong emphasis is put on collaboration with non-governmental organizations and local governments. These organizations serve as sources of knowledge and partners in activities. To sustain its voluntary

nature, it is also important that volunteering not be linked to employee evaluations or financial rewards.

The main challenges associated with corporate volunteering in Poland include low awareness and limited knowledge among employers and the wider public, a failure to recognize its benefits, and an overall low level of social engagement. The COVID-19 pandemic also impacted this form of volunteering. Although it restricted face-to-face interaction, it accelerated the adoption of new technologies, such as e-volunteering. Most experts opposed formal statutory regulations of corporate volunteering, favoring self-regulation to preserve flexibility and avoid unnecessary bureaucracy. The author emphasizes that, despite existing challenges, corporate volunteering in Poland has a significant potential for further growth, particularly within large enterprises. However, this development requires broader dissemination of knowledge, program enhancement, and strategic cooperation with social partners (Szimanek, 2022a).

The report *Employee Volunteering for Ukraine* (Szimanek, 2022b) highlights the unprecedented mobilization of corporate volunteering in response to the war in Ukraine. This report is a follow-up to an earlier study from autumn 2021. A key observation is that, in all 31 surveyed companies, employee volunteering was directed toward supporting refugees from Ukraine, and in more than half of them, it became the dominant focus. The willingness of both employees and employers to engage made this possible. The study also showed an increase in the number of participating employees and new volunteers joining, as well as a greater amount of time was devoted to social activities.

The forms of aid also evolved. Initially, help was delivered in a mostly spontaneous and often chaotic manner. Volunteers provided support such as transportation and basic goods like food, medicine, and clothing at the border. Over time, these activities became more thoughtful, structured, and systemic. They adapted to the changing needs of refugees, like providing assistance in learning Polish, finding jobs, or integrating into local communities. Support for refugees significantly strengthened and developed the companies' collaboration with non-governmental organizations, which proved to be invaluable partners in providing knowledge about needs and effective support mechanisms. Companies supported NGOs financially, materially, and through volunteer skills.

Despite an initial surge a slight decline in company involvement was observed approximately six months after the outbreak of the war. Most companies continued to engage, though often on a smaller scale. This trend was similar to the overall decline in social engagement in Poland at the time. The report's main finding was that focusing volunteer activity on refugee assistance carries potential challenges such as limiting activities in other social areas and a dramatic increase in costs borne by companies. In some cases these costs have exhausted companies' annual budgets for social engagement. Despite these challenges, none

of the surveyed companies planned to limit or give up on employee volunteering, and most intended to expand it. Employee volunteering is most often associated with values such as social solidarity, respect for others, and responsibility. Interestingly, it has proven to be an effective way for volunteers and employers to cope with the shock of war, providing a sense of agency and hope (Szimanek, 2022b).

Time constraints remain the key barrier to expanding employee volunteer programs. Many employees find it difficult to balance professional responsibilities with additional social engagement. Some are concerned that linking volunteering to professional performance evaluations could undermine its altruistic nature by turning it into a career development activity rather than a genuine act of benevolence. The most common areas of employee volunteering include education, social welfare, ecology, and environmental protection. The main beneficiaries are children, older adults, people with disabilities, and individuals facing challenging life circumstances. In response to major social events such as the war in Ukraine, many companies have expanded their volunteering activities, rearranging and strengthening their programs.

Corporate volunteering can lead to the development of social and interpersonal skills. Research by Winnicka-Wejs and Szotysik (2019), shows that volunteers reported improvement in communication, teamwork, and networking skills. Half of the volunteers indicated that volunteering enhanced their interpersonal abilities, and one-third noted increased motivation and better work organization. Furthermore, 50% of participants believed that employers are more likely to hire individuals with volunteer experience, and 61% felt that such made the more attractive to employers. One of the main motivations for volunteering was to gain new knowledge and skills and develop key competencies (Szotysik, 2018, pp. 33–47). The research results discussed above (Winnicka-Wejs, Szotysik, 2019) are consistent with the available reports on the role of corporate volunteering in advancing employee competencies. The most common outcome remains developing and acquiring soft skills (see Kulig-Moskwa, 2014, pp. 1099–1106).

Despite its growing popularity, corporate volunteering in Poland still faces challenges, including a lack of awareness, flexibility, and institutional support. Many companies, especially those in the SME sector (which account for 99.8% of Polish enterprises), fear the legal and organizational challenges of formalizing activities. Additional setbacks include unstable sanitary conditions, limited financial resources, and difficulty finding non-governmental organizations that provide suitable volunteer opportunities.

Employee volunteering programs must be designed suitably to be effective. It is essential to address the needs of both employees and beneficiaries. Building partnerships with non-governmental organizations and offering diverse and flexible forms of engagement are also crucial in this process. Professional training for volunteer coordinators, organizational solutions that allow employees to balance work and

volunteering (e.g., through paid leave for volunteering), and stronger cooperation between companies, social organizations, and local governments are equally important.

3.3. Volunteering in Cultural Institutions

A review of Polish publications on volunteering in cultural institutions indicates that this area remains understudied, although the number of individuals engaging in such activities seems to be steadily increasing. The 2010 study *Volunteering in Culture* (Pazderski, Urmański, Makowski, 2010) compared Polish and European models of cultural volunteering and found that only a few institutions in Poland offered volunteer opportunities. The authors observed that “Cultural centers located in smaller urban municipalities and mixed rural-urban areas are the most likely to engage volunteers” (p. 109). A review of the websites of museums, libraries, and other cultural institutions across Poland suggests that the number of such initiatives has grown significantly. Volunteering opportunities are now available not only in major urban centers, but also beyond them: in open-air museums, libraries, cultural centers, as well as during festivals or other cultural events. Many well-known institutions have launched volunteer programs since 2000, including the Warsaw Uprising Museum in 2003, the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in 2009, the National Museum in Warsaw in 2012, the Emigration Museum in Gdynia in 2012, and the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk in 2019.

Research on volunteering in cultural institutions is usually in the form of internal evaluations. Some of these found their way to a small number of academic articles and reports. As a result, most available data reflects the institutional perspective rather than that of the volunteers.

For cultural institutions, collaborating with volunteers is an important part of their local community engagement strategy. Volunteers support a wide range of activities, from assisting in organizing events and maintaining exhibitions to working with specialized departments such as film documentation, promotion, education, or sales. In some museums, volunteers design and lead educational programs.

Institutions located in park settings, such as the Museum of King Jan III’s Palace in Wilanow, engage volunteers in gardening and conservation work. For instance, volunteers weed flowerbeds or care for local wildlife (squirrels, birds etc.). Volunteers have also played a key role in digitization projects, such as at the Silesian Digital Library, where they contributed to scanning hundreds of thousands of documents.

Some institutions, offer volunteers professional introductory courses to help them gain new knowledge and experience. In others, volunteer

assist with more routine tasks, such as providing directions during events or handling ticket distribution. Many institutions welcome volunteers of all ages. For example, the Emigration Museum in Gdynia accepts volunteers aged 13 and older, POLIN accepts volunteers aged 16 and older, the Grand Theatre in Warsaw mainly collaborates with university students, and the Young Horizons Film Festival offers opportunities for those aged 12 and older. An interesting case is described in the article *A Volunteer in a Library, Meaning Who?* (case study based on the Municipal Public Library in Opole, Pawluk, 2020). The text tells the story of a retired librarian who chose to continue working as a volunteer in her beloved institution. Some cultural organizations formalize volunteer participation through written agreements, requiring a commitment of at least one year and tailoring tasks to the volunteers' skills and interests. Others offer short-term or seasonal opportunities, particularly during festivals or temporary exhibitions.

When asked about their motivations, volunteers most frequently cite the opportunity to gain new experiences, meet new people, and participate in cultural life (Godlewski, 2016). Volunteering in cultural institutions also offers a range of additional benefits, such as a chance to explore the behind-the-scenes space, change the daily routine, meaningful use of free time left after work, studies, or school, expanding theoretical knowledge, sharing one's skills, building a personal/professional brand, overcoming fears, and developing openness to new challenges (Bryzik, 2021).

From an institutional perspective, data from the Emigration Museum in Gdynia illustrates the value of volunteer programs for cultural organizations. These programs offer benefits such as building a positive public image, promoting inclusion and equality (especially between generations and among people with disabilities), increasing event visibility, developing an engaged audience, and performing tasks at little or no cost. Cultural institutions employees also emphasize that working with volunteers brings in fresh perspectives, encourages dialogue with audiences, and broadens their own knowledge.

On the other hand, the report *Volunteering in Cultural Institutions* (Bryzik, 2021), which focuses mostly on volunteers' experiences, reveals a gap between institutional expectations and volunteers' motivations. The author of the report writes: "While institutions emphasized volunteering as a way of filling staffing or organizational gaps (though not excluding broader, more creative collaboration), volunteers primarily seek personal development: opportunities to learn, explore new roles, and experiment in a supportive, low-pressure environment (that allows for asking questions and mistakes as part of the growth process)" (p. 33).

The report also identifies several challenges associated with volunteer-institution cooperation. On the one hand, institutions struggle with recruitment (limited information on websites, unclear application procedures, and difficulty matching volunteers with suitable tasks), on the other hand, employees note that volunteering engagement can

be very short-term, with many volunteers leaving soon after training. Volunteers report being dissatisfied with the poor working atmosphere, lack of training, repetitive tasks, and a feeling of being undervalued. To make use of volunteers' potential in the cultural sector, further work is needed to map existing practices and develop clear recommendations for institutions that are planning to introduce or strengthen volunteer programs. This guidance should help create sustainable, mutually beneficial systems that align volunteers' developmental needs with institutional goals.

3.4. E-volunteering in Poland

E-volunteering is an organized, free, unpaid form of involvement that supports individuals or institutions beyond one's family and friends. Modern technologies are utilized at all stages, from recruitment and training of e-volunteers to task completion, and communication. E-volunteering is an excellent supplement to traditional volunteering, which is why many organizations have introduced hybrid models that combine online assistance with in-person collaboration.

The development of e-volunteering in Poland has occurred in the context of the growing popularity of the internet and as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced many organizations to move their activities online. Recently, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of individuals engaging in online assistance, especially in projects that do not require direct contact with beneficiaries (e.g., psychological support, education, translation, or administrative work). Platforms such as www.e-wolontariat.pl have become essential spaces where non-governmental organizations can connect with volunteers for remote tasks.

Similar to traditional volunteering, e-volunteers are motivated by the desire to help. However, they also appreciate the convenience of remote work. This form of engagement is particularly attractive to those who cannot or are unwilling to participate in person in volunteering due to various reasons, such as lack of time, professional obligations, or disabilities. E-volunteering also strengthens large-scale initiatives by removing geographical barriers. Research confirms that this form of volunteering offers flexibility and accessibility, including for people with disabilities, facilitates large-scale social engagement, and helps reduce inequalities. Additional benefits include reduced emissions, lower emotional strain (e.g., for introverts or individuals on the autism spectrum), and diminished feelings of social isolation.

