THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

MENTAL WEALTH INITIATIVE – SOCIAL PRODUCTION REPORT SERIES

The Value of Social Production in Australia

Unlocking productive capacity beyond the formal economy



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Publication Information

About this report

This report introduces social production – the unpaid, socially productive activity that sustains Australian families, communities, and civic life – as a measurable component of national productive capacity. It presents a national estimate for Australia for 2024 and sets out what becomes governable in Australian policy when this contribution is made visible.

The report is a product of the University of Sydney's Mental Wealth Initiative. It is written for an Australian policy and research audience. Its purpose is not to recommend specific policy decisions but to introduce a measurement framework that complements existing national accounting and to indicate where it can support Australian policy debates that are already under way.

ABOUT THE MENTAL WEALTH INITIATIVE

The Mental Wealth Initiative at the University of Sydney is a transdisciplinary research capability focused on understanding and addressing the structural drivers of national prosperity, resilience, and population health and wellbeing. Its work on social production accounting makes the non-market foundations of prosperity and system sustainability visible, and therefore governable, in national accounts and policy frameworks. This work has gained relevance as countries confront the demographic, fiscal, technological, and geopolitical pressures of the current era.

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CONTACT

Associate Professor Jo-An Occhipinti, Co-Director, Mental Wealth Initiative, Sydney School of Public Health, University of Sydney. jo-an.occhipinti@sydney.edu.au

NAVIGATION

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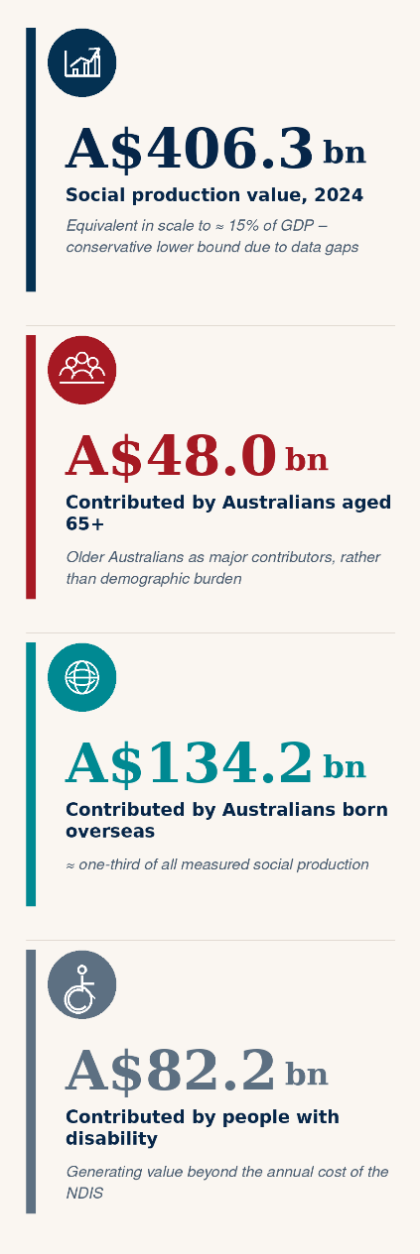
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Executive Summary

The hidden infrastructure of a contributing nation

Australia, like other advanced economies, faces a defining economic challenge. It must sustain national prosperity and the public systems that support it through a convergence of pressures – an ageing population, slowing productivity growth, the rising frequency and cost of natural disasters, weakening social cohesion, and the displacement of work by technological change. Fiscal pressures are set to grow. The Intergenerational Report 2023 estimates that spending on health, aged care, the NDIS, defence, and interest payments will rise from about one-third to about one-half of Australian Government spending over the next forty years (Australian Treasury 2023). Many of these pressures depend on the strength of the social foundations beneath the market economy as much as on market output, and cannot be fully understood or governed through a frame that measures only paid and market activity.



The Australian Government is responding across several reform tracks at once – the Aged Care Act 2024 and the Support at Home program (Department of Health, Disability and Ageing 2025a; 2025b), the reforms to secure the long-run sustainability of the NDIS (Department of Health, Disability and Ageing 2026), the National Care and Support Economy Strategy (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2023), and the productivity, resilience, and budget-sustainability agenda of the 2025 Economic Reform Roundtable (Australian Treasury 2025). Each of these reforms is premised, explicitly or implicitly, on an assumption about what families, communities, and civil society can and will continue to contribute.

Australia's national accounts measure paid work and market activity in detail; the unpaid productive activity that sustains communities and underpins the resilience of formal systems – including unpaid care work, volunteering, informal mentoring, and civic participation – sits outside the fiscal and budgetary frameworks built on those accounts. The reforms therefore rely on a productive capacity they cannot fully see, track, or sustain. When that capacity erodes, the demand it was absorbing returns to formal services as cost, working against the fiscal sustainability the reforms pursue. Making that capacity visible through systematic, integrated measurement is the precondition for governing it.

This report introduces social production – a macroeconomic indicator that extends the national accounts beyond GDP by placing a monetary value on unpaid productive activity that creates genuine social, environmental, and economic value but remains largely invisible in the current economic frame. It presents a preliminary national estimate of social production for Australia for 2024.

In 2024, social production in Australia is estimated at **A$406.3 billion**, equivalent in scale to approximately 15 per cent of GDP. This is a conservative lower bound as only three of the eight defined categories of social

production are measurable from current Australian data. Within that total, Australians aged 65 and over contributed an estimated A$48.0 billion; Australians not in the labour force contributed an estimated A$128.3 billion; Australians with disability contributed an estimated A$82.2 billion; and Australians born overseas delivered roughly one-third of the nation's total social production. The data highlight that the people that the prevailing economic frame treats as dependants – older Australians, people outside the labour force, people with disability – are, at scale, major contributors.

Aligned interests. Government, business, and community have a common stake in social production, because one capacity serves all three. For government, it is a productive base that absorbs demand otherwise borne by formal health and social care systems, and underpins economic resilience during times of crisis. For business, it enables workforce participation, builds skills, and strengthens networks, contributing to productivity and stability. For communities, it sustains cohesion and the mutual support that neighbourhoods rely on in adversity. Because the same capacity benefits all three, protecting it is a shared national interest, not a sectional one.

Just as GDP was instituted to give governments a single, comparable signal of national productive capacity for the policy challenge of its era – post-war reconstruction and industrial expansion – social production is designed as a complementary single macro signal for the policy challenges of ours. It has the potential to be the most consequential extension of macroeconomic measurement since GDP itself, with direct implications for how governments allocate resources, safeguard fiscal sustainability, and strengthen systemic resilience.

Social production is being measured in parallel in Switzerland, Norway, the United States, and Japan. Australia is well placed to be among the early movers in integrating it into the national accounts. This report concludes with a staged pathway toward an Australian Social Production Satellite Account, as a first step to integration into the national accounts. It is designed to build on the Time Use Survey that Australia already collects and on the work the Australian Bureau of Statistics has begun in experimental valuation of unpaid care within the Labour Account.

Key messages

Five things this report establishes

1

Social production is a large, measurable component of Australian productive capacity.

