

# **Occasional paper no. 26**

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**An empirical look at citizen co-production in Australia**

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## An empirical look at citizen co-production in Australia

John Alford and Sophie Yates<sup>1</sup>

Co-production – the contribution of time and effort to the *delivery* of public services by service-users and citizens, prompted by or in concert with public sector organisations – is attracting increasing attention from governments and communities. The literature identifies numerous initiatives in the United States, Britain, Germany, Indonesia, Sweden and Latin America, with co-production reported in disaster management, social protection, economic affairs and education – among others.

Yet despite this interest in more than a few services, its ‘big society’ appeal, and the substantial scholarly endeavours devoted to it, there is still much to uncover about co-production. Large groups of co-producing clients have not yet been asked about what they actually do.

This paper is a contribution to developing some answers. Drawing from a large-sample (1,000) survey of co-production in Australia, it looks at what co-producers do (in what kinds of services, and how often) and what motivates them to co-produce.

### What do we mean by ‘citizens’, ‘clients’ and ‘co-production’?

A major challenge in studying co-production is that it has many meanings and many faces. Firstly, what exactly do we call these individuals who constitute the public – who use the service and sometimes co-produce it? We distinguish between the citizenry as a collective consumer of what, following Moore (1995), we call ‘public value’, and clients as individual consumers of ‘private value’ provided by services. One implication of this is that, unlike those who have argued that we the public should be characterised as *either* citizens *or* clients, we take the view that we are both. We see ‘citizens’ and ‘clients’ as *roles* rather than categories, and we each embody some combination of them.

This raises a further distinction: between clients and volunteers. To the extent that they work to create value for the public, volunteers are clearly co-producers. But they differ from clients in that they do not receive any service from the organisation. Rather they provide their contributions for reasons other than the receipt of services, such as moral norms. This article therefore focuses on but distinguishes between citizens, clients (service-users) and volunteers as co-producers (see Alford and O’Flynn 2012).

Secondly, the term ‘co-production’ itself has two elements. The ‘production’ aspect signifies that it involves some kind of transformation of tangible or intangible inputs into more valuable outputs. The ‘co-’ aspect denotes that it is done jointly by two or more parties. One way of comprehending this jointness is to see co-production as a reciprocal process: it entails the government organisation and the citizen each giving something, such as time and effort, to the other.

For this study, we see co-production as including *any activity by one which adds value (‘produces’) and is at least partly prompted by some action or behaviour of the other* – particularly where the citizen co-producer’s behaviours contribute in some way to achieving publicly valuable purposes (e.g. reduced health spending, or better environmental outcomes). A driver prompted by a traffic roundabout to slow down contributes to the government’s efforts to reduce road accidents, but the government agency is not acting conjointly with the driver. Indeed, it is not even present, but its installation of a roundabout has resulted in value for the public. This is an important point for our study, in which some of the examples of co-production do not involve conjoint activity, but are prompted by one party’s action toward another. On this basis, we consider two key questions in our research:

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<sup>1</sup> A longer version of this article can be found in the Australian Journal of Public Administration: see <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-8500.12157/abstract>.

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- 1) What do citizens provide to the government organisation and/or the public when they co-produce? More specifically, what kinds of work and what kinds of services do they provide in this process? How much? What activities or behaviours does co-production include?
  - 2) What do government organisations provide to citizens to induce them to co-produce?

## What can citizens or clients contribute to co-production?

An elementary question is simply how much citizens co-produce. While there has been considerable research on the contribution of the non-profit sector to employment or GDP, there has been very little on co-production by citizens and service-users. Although our survey does not provide data on outputs, it does provide some indication of how much time and effort citizen-consumers devote to co-productive processes. Importantly, it shows the relative contributions to the three different types of services: community safety, health and environment.

Another more extensively discussed question is whether co-production is individual or collective in nature (Bovaird and Loeffler 2012). As with the debate about citizenship and clients, the most useful answers derive from recognising that there are really two questions here:

- 1) Whether the *production* is individual or collective, that is, whether each citizen provides co-productive effort on their own, or citizens organise as a group to do so jointly; and
- 2) Whether *consumption* is individual or collective, that is, whether the fruits of co-production offer private value to individual consumers, or public value to the collective citizenry.