The most common examples of e-volunteering in Poland are:

- **Online psychological support.** In response to the mental health crisis that intensified during the pandemic, initiatives offering psychological assistance through e-volunteering have emerged. Volunteers provide support via online chats, phone calls, or video conferences.

- **Remote education.** Many NGOs create online courses and training sessions, that engage volunteers in educational activities aimed at children, youth, and adults. These initiatives often promote equal access to education , among other things.
- **Translation and administrative work.** Numerous organizations seek volunteers to translate documents, prepare materials, and assist with online administrative tasks.
- **Humanitarian aid.** In the field of humanitarian support, e-volunteers contribute by creating promotional content, organizing online fundraising events, and assisting with crowdfunding campaigns.

Despite its many advantages, e-volunteering has its own problems. One key issue is the lack of adequate training for NGOs. Organizations do not always know how to effectively manage online volunteers. Another difficulty lies in maintaining long-term motivation because the absence of direct interpersonal contact can reduce satisfaction and commitment levels. In addition, unequal access to technology and the internet can limit some social groups' engagement in e-volunteering. Nevertheless, the benefits of e-volunteering are significant. This form of engagement offers flexibility, affordability, and wide accessibility, especially for people living in sparsely populated or remote areas, people with limited mobility, or individuals with neurological disabilities for whom remote engagement is more convenient. E-volunteering creates opportunities for people who wish to contribute to social causes but cannot to do so in traditional ways.

The Dobra Sieć (Good Network) Foundation conducted the first-ever assessment of volunteers and organizations involved in e-volunteering in Poland. The study included 130 volunteers and institutions registered on the TuDu.org.pl platform.

The findings indicate that the respondents generally have experience with both traditional and online volunteering. They are predominantly driven by intrinsic, altruistic motivations to help others. E-volunteering is seen as **an attractive alternative to in-person volunteering** and as an opportunity to acquire new skills.

The remote format enables volunteers to participate in diverse individual tasks, such as editing or translating texts or offering expert advice. E-volunteers are typically young. Most of them are aged 25-39 (43.8%) or 18-24 (27.1%). They come from both smaller towns and large cities.

3.5. Summary

The tradition of volunteering in post-communist countries, including Poland, differs from that in societies not shaped by this ideology. During the communist era, *social service* was often mandatory and imposed top-down. Non-governmental organizations and modern forms of volunteering became possible only after the political transformation of the 1990s. Another characteristic feature of Polish society is the phenomenon of **familialism**. Polish citizens tend to direct their willingness to help primarily toward relatives and close friends, because of strong family and kinship ties which often limit formal social involvement. Helping strangers is less common, though there is a notable exception of events like natural disasters or wars.

Gender differences are also evident in the amount of time spent on volunteering, the motivation behind it, and forms of volunteering. Numerous studies, including those by **CBOS** and the **Klon/Jawor Association**, confirm that **women** are more likely than men to volunteer. They most often participate in initiatives aimed at helping those in need, such as children, seniors, or people with disabilities. They are usually active in foundations, aid associations, parishes, and schools. Their motivation is predominantly altruistic, rooted in empathy, compassion, and the desire to care for others. By contrast, **men** are less frequently involved in volunteering and tend to participate in activities related to sports, technical support, logistics, or event organization. They are also more visible in formal structures such as the **Volunteer Fire Department**, **sports clubs**, or **scouting organizations**. Their motivations often include personal and professional development, acquiring new skills, and building networks of contacts.

The family environment plays an additional role in shaping volunteering patterns. Despite their household and caregiving responsibilities, women often find time to engage in community activities, particularly at the local level. Men, in turn, are more likely to volunteer when they are single or have fewer family obligations. These differences reflect broader cultural and social norms that influence the expectations and social roles of women and men in Poland.

The development of volunteering in Poland continues to face many individual and systemic **barriers**. Although awareness of volunteering and civic engagement is gradually increasing, several persistent challenges still limit broader participation.

Time constraints are the most frequently mentioned obstacle. It is reported by **59% of respondents**, who often struggle to combine social engagement with work and family life. The youngest respondents emphasize the importance of flexibility and irregular involvement, which makes volunteering more accessible. Interest in volunteering tends to decline among people aged **26–35**, likely due to the growing demands of professional and family responsibilities. Those with unstable employment

or irregular working hours also find it difficult to commit to long-term volunteering.

In Polish society, the **definition of volunteering** is narrow and ambiguous. It is most often associated with charity and helping those in need, rather than with civic engagement, environmental protection, or community development.

Volunteering, particularly in the form of **employee or youth volunteering**, is sometimes viewed as *free labor*, *exploitation*, or a source of *cheap labor*. Such associations discourage potential volunteers from participating. Paradoxically, volunteering is also **idealized** in the Polish imagination as an activity reserved for *exceptional individuals* or *self-sacrificing social activists* with a sense of mission. This perception can alienate ordinary citizens, leading to the belief that *it's not for me* or *I wouldn't be good enough*.

Potential volunteers often express concerns about the required **time commitment** or discomfort when in contact with people in difficult life circumstances. Many (83% of respondents) perceive volunteering as demanding, exhausting, and emotionally challenging, requiring exposure to others' suffering or problems. Among older adults in particular, additional stereotypes persist (like associating volunteering with the communist era and the *act of social work*), accompanied by limited knowledge about for age-appropriate engagement opportunities.

The following chapter is devoted to research on social activity among children and youth. In our opinion, the youngest Polish citizens should be the focus of particular attention in long-term programs that support and study volunteering.

3.6. Key Findings

- **A complex and evolving volunteering landscape:** Poland has seen a long-term development of volunteering, reflected in the growing scale of non-governmental organizations engaging volunteers (from 47% in 2002 to 62% in 2024).
- Despite this growth, the average number of volunteers per organization decreased from fifteen in 2002 to five in 2021, rising again to eight in 2024. This suggests that more organizations now use volunteers, although they may not be greater in numbers.
- Individual (informal) volunteering is far more common (26.5% of Poles in the first quarter of 2022) than volunteering within formal structures (5%). The latter declined by 3.5 percentage points compared to 2016.

- The war in Ukraine significantly affected volunteering, leading to a surge in engagement (37.1%) in February–March 2022. This strengthened the public image of NGOs.
- **Challenges in management and institutionalization of volunteering:** Many Polish organizations lack the formal structures necessary for effective volunteer management. There is a shortage of specialized coordinators, recruitment systems, training, and evaluation and motivation procedures. As many as 45% of volunteers work is an *unorganized or occasional*.
- Changes could be implemented in role division and internal communication. Motivational systems should be considered, as well as training for volunteer leadership competencies.
- **Information barriers are significant:** nearly half of Polish citizens (44%) cannot name an organization that offers volunteering opportunities, and 29% do not know how to apply.
- **Motivations and volunteer profiles:** The motivations for volunteering in Poland are diverse and include the desire to be needed, to help others, personal satisfaction and enjoyment, social relationships, and personal or professional growth.
- Women volunteer more often than men, primarily driven by altruistic motives, especially in areas related to helping those in need. Men are less likely to volunteer and prefer sporting, technical, or logistical events, motivated more often by personal development or gaining experience.
- Organizational volunteering is most common among young people (students and pupils) and individuals with higher education (36.7% in 2022) and better financial or professional standing.
- Lack of time is the most frequently mentioned challenge (59%), especially among those aged 26–35, highlighting the need for flexible engagement formats.
- **Perception of volunteering:** Volunteering is often seen negatively as *unpaid work, exploitation, or a disruption to the labor market*. Paradoxically, volunteering is also idealized as an activity reserved for *exceptional people* on a mission which may discourage *ordinary people* from participating. Polish people often fear having to devote too much time or coming into contact with those in difficult life situations. There is also a phenomenon of familialism, where strong family ties limit formal engagement, as Poles tend to prioritize helping relatives and close friends.

■ Specific forms of volunteering:

- **Employee volunteering** is becoming an increasingly important part of CSR strategies, offered by approximately 20% of large companies. It helps employees develop soft skills (e.g., communication, teamwork) and it positively influences the company's image. Even though it is a growing sector, it remains primarily the domain of large companies and faces barriers such as a lack of employee time. There are also concerns about losing its altruistic nature.
- **Volunteering in cultural institutions** remains largely under-studied but seems to be growing in popularity. Volunteers engage in diverse activities, from event support to digitization projects. However, there is often a mismatch between institutional expectations (filling staffing gaps) and volunteer motivations (personal development and gaining experience).
- **E-volunteering** has expanded significantly, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, offering flexibility and accessibility (e.g., for people with disabilities or neurodivergent individuals). It most often involves psychological support, remote education, translation, and administrative work. Key challenges include providing adequate training to organizations and sustaining volunteer motivation online.

The Future of Volunteering: Children and Youth



Including youth social activities in the report is particularly significant because volunteering and other forms of civic engagement among young people generate multidimensional benefits for the participants and for the organizations they support. Examining this area also allow us to identify key challenges and barriers, which is essential for effectively fostering and developing such initiatives. Young people have an enormous potential to build civil society in the coming decade. Through volunteering, they develop interpersonal, civic, and professional skills, learning cooperation, responsibility, empathy, and the value of working for the common good.

Volunteering also contributes to identity formation and build self-esteem and a sense of agency. It also strengthens confidence in one's ability to handle difficult situations. For many, volunteering becomes a path to finding purpose and achieving self-fulfillment. Studies show that socially active individuals tend to have better mental health, lower susceptibility to depression, and have higher self-esteem. Volunteering helps form new friendships and social bonds, including so-called *weak ties* that play an important role when looking for information or opportunities. Through these experiences, young volunteers learn responsibility, cultivate active civic attitudes, and develop socio-political awareness.

In the context of generational and social change, the expectations of Generation Z are particularly relevant. This age group seeks flexible and modern forms of engagement that align with their values and offer real impact and visible results. Integrating social activity with education and professional development, as well as leveraging digital tools such as e-volunteering, is particularly important for engaging this generation. Considering these factors in research and practical initiatives allows for a more comprehensive understanding of current trends in the development of volunteering in Poland.

Youth social activity is also important for public policy and civic education. The growth of volunteering among young people can be supported through national and local government programs, school and university initiatives, and mechanisms that encourage collaboration

between NGOs and young volunteers. Including this issue in the report enables the formulation of more precise recommendations for developing research frameworks, and systemic support for youth-led social initiatives.

Finally, in the context of contemporary social and economic challenges – such as job insecurity, academic pressures, and growing social isolation – volunteering can be a powerful tool for self-realization and building a sense of belonging. It can also strengthen identity. Therefore, it is essential to address youth social activity in this summary and in future research to present a complete picture of contemporary forms of social engagement in Poland.

