

Indicators of Community Strength: a framework and evidence



*Department for
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A Victorian
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initiative



Prepared by

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Foreword

This report examines social participation and the evidence for the benefits it creates for individuals and communities.

It shows the potential for relatively simple forms of social participation, such as volunteering or group membership, to create positive outcomes for individuals in areas including improved health and wellbeing.

It also shows how some forms of participation can create positive outcomes for communities such as increased tolerance and reduced crime.

However the networks created by social participation play another important role.

They are the precursors to increasing community involvement in local governance, giving more people the opportunity to have a say in shaping the community they live in.

Community participation and community involvement in local governance are the hallmarks of strong communities. These are key interests of the Department for Victorian Communities.

As part of that interest, the Department has developed a set of *Indicators of Community Strength* that measure community participation, community attitudes, and how people feel about opportunities to participate in their local areas.

This report provides a theoretical framework for the indicators and shows how the work of the Department for Victorian Communities fits with a broader international literature on community strengthening.

The benefits generated by community participation and community governance – including improved health and well-being, reduced crime, better educational outcomes and improved community facilities – place an interest in these networks at the centre of public policy.

Whilst community strengthening strategies are not a panacea for solving social disadvantage, nor are networks always constructive, our research and practice is rendering more visible the ‘policy agency’ of community strengthening strategies.

We hope this work will add to debates about the measurement and building of stronger communities.

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Introduction

Since 2002 the Department for Victorian Communities (DVC) has been examining new ways of measuring community strength. A set of indicators has been developed that provides a different way of looking at communities – highlighting aspects of social organisation including social attitudes and community participation.

This report provides an explanatory framework for the DVC *Indicators of Community Strength*. The framework focuses on three types of networks that are important in communities:

- close personal networks (families, close friendship groups);
- broader associational and community networks (wider networks made through work, interest groups, school, etc); and
- governance networks (networks of decision-makers).

The report describes each of these network types, the international evidence about their benefits, and the indicators that DVC uses to report on them. It also briefly describes what we currently know about each of the indicators in terms of differences across areas and population groups in Victoria. The final section outlines DVC's broad policy strategy for building networks.

It is hoped this explanatory framework and evidence will add to debates about measuring and improving community strength.

Networks and strong communities

DVC's goal is to build strong – active, confident and resilient – communities. DVC sees strong communities as having a sustainable mix of assets (economic, human, natural, cultural), and, strong governance that maximises the equitable use of those assets.

Governance includes all the decision-making organisations, policies and practices that impact on a community. This includes the policies and practices of the three levels of government (local, state, federal), the management committees of community organisations, school boards, residents groups and business boards.

Strong governance is characterised by broad and inclusive networks of decision-makers utilising processes that ensure all the interests within communities have a voice in decision-making and problem solving.

Strong governance makes communities better able to use their existing assets, and means they can more easily make claims for new resources. This means services and infrastructure are better tailored to need. It also means communities can better respond to change, for example, when a local industry closes down, or when a skills shortage is created as a generation of older people retire.

Strong governance is built through connectedness. Network theorists argue healthy communities require a balance of three types of social connection:

- close personal networks;
- broader associational ties and community networks; and
- governance networks (Szreter 2002).

The different network types generate different benefits for individuals and communities and each provides a foundation for building the other. For example, strong and positive close networks can give people the skills and confidence needed to participate in broader associational and community networks, and broader participation has been shown to lead some people to become involved in governance (Pope & Warr 2005).

A framework to underpin the indicators of community strength

Figure 1 provides a model of the three types of network. It summarises their potential benefits, the indicators that report on them in Victoria and broad policy directions that DVC advocates to help build them. The figure is briefly summarised here and described in detail in the following sections.

The first type of network depicted in Figure 1 is the close personal network of family and close friends. These networks can provide individuals with a range of benefits including confidence, support, practical help and resources. There is a wide range of policies across government designed to improve the *wellbeing* of these networks, but few that can help *build* them. For this reason, the *DVC Indicators of Community Strength* only include two indicators of these networks: a measure of their absence - social isolation (an inability to get help from friends, family or neighbours when needed); and a measure of where they may have limited resources to draw on (an inability to raise \$2000 in two days in an emergency).