## What prompts citizens or clients to co-produce?

Clients are arguably a vital source of data about the factors that induce people to co-produce. But despite this, there has until recently been very little attempt to survey their views

*Motivation:* Initially, this was understood in utility-maximising terms, e.g. in the marketing literature: “Question: What motivates customers? Answer: Self-interest, the same thing that motivates everyone” (Schneider and Bowen 1995, 96). But it is now well recognised that people’s motivations to co-produce are complex and variable. They include intrinsic motivations, social affiliation (or peer pressure), and identification with normative purposes.

*Ability:* Just as important as motivation is the ability to co-produce; a citizen/client may be keen to contribute, but have difficulty in doing so, either because the task is too hard or they lack the requisite competence. In this situation, the organisation needs to either simplify the task or enhance the person’s skills (Alford 2009).

*Self-efficacy:* This refers to the extent to which citizens feel they can ‘make a difference’ by influencing the service in a meaningful way (Bandura 1997; Parrado et al.2013). This factor relates to both willingness and ability. The greater the sense of self-efficacy, the greater it resonates with citizens’ intrinsic motivations. At the same time, the more the citizens’ capacity relative to the task is enhanced, the more their sense of self-efficacy is boosted. In short, we focus on willingness to do more and self-efficacy as indicators of motivation and ability to co-produce.

*Satisfaction:* Alford (2002) explained that taxpayers in western countries are more likely to comply with their obligations if they “feel that they receive satisfactory material or symbolic value from government and that other taxpayers are paying their fair share” (p. 46). Similarly, a person who feels they receive thorough and attentive service from their General Practitioner might be more likely to follow that GP’s advice about changing their diet and reducing their alcohol intake. Van Ryzin (2007) suggests that the causality may run

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in either direction. On the one hand, citizens' response to performance shortcomings may be to engage in co-production in order to enhance performance. On the other hand, poor performance might undermine trust in government and therefore willingness to co-produce.

The current study, a replication of an earlier five-country European survey (Loeffler et al 2008), comprises evidence from telephone surveys of 1,000 Australian adults conducted by a market research company. The sample was constructed to be representative with reference to age, sex, state/territory location and rural/urban location.

## Findings

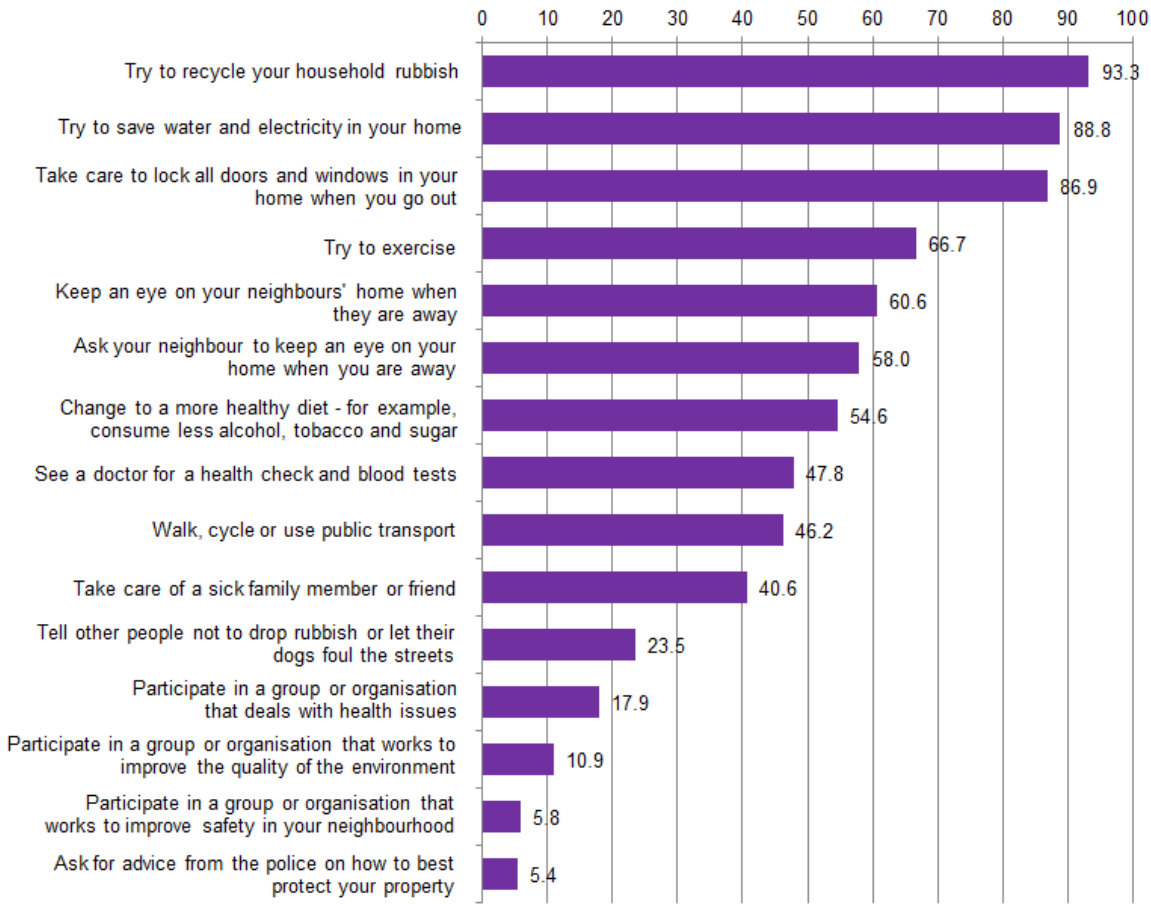
### Individual behaviours; private value