4.1. Children and Youth as Social Actors

Nearly 20% (7 million) of Polish citizens are under 18 years old. This group is in a particular social position – they are protected by the law, yet lack real political influence over decisions that affect their lives. Although adults often see childhood and adolescence as changing rapidly, the rules that shape young people's experiences are still largely created by adults. Their choices determine the quality of life for children and youth in many areas.

For years, young people have been the least likely to participate in elections. In the 2019 parliamentary elections, only 47% of people aged 18-29 voted (Lipiński, 2019). This pattern is common in all democratic societies. Reasons for this include a low sense of political influence and agency, little experience with civic engagement, disappointment with civic education understood as a school subject, and discouragement caused by a lack of democratic practices in schools and the lack of young people's representation on electoral lists. Therefore, political decisions affecting the future of young people are made mostly not by them, but by older generations, not only nationally but also locally.

However, in recent years, Poland has seen a noticeable shift. Political engagement among young people has increased sharply. In the October 15, 2023, parliamentary elections, voter turnout among the 18-29 age group reached about 68.8%, compared to an overall turnout of 74%. In the most recent presidential election, as many as 73% of young people voted, while the total turnout was 71.3% (Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza, 2025).

It is worth researching whether this growing political participation will lead to greater civic and social engagement in other areas of public life. Understanding what motivates young people to get involved and what their guiding values are, and whether this activity will last is an important research goal.

Scientific studies on youth behavior and preferences are usually fall under two main categories: one focused on opportunities and the other

on risks (Pyżalski, 2023). The identification of problem areas helps initiate actions that prevent negative phenomena in the educational process, and is aimed at achieving a positive result – educating a young person to be a good citizen. A literature review shows that research often focuses on challenges such as the use of psychoactive substances (Sierosławski, 2015), the risks of social exclusion, depression, and mental health issues (e.g., Kuśpit, 2019; Daszykowska-Tobiasz, 2023), and problems related to education (Grotowska-Leder, 2011; Czerkawski, 2012; Sadura, 2017). Meanwhile, areas related to young people’s aspirations, lifestyles, and quality of life (except in the context of poverty) are less explored in Polish research.

Studies that focus on positive examples of youth activity often aim to diagnose not only the current situation but also to look for or create an image of the *perfect youth*, who best fits adult expectations and represents the promise of the future. Recently more attention has been given to young people’s online engagement (Pyżalski, 2023), civic involvement (Kelsz, 2024), and shared values (Magier, 2023).

Although civic education is officially part of the school curriculum, it is often limited to theoretical knowledge about society. Elements that encourage independent thinking, participation, and civic responsibility are often overlooked (Zielińska, 2008). Unlike those in some other countries such as the United Kingdom, the Polish education system still emphasizes competition rather than cooperation between students (Stefańska, 2023). This approach can reinforce educational inequalities (Zahorska, 2009), especially when compared with more egalitarian systems like Finland’s (Srokowski, 2022).

Students’ behavior is still evaluated in school. This has been abandoned in almost all European countries (Suchecka, 2022). Such a grading system tends to promote conformity rather than autonomy or critical thinking (Jaskulska, 2009). It may also deepen inequalities because it is influenced by subjective judgments and biases, such as the halo effect, and may result in unfair treatment based on factors like gender or disability, among others.

Student rights are frequently violated in Polish schools. Examples include school regulations and statutes that limit adult students’ autonomy (e.g., in justifying absences or deciding on participation in school trips), restrict self-expression through clothing or hairstyle (Korzeniowski, 2023), and impose rules that infringe upon personal dignity. One such rule is prohibiting the use of the restroom during lessons. The Polish school system provides a limited space for the realization of democratic values and insufficiently fosters the development of social competencies, self-agency, and empowerment among students.

According to Lareau’s (2003) findings, leisure activities significantly predict the future educational and professional success of children and adolescents in the United States. Similar research conducted in other countries suggests that educational and extracurricular

activities significantly influence the development of young people. Civic engagement contributes to building competencies that are often neglected or inadequately supported by Polish schools. Thus, examining areas beyond the immediate school environment enables us to create a more comprehensive picture a young citizen developing on the margins or outside the formal education system.

It is known that adults engaged in volunteering display a **higher sense of agency and community** (Grabowski, 2020). Similarly, young people's involvement in social activities can yield not only positive social outcomes but also individual benefits, including improved well-being.

The growing prevalence of mental health issues among children and adolescents is linked to loneliness, a perceived lack of control over one's life, and social isolation, among other factors. The report *Young Heads* (Flis & Dębski, 2023) describes *the triad of the mental health crisis in children and adolescents*, in which young people perceive themselves as worthless, incapable, and insignificant to others. Although participating in social activities alone cannot solve such complex issues, volunteering provides an important opportunity for young people to acquire new skills, establish supportive relationships, and strengthen their belief in their ability to influence the world around them. Fostering prosocial and civic attitudes from an early age may therefore play a vital role in social prevention and in building social capital.

4.2. Ethical challenges in research with children and youth

Conducting research with children and adolescents poses practical, methodological, and ethical challenges. Since minors are under the legal guardianship of their parents or legal caregivers, researchers must obtain informed consent from both the young participants and their guardians. When research takes place in institutional settings such as schools, the process additionally requires the permission and involvement of institutional representatives, further complicating the procedure. There are two types of consent relevant to research involving minors. The first is *consent*, meaning informed consent provided by a legal guardian (referred to in this context as a *gatekeeper*) on behalf of the child. The second type is *assent*, meaning the agreement expressed by the child or adolescent themselves, who, due to their age, may not yet be fully capable of understanding all the implications of participating in research (Kellet, 2005; Skånfors, 2009; Dockett, Perry, & Kearney, 2012). In practice, obtaining all the necessary permissions from both parents and minor participants can be time-consuming and, in some cases, impossible.

As a result of these organizational and ethical complexities, research on children and adolescents is relatively rare. This underrepresentation extends to analyses of young people's involvement in various forms of social activity, which, despite their importance for socio-civic development, remain insufficiently explored.

A review of the literature on the prosocial activities among young people reveals a variety of research approaches in this area. Several main research trends can be distinguished, encompassing both volunteering and other forms of civic participation among individuals under 18 years of age.

The first group consist of studies situated within the sociology of youth. These studies often cover a broad age range (from 15 up to 35 years) and draw on data from the Central Statistical Office, municipal/city reports, and CBOS research. The second group consists of analyses addressing youth civic activity as part of broader social diagnoses, reports, and international comparative studies, such as PISA and ICSS. The third group comprises of research focusing specifically on children. This research is most often qualitative, based on small samples and case studies.

4.3. The Most Important Areas of Social Activity of Children and Youth

The *ladder of participation* model developed by Sherry R. Arnstein (1969) remains a classic analytical framework for assessing the degree of genuine civic involvement in decision-making processes. The model consists of eight levels of participation grouped into three main categories.

- 1. Non-participation** – encompassing *manipulation* and *therapy*, where citizen participation is merely symbolic and serves primarily to legitimize decisions already made by authorities.
- 2. Tokenistic participation** – including *information*, *consultation*, and *placet* (consent), which allow citizens to express their opinions but without real influence over the outcomes.
- 3. Actual participation** – comprising *partnership*, *delegation of power*, and *citizen control*, where participants co-decide or assume full authority within specific areas of public policy. This model highlights the distinction between symbolic and authentic participation and serves as a critical tool for analyzing participatory mechanisms, and their potential instrumental use by decision-makers.

Youth Councils

In Poland, youth councils primarily operate at the municipal level. The April 2021 amendment to local government legislation introduced the legal basis for forming such councils also at the district (*powiat*) and voivodship levels while clarifying existing regulations governing municipal youth councils. Currently, there are over 500 councils at the municipal level and 71 at the district level (Dec-Kiełb, 2025). According to the law, youth councils have consultative, advisory, and initiative functions, and their operational rules and electoral procedures are defined by their statutes. Their key responsibilities include reviewing draft resolutions concerning youth, co-creating and monitoring the implementation of local youth strategies, and undertaking independent initiatives, particularly educational and civic ones for young people.

The new regulations, introduced after 2021, guarantee youth councils the right to legislative initiative, as well as the right to submit proposals and inquiries to local government authorities. Council members are usually young residents of a given local government area, such as students active in school governments or local youth organizations. Research on youth councils and their functioning in Poland remains limited. The Civis Polonus Foundation has conducted studies focusing primarily on the legal aspects of youth councils and the activities of the Children and Youth Council at the Ministry of National Education (Wasilewski et al., 2018). These studies included statistical data, analyses of council existence, budget structures, types of activities undertaken, and cooperation with municipal authorities. They also examined the motivations of council participants. The most frequently cited reasons were a sense of responsibility toward voters (64.8%), a desire for positive community perception (48.4%), and a sense of achievement coming from completed projects (52.3%). Additional research conducted by Boratyn (2019, 2021) examined the role of mentors in council activities, their influence on the councils operation, and the legal frameworks governing their work.

Youth Volunteering

One of the large-scale study that reliably examined youth volunteering in a specific context was the *Diagnosis of School Volunteering in the Lesser Poland Voivodeship* (Kałużny, 2021). The study used a quantitative CAWI survey of 100 supervisors of school volunteer groups and 900 students from schools with active volunteering initiatives. According to the students' responses, various forms of volunteering were present in their schools, including:

- Groups of student volunteers carried out activities under the supervision of a teacher (55% of responses).
- Schools operated organized volunteer clubs, such as School Volunteer Clubs or Caritas Clubs (42%).

- Individual students engaged in volunteering outside of school, on their own initiative, within various institutions or organizations (26%).
- Volunteering activities were conducted within the framework of the student council (21%);
- Volunteering was coordinated by external institutions, such as associations or foundations (11%).

The young people most frequently participated in helping those in poor financial situations or in difficult life situations, as well as in organizing charity events. Other common activities included helping fellow students, supporting people with disabilities, preparing Christmas packages, and assisting the elderly.

Approximately 40% of students (from schools where volunteering opportunities were available) took part in such initiatives. However, some of these activities were one-time events. For instance, there were fundraising campaigns during the Christmas season and fairs to support individuals in need.

Among students who did not volunteer, 43% expressed a desire to do so. Despite being interested in this form of helping, reasons for non-participation included an excessive school and academic workload (65%), extracurricular commitments (43%), and a perceived lack of interest or predisposition for this type of activity (37%). These reasons are similar to those cited by students wishing to participate in student government (see the chapter *Student Government*). Interestingly, 13% of respondents attributed their lack of involvement to insufficient information about volunteering opportunities, and 13% stated that they had not been invited to participate. Similar findings (see the chapter *Social Activity in Small Towns*) suggest that personal encouragement – meaning an explicit invitation to participate – can significantly influence young people’s willingness to engage. Due to their limited experience and high self-awareness, many young people feel anxious when entering new situations, particularly when the expectations and nature of the activities are unclear. In such cases, an invitation – whether from a teacher supervising volunteer work or another student – can motivate them to take action.