An estimated A$406.3 billion was generated in 2024 through unpaid care of children, care of older people and people with illness or disability, and volunteering – equivalent in scale to about 15 per cent of GDP. This is a conservative lower bound as only three of eight defined categories of social production are measurable from current Australian data.

2

The groups the budget counts as costs are among the largest contributors.

Australians aged 65 and over contributed an estimated A$48.0 billion; people outside the labour force an estimated A$128.3 billion; people with disability an estimated A$82.2 billion; and Australians born overseas roughly one-third of the measured total. This report provides evidence that the burden narrative does not hold.

3

Healthy longevity is productive-capacity investment, not only cost containment.

Per-capita contribution does not decline steadily with age: Australians aged 65 to 74 contribute more per person than those aged 55 to 64. The years of healthy life beyond 65 are also years in which substantial unpaid contribution is generated. The benefit runs both ways. Engagement in socially productive activity can contribute to maintaining a sense of purpose, social connection, mental health, and functional capacity into later life (Carlson et al. 2015; Sawan et al. 2025).

4

Australian policy success is already relying on social production; what is missing is the systematic measurement needed to govern it.

The cost-saving logic of the Support at Home program, the sustainability arithmetic of the NDIS reforms, and the resilience assumptions behind ageing in place all depend on a non-market productive capacity that is invisible and unguarded. Systematic measurement enables that capacity to be evaluated, strengthened, and sustained.

5

A macro signal Australia can leverage, not a new reporting burden.

Social production is built largely from time-use data Australia already collects, and the Australian Bureau of Statistics has already begun valuing unpaid care within the Labour Account. Social production is a single, inclusive, nationally aggregated signal expressed in the language of national accounts – designed to sit alongside GDP in fiscal analysis.

SECTION 1

Introduction

The contribution Australian policy already relies on, but cannot yet see

Over the coming decades, Australia must sustain its prosperity and the public systems that underpin it against a convergence of structural pressures – an ageing population, slowing productivity growth, the rising frequency and cost of natural disasters, weakening social cohesion and civic participation, and the displacement of work by technological change. How Australia manages these pressures depends as much on the strength of the social foundations beneath the market economy – the unpaid productive activity through which people support families, communities, and civic life – as on market activity on which public budgets depend. None of these pressures can be understood, or governed, through a measurement frame that captures only paid and market activity.

Australia's current reforms deepen a reliance on non-market productive capacity that lies outside the fiscal frame. For example, *Support at Home* and the measures to secure the NDIS (Aged Care Taskforce 2024; Department of Health, Disability and Ageing 2026) are designed to contain projected outlays, in part by drawing more heavily on unpaid care and the informal supports around it, consistent with the budget-sustainability priority set at the 2025 Economic Reform Roundtable (Australian Treasury 2025). These savings assume that informal community contributions will be sustained and grow as demand rises. That contribution is one part of a wider body of unpaid production the national accounts omit, and it lies outside the long-term budget projections built on those accounts, so the strategy for fiscal sustainability depends on forms of production its own frameworks exclude.

Failing to capture a complete picture of production in the national accounts has led to a narrative of burden that cascades through official metrics and political and social discourse. The *old-age dependency ratio*, which the Intergenerational Report uses to summarise demographic pressure, classifies every Australian over 65 as a dependant on age alone, and the long-term projections express growth in the populations outside paid work as growth in spending. Political language has seen distinctions drawn between 'lifters' and 'leaners' or 'taxed' versus 'taxed-nots', whereby only the value generated by those that contribute to the formal economy is recognised, despite other forms of production – including unpaid care, volunteering, and community support – being essential to the sustainability of public budgets and prosperity of the nation.

Government's own strategy recognises these contributions. The National Care and Support Economy Strategy states that Australia's formal care and support systems rely on the unpaid work of families and communities (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2023). However, recognition in the strategy is not valuation in the projections that govern the budget. The Australian Bureau of Statistics has begun to value unpaid care within the Labour Account – this progress shows global leadership – but those estimates as cover only part of the unpaid production the budget draws on and is not yet carried into fiscal projections (ABS 2024a). Participation and trust are also falling. Volunteering through an organisation fell from 30 percent of adults in 2019 to 23 per cent in 2025, and the share who agree that most people can be trusted fell from 61 percent in 2020 to 50 per cent in 2025 (ABS 2026). The Assistant Minister for Productivity, Competition, Charities and Treasury has described this decline as a risk to the systems that depend on that contribution (Leigh 2026). Because the wider productive contribution is not systematically measured, valued, or integrated into the frameworks that govern public spending, it cannot be weighed against the spending it offsets, monitored as it changes, or supported where it is declining.

The Australian Government reforms depend on this contribution most where it is least visible. When unpaid production including care and community support falls away, the need remains and returns to formal services as higher demand and cost, working against the fiscal sustainability these reforms are pursuing. The same productive capacity makes our nation resilient against shocks. Through the COVID-19 pandemic and successive bushfire and flood seasons, community networks sustained people and local economies and reduced the scale of the response governments had to mount. Where that capacity is thin, the state carries more of the load, at higher cost.

This report supplies the missing measure. *Social production* values the unpaid productive activity that sustains Australian communities – including care of children, care of older people and those living with illness or disability, volunteering, informal mentoring, civic participation, and environmental stewardship – in the terms of the national accounts, extending the production boundary beyond GDP. That boundary has never been fixed. It is a pragmatic and institutional choice, revised repeatedly since national accounting was standardised in the mid-twentieth century to bring in productive activity once left outside it. Extending the boundary to include unpaid social production continues that evolution for the challenges this era presents. Social production gives decision-makers a view of where investment would maintain, distribute, and foster this capacity and sustain the reforms that depend on it. Applied to Australia for 2024, this report highlights the extent to which Australian policy already relies on this productive capacity to balance budgets and to deliver on its reform promises – ageing in place, resilience through crises and shocks, and a productive and adaptive economy. Until social production is systematically and routinely measured and set within the frameworks that govern public spending, that reliance cannot be adequately governed.



SECTION 2

Making the invisible visible

Introducing social production

Introducing social production

Social production is a macroeconomic indicator that places a monetary value on unpaid activities that create genuine social, environmental, and economic value but remain invisible in the current economic frame. Whether it is neighbours supporting one another through hardship, older adults mentoring young people, young volunteers providing community support, or indigenous stewardship of land, water, and biodiversity – social production is the glue that holds societies together.

Social production supports productivity in the formal economy: a grandparent caring for grandchildren enables parents to work, and neighbourhood volunteering builds the trust and networks that help local businesses and services function. It acts as a stabiliser during disruptive events, mobilising people and resources to support recovery, as Australian communities have done through bushfires, floods, cyclones, droughts, and the COVID-19 pandemic. And evidence indicates that engaging in socially productive activity can support mental health and wellbeing across the lifecourse, particularly in during the teenage years and older age (Carlson et al. 2015; Occhipinti et al. 2023; Rowland and Evans-Whipp 2023).