Figure 1 lists the 15 co-production behaviours in order from the most to least prevalent. The measure used is the percentage of participants saying they 'often' performed this activity.

The responses make two things abundantly clear about the individual vs collective co-production debate. The first is that individual co-production is much more common than collective co-production. This is evident from the fact that the most performed activities don't require interaction with other people (recycling, locking doors and windows, exercising). By contrast, the least performed activities involve group participation, liaising proactively with authorities (e.g. asking for advice on property protection) and 'face-threatening' activities (telling people on the street what to do). These all *do* require interaction with other people.

The second clear finding is that the majority of the most-performed activities are mainly devoted to producing *private* value – for instance, the personal benefits gained by saving on electricity costs or exercising more. Recycling is an exception to this, but its popularity can be explained by a number of other factors, which we will discuss below. Also commonly performed are activities that involve a large element of reciprocity (e.g. neighbours keeping an eye on each other's properties). On the other hand, most of the least-performed activities involve largely *public* value, with a smaller component of private value.

**Figure 1. Co-production behaviours in Australia<sup>2</sup>**



'Co-production' conjures up the idea of people doing things together, and perhaps sharing the 'products' once they are produced, but it appears that the more popular activities involve doing things alone, privately 'consuming' the results. However, if the analysis is based on the more expansive definition we have employed here – that is, where a client's co-production is prompted by governmental action, and creates some public value – then these activities do fit within our definition.

**What prompts co-production?**

As we explained earlier, people's propensity to co-produce is thought to be a function of a number of interrelated factors, including the impact of organisational motivators and facilitators on their willingness and ability to do it, their satisfaction with the service, and their sense of efficacy – mediated by their demographic characteristics and contextual factors.

*Self-efficacy*

From the literature, we might expect citizens' sense of efficacy to be important in prompting co-production. As Table 4 shows, our participants generally think citizens can make a difference – 89% think they can make a big difference or at least some difference to neighbourhood safety, 92% think the same for the environment, and 93% for the health of themselves and others.

<sup>2</sup> Percentage of participants reporting they 'often' performed each activity.

**Figure 2. Attitudes to citizen efficacy**

“How much of a difference do you think ordinary citizens can make to...”