According to the report’s findings, participants’ motivations were primarily altruistic. They emphasized feelings of satisfaction and joy. They enjoyed having the opportunity to help others and appreciated the sense of doing something meaningful. Respondents also highlighted the opportunity to gain new experiences (48.8%) and to spend their time in an interesting way (47.5%). Only a few respondents viewed volunteering negatively as exploitation of unpaid labor (15%), a waste of time (5%), or a frivolous activity (3.8%). Another important aspect of volunteering was the opportunity to meet new people. One in three respondents cited this as a significant motivator. Overall, satisfaction with school volunteering was high, and participants expressed a desire to continue volunteering.

In the report *Important People from Small Towns* (Ostrowski & Pierścińska, 2025), the motivations of the participants were predominantly altruistic (a desire to do good). However, for some, obtaining additional points toward high school admission was an important factor. Another type of motivation also emerged: some volunteered said that helping others helped them to cope with their own psychological difficulties (Żbikowska, 2023).

According to report by Ostrowski and Pierścińska, the main factors discouraging young people from engaging in voluntary activities are:

- A belief that such activities are not intended for young people.
- A sense of incompetence (*I don't know how to do it*).
- The activities are in a distant location (with transport exclusion playing a significant role).
- Perceived exclusivity (*there's a group of people who already know each other, and I'm not part of it*).
- Fear of ridicule.
- Fear that the effort will be wasted.
- Lack of support from adults, leading to a lack of perceived influence.
- Reluctance to work for others.
- A belief that such activities do not lead to meaningful change.
- Fear that volunteering could negatively affect one's mental well-being.
- Lack of resources (equipment, contacts, skills that one doesn't have).
- The perception that volunteering entails too much responsibility.

The recommendations based on this report are twofold. First, although the surveyed teenagers were satisfied with helping others, they did not associate these activities with personal development, happiness, or satisfaction. Given the high percentage of those not involved, perhaps showing that this type of engagement might lead to gaining new opportunities for development or self-fulfillment, or even that it could be an enjoyable pastime, would convince some of those undecided.

The second issue is rewarding volunteers. Student supervisors who participated in the study suggested recognizing the most active volunteers, for example, by providing them with training on specific topics, and offering material prizes, such as T-shirts and other gadgets. Students, on the other hand, believed that the best reward would be the financial support and opportunities to meet with institutions and

non-governmental organizations interested in working with volunteers. Therefore using volunteering as a springboard to gain new experiences (for example, by getting out of school, meeting new people, and gaining unique experiences) could be the additional motivation for teenagers to take action to help others.

The report *Youth Activism* (Kelsz, 2024) offers valuable insights into the well-being of young activists. The study, which was conducted among 439 activists aged 16-30 through a questionnaire survey and 29 in-depth interviews, explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people's well-being and their level of social engagement, among other issues. The authors note that "as many as 30% of respondents believe that their interpersonal relationships have not returned to their pre-pandemic state and have, in fact, deteriorated." Young people from smaller urban centers assessed their well-being particularly negatively. "As many as 41% of respondents indicated that the mood in their homes, schools, workplaces, or organizations had slightly or significantly worsened since the pandemic (...) one in four people reported that their general apathy and negative mood were significantly higher than before." At the same time, in terms of returning to social activities and participation in non-governmental organizations, as many as two-thirds of activists stated that their ability to maintain contact and organize activities improved after the pandemic. This was particularly true for those living in rural areas.

Recent research reveals a consistent pattern among individuals who engage in activities for the benefit of others. The report *Youth in Warsaw* (Adamowicz & Gąsior, 2022) identifies a group called *Committed*, which refers to people under 18 who actively participate in various forms of social activities. The *Committed* are often members of social, political, cultural, and religious organizations and associations, and 55% also belong to sports clubs. As the report's authors note, "The engaged are significantly more likely to be interested in local politics and to notice many things in their neighborhood that they believe should be changed." They also have the least amount of free time of all the analyzed segments, partly due to their intensive involvement in extracurricular activities.

Żbikowska (2023) identified a similar group of young people in her study of middle school students living in the suburbs of the capital. This group frequently attended community centers, cinemas, museums, theaters, operas, and various artistic and educational events. They were more likely than others to participate in extracurricular activities, devote more time to studying, and volunteer. In contrast to the more balanced gender distribution found in the Warsaw study, girls predominated in this group.

Since the most engaged young people demonstrated an interest in both community service and cultural participation, it may be hypothesized that they came from wealthier and more educated families. The findings of both reports support this interpretation. The higher cultural and social capital of the engaged youth likely translated into a stronger sense of

empowerment among this group. However, since both studies were conducted in the capital city, it would be valuable to extend the research to other Polish cities, as well as to rural areas. Moreover, it would be worthwhile to consider creating strategies that strengthen the sense of empowerment among young people from less privileged backgrounds.

Social Activity in Small Towns

One of the few texts that describes the lives of young people in smaller urban centers and rural areas is the report *Important People from Small Places* (Ostrowski and Pierścińska, 2025). The study was qualitative, and interviews were conducted within working groups with representatives from seven voivodships. Each group consisted of six people, who varied in age, gender, level of social involvement, and size of place of residence.

Young people were most often involved in fundraising for those in need. They had experience with school volunteering and online fundraising. Their activities were most often focused on the local environment, such as school, home, or neighborhood. Interestingly, the young people's activities were more often dedicated to a specific cause than to protecting their values, such as saving the environment. Although socializing is a priority for many young people, relatively few activities were integrative.

Many respondents perceived social activity as things they could do daily and spontaneously. These activities were often on a one-off basis, such as helping a neighbor with shopping, listening to the friend's problems, or helping someone with their homework. One common example of such activity was helping at an animal shelter, though the distance was often an obstacle to this type of work, due to issues with public transportation. These are informal activities that do not fit into an institutional framework. Older participants were more likely to mention institutions in the context of helping, though not NGOs or associations.

One prevalent theme in this study that was largely absent from other sources was the importance of adult's invitation in joining social activities. The authors write, "The more direct and personalized it is (e.g., if the invitee's strengths or the benefits they can gain from being active are mentioned), the greater the chance of success. Young people personally encouraged by teachers to run for school government or the youth council find it easier to overcome shyness and doubt than those who receive an impersonal invitation sent to the entire class or a poster announcing elections." The relationship between teacher and student played a crucial role here. The better the relationship participants had with the adult initiating social activities, the greater the chance they would take action. Young people were much more willing to engage when felt they were being listened to and, in some cases, that they could talk to the adult about topics unrelated to social engagement (like their personal problems). Encouragement from friends also played a significant role – often outweighing doubts or personal interests.

The form of the activities undertaken most often depended on the initiative of the adult. If young people felt they could trust the adult leader, they would suggest their own ideas, but the impulse almost always came from the adult. This suggests that the involvement of young people depends largely on the adult coordinator, their attitude, social and communication skills, and their resources. Interestingly, when young people themselves had an idea about how to help others, their parents were usually supported them, and these parents were often active members of the local community themselves. A similar pattern emerged in the research paper, where the only youth association established in the municipality was created by the children of local social activists. The children learned how to organize events targeted for specific age group from their parents (Żbikowska, 2023).

Volunteers and Professional Careers

Kowalska's (2023) research on ways in which volunteering helps build a professional career paints an interesting picture of young people who view social engagement as a way to gain knowledge and skills essential for the future job market, especially when they lack experience. Students who participated in the study stated that volunteering allowed them to confront their ideas and theoretical knowledge with professional practice. Although volunteering wasn't the only activity they engaged in to build their careers, it was the one most frequently cited. According to the respondents, volunteering helps build a career because it provides the opportunity to test oneself in various situations (48.7% of respondents), develop teamwork skills (45.0%), allows one to acquire practical skills that meet employers' expectations (45.0%), helps create a CV (43.7%), allows one to assess one's own predispositions and preferences (43.7%), and provides the opportunity to build a network of contacts (28.7%).

Respondents most frequently cited the following skills as those developed during their volunteering activities were: interpersonal communication (47.5%), time management and organization (47.5%), and the ability to apply selected methods and techniques for teamwork (43.5%). Other skills mentioned by respondents included using online tools (36.2%), public speaking skills (36.2%), and collaborating with others (35.0%). Respondents gained the most from opportunities for practice (58.7%), collaborate with others (46.2%), and receive training (40.0%).

Youth E-Volunteering

There is very little data on how often young people volunteer online. The authors of the report *Important People from Small Places* (Ostrowski and Pierścińska, 2025) only partially mapped this area. Their research showed that young people did not associate the internet with opportunities for social activity, excluding fundraising or sharing information about a given campaign or event. The authors indicated that some young people were engaged in activities that could be classified as

civic activity (running online thematic groups, managing Discord servers, or creating educational videos).

Pyżalski has been researching young people's online activity for years, primarily focusing on the issue of cyberbullying. A large-scale study a sample of 7,107 people aged 12–19 from six European countries (Estonia, Finland, Germany, Poland, Italy, and Portugal) showed that positive online activity (social engagement) and negative online activity (having contact with harmful content, making poor health decisions) are inextricably linked. Individuals with higher levels of positive online engagement – in the form of both online civic activity and daily online activity – were also more frequently engaged in risky online behaviors (Pyżalski, 2023). This may be due to the total number of hours spent online.

The author of the study *Volunteering in Poland. The Case of the Digital Poland of Equal Opportunities Project* (Szymańska-Palaczyk, 2016), tracked the activities of the Lighthouse Keepers of Digital Poland, indicated that students constituted 4.9% of their study sample. Among the young people involved in the Lighthouse Keepers' activities, most were interested in the humanities (46.2%) or the social sciences (30.8%).

Student Government

Student government is one of the most important areas of civic engagement available to children and young people in every school. Student governments were established under Article 85 of the Polish Education Law. All students in a school are a part of the student government. Student governments formally function as one of the four main school bodies, alongside the principal, the teaching staff, and the parents' council. The student government presidium operates on democratic principles and it is elected through universal, equal, direct, and anonymous elections, in which every student in a school can participate. Although the student government lacks the authority to make decisions about the school (it requires the principal's consent), it can submit motions and opinions on all school matters, making it a crucial part of consultation processes. This allows students to influence key areas of the school operation (curriculum, the way the school space is arranged, and the school calendar). The most important responsibilities of student governments are assessing students' needs, communication between the school community and the principal, and organizing extracurricular activities. The student government fosters democratic education, civic responsibility, teamwork, and it strengthens students' sense of influence.