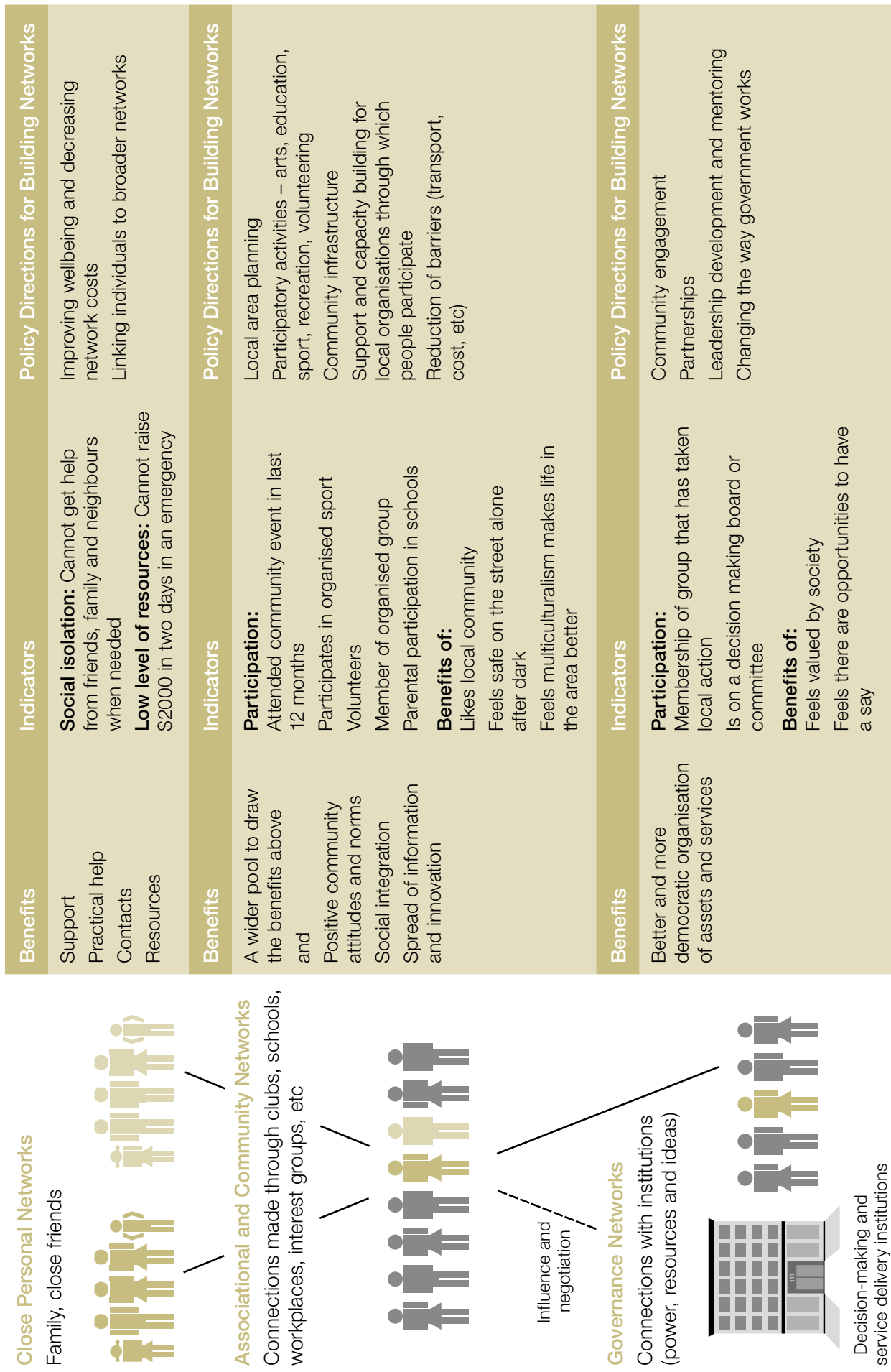
The second type of network depicted in Figure 1 is the broader associational and community network established around a common interest or involvement in specific settings, such as a school, workplace, interest group or community organisation (Pope & Warr 2005). These networks provide the same sorts of benefits to individuals as close personal ties (but from a wider pool) but can also generate additional benefits for communities. Benefits include positive social attitudes such as tolerance of diversity, positive norms that decrease anti-social behaviour, and involvement in the decision-making that can improve community life.