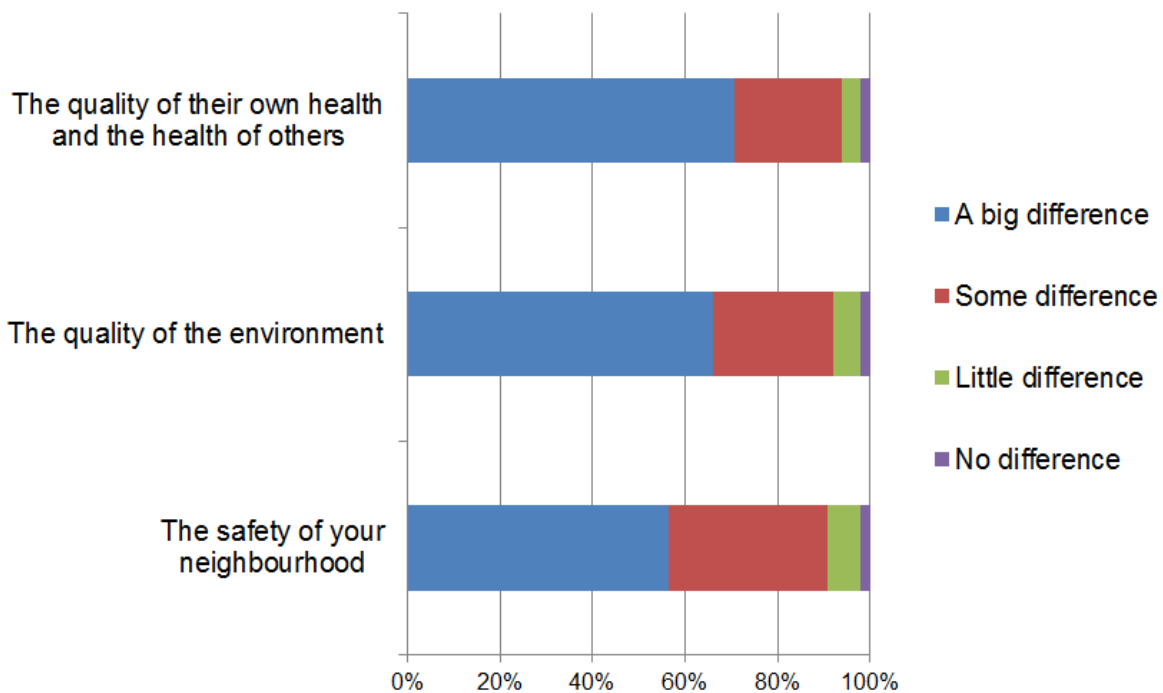
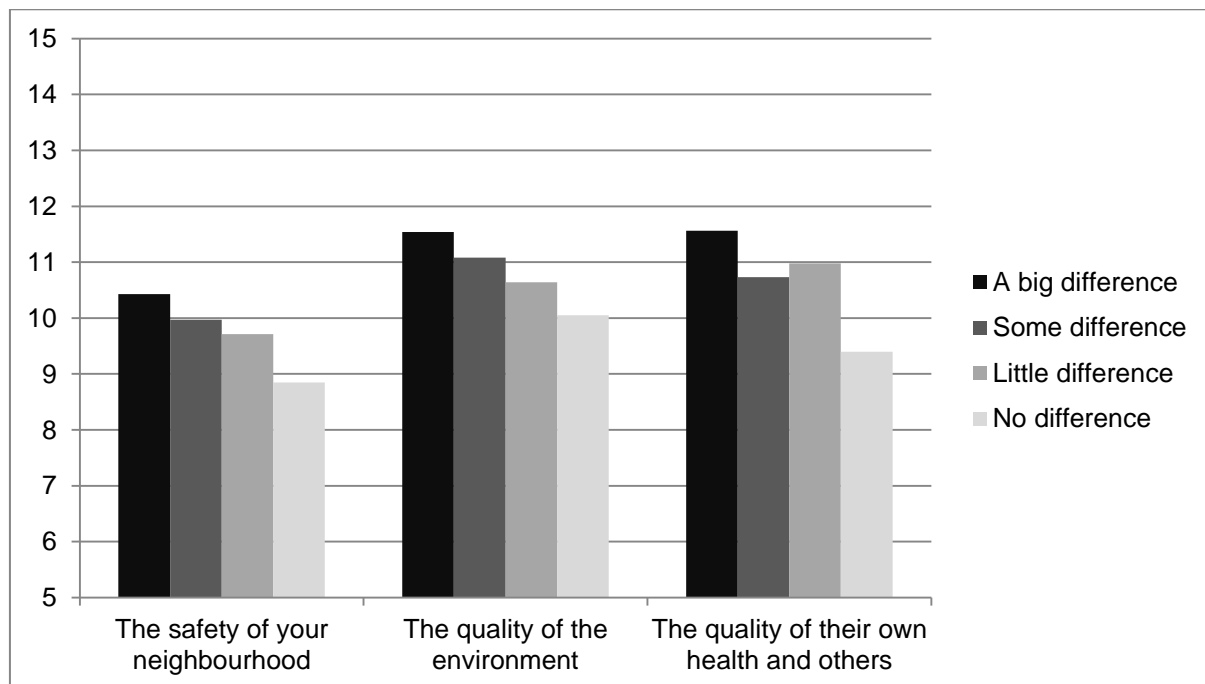