Research on student governments focuses on their legal foundations (Wolanin, 2022), typologies (Poleszak, 2018), and areas of operation (Geller, 2013). Most publications are purely theoretical. Only a few demonstrate how student governments actually work in schools and universities, and most of these studies were conducted in primarily in high schools and junior high schools, but not in vocational schools or technical schools.

In recent years, no new publications have appeared that could provide a broader diagnosis of the institution in the current educational context. However, earlier research reveals several problems and areas requiring support. Geller (2013) points out that one of the most significant barriers in student government operations was the lack of understanding of their nature and role among teachers.

The surveyed students felt that members of school staff considered student governments unnecessary and doubted the feasibility of implementing student ideas. Consequently, the staff were reluctant to give their students power (by allowing them to pursue projects or ideas in their own way), and sometimes actively sabotaged certain activities. Teachers were particularly unfavorable toward ideas not strictly related to imparting knowledge, as well as toward student governments members who did not meet the definition of the *perfect student* – polite and high-achieving. This creates a situation in which participation in student government must be *earned*: “These beliefs often go hand in hand with the belief that student rights might only be granted to those who fulfil their obligations” (Geller, 2013).

The distortion of the idea of self-governance in student government activities also stems from the teachers initiating certain activities and using various forms of pressure to persuade government members to act according to their vision. Students that do not show humility toward teachers may face negative consequences: “Those present at our workshops often said that lack of obedience or disagreeing with the vision the teaching staff had on how the student government should be working, could result in serious problems in other areas of students’ activities, such as passing tests, obtaining permissions for class trips, obtaining positive behavioral grades, etc.” (Geller, 2013). Therefore, although the law mandates that the student council serve as the *fourth power* in schools, its power is limited. Its existence and ability to act in accordance with the law depend on the attitude and level of knowledge of the school headmasters and the teaching council. “The main problem in our school is that the student council wants a lot of things but can do very little. We have little support from our principal” (Geller, 2013).

The competencies of student council members also have a significant impact on how they function. Young people often lack the skills necessary to defend their ideas. When faced with criticism, especially if it takes a blunt form, they are unable to make compelling arguments or adjust their positions without seeming arrogant. This is not surprising, given that the formal educational process rarely promotes developing skills such as the ability to select and present data, prepare action plans, and visualize project benefits, assess risk and identify alternative scenarios, and finally, seek compromise. There is no clear communication about what the student council is, what its tasks are, and why it is worth cooperating with it. Many students do not know that they can participate in its activities. At the same time, they do not know where to look for this information. The electoral process itself often leaves much to be desired because it relies heavily on candidate’s popularity. Students lack the

tools to assess a candidate's qualifications, experience, motivation, or ability to fulfill their promises. Unfortunately, social studies classes do not focus on developing the critical analysis skills necessary to evaluate election programs, which limits the effectiveness and credibility of the student government as a representative institution.

Active student government members also point out the barriers to engaging all students in school-related activities. Students who do not hold formal positions in the student government presidium (president, deputy) are significantly less likely to participate in activities. They cite a lack of time or a feeling that *it's not for me* (Żbikowska, unpublished research). At the same time, active student government members feel it is difficult to encourage their peers to take action if there are no benefits (e.g., additional positive grades, fewer tests, higher grades for behavior). Student government leaders struggle to both mobilize their peers and maintain their motivation. Even when convinced to participate, students either withdraw after a short time, or their participation is limited to passively accepting the ideas presented by the leaders and later leaving them to their own devices. Many schools have a motivational system designed to influence student behavior, awarding points for participation in student government, among other things. Active members point out that this system contradicts the idea of selfless engagement in community work.

As Poleszak (2018) writes, a student government must meet the definition of a cooperative student government to be effective: "Whose presidium is composed of students elected in democratic school-wide elections (preceded by the presentation of election programs), and being respected by both their peers and the teaching staff." This type of student government is task-oriented, works well with adults, and takes responsibility for its actions within the school environment. However, such a student government to exist and function requires a high level of knowledge, competence, and cooperation is required among all groups in the school environment including teachers and principals, administrative staff, parents, and the students. Meanwhile, as Poleszak notes, "knowledge about the essence of school self-governance is insufficient among both students and teachers. Therefore, it would be advisable to demonstrate, through informational and educational activities, the importance of school self-governance for the development of students, schools, and the local community."

The authors of the study *Youth Activism* (Kelsz, 2024) highlighted the fact that young activists have a clearly negative assessment of the Polish education system, both locally and nationally. In their opinion, the education system is anachronistic, places significant pressure on results and grades, and emphasizes competition over collaboration. The activists also noted that Polish **schools lack opportunities to develop soft skills** because project-based activities are neither promoted nor implemented. Social skills and a collaborative approach are not rewarded. As a result, schools, in

their opinion, are places where self-governance is underdeveloped and students' sense of agency suffers. The respondents felt they lacked the agency to engage in solving educational problems at the national level.

4.4. The Impact of Civic Activity on the Youth Well-Being

The recent depression epidemic, which has been discussed particularly in the context of the youth, poses a question: How can volunteering impact teenagers? The article *Adolescent Volunteering in Poland – Contextual and Individual Determinants* (Lachowski and Lachowska, 2023) explores how helping others influences young people's well-being.

The study included individuals aged 14-15 (the eighth grade or first year of secondary education). Of the study group, 26.6% of respondents volunteered. Seven areas could be considered predictors of the likelihood of volunteering in the study group. Region of residence was a significant predictor. Higher per capita income in the region and higher unemployment rate significantly decreased the likelihood of volunteering, while living in a city increased it. Fathers' employment in agriculture and the number of children in the family significantly increased the likelihood of youth engagement in volunteering. Interestingly, a higher income from agriculture in the region was positively correlated with the time youth devoted to volunteering. Children of mothers with lower education levels as well children of mothers working in agriculture, spent more time volunteering than the rest of the volunteer group.

The average duration of volunteering in this group was 15.6 hours. 28.5% of respondents spent less than 3 hours per month, 30.5% between 4 and 9 hours, 25.2% between 10 and 25 hours, and 15.4% over 60 hours per month.

Another important finding of the study was that volunteering was correlated with a subjectively assessed higher level of physical fitness and a lower level of helplessness. The more time teenagers devoted to volunteering, the higher their self-efficacy and the lower their perceived levels of helplessness. Young people were more likely to engage in long-term volunteering when passion was their main motivation. Those who valued being liked and respected showed were less likely to engage in long-term volunteering.

4.5. Support

Young people involved in social activities feel they lack support, and it is mainly because they believe **their voices are marginalized in the public debate**. Adolescents are convinced that their problems and perspectives are insignificant to national and local authorities. As a result,

they often experience a lack of agency, which decreases their motivation. Teenagers are also strongly stereotyped as a social group and adult's knowledge about this age group is limited and superficial (Żbikowska, 2023). With the exception of large cities, municipal employees and cultural institutions primarily rely on knowledge derived from professional or personal experiences, as well as research conducted by employees that leaves much to be desired methodologically (Żbikowska, 2019). Although employees recognized the need to create a well-functioning model of cooperation with young people but were unable to implement it.

When it comes to teenagers, due to their low level of agency and lack of experience, individuals unconnected to activist circles were unsure how to change their environment (Żbikowska, 2023; Ostrowski and Pierścińska, 2025). They could not imagine what new activities they could engage in.

The authors of the report *Important People from Small Places* came to a similar conclusion: "Some would expect more to happen, but their requests referred more to the frequency of what was already happening, rather than new types of activities they would like to engage in but cannot" (Ostrowski and Pierścińska, 2025). Young activists stated that they could benefit from professional expertise and systemic support in their areas of activity, preferably in the form of mentoring or training (Kelsz, 2024). They cited the lack of or limited access to financial resources for implementing grassroots initiatives as a significant limitation in their pursuit of professionalization. These deficiencies harm both the effectiveness of their actions and their long-term involvement people in social life.

4.6. Suggestions and Recommendations for Participatory Work with Youth

Young people are a particular group of volunteers due to their relatively low sense of agency and influence. To strengthen their belief that volunteering can be valuable and enriching, the opportunities should be tailored to their specific needs and motivations. The following recommendations are based on the above studies, as well as analyses from other areas of youth sociology (including the sociology of leisure, education, generational studies, and social inequalities). They are also based on the author's experience in supporting children and young people in volunteering and civic engagement activities.

Education and Flexibility of Engagement. Development of volunteering engagement requires changing the perception that only long hours of involvement bring tangible effects. Even one or two hours a week in the local community can lead to visible social changes. Therefore, schools and extracurricular programs should offer activities tailored to students' schedules, clearly communicate the value of short-term activities,

and raise awareness that volunteering can include small, regular acts of support. To propose such activities, it is essential to examine the yet invisible areas of youth social work, such as support for local communities, peer support, and other activities happening outside of institutional frameworks.

Collaboration with External Entities. To encourage young people to abstain from some extracurricular activities in favor of volunteering, partnerships must be established with non-governmental organizations, local cultural institutions, businesses, and social services. Students would gain access to specialized knowledge, new social networks, and real-world opportunities outside of school. This would strengthen their motivation and level of competence, help them develop skills, and provide them with experience. In this context, mapping out institutions willing to work with young people would be essential. Understanding the competencies that adolescents wish to develop is also crucial.

Designing integrated pro-social activities. Currently, student governments and volunteer organizations have few initiatives that combine integration with valuable projects (e.g., local clean-ups, charity events, fundraising), which could have a lasting impact on agency of children and adolescents. For example, the model of science clubs in Uruguay could serve as inspiration for such initiatives. There, young people initiated scientific research, social campaigns, and other activities that allowed them to influence the local community.

Psychological support and mentoring. Young people often express the need for professional support, both emotional and educational. At the same time, they provide such support themselves. Implementing a mentoring system, providing project management training, and offering access to psychological counseling would better prepare students for social leadership roles and reduce the burden of peer support.

Co-creating initiatives instead of ready-made solutions. Students express a willingness to act, but often do not know how. Programs should be co-created with young people, from problem identification through idea development to implementation, so that they learn to creatively find solutions through participatory processes.

Activation through strengths. Engaging young people effectively should be based on their interests and skills. Offering them activities in which they feel competent increases their motivation to act. Consultations, surveys, and focus groups help us identify the individual strengths of young leaders and activists and build social projects around them.

The role of an experienced mentor. It is crucial to engage an adult who can listen and support, while also wisely managing projects. A good supervisor should act as a mentor, meeting facilitator, and advisor, without taking too much initiative. More research is needed to determine the qualities that young people value in student government or volunteer

mentors. It is also necessary to examine the needs of those already involved in order to support them and prevent burnout.

Developing an infrastructure of engagement. Young people have strong altruistic motivations. To build on them, a *helping infrastructure* should be created. The infrastructure could consist of platforms, networks, and sustainable volunteer programs. It is essential to create easily accessible local volunteer centers and information systems that use the language of young people, enabling them to easily discover projects and initiatives.