Social production has been estimated in several national contexts and is documented in published peer-reviewed work (Occhipinti et al. 2023, 2026; Sawan et al. 2025). In addition, a methodological handbook prepared with input from an international transdisciplinary research consortium underpins training offered by the University of Sydney's Mental Wealth Initiative.

Why measure social production

Gross domestic product (GDP) was instituted in the mid-twentieth century to give governments a single, comparable signal of national productive capacity, designed for the policy challenge of the era – managing post-war reconstruction, mobilising industry, and stabilising recovery. Having served that purpose GDP remains the central measure of market production and a key signal by which governments' economic management is judged. The challenges that now define this era are different. Mounting fiscal pressure, ageing populations, slowing productivity growth, weakening social cohesion, the rising frequency of natural disasters, and the displacement of work by technological change cannot be governed by tracking market output alone. Managing these challenges depends on the strength of the social and ecological foundations beneath the market – the unpaid productive activity through which people sustain communities, civic life, and the natural environments in which they live.

Social production is designed to make that foundation legible in the terms governments already use to allocate resources and assess sustainability. It is a single macro-level signal that sits alongside GDP, expressed in the language of the national accounts, and intended as the **minimum essential measure for governing non-market productive capacity for systemic resilience and fiscal sustainability**. It is not a further entry in the wellbeing dashboards and indicator sets that increasingly stretch statistical agencies and governments, where reporting load is itself constrains what gets measured well. Social production is macroeconomic signal focused on the activity on which the resilience of formal systems – health, aged care, disability support, and emergency management – depends, and which absorbs growing load as those systems come under pressure.

Keeping social production as a distinct signal preserves its sensitivity to the shifts that matter most for policy: erosion of voluntary associations, decline in civic participation, withdrawal from neighbourhood and intergenerational support, and the silent depletion of community capacity to absorb shocks.

The eight categories of social production

Social production covers eight defined categories of unpaid contribution.

No.	Category	Definition
1	Unpaid charity work, formal and informal volunteering, and community services	Unpaid contributions to community organisations, services, events, and groups, including emergency services, community festivals, religious organisations, sporting and youth groups, and similar civic associations.
2	Unpaid education and care of children (under 15)	Unpaid education, supervision, and care of children, including own children and the children of friends, neighbours, and extended family; tutoring and homework help; passing on cultural knowledge; and unpaid babysitting.
3	Unpaid care of older, sick, or disabled people (15+)	Unpaid care of older people and those with illness or disability, within or outside one's own household, including help with self-care, shopping, transport to appointments, support to participate, and home support.
4	Unpaid crowd service and contributions open knowledge	Unpaid contributions to open-access knowledge where no income is received, including open-source software, Wikipedia, free online tutorials, and citizen science.
5	Unpaid contributions to the creative arts	Unpaid creative practice, performance, and cultural production shared with communities freely, including works of art, music, dance, storytelling, and drama.
6	Civic participation and community infrastructure	Unpaid participation in associations and community-building activities that strengthen civic infrastructure.
7	Unpaid ecological restoration and stewardship	Unpaid environmental restoration, conservation work, and biodiversity stewardship, including land and sea management, habitat restoration, environmental clean-up, and natural-disaster preparation.
8	Unpaid informal training and mentoring	Unpaid mentoring, on-the-job training, and intergenerational knowledge transfer outside formal employment, including older adults mentoring youth and experienced workers supporting skills development.

How the value is estimated

The valuation approach is input-based. For each category of social production and each demographic group, the average hours per person spent on the activity, derived from time-use survey data, are scaled to the population and multiplied by a single shadow price: the country-wide median hourly wage rate in the formal economy. The total estimate for a given year is the sum across the eight categories and across demographic groups. The estimate requires only three inputs – time use hours, population, and median wage – which makes the framework feasible to implement across low-, middle-, and high-income economies, and supports cross-national comparability.

Applying a single economy-wide wage rate is a deliberate methodological choice that preserves valuation neutrality across activities, between demographic groups, and between market and non-market work. A single rate keeps four distortions out of the estimate: (i) hierarchical pricing that ranks some forms of contribution above others; (ii) the gender pay gap, which enters if female-dominated occupational wages or forgone earnings are used to value care work; (iii) the low pay of foundational-economy workers in health, care, and education, which would otherwise be carried into social production, thereby undervaluing it; and the zero-valuing of contribution by people outside the labour market – older people, students, and others not in paid work – which an opportunity-cost basis would impose. The median hourly wage is therefore preferred over replacement cost, opportunity cost, minimum wage, housekeeper wage, and output-based methods, each of which carries one or more of these distortions.

The estimate of social production in this report is best read as a preliminary signal of the scale of non-market productive capacity, an order-of-magnitude reading given that only three of the eight categories are currently measured. Repeated across years, the measure's primary value is the direction and pace of change, which show whether that productive capacity is being sustained or eroded, and signal the need for proactive, targeted action.



SECTION 3

What Australia produces beyond the market

A preliminary national estimate, and value contributed across the population

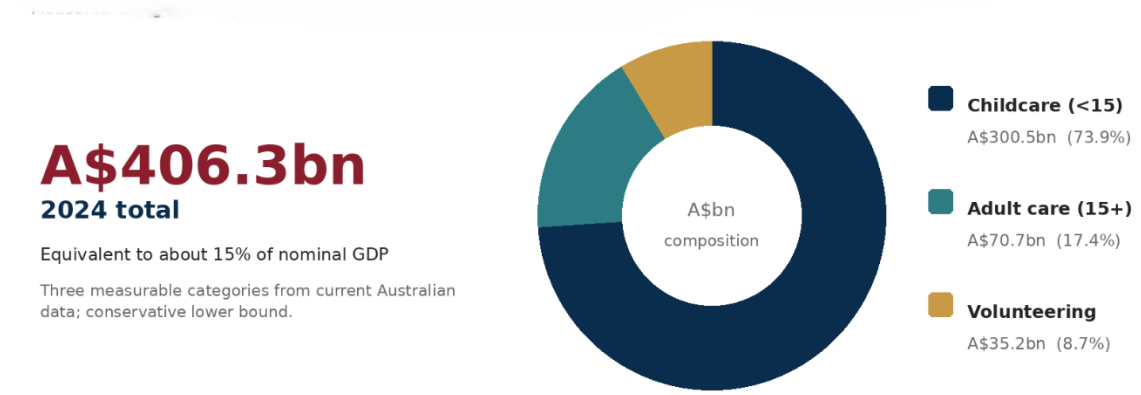
A national estimate

This section presents a preliminary national estimate of social production for Australia for 2024. The estimate uses time-use data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics Time Use Survey, wage data from ABS Employee Earnings, and ABS population data (method detailed in Section 5).

Australians aged 15 and over generated an estimated **A$406.3 billion** in social production in 2024, equivalent in scale to approximately 15 per cent of nominal Australian GDP that year, or about A$18,600 for every Australian aged 15 and over. Three of the eight defined categories of social production are measurable from current Australian data, so this figure is a conservative lower bound on Australia's total social production.

