

## **Forcing unemployed to do voluntary work ‘unlikely’ to improve their mental health, research says**

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Welfare policies that force unemployed young people to carry out regular voluntary work are unlikely to improve their mental health and wellbeing, new research says.

Jobless people who carry out voluntary work regularly have no better mental health than average among the unemployed, the British Sociological Association’s annual conference in Birmingham was told today [Wednesday 6 April 2016].

Dr Daiga Kamerāde and Dr Matthew Bennett, of the University of Birmingham, analysed survey responses by almost 2,500 unemployed people in 29 European countries, including the UK, to see how doing voluntary work altered their mental health.

They found that in the UK people who did voluntary work once every fortnight or less had better mental health than those not volunteering at all. But more frequent volunteers had no better mental health than the average unemployed person.

“We found that in the UK volunteering occasionally – less than twice a month – when you are unemployed is good, but doing it regularly doesn’t make any difference to mental health,” said Dr Kamerāde.

However, young unemployed people in England are required to participate in up to 30 hours of community work a week or to lose their benefits, despite there is no robust evidence that such work increases their chances of securing paid work or improves their mental health and wellbeing.

“Our findings suggest that requiring young people to do regular voluntary work is not likely to improve their mental health. This suggests that unemployment benefit claimants should by no means be pressurized to do ‘voluntary’ work, as in England. Not at least until we have some robust evidence that this compulsory ‘voluntary’ work has beneficial effects.”

The researchers found that in general in countries that paid high unemployment benefits, volunteering often was linked to better mental health, but not in countries such as the UK which paid medium level unemployment benefits.

“In countries with ungenerous unemployment benefits doing regular voluntary work is actually related to poorer mental health outcomes than not volunteering or volunteering only occasionally. Volunteering regularly and receiving little welfare support can damage one’s mental health.”

Dr Kamerade and Dr Bennett used responses to the European Quality of Life Survey of nearly 2,449 unemployed people in the 29 European countries, taken in 2011/2012. The survey included questions which asked people how often they had carried out voluntary work in the previous 12 months, and also about the state of their mental health.

## **Note**

The British Sociological Association's annual conference takes place Aston University, Birmingham, UK from 6 to 8 April 2016. Around 600 research presentations are given. The British Sociological Association's charitable aim is to promote sociology. The BSA is a Company Limited by Guarantee. Registered in England and Wales. Company Number: 3890729. Registered Charity Number 1080235 [www.britsoc.co.uk](http://www.britsoc.co.uk)

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