Emphasis on quick results. Direct, immediate results are a particularly powerful motivator for young people. A smile coming from the person they helped, or being publicly thanked can encourage them to do more. Schools should implement a quick feedback system for volunteers and student government activists, highlighting their contributions and achievements.

End elitism. Avoid creating elite *engaged* groups that seem inaccessible to the *average* student. The only available research on the typology of youth involved in social initiatives comes from large cities, and the rest of the country is underrepresented. Conducting research in other regions of Poland is very important.

Values and experiences. Young people want to develop new skills, create new, interesting memories, and meet new people. Social programs should offer a variety of activities (intercultural projects, thematic events, educational trips), which will diversify experiences and enhance young people's social skills. It is important to remember that young people are forming their identities, so conversations and activities centered around their values are important at this stage. Knowledge about these values could help design a range of activities that better appeal to undecided students.

Ensuring a sense of effectiveness and influence. Youth engagement increases when they see the real impact their actions have on the project outcomes. They should be involved in key decision-making processes. This can be achieved through regular evaluation sessions, during which young people can assess progress and propose adjustments.

Partnerships with youth organizations. Traditional NGOs and associations may not always be natural partners for students. Therefore, it is worthwhile to support the creation of youth forums, grants, and initiatives that are managed by young people and tailored to their needs.

4.7. Key Findings

- Moving beyond the *opportunities and threats* paradigm in research on children and youth could provide valuable insights into the reasons for their engagement – or lack thereof – in volunteering activities.

- Institutions that support civic and volunteer activities among young people, such as student councils, youth councils, and school volunteer clubs already exist. However, they do not always function as intended or expected. It is necessary to examine how to better support these institutions, so they could fulfil their roles more effectively.
- Young people believe that their problems and perspectives are not important to national and local authorities.
- Research on student governments shows that institutions established to encourage youth activity and volunteering do not fulfill their functions adequately. This is largely due to a lack of knowledge, support, and a climate of trust towards young people and their ideas.
- Children and young people want to be involved, and altruistic motivations are relatively common. However, they do not always know how to engage or are unable to do so. The main barriers include lack of time, limited transport accessibility, feelings of incompetence, lack of adult support, and a sense of helplessness.
- Involvement in volunteering activities is associated with lower levels of helplessness and a higher sense of self-efficacy.
- Studies conducted in large cities show that engaged individuals tend to have higher cultural and social capital. It is important to study the situation of engaged young people in other parts of the country to avoid reinforcing exclusion mechanisms that affect those in poorer material or social conditions.
- For young people, engagement through formal institutions, such as foundations or associations, is less attractive than helping through informal, casual activities.
- Adult involvement is crucial for engaging adolescents, both at the stage of inviting them to participate and planning activities, as well as in creating spaces where children and youth feel they can work on their own ideas and projects.
- For young people, working for others can be perceived as a way to gain knowledge and skills essential for their future careers.
- Online volunteering among children and young people remains understudied.

Summary of Key Findings from the Report

5

This summary presents a complex picture of volunteering in Poland. It focuses on the overall scope of volunteering, as well as the trends, motivations, and forms implemented by organizations and institutions. It also describes the involvement of children and young people. The analysis draws on existing research, identifying both strengths and the key challenges in the development of volunteering in Poland.

5.1. Scale, Trends, and Challenges of Volunteering in Poland

- **Diversity of definitions and methodologies:** In Poland, the three main research centers (GUS, CBOS, Klon/Jawor) use different definitions of the phenomenon. This results in varying statistics and data with limited comparability.
- **Individual volunteering as a dominant form:** Individual volunteering, conducted outside organizational structures, is far more common than organizational volunteering. It engages five times as many people (26.5% versus 5% according to GUS).
- **Impact of education and income:** Higher education levels and higher household incomes correlate with greater engagement, particularly in formal volunteering.
- **Urban engagement:** City residents seem more likely to volunteer, though volunteering in rural areas seems to be understudied. One reason for this is better access to institutions and different programs.
- **Women's engagement:** In Poland, women are slightly more likely than men to volunteer, both individually and through organizations, although the areas of activity differ.
- **Formal volunteering is at a low level:** Poland has one of the lowest rates of formal volunteering among OECD (5.6%) and EU (7.4%)

countries. This suggests an underdeveloped culture of structured engagement or a preference for informal forms.

- **Lack of time as a barrier:** The most frequently cited barrier is a lack of time (65% among youth, 49% in the general population), though this reflects a range of underlying factors such as workload and family responsibilities.
- **Lack of interest:** Poland ranks among the countries with the highest percentage of people who declare no interest in volunteering (27%).
- **Crisis-driven mobilization:** Major crisis events, such as the outbreak of war in Ukraine, lead to a considerable but short-term increase in social mobilization and volunteering.
- **Historical context:** In post-communist countries such as Poland, the volunteering tradition differs from that of Western Europe due to the legacy of imposed *social service* during the communist period, which still influences perception today.

5.2. Volunteering in Organizations and Institutions

- **Non-governmental organizations (NGOs):** Around 62% of Polish NGOs rely on volunteers, though only a few maintain regular engagement. Many struggle with recruitment and retention due to the absence of formal management structures, coordinator training, and stable staffing or finances.
- **Employee volunteering:** Interest in employee volunteering is growing, as it becomes a part of corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies, particularly in large companies. Employee volunteering benefits both employers (team integration, skill development, reputation) and employees (personal growth, a sense of influence). However, challenges remain, including lack of time, low awareness, and concerns over formalization.
- **Volunteering in cultural institutions:** Although still under-researched, this area is expanding. Volunteers contribute to a wide range of activities, from event organization to specialist tasks. Their motivations include gaining new experiences, social contacts, and participation in culture. Nevertheless, a gap exists between institutional expectations (staff support) and volunteers' expectations (learning, growth), along with difficulties in recruitment and management.
- **E-volunteering:** It has expanded, especially since the pandemic, offering flexibility and accessibility to those unable to engage in person. Activities include psychological support, remote education, and translation. Challenges include insufficient training for

organizations and sustaining long-term motivation without direct contact.

- **Public perception of volunteering:** Volunteering is often viewed negatively, as *working for free* or *a waste of time*, yet it is also idealized as something for *exceptional people with a calling*, which discourages broader participation.
- **General challenges:** Key challenges to volunteering in Poland include a vague and narrow public understanding of the term, lack of time, fear of contact with suffering, a mismatch between offers and volunteer expectations, and limited information about opportunities for engagement.

5.3. Motivations for Volunteering

- **Multidimensional nature of motivation:** Motivations for volunteering are complex and context-dependent. They combine practical needs (personal growth, recognition, well-being) with symbolic needs (selflessness, compassion, shared values, identity-building).
- **Changing motivations over time:** Initial motivations may differ from those sustaining long-term involvement. Continued engagement depends on satisfaction, a feeling of group belonging, and the consolidation of volunteer identity. The key is to match volunteers' motivations with the organizational environment.
- **Family environment influence:** Supportive parenting styles and a family tradition of helping others play a vital role in shaping prosocial attitudes among children and adolescents.
- **Cultural context:** In Poland, volunteering often has strong symbolic value, particularly in times of crisis (e.g., the war in Ukraine), when duty and solidarity prevail. Although altruism is frequently declared, social norms may discourage openly admitting self-interested motives.
- **Personal benefits:** Volunteering is perceived as providing tangible benefits such as skill development (especially soft skills), better employability, social integration, improved mental health, and a sense of agency.
- **Motivation management:** Effective management, through rewarding, recognition, empowering, training, and alignment with volunteer expectations, is essential for volunteer satisfaction and retention.
- **Volunteer Stages:** Volunteering is a developmental process in which motivations and satisfaction evolve. Organizations should support volunteers at every stage, helping them navigate unexpected obstacles and redefine their roles.

5.4. Volunteering and Social Engagement of Children and Youth

- **Multifaceted benefits for young people:** Volunteering helps develop interpersonal, civic, and professional skills, boosts self-esteem and sense of agency, fosters empathy, and strengthens resilience. It also helps young people form friendships and build social bonds.
- **Rising political engagement:** In recent years there has been a sharp increase in political participation among Polish youth (e.g., voter turnout), prompting questions about whether this activity extends to broader civic engagement.
- **Challenges within the education system:** Many young activists view the Polish education system as outdated and overly competitive. It places little emphasis on cooperation and fails to nurture soft skills, or a sense of empowerment. Students' rights are often violated, and behavior grading promotes conformism.
- **Barriers to engagement:** The most common obstacles include excessive academic workload and extracurricular activities, little information about volunteering opportunities, and the absence of direct invitations. Other barriers include feelings of incompetence, fear of ridicule and wasted effort, lack of adult support, and the marginalization of youth voices.
- **The key role of adults:** A direct and personal invitation from an adult, such as a teacher, can be an important decisive factor. Young people's engagement greatly depends on the attitude, competence, and support of adult coordinators.
- **Formal structures vs. practice:** Although there are formal institutions such as youth councils, student governments, and school volunteer clubs, they often function with limited agency, or fail to function as intended due to a lack of knowledge, support, or trust from educators.
- **Profile of young volunteers:** Studies in large cities show that the most active young volunteers tend to come from wealthier, educated families and have a stronger sense of empowerment. Targeted efforts are needed to engage youth from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- **Volunteering and career development:** Many young people, especially students, treat volunteering as a way to build a better resume. It allows them to gain skills, work experience, and professional connections.
- **Youth e-volunteering:** While under-researched, youth e-volunteering is on the rise, with young people engaging in online civic initiatives such as managing topic-based online groups or creating educational content. However, they rarely associate this type of action with formal social activism.

To sum up, volunteering in Poland is a dynamic and evolving phenomenon. Although formal participation lags behind that of Western Europe, involvement continues to grow – particularly in response to crises and among younger generations. The key to further development lies in understanding the diversity of motivations, adapting opportunities to different groups (especially young people), improving professional volunteer management within organizations, and consciously shaping a positive and inclusive image of volunteering in society.

Major Knowledge Gaps About Volunteering



The development of volunteering in Poland faces barriers that stem from gaps or ambiguities in collecting, defining, and interpreting data. There is a clear contradiction in Polish society between the belief that Poland is a country of volunteers and the low actual rates of citizen engagement in volunteering. One of the main problems is the negative image of volunteering, which many perceive as *cheap labor, self-interest disguised as altruism*, and, in the case of young people and international projects, as *cheap vacations or fun*.

Many Polish people don't know the name of a single organization offering volunteering opportunities, nor do they know how to find such an initiative. Therefore, communication is clearly ineffective, and awareness of available opportunities is very low. This is most clearly visible in the area of employee volunteering. Some businesses are unaware that employee involvement in social activities is even legally possible. This raises concerns among both employers and employees.

The value of experience gained through volunteering is also often underestimated. Neither employers nor volunteers consider it an important tool for building a professional career. As a result, this experience rarely appears on CVs, even though it could provide valuable knowledge about competencies and skills.