The three categories that make up the measured total are unpaid care of children (estimated at A$300.5 billion, or 73.9 per cent of the measured total), unpaid care of older people and people with illness or disability (A$70.7 billion, 17.4 per cent), and volunteering and unpaid charity work (A$35.2 billion, 8.7 per cent) (figure 1). The childcare category captures care of children under 15; the community-participation category is not separately identifiable in the 2024 time-use instrument and is therefore not included (see Section 5).

Figure 1. Total social production and its composition, 2024



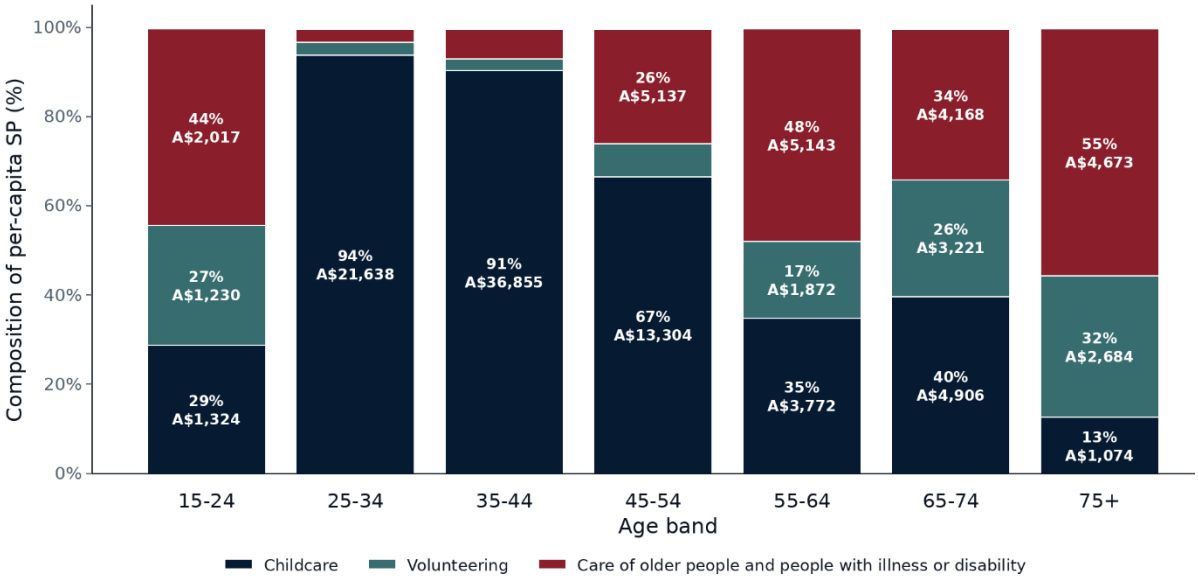
Contributions across the lifecourse

Per-capita social production differs across the lifecourse. It is highest among Australians aged 35 to 44, at about A$40,600 per person, largely reflecting unpaid care of children. The prominence of this age group should be interpreted in light of current data coverage: childcare is measured in detail, whereas several forms of social production that may be more prominent at other ages are not separately captured.

The composition of measured contribution also changes with age (figure 2). Childcare accounts for most social production among Australians aged 25 to 44, but its share falls in later age groups as unpaid adult care and volunteering become more prominent. Among Australians aged 75 and over, unpaid care of older people and people with illness or disability accounts for more than half of measured social production, and volunteering remains substantial.

In aggregate terms, the 25-to-34 and 35-to-44 age groups account for the largest share of measured social production, while unpaid adult care is concentrated among Australians aged 45 to 64. Yet contribution does not decline uniformly with age. Australians aged 65 to 74 contribute more per person, at about A$12,300, than those aged 55 to 64, at about A$10,800. **Australians aged 65 and over generated an estimated A$48.0 billion in social production in 2024**. The data therefore do not support a simple account of retirement and aging as a transition from contribution to dependency.

Figure 2. Composition of per-capita social production by age band, 2024



HEALTHY LONGEVITY AND THE PRODUCTIVE WINDOW

Australia has one of the highest life expectancies in the OECD, and a long period of life expected in good health (AIHW 2024). The estimates in this report suggest that the years of healthy life beyond 65 are not only years in which health-system costs are deferred; they are also years in which substantial unpaid productive contribution continues to be generated. Australians aged 65 and over contributed an estimated A$48.0 billion in 2024, and per-capita contribution in the 65-to-74 band exceeds that of the 55-to-64 band.

The benefit runs in both directions. Engagement in socially productive activity is associated with sustained purpose, social connection, and cognitive and functional capacity in later life (Carlson et al. 2015; Occhipinti et al. 2023). Investment in healthy longevity can therefore help extend the period over which contribution is sustained, not only the period over which costs are deferred. The contributing life is both a source of national productive capacity and a foundation of wellbeing for those who provide it.

Contributions across the population

Contribution by labour-force status

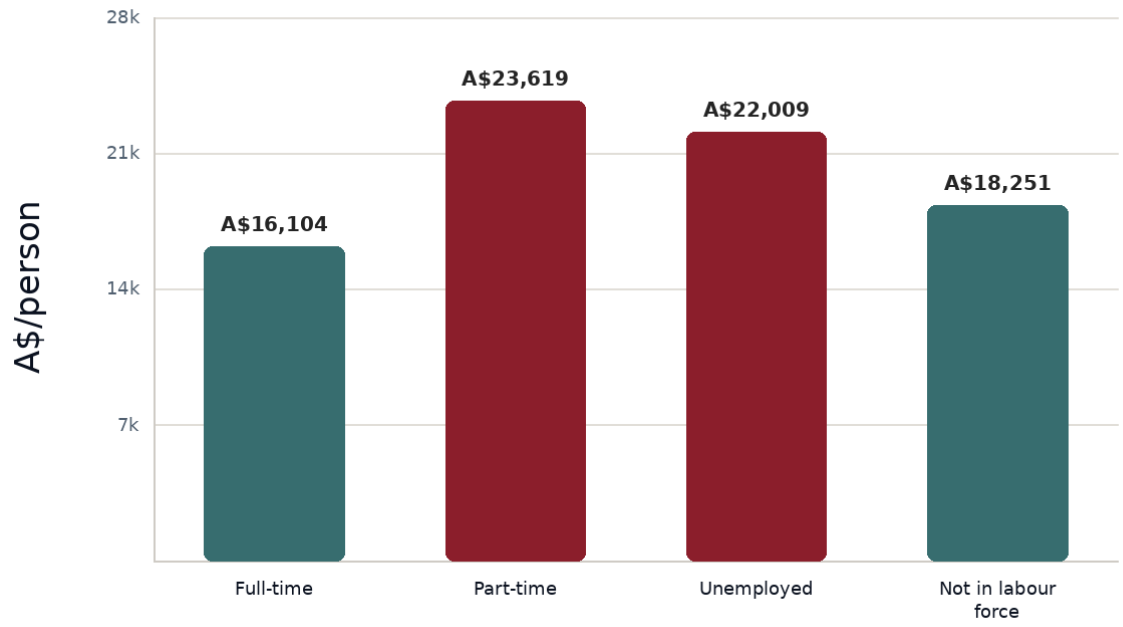
Australians outside the labour force contributed an estimated **A$128.3 billion** in social production in 2024, representing close to one-third of measured social production when the population is classified by labour-force status, and averaging about A$18,300 per person in this group. This is the clearest demonstration that the participation frame, which counts these Australians as outside productive activity, records only part of what they produce. Retirees, people with caring responsibilities, and students counted as economically inactive are, in aggregate, generating non-market output at a scale comparable to a major industry.