Figure 3 shows that for each policy domain, as citizen efficacy increased, so did the co-production index for that area. That is, those who thought citizens could make a bigger difference reported higher levels of co-production. The differences are relatively small, but statistically significant.

**Figure 3. Citizen efficacy and the co-production index<sup>3</sup>**



<sup>3</sup> The co-production index (min. 5 max. 15) indicates how much co-production an individual performs in each domain of interest.



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### *Willingness to do more*

There were variations between service types in the extent to which people were willing to spend more time volunteering than they currently do (Table 1). In the areas of environment and neighbourhood safety, our participants were willing to spend more time than they currently do. Participants reported on average that they spend just a few hours a year on group neighbourhood safety and environmental activities, but would be willing to spend up to a few hours a month. However, in the area of health there was virtually no difference between the time participants reported spending and the time they were willing to spend.

This implies that Australians feel they are already spending enough time on their own and others' health, but governments might reasonably expect that, with the right inducements, citizens would be willing to contribute more to neighbourhood safety and environmental causes.

**Table 1. Willingness to do more<sup>4</sup>**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Willing to spend</b>	<b>Currently spending</b>
Volunteering to make your neighbourhood safer, working with the local police and other citizens	2.51	1.47
Volunteering to improve the environment where you live, working with your neighbours and with your local council	2.59	1.76
Improving your own health or the health of other people, working with other people and with local health agencies	3.20	3.25

### *Information provision and consultation*

Participants had a moderately high level of satisfaction with two aspects of services that we might expect to augment individuals' willingness and ability to co-produce. One of them is the level of *information* provided, which may enhance citizens' ability to co-produce. Here respondents were somewhat satisfied about environment (3 on a scale of 1 = very unsatisfied to 4 = very satisfied) and public safety (3.03), but most satisfied with health (3.39).

The other aspect is the extent to which government organisations consult with their clients and include them in decision-making about the service. This may resonate with both intrinsic motivation and social affiliation to prompt greater willingness to contribute. People were somewhat satisfied with the way their opinions are sought and knowledge used in public safety and crime prevention, but there is more room for improvement with environmental issues (2.7 out of 4). Overall, health was the area in which participants were most satisfied with all aspects of information provision and inclusion/consultation.

Despite our expectation that levels of inclusion and consultation would affect participants' willingness to volunteer and levels of co-production, this was not the case. Statistical tests revealed no more than negligible relationships between any of these factors.

### *Reciprocity – the effect of satisfaction*

Another factor that may prompt citizens to co-produce is a pattern of reciprocity – an exchange relationship – between a government organisation and its citizens/clients. In this relationship, clients contribute time and effort, while the organisation provides not only the service but also other incentives to encourage co-productive behaviours, such as motivators or facilitators, as discussed above. It follows, therefore, that people's propensity to co-produce may be in part a function of their satisfaction with the actual service itself.

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<sup>4</sup> mean score; 1 = no time at all; 2 = a few hours a year; 3 = a few hours a month; 4 = a few hours a week (or more)

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Table 2 shows that, on a scale of 1 (very dissatisfied) to 4 (very satisfied), citizen/client co-producers are quite well satisfied with public services in the three areas of interest. Participants are on average somewhat satisfied with their local environmental services, and closer to very satisfied with their local police and health services.