The question of whether unpaid and voluntary community service is accepted and supported as a social norm in various socioeconomic environments remains. Public opinion still associates volunteering primarily with **hard, exhausting work** for the benefit of social welfare, effectively discouraging potential volunteers. Many people perceive volunteering as an obligation or as unpaid work, not as a source of personal gain or a valuable way to spend leisure time.

Public perception of volunteers also plays a role. They are often met with misunderstanding, or even criticism, in their immediate circle of friends

and family. Socially engaged people are sometimes ashamed to admit their involvement, fearing negative judgment. The media lacks narratives about the benefits of volunteering. Both social media and the press rarely highlight volunteers' personal gains, such as development, relationships, or a sense of purpose.

People who are not involved often do not understand the motivations of active volunteers. They wonder how volunteers find the time and why they choose to take on additional unpaid activities. There is a widespread belief that volunteering is only for *exceptional individuals*, not for average citizens. Furthermore, many potential volunteers feel unprepared for such a role because they fear that they lack the necessary skills or personality traits.

It is also worth noting that volunteers often have a negative perception of politics and consciously separate their social activities from it. There is a clearly visible need to rethink politics as a broad area of life that impacts civic and community activities. These diverse knowledge gaps, stereotypes, and social prejudices create a complex landscape of barriers that effectively limit the growth of volunteering in Poland. Regarding volunteering and social engagement among Polish citizens, sources point to a number of issues that remain misunderstood, under-researched, or subject to misconceptions. Based on a review of existing research, we identified the main knowledge gaps about volunteering in Poland.

Data gaps and inconsistencies in definitions not only make it impossible to assess the actual level of citizen engagement but also limit the ability to design effective policies supporting the development of volunteering. These challenges are both quantitative and qualitative, and overcoming them requires a multifaceted research and institutional approach.

- 1. Lack of a comprehensive research program and precise research questions.** There is a need to develop a complete model that will determine which data is required for the Solidarity Corps and the National Institute for Freedom (NIW) to support their activities. The questions available in existing studies are often too general to serve as a starting point for specific programs. Creating such a model first requires a) an in-depth social diagnosis and b) an assessment of the institutions and individuals needs for coordinating volunteering activities. A research program should be formulated based on them and include regular quantitative research and further qualitative research. Formulating questions in relation to the statutory objectives of the NIW and the Solidarity Corps will allow for collecting the data needed for strategic decisions. Constant monitoring of knowledge produced by national and international research centers will enable the ongoing updating of research questions, plans, and measurement tools allowing them to better address practical social challenges related to the development of volunteering.

- 2. Lack of a consistent definition of volunteering.** One of the fundamental problems is the multitude of definitions of volunteering present in public debate, among research institutions, and even among volunteers themselves. Conceptual variability and the use of different classification criteria (e.g., by the Central Statistical Office, the Public Opinion Research Center, and non-governmental organizations) lead to difficulties in comparison and interpretation of results. Poland also has no unified system for collecting data on volunteer activities. A unified system would enable comparisons across sectors, institutions, and companies. In many cases, individuals involved in social activities do not identify with the *volunteer* label. This results in underreported statistics and an inaccurate picture of social engagement. The public definition of volunteering is either vague or very narrow. Polish people typically associate volunteering with helping those in need and less often with working for the community or the environment. Unpaid activity undertaken independently is usually not classified as formal volunteering. This results in omissions of this form of participation in official statistics. Furthermore, concepts such as *helping others* does not include animals, nature, climate, or culture, thus failing to capture important areas of social engagement. More detailed data on the regularity and frequency of citizen involvement is needed, especially for informal volunteering.
- 3. Barriers to conducting comparative international research.** The absence of a coherent system for collecting comparable data across all European Union member states makes it difficult to better understand the environmental factors shaping the social attitudes of Poles. For example, there is a lack of data comparing the motivations of volunteers in Poland with those in other European countries with similar histories (e.g., the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia). Adapting measurement tools would primarily involve translating and partially modifying well-established questionnaires, such as the Volunteer Functions Inventory, or tools from various European projects. However, there are currently no validated versions of these tools tailored to Polish realities that take into account cultural differences. Access to international longitudinal studies that allow for the observation of changes in engagement and motivation over time is also limited. Most existing analyses are cross-sectional and include samples from Western European countries, rarely focusing on Poland or its neighbors.
- 4. Insufficient data and measurement limitations.** There is a lack of contemporary, comparable, and in-depth data on various forms of volunteering, particularly informal and employee volunteering. In the context of dynamic social and economic changes (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic, migration), existing data is rapidly becoming outdated. Furthermore, many studies are cross-sectional, based on single self-reports, which limits the ability to analyze changes over time. Currently, most existing studies rely on volunteer self-reports at a single point in time. Longitudinal studies comparing the

individual's state before, during, and after volunteering would be of much greater value. This would enable the objective measurement of variables such as well-being, sense of empowerment, openness to others, social sensitivity, and level of trust. Long-term studies tracking changes in volunteer motivation over time are also lacking. Such studies could capture the impact of volunteering not only on psychological dimensions, but also on professional and relational ones. For example, research suggests that volunteering may be a good form of career planning. However, this issue could benefit from further exploration: How might volunteering influence the educational choices, career paths, networks, and lifestyles of volunteers compared to those who are not involved? What needs does volunteering fulfill for individuals at different stages of life?

- 5. Insufficient consideration of demographic and cultural variables.** Most analyses do not adequately account for regional, cultural, or demographic differences in volunteering. Available research is often based on qualitative analyses or broad reports that do not provide clear indicators for Poland and the region. Factors such as age, gender, education level, economic status, having children, or values influence motivations and barriers to engagement, but there is little data that would allow for further exploration of this subject. Data on family patterns and local community structures are particularly needed. Local variations often differ in terms of civic traditions and forms of activity, especially considering the specific nature of political transformation in different regions. Targeted quantitative data collection is recommended, including the development of national research panels and long-term observations, to better understand the dynamics of volunteer motivation in Poland and Central and Eastern Europe.
- 6. Poor availability of data and research tools.** Limited access to raw data from public surveys is a significant barrier to the volunteering research development. It limits the possibility of conducting secondary analyses, international comparisons, and thus the development of scientific and applied knowledge. The lack of public access to raw data from volunteering reports constitutes a barrier to the development of research and in-depth analyses, preventing the testing of new hypotheses and deepening knowledge without the need for costly ground-up research.
- 7. Descriptive nature of analyses.** Many analyses of the motivations, barriers, and benefits of volunteering are limited to describing their frequency. A more in-depth analysis of these variables, broken down by demographic characteristics such as gender, age, education level, or place of residence is necessary. Furthermore, analyses of relationships between these variables are rarely conducted beyond descriptive statistics, which limits the interpretation and application of the results.

- 8. Lack of data on public perception of volunteering.** Public perception of volunteering remains understudied: How is volunteering perceived by non-committed individuals, and what social norms influence willingness to work for others? The low prestige of volunteering, its association with unpaid work, or being perceived as a form of entertainment, can be discouraging and exclusionary for potential candidates. The question remains open about the social norms regarding unpaid and voluntary work: To what extent is it accepted and supported in environments with different socioeconomic profiles? It is worth considering the following hypothetical question: Is working *for free* perceived today as a valuable, prestigious activity, or as something marginal or incomprehensible? This issue is particularly important because, among those not involved in volunteering, one of the most frequently cited reasons for leaving was the low social prestige of this kind of engagement.
- 9. Underestimating the role of social networks and communication.** Current research on volunteering confirms that personal recommendations, primarily from friends and family, remain the dominant channel for recruiting volunteers for NGOs. This communication model, while effective, significantly limits the ability to reach people beyond an immediate social circle. Although organizations are increasingly using social media and collaborating with other volunteer organizations, direct contact still plays a key role in recruitment. However, previous analyses have paid little attention to examining the structures of social networks themselves and their impact on volunteer activity. It would be worthwhile to examine the extent to which people involved in volunteering interact with inactive individuals and whether such interactions foster a natural flow of information and values. This type of analysis could improve our understanding of the social mechanisms of inclusion in, or exclusion from, civic activities. Examining the extent to which active individuals influence the attitudes and decisions could help build lasting support structures in local communities.
- 10. Lack of systematic data on the negative aspects of volunteering.** The dominant culture of altruism means that detailed research on the negative aspects of volunteering, such as the psychological and health costs is lacking. This, in turn, leads to a lack of systemic solutions supporting the engaged. Similarly, in the field of institutional and employee volunteering in Poland, comprehensive data on its organization and the impact of experiences on the willingness to continue or discontinue involvement are still unavailable. Dynamic changes related to the pandemic and the influx of refugees have rendered previously collected results outdated.
- 11. Overcoming differences in approaches to motivation research is a challenge.** Integrating various research approaches is necessary to capture the multidimensionality of the phenomenon

and overcome the taboos associated with the culture of altruism. Reports point to inconsistencies in motivational factors. Depending on the study, various motives are emphasized, ranging from altruism and social solidarity to personal development, economic motivations, and social recognition. These differences stem from the varying ways the concept is operationalized, the lack of standardized tools, and the impact of changing socioeconomic conditions. Systematic research could help reconcile these differences. Implementing standardized quantitative tools and longitudinal studies is recommended for developing a more comprehensive picture of volunteer motivation. One example of such situations might be the question about reasons for not being engaged. The most common answer is *lack of time*. However, only a better understanding of what this lack of time really means in practice (excessive workload, caregiving, commuting, etc.), what it stems from, and who it affects, will allow us to implement actions that realistically address this barrier to engagement.

12. Specific data gaps:

- **Lack of in-depth data on agency.** A sense of agency is a key component of long-term social engagement. Therefore, a better understanding of the barriers to and potential of volunteering requires examining the sense of agency among Polish volunteers and the factors that influence it. A lower sense of agency can significantly limit engagement, especially among the youngest and oldest generations.
- **Lack of questions about the volunteer experience, including conflicts and disappointments.** There is little data on what demotivates volunteers, or which specific situations within organizations lead to disengagement. There are no sufficient motivational analyses of those who have withdrawn from volunteering.
- **Lack of data on activist profiles and typologies.** Research is needed to formulate a typology of youth activists. Creating dominant profiles describing engaged and disengaged, which take into account diverse motivations and understandings of engagement, would also prove useful.
- **Specific qualitative data.** Qualitative research is narrow in scope and focused on description rather than explanation. Exploratory qualitative research is needed to understand a) the language used to describe volunteering and social engagement and b) the complexity of motivations and barriers to volunteering, and c) the needs of volunteer coordinators and volunteers themselves that determine satisfaction with their activities, etc.
- There is a lack of detailed, in-depth information on volunteering activities that go beyond the standard, such as those related to local activities, animal welfare, organizations, schools, or parishes. The list of possible functions and tasks performed by volunteers is

very extensive, but it does not appear in surveys, making it difficult to capture certain forms of activity and provide a comprehensive description of volunteering as a phenomenon. Current questions about volunteering or unpaid work do not cover important social activities, such as organizing fundraisers or informational campaigns, sharing knowledge, helping neighbors, and acting as intermediaries with offices.