Australians employed part-time contributed an estimated A$104.3 billion and recorded the highest per-capita contribution of any labour-force group, at about A$23,600 per person (figure 3). Unemployed Australians also recorded a high per-capita contribution, at about A$22,000 in 2024. Australians employed

full-time contributed an estimated A$158.5 billion. The scale of contribution among people in paid work carries a direct implication for labour-market and fiscal policy: if it contracts – through rising work intensity, expanding care load, or weakened family support – part of the load may shift to formal services or constrain participation in paid work, with consequences for public expenditure and household income.

Young Australians (aged 15 to 24) contribute less per person than older age groups, consistent with stage of life. As with the wider age profile, this finding should be interpreted in light of current data coverage, which may omit forms of social production that are more prominent among young people. Among young Australians who are dependent students, the single largest component of measured social production is unpaid care of older people and people with illness or disability, with an estimated value of about A$6.4 billion in 2024. The conventional image of students as recipients of support therefore does not capture the full picture. The contribution of young Australians is particularly salient given the worsening labour-market conditions faced by younger generations (Mental Wealth Initiative and Orygen Policy Centre 2026).

Figure 3. Social production by labour-force status, 2024

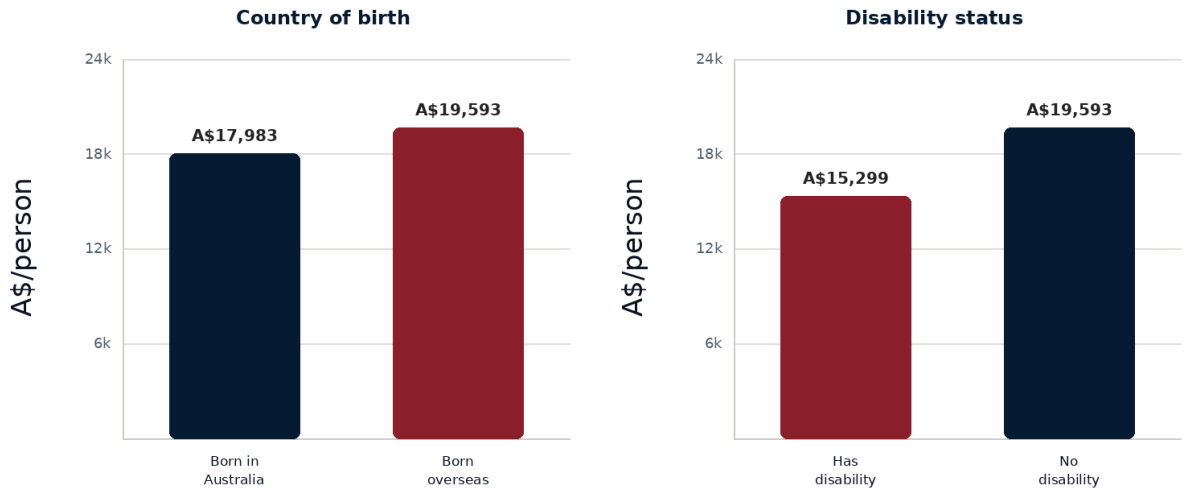


Who contributes

Australians born overseas accounted for roughly one-third of measured social production in 2024 – an estimated **A$134.2 billion** – and recorded a higher per-capita estimate than Australians born in Australia, at about A$19,600 per person compared with about A$18,000 (figure 4). Australians born overseas are therefore substantial contributors to Australia's non-market productive capacity. At a time when migration is often discussed in terms of cost and strain, the data records a substantial and proportionate contribution to the unpaid work that sustains communities and the care system.

Australians with disability contributed an estimated **A$82.2 billion** in social production in 2024. Their per-capita contribution was about A$15,300, compared with about A$19,600 among Australians without disability (figure 4). These findings show that people with disability are not only recipients of support, but also substantial providers of unpaid care, volunteering and other forms of social production.

Figure 4. Social production by country of birth and disability status, 2024



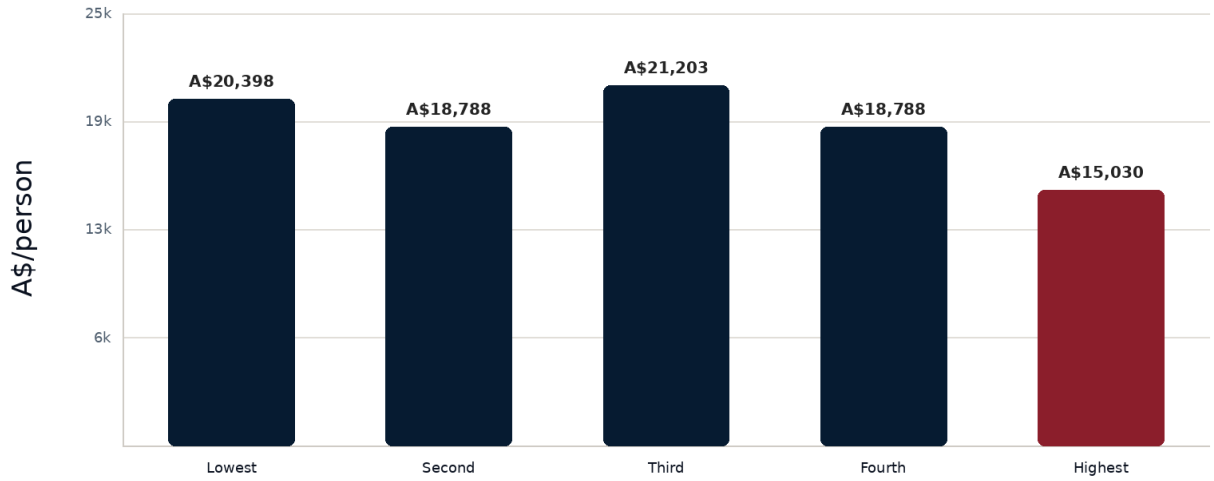
Across the income distribution and geography

Per-capita social production is distributed across equivalised household income quintiles, without a clear income gradient. Equivalised household income adjusts for differences in household size and composition. The highest equivalised-household-income quintile records the lowest contribution of the five – about A$15,000 per person, compared with roughly A$18,800 to A$21,200 per person in the other quintiles (figure 5).

The unpaid productive base is therefore not aligned with the distribution of financial capacity. This creates a policy risk: where greater reliance on households is not matched to their capacity to sustain it, the additional load will be distributed inequitably and may erode the unpaid care, support and community contribution on which formal systems depend. As that capacity weakens, more of the unmet need may return to formal systems as demand and cost.