**Table 2. Satisfaction with government services**

Service	Mean (1-4)
Police in your area	3.3
Public agencies managing the environment in your area	3
Health care providers, such as your doctor and local hospitals	3.4

Despite our expectation that greater satisfaction would co-occur with higher levels of co-production, Pearson correlations again showed non-significant or significant but weak relationships between levels of satisfaction with government services and co-production levels.

### *Demographics*

If attitudinal factors such as satisfaction with services, consultation, and information provision do not appear to affect levels of co-production, and citizen self-efficacy only slightly, do demographic variables play a role? No demographic factors significantly influence the overall co-production index, and there are only small differences at a more fine-grained level of analysis (e.g. women are slightly more likely than men to change their diet, see a doctor, and participate in a health-related group; and students are more active co-producers in the domain of environment, while the retired are higher co-producers in community safety).

## **Recycling: a case study**

Recycling household rubbish stood out in our results set, as it was the only one of the top five activities to include neither private value nor neighbourly reciprocity. The value of recycling is entirely public, as the benefits of improved environmental outcomes are jointly consumed. And yet the activity itself is dependent on individual citizens doing their bit – councils simply cannot recycle household waste without help from citizens. Despite this, the activity was so prevalent in our sample that only 10 participants out of 1,000 reported never trying to recycle.

How then to account for the popularity of recycling? Apart from the general (and modest) relationship between self-efficacy and co-production discussed earlier, none of our other potential motivational factors (satisfaction with environmental services, information provision, inclusion in decision-making) or demographic factors explain the propensity to recycle. Young and old, students and workers, rural and city-dwellers – all reported similar levels of recycling. And although environmental concern is undoubtedly part of the answer, ABS data indicate that concern over environmental issues has actually declined in recent years (from 82% in 2007-08 to 62% in 2011-12), whereas recycling rates remain high (ABS 2012). We argue that there are also other factors at play.

Our explanation broadly translates to the following: it's *simple*. As Alford (2009) demonstrated with his case study of the implementation of postal codes in Australia, simplifying the task (in that case, introducing postal code squares on envelopes) can have a dramatic effect on users' willingness to perform it (see also Thomas 2012). In the case of recycling, councils do many things to simplify the task of recycling for ordinary citizens:

- They provide different bins for general waste and recycling (and in many cases, the latter is larger than the former).

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- Citizens are not required to sort their recycling (into glass, cardboard, plastic, etc), as that is done by councils.
  - Many councils collect recycling bins on a weekly basis, so citizens do not need to remember which week to put out their recycling bin.

Recycling is also simple to *understand*. Councils send out fridge magnets and pamphlets explaining exactly what substances can be recycled in that council area. Sustained information campaigns over many decades, implemented by all levels of Australian governments, have increased community awareness of the need for recycling. Further, there is an easily understood connection between recycling (the inputs), reduced landfill (the outputs), and improved environmental outcomes.

Another important factor here is that like the other most popular co-production activities, recycling can be performed without interacting with other people.

### **Conclusion: advice for policymakers**

What motivates citizens to co-produce has been the subject of much speculation. Our examination of the co-production literature suggested several lines of investigation in our analysis – namely, that satisfaction or dissatisfaction with services might prompt co-production, or that inclusion in service decision-making or being provided with adequate information about services might do so. For our sample at least, this did not appear to be the case, and these findings both show the value of large-scale empirical investigation, and have implications for policymakers and others who want to encourage co-production in Australian citizens.

To encourage co-production, governments should:

- recognise that citizens mostly prefer to focus on activities that they can perform **on their own**, or at least without engaging in a coordinated manner with other citizens or government professionals.
- try to engage citizens in activities that include a component of **private value** – self-interest is not paramount, as our recycling case study shows, but it does appear to be a factor in why citizens co-produce.
- make things as **easy** as possible for co-producers – both as regards the task itself, and the information they are provided.

Co-production might conjure up images of citizens working together for the common good, and indeed Alford (2009) suggested that the “company, fellowship and esteem of others” might be an important factor in why people co-produce (p. 27), but our findings suggest that in most if not all cases citizens might be better engaged individually, on their own terms.

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