- Little is known about the reasons for initiating and sustaining volunteering. Systematic research on this topic is lacking, especially regarding corporate and informal volunteering.
- Despite interesting local studies, there is no precise, nationwide, quantitative data on volunteers based on a single naming convention.
- Previous data on corporate volunteering is no longer valid due to dynamic changes in the labor market caused by factors such as the pandemic and the influx of refugees.
- There is not enough data on motivations in employee volunteering, which may vary depending on the industry or the employee's age. The same applies to volunteering in organizations and institutions: How do volunteers working in museums differ from those working at fundraising events, etc.?
- Insufficient research on the psychological and health costs of volunteering, particularly in the context of helping refugees and people in difficult life situations. This lack of systemic support in this area can lead to volunteer burnout and withdrawal.
- Scarce research captures the complexity of volunteer motivations, including self-interest, and allows for the identification of changes in motivation at various stages.
- There is a lack of systematic knowledge about institutional barriers – including volunteering organized by local governments, organizations, and companies.
- It is unclear why students and pupils engage in volunteering (is it a matter of grades, building relationships, developing competencies, or an internal need for engagement?). It is also unknown what causes young people to discontinue volunteering despite initial commitment.

13. Specific gaps in research methodology

- **Questions about volunteering over a longer period.** It is recommended to ask questions about the last year, rather than the last four weeks, unless surveys are repeated more frequently. Otherwise, we observe a strong seasonal pattern and miss the diversity of activities conducted throughout the year.

- **Missing data about respondents' social environment.** Patterns of involvement within family and close circles, the prestige of volunteering in the immediate community, the number of people involved in social activities, and awareness of various forms of involvement. The role of social context and socialization is not considered in the research.
 - Questions in current studies are often too general. For example, they do not specify what exactly *lack of time* means as a barrier to involvement.
 - Surveys often do not specify if volunteers are members of the organization they work for, which can distort the picture of their involvement.
 - People's understanding of volunteering varies, leading to **inconsistencies** in data. This problem also applies to self-identification. Those engaging in volunteering often do not call themselves *volunteers*, but rather, for example, *activists* or *social activists*.
- 14. Despite the growing interest in the topic of youth social engagement, there are still significant research gaps, hindering the understanding of the true picture of youth participation. Analysis of the available literature reveals several significant problems:**
- **Excessive generality and homogeneity of research** – youth are often treated as a homogeneous group, and diversity within this group is not taken into account (age, type of school, place of residence, financial situation, health, or vulnerability to social exclusion). Groups such as younger children (grades 1-3), vocational school students, boarding school residents, and people with disabilities are overlooked.
 - **Lack of data on less obvious forms of activity** – research is dominated by the perspective of high school students aged 16 and older. Meanwhile, many forms of social activity also occur in younger age groups (e.g., Small Student Governments), which are insufficiently recognized and researched.
 - **Neglect of the mental health context** – despite the importance of this topic for youth, few analyses of their emotional involvement in helping peers and the risks associated with it (e.g., burnout, overload) exist. There is no systemic support for young people in this area.
 - **Insufficient knowledge** about the role adults play in initiating youth activities. We know adults who support young people (e.g., student government and volunteer supervisors) play a key role in the engagement process, but their situation, needs, motivations, and difficulties are almost completely unexplored.

- **Focus on quantitative data** – research focuses primarily on measuring general levels of activity, rarely attempting to understand the motivations, barriers, causes of withdrawal, or actual experiences of young people. There is a shortage of in-depth, qualitative analyses.
- The effects of **youth engagement** are unclear. We do not know if youth activity actually impacts local communities, and if the outcomes are considered valuable and motivating by the young people. Understanding this aspect could significantly increase the effectiveness of youth engagement programs.

Expert Commentary: Strategic Directions for the Development of Volunteering in Poland



Despite its undeniable potential, the development of volunteering in Poland still faces systemic barriers that make it difficult to achieve the scale and professionalism comparable to Western European countries. To increase social engagement and streamline its organization, it is essential to adopt **a holistic approach that combines a deep understanding of motivations and barriers with specific systemic and promotional improvements**. This commentary presents strategic recommendations aimed not only at increasing the number of volunteers, but also at improving the quality of their experiences and the effectiveness of their activities. These recommendations should attract the attention of public institutions and strengthen the foundations of civil society.

Individual and informal forms of volunteering dominate in Poland, resulting in many activities remaining outside official statistics. Despite the spectacular mobilization in response to crises such as the war in Ukraine, Poland has the lowest long-term formal engagement in the OECD and the EU.

Public perception of volunteering is often **vague and narrow**. It is equated with *working for free*, *wasting time*, or heroism, which effectively discourage people from getting involved. Furthermore, historical conditioning from the communist era, when *social service* was often imposed, continues to shape ambivalent attitudes toward this form of activity. The most frequently cited barriers are **lack of time** (although this is an all-encompassing concept that requires a thorough analysis of underlying causes) and a **lack of interest**, reported by 27% of Poles. There is also a **structural selection bias** – organizations often recruit individuals who are already active and have high social capital. As a result, inequalities in access to volunteering deepen.

To increase the scale of volunteer engagement, **thoughtful image-building and reaching broader social groups are crucial**. Intensive information campaigns should be launched that go beyond the traditional, narrow understanding of volunteering as solely charitable, and that emphasize diverse forms of activity: from environmental and cultural protection, sports, to supporting local communities. It is equally important

to emphasize the personal benefits of volunteering, such as developing of soft skills (interpersonal communication, teamwork, time management), improving mental health (reduced feelings of helplessness, increased agency), networking, and gaining valuable professional experience that can be an asset in the job market. Promotional messages should move away from the *heroization* of volunteers and normalize volunteering as **an accessible activity for ordinary people**, not just special individuals with a *calling*.

A shift towards **more targeted and personalized recruitment efforts** is also important. Direct, personalized invitations to volunteer, especially from **trusted adults** (such as teachers or community leaders), are a key motivator, particularly among young people. It is essential to actively seek volunteers outside of traditional social networks, and target young people from less affluent and less educated families, and from smaller towns. These individuals are often not even invited to participate. To reduce the barrier of a lack of knowledge about volunteering opportunities available, outreach efforts must be more effective .

It is also necessary to increase **flexibility and diversify engagement opportunities** to address the perceived *lack of time* reported by many. Promoting short-term, so called *plug-in* volunteering and shorter-duration activities (e.g., one to two hours per week) can significantly lower the entry barrier and make volunteering more accessible. The development of e-volunteering, through investment in platforms and training that support online volunteering, not only offers flexibility and accessibility for people with physical limitations, professional responsibilities, or residents of remote regions. It also opens up new forms of symbolic expression. Organizations should adapt volunteering opportunities flexibly to diverse motivations – altruistic, developmental, social, or career-related – as motivations are multidimensional and context-dependent.

A key area requiring intervention is the **professionalization of volunteer management**. Organizations and institutions must invest heavily in developing the competencies of volunteer coordinators, as insufficient preparation is one of the main causes of poor volunteer experiences and dropouts. Clear structures and procedures for recruiting, inducting, assessing, and motivating volunteers should be implemented to move away from the unstructured and occasional nature of volunteering. Retention strategies should be based on an understanding that motivations and satisfaction change over time. Organizations should offer **rewards and recognition, empowerment** (involvement in decision-making processes), **emotional support and mentoring**, as well as **opportunities for role redefinition** to prevent burnout and discouragement.

Supporting children's and youth volunteering is particularly important. Student governments and youth councils should become real platforms for participation, not just formal structures. This requires a **shift in the approach of adults** (teachers, administrators) to a more

partnership-based and trust-based approach. Volunteering should be integrated into the school curriculum with formal education to develop soft skills, collaboration, and critical thinking, and it should be combined with opportunities for professional development and gaining experience in the labor market. Students and young activists need professional, educational, and emotional support. It is important to design activities that appeal to young people, show quick and visible results, and provide opportunities to create their own initiatives.

Employee volunteering requires its deeper integration with companies' CSR strategies for development. Companies, especially large ones, should develop **structured employee volunteering** programs that offer valuable opportunities for engagement. Offering flexible forms of engagement (e.g. days off for volunteering) and support in balancing workloads is essential. Supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is crucial to overcoming their legal and organizational concerns related to employee volunteering, given their dominant share of the Polish economy.

Strengthening cross-sectoral cooperation and standardizing research data are fundamental to long-term development. Encouraging non-governmental organizations, public institutions, and businesses to work together to promote and develop volunteering is crucial.

A recommended core of questions and a methodology for surveying volunteering in Poland should be developed and implemented. This will enable data comparability at the local, national, and international levels, filling current gaps and inconsistencies. It is equally important to conduct in-depth qualitative research to understand the complexity of motivations and barriers, especially in the context of a *lack of time* and the impact of social relationships on engagement.

In summary, developing volunteering in Poland requires **a coherent and multidimensional strategy** that considers cultural specifics, individual motivations, and structural conditions. Investing in professional volunteer management, especially in the youth and corporate volunteering sectors, as well as **consciously shaping its image and promoting diverse, flexible forms of engagement** are fundamental steps towards building a stronger and more active civil society. Public institutions have a key role to play here, through adequate funding, supporting civic education, standardizing research, and initiating innovative programs that will unleash **the enormous, often underused, volunteer potential** within Polish society.

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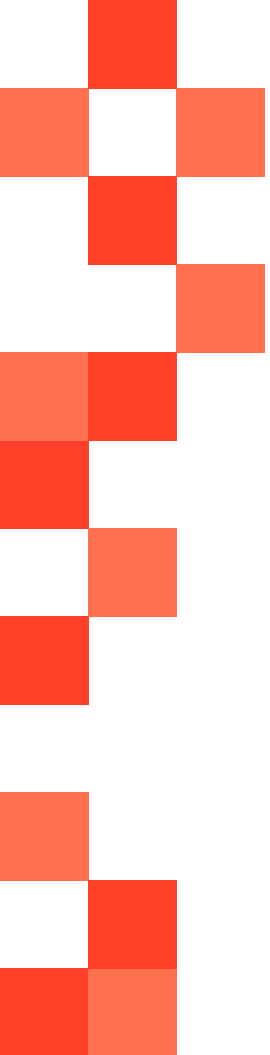
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This publication was created as part of the International Volunteer Year for Sustainable Development (IVY 2026), proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly. The IVY celebrations in Poland are coordinated by the National Freedom Institute – Centre for Civil Society Development.