Social production is also generated across metropolitan and regional Australia. Major cities account for an estimated A$303.3 billion, and regional and remote Australia together account for an estimated A$98.9 billion. Per-capita contribution is equivalent in major cities and inner-regional Australia, at about A$18,500 per person, and somewhat lower in outer-regional and remote Australia, at about A$16,600 per person (table B6). The lower per-capita estimate in areas where formal services are often less accessible points to a vulnerability, as the local unpaid capacity underpinning regional resilience and disaster preparedness may be weakest where reliance on it is greatest.

Figure 5. Per-capita social production by household income quintile, 2024



Notes on the estimates

The Australian estimate covers three of the eight defined social production categories – volunteering and unpaid charity work, unpaid care of children, and unpaid care of older people and people with illness or disability. The remaining categories are not separately measurable from current Australian data sources (Section 5 and Appendix A). The figures presented here are therefore a conservative lower bound on Australia's total social production.

The national total is calculated from the male and female population estimates, which together provide the report's complete and internally consistent population breakdown. The age, labour-force, country-of-birth, disability, income and remoteness estimates are alternative ways of dividing the same population. They should therefore be read separately and not added together or to the national total. Estimates for smaller subgroups are based on smaller survey samples and carry greater uncertainty; their confidence intervals are reported in Appendix B.



SECTION 4

What measurement makes governable

From invisible contribution to policy capacity

Measurement changes what questions can be asked and which decisions become possible. This section identifies five Australian policy domains in which social production measurement opens new possibilities. The intention is not to recommend specific positions, but to indicate where measurement makes visible a capacity on which the policy system is currently dependent on but cannot adequately see, support, or safeguard.

Domain 1: The care economy and the sustainability of formal care systems

Australia's aged-care and disability-support reforms are designed around a non-market capacity they do not routinely measure. The Support at Home program is designed to help older Australians remain in their homes and communities for longer, within a broader reform agenda concerned with the sustainability of aged-care funding (Aged Care Taskforce 2024; Department of Health, Disability and Ageing 2025b). The reforms to secure the NDIS's long-run sustainability go further still, recalibrating participants' plans around an explicit assessment of what informal supports already provide (Department of Health, Disability and Ageing 2026). In both cases, the sustainability arithmetic rests on a contribution that is large, measurable, and not explicitly represented in fiscal projections.

The estimates in this report make that contribution visible: an estimated A$70.7 billion in unpaid care of older people and people with illness or disability in 2024, and an estimated A$82.2 billion of social production generated by Australians with disability. With this capacity in view, decision-makers gain a basis for evaluating whether reforms are sustaining or eroding the non-market support they assume, and where investment – in respite, navigation, transport, carer support, and the reciprocity infrastructure that sustains informal care – would protect it.

With more granular time-use data and a sampling design capable of producing reliable estimates for smaller population groups, measurement could identify where unpaid care is concentrated, where household capacity is already under pressure, and where changes to formal provision risk exceeding the capacity available to absorb them. This would help distinguish reforms that genuinely strengthen care capacity from those that counterproductively shift unmet need to households, where limited capacity to absorb it may allow needs to escalate and return to formal systems as greater demand and cost.

Domain 2: Healthy longevity as productive capacity

Investment in healthy longevity has been argued in Australian policy primarily in health-cost terms: compress morbidity, reduce health-system expenditure, sustain the labour force. Social production measurement adds a complementary frame. Australians in the 65-and-over cohort generate substantial non-market contribution, and per-capita contribution does not fall away with age in the way the dependency framing assumes.

Better health can extend people's capacity to contribute, while participation itself can support the purpose, social connection, cognitive function and functional capacity associated with healthy longevity. Measuring social production therefore broadens the policy response beyond prevention and health services to include investment in the social, civic and community infrastructure that enables older people to remain active contributors. Such investment can both sustain productive capacity and help generate the health and wellbeing benefits that extend it. This reframes prevention, healthy-ageing programs, and the social infrastructure that sustains older-age participation as investments in productive capacity, rather than primarily as cost-containment measures.

Domain 3: Productivity and the labour market

Productivity is at the centre of the national reform agenda, and slowing productivity growth is among the pressures the Intergenerational Report identifies (Australian Treasury 2023; 2025). Social production is part of what sustains formal productivity: unpaid care of children enables parental employment, and the unpaid contribution of those not in the labour force adds productive capacity the participation statistics

do not record. The estimate of A$128.3 billion contributed by Australians outside the labour force, and the high per-capita contribution of part-time workers, show that labour-force status is an incomplete measure of productive participation. They also expose a blind spot in productivity policy.

Measures that increase paid work hours or intensity may raise recorded market output while reducing unpaid care, volunteering and community contribution. Some of the resulting unmet need may then reappear as greater household pressure, reduced participation or productivity in paid work, or increased demand for formal services. Without measuring both forms of production, policy can mistake a transfer of activity from the non-market to the market economy for an unambiguous gain in national productive capacity. Social production measurement makes it possible to assess labour-market, care and workplace policies by their combined effects on paid and unpaid production, rather than by labour-force participation alone.

Domain 4: Resilience, preparedness, and civic capacity

Australia's resilience to shocks rests in part on a whole-of-society capacity to mobilise: the neighbourhood support, community-organised volunteering, and mutual aid that sustained communities through bushfires, floods, and the pandemic. In practice, this includes checking on isolated residents, transporting people and supplies, staffing shelters and relief centres, sharing local information, coordinating donations, and sustaining care when formal services are disrupted. These activities can slow the accumulation of unmet need and reduce pressure on emergency, health and social-service systems.

At the same time, the civic base that supports this local response capacity has been eroding – formal volunteering and associational participation have declined, increasing concern about Australia's capacity to respond to future shocks (ABS 2026; Leigh 2026). Current resilience policy recognises growing exposure to economic, geopolitical, technological and climate shocks, but focuses largely on economic fundamentals, supply chains, skills, industry, technology and strategic capability (Australian Treasury 2025). The civic capacity on which local mobilisation depends is largely absent from that account.

As disruptions become more frequent and severe, preparedness increasingly depends on knowing where this community capacity exists and where it is weak. Measuring social production at a sufficiently local level would also allow governments to identify communities with high exposure and limited reserve capacity, and to direct investment in local organisations, volunteer networks and community infrastructure during ordinary times, before the next shock tests them.

Domain 5: Fiscal sustainability and cross-sectoral coherence

The levers that strengthen or erode social production sit across many portfolios – labour-market regulation, family and care policy, tax policy, immigration, urban and regional planning, civic infrastructure, and emergency management – not in any single department. Without a shared, monetised measure, government cannot assess how these policies collectively affect the nation's non-market productive capacity, or whether one portfolio is undermining capacity on which another depends.

Expressed in the language of the national accounts, social production gives that reliance a single term in fiscal analysis. It would allow changes in non-market productive capacity to be tracked over time and incorporated into cross-portfolio policy appraisal and long-term fiscal planning. An Australian Social Production Satellite Account, compatible with the national accounting architecture and built on data the ABS already collects, would provide a common basis for federal and state decision-makers and a first step towards fuller integration with the national accounts and long-term fiscal projections.

Measuring social production does not imply substituting unpaid contribution for adequate public provision; it provides a fuller basis for understanding how formal and civic capacity interact.



SECTION 5

Method and data sources

The estimation approach, the Australian data, and the decisions that shape interpretation

The valuation approach

The estimate of social production follows the input-based valuation approach set out in the published methodology (Occhipinti et al. 2023) and the accompanying training handbook.

$$C_s = \sum_i \sum_j (H_{ij} \times P_j \times W)$$

H_{ij} = annual hours per person in social production category i for demographic group j

P_j = population of demographic group j

W = economy-wide median hourly wage or closest available proxy

For each demographic group and activity category, average annual hours per person are scaled to the relevant population and valued at the median hourly wage. The national total is calculated from the complete male and female population breakdown, while age and other characteristic breakdowns are reported separately on their own basis.

A single economy-wide median hourly wage is applied to every hour of social production, regardless of activity or who performs it. This preserves valuation neutrality across activities, between demographic groups, and between market and non-market work. The median is preferred over the mean because it is less sensitive to extreme values at the top of the wage distribution.

This report values the unpaid labour contribution to social production. The broader framework also includes public and private investment in the social capital infrastructure that enables such activity, paralleling the expenditure approach to GDP (Occhipinti et al. 2023); that investment component has not yet been imputed for Australia and is not included in the present estimate.

Data sources

Time use is taken from the Australian Bureau of Statistics Time Use Survey (ABS 2025a), which records average time spent on unpaid activities across demographic and population groups, including by sex and age. The survey items are mapped to the three social production categories that current Australian data can support: volunteering and unpaid charity work; unpaid care of children under 15; and unpaid care of older people and people with illness or disability. Population is drawn from the survey's in-scope population. The valuation parameter is median gross hourly earnings for full-time employees, used as a proxy for the economy-wide median hourly wage (A$44.12 per hour, August 2024; ABS 2024b). The GDP figure used for the scale comparison is nominal Australian GDP for 2024 (A$2,722.0 billion), published in the ABS Australian National Accounts (ABS 2025b). Both the social production estimate and GDP are expressed in 2024 current prices, so the comparison is reported on a nominal-on-nominal basis.

Data decisions and limitations

The following limitations concern data coverage, comparability over time, sampling reliability and the treatment of subgroup estimates.

Why the Time Use Survey, and not the General Social Survey

Social production is valued by applying a shadow wage to the time spent on each activity, which requires a consistent measure of duration across categories and population groups. The Time Use Survey provides this directly through diary-recorded average time per day for childcare, care and support of adults, and volunteering. These activities can therefore be valued on a common measurement basis. The General Social Survey, by contrast, measures participation through recall questions, captures only formal, organisation-based volunteering, and reports hours only for volunteers. Recall-based and diary-based measures are not interchangeable, and combining them would place categories on inconsistent measurement bases. The General Social Survey remains a valuable complementary source for characterising participation, but the valuation rests on the duration data provided by the Time Use Survey.

Category coverage

Three of the eight defined categories are measurable from current Australian data – volunteering and unpaid charity work, unpaid care of children, and unpaid care of older people and people with illness or disability. The childcare category captures care of children under 15. The remaining five categories are not separately measurable from current Australian sources (Appendix A). The estimate is therefore a conservative lower bound on Australia's total social production. Their omission means that the national estimate understates the full scale of social production.

The temporal measurement gap

Australia's Time Use Survey is periodic, has been collected at irregular intervals, and has been reclassified between rounds. A consistent social production time series cannot therefore be produced from the available surveys. This report presents a single-year estimate for 2024. A standing Social Production Satellite Account would require a stable time-use instrument capable of supporting repeated, comparable measurement.

The narrowing of the instrument

Between earlier rounds and the 2024 collection, the Australian time-use classification lost its distinct code for community participation and civic engagement, so that activity is no longer separately identifiable. This reflects a loss of measurement resolution, not necessarily a change in participation itself. It also reduces national statistical capacity in an area of growing policy interest. Together, the irregular collection cycle and narrower activity classification limit Australia's ability to monitor changes in social production over time.

Sampling reliability

Time-use estimates carry sampling error because a different survey sample would produce slightly different results. The ABS reports a relative standard error for each estimate. Because population and wage are fixed multipliers in the calculation, each social production estimate inherits the relative standard error of its underlying time estimate. A standard error and approximate 95 per cent confidence interval can therefore be calculated. For totals that combine activities, component errors are combined according to their contribution to the total, so a small but imprecise component has limited influence on the precision of the aggregate estimate. ABS reliability flags are retained for the underlying components.

Confidence intervals are reported in Appendix B. They capture time-use sampling error only and assume that component activities are statistically independent. Because activities may be positively correlated across individuals, the resulting intervals may understate sampling uncertainty. The normal approximation is also less reliable for small or highly skewed subgroups. The intervals do not capture non-sampling error or the undercount arising from the five categories not measured. Estimates for smaller subgroups should therefore be interpreted with greater caution.

Other limitations

- Some activity mappings are proxies for the intended category and should be interpreted as approximations.
- Annualising daily averages assumes that the survey period is representative of the full year; seasonal variation is not separately modelled.
- Published population cells are subject to ABS confidentiality adjustments, and some characteristic breakdowns exclude not-stated responses. As a result, subgroup estimates may not sum exactly to the national total and are reported on their own basis.
- The median hourly wage is applied as a single economy-wide parameter to preserve valuation neutrality. This is a methodological choice, not a data limitation.

A pathway to a Social Production Satellite Account

The infrastructure needed to move from a single snapshot to an official national statistic already exists in Australia. The Australian Bureau of Statistics has already been funded to value the labour contribution of unpaid care within the Labour Account, drawing on the Time Use Survey and established earnings data, following the 2023 Working Future White Paper (ABS 2024a). Social production is the macro-level extension of that work to the full eight-category envelope, produced within national accounting conventions as a satellite account that sits alongside GDP without altering it. Implementation need not wait until all eight categories can be measured.

An experimental account could begin with the three categories supported by current data, establish a consistent time series and reporting framework, and expand as the time-use instrument is stabilised and extended. The practical steps are to stabilise and extend the time-use instrument so that all eight categories can be resolved consistently and tracked over time, establish clear institutional responsibility for production and revision of the estimates, and develop a staged pathway for their use in cross-portfolio policy appraisal, long-term fiscal analysis and, ultimately, fuller integration with the national accounts. Each of these steps builds on infrastructure Australia already has.

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Appendix A

Category definitions and Australian data mapping

The table below lists the eight defined social production categories, the Australian data source used for the three currently estimable categories, and the gaps that prevent estimation of the remaining five from current Australian data.

No.	Category	Australian data source	Status
1	Formal and informal volunteering and unpaid charity work	ABS Time Use Survey (volunteering activities)	Estimated
2	Unpaid education and care of children (under 15)	ABS Time Use Survey (looking after children under 15)	Estimated
3	Unpaid care of older, sick, or disabled people (15+)	ABS Time Use Survey (caring and support, 15+)	Estimated
4	Unpaid crowd service, citizen science, and contributions open knowledge	Not collected in the 2024 ABS Time Use Survey	Data gap
5	Unpaid contributions to the creative arts	Not collected in the 2024 ABS Time Use Survey	Data gap
6	Civic participation and community infrastructure	Not separately identifiable in the 2024 ABS Time Use Survey instrument	Data gap
7	Unpaid ecological restoration and stewardship	Not collected in the 2024 ABS Time Use Survey	Data gap
8	Unpaid informal training and mentoring	Not collected in the 2024 ABS Time Use Survey	Data gap

Closing these gaps is the principal medium-term opportunity for strengthening the Australian estimate. None requires fundamental redesign of Australia's survey infrastructure; each can be addressed through targeted refinements to the time-use instrument, designed with the Australian Bureau of Statistics and research partners, and supported by continuous collection.

Appendix B

Additional outputs, with 95% confidence intervals

The 95% confidence intervals reflect sampling error in the underlying time-use estimates only and may understate sampling uncertainty where covariance between component estimates is not captured. They do not represent total uncertainty and exclude non-sampling error and the omission of the five categories not measurable from current Australian data (Appendix A). Values are expressed in 2024 current prices.

Age, labour-force, country-of-birth, disability, income, and remoteness breakdowns are alternative partitions of the population and are reported separately. They should not be added together or to the national total, which is calculated from the male and female population breakdown.

Table B1. Social production by category, 2024

Category	Value (A$bn)	95% CI (A$bn)	% of total
Childcare (under 15)	300.5	285.7 – 315.2	73.9%
Adult care (15+)	70.7	64.3 – 77.1	17.4%
Volunteering	35.2	30.5 – 39.9	8.7%
Total measured	406.3	391.0 – 421.7	100%

**Confidence intervals are reported for aggregate values. Confidence intervals for per-capita values are directly proportional to those for aggregate values and are not shown separately.*

Table B2. Social production by age band, 2024

Age band	Value (A$bn)	Per capita (A$)	95% CI (A$bn)*
15–24	15.4	4,572	12.1 – 18.7
25–34	91.1	22,980	81.6 – 100.6
35–44	153.9	40,631	144.1 – 163.7
45–54	65.2	19,920	58.3 – 72.1
55–64	32.6	10,787	28.1 – 37.2
65–74	33.1	12,294	28.7 – 37.4
75+	14.9	8,431	12.2 – 17.6
65+ (combined)	48.0	10,761	42.9 – 53.1

**Confidence intervals are reported for aggregate values. Confidence intervals for per-capita values are directly proportional to those for aggregate values and are not shown separately.*

Table B3. Social production by labour-force status, 2024

Labour-force status	Value (A$bn)	Per capita (A$)	95% CI (A$bn)*
Employed full-time	158.5	16,104	148.5 – 168.5
Employed part-time	104.3	23,619	95.9 – 112.7
Unemployed	13.0	22,009	9.8 – 16.1
Not in the labour force	128.3	18,251	118.7 – 137.9

**Confidence intervals are reported for aggregate values. Confidence intervals for per-capita values are directly proportional to those for aggregate values and are not shown separately.*

Table B4. Social production by country of birth and disability status, 2024

Group	Value (A$bn)	Per capita (A$)	95% CI (A$bn)*
Born in Australia	270.1	17,983	255.1 – 285.1
Born overseas	134.2	19,593	122.9 – 145.4
Has disability	82.2	15,299	74.6 – 89.8
No disability	323.2	19,593	306.8 – 339.5

**Confidence intervals are reported for aggregate values. Confidence intervals for per-capita values are directly proportional to those for aggregate values and are not shown separately.*

Table B5. Social production by equivalised household income quintile, 2024

Income quintile	Value (A$bn)	Per capita (A$)	95% CI (A$bn)*
Lowest	73.2	20,398	65.2 – 81.1
Second	68.7	18,788	60.9 – 76.6
Third	98.7	21,203	88.8 – 108.6
Fourth	82.5	18,788	72.8 – 92.1
Highest	69.9	15,030	63.6 – 76.1

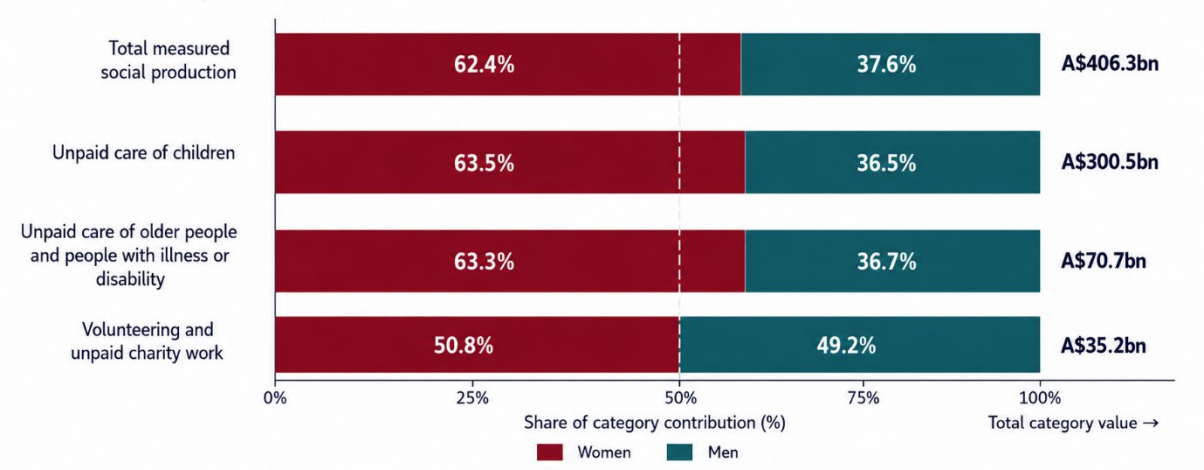
**Confidence intervals are reported for aggregate values. Confidence intervals for per-capita values are directly proportional to those for aggregate values and are not shown separately.*

Table B6. Social production by remoteness, 2024

Remoteness	Value (A$bn)	Per capita (A$)	95% CI (A$bn)*
Major cities	303.3	18,519	289.4 – 317.2
Inner regional	73.6	18,519	65.4 – 81.7
Outer regional and remote	25.3	16,641	20.2 – 30.4

**Confidence intervals are reported for aggregate values. Confidence intervals for per-capita values are directly proportional to those for aggregate values and are not shown separately.*

Figure B1. Social production by sex and activity category, 2024*



**Shares are based on the three measured social production categories only: unpaid care of children, unpaid care of older people and people with illness or disability, and volunteering and unpaid charity work. Values are in 2024 Australian dollars.*

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Produced by the Mental Wealth Initiative, The University of Sydney.

For correspondence: jo-an.occhipinti@sydney.edu.au

sydney.edu.au



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