Associational and community networks are built through participation in employment, education and public life, the latter of which includes activities such as organised sport, volunteering and parental participation in schools. The *DVC Indicators of Community Strength* include a number of indicators of participation in public life and the positive attitudes this participation can generate.

The third type of network depicted in Figure 1 is the governance network that links close personal networks and associational and community networks to institutions and therefore power, resources and ideas (Woolcock 1998). It is through governance networks that communities can turn their assets into specific outcomes such as increased economic opportunities and improved community services and facilities (Browning & Cagney 2002). Strong and inclusive governance gives a community the ability to identify and assess issues, enter into public policy debates, and take action to get things done. The *DVC Indicators of Community Strength* include indicators of participation in governance networks, and the positive social attitudes that this type of participation can generate.

Communities need a balance between the three types of network (Szreter 2002). If whole communities, or population groups within a community, are not participating in one type of network, they will not generate its benefits. For example, young people in some Victorian communities have been shown to have fewer opportunities to participate in community or governance networks and also have less positive attitudes about the places they live (see page 20 *The case of young people in Trafalgar* in the *Building networks* section).

Figure 1. A model of three types of social networks, their benefits, policy options for building them and their relationship to the indicators of community strength.



Background to the indicators of community strength

DVC has now reported on the *Indicators of Community Strength* over time (DVC 2004; DVC 2005b), at the Local Government Area (LGA) level (DVC 2005a), and in select neighbourhoods where significant community strengthening activities are being undertaken (Pope 2006a). The Whitehorse Community Health Service has also reported the indicators in their population health survey of their general, disadvantaged and Chinese populations (Pope 2005a). Research reports related to the indicators are available on the research and publications page of the DVC website (www.dvc.vic.gov.au).

This report includes summaries of the findings from all the above collections. It is acknowledged that their description of communities is limited by the geographic and demographic categories collected in the surveys.

The indicators of community strength were designed to generate debate about aspects of community life related to DVC's goal of creating active, resilient, confident communities. Indicators are *summary* measures of social, economic or environmental phenomena that are amenable to public policy intervention. They are important for tracking the overall progress of, raising awareness of, and keeping a spotlight on issues (Innes 1994). They are not an attempt to fully describe or evaluate an issue, and this should be left to more complex forms of research. The DVC indicators do not attempt to describe all aspects of community wellbeing and are not the only indicators that could be chosen to populate the framework outlined in this report.

We now know a significant amount about the indicators in Victoria. We can describe overall levels of community participation and attitudes over time and can highlight differences between population groups. We can demonstrate that local area differences are significant and areas have different strengths and weaknesses. From this we know that one-size fits all approaches to community strengthening are unlikely to work and we will need to start tailoring solutions to the specific circumstances of communities.

The *Indicators of Community Strength* also demonstrate the importance of small area data for accurate planning. For example, for the indicator of the percentage of Victorians that feel safe on the street alone after dark the State average is 61% (DVC 2005b), but this ranges from 50% to 89% across LGAs (DVC 2005a), and from 38% to 84% across nineteen metropolitan neighbourhoods (DVC unpublished). From this we can see that planning based on Victorian averages could significantly under- or over- represent issues in some local areas.

The following sections examine the three types of network outlined in Figure 1 in more detail. Each section examines what the international literature shows about the benefits of that network type. It then provides a summary of what we currently know about these networks from Victorian data.

Close personal networks

Close personal networks (sometimes referred to as bonding networks or strong ties) are those made up of family and close friends. They can be characterised as consisting of 'people like yourself' and are therefore less likely to be as diverse as the other network types (Szreter 2002).

Benefits of close personal networks

Close personal networks can be sources of benefits such as confidence, emotional support, practical help, contacts, resources and other forms of assistance (Pope & Warr 2005). These benefits provide the foundations for dealing with everyday life, taking on challenges, developing new skills and exploring new roles and experiences (Pope & Warr 2005).

Reviews of the international literature have shown that close personal ties (actual or perceived) are associated with better physical and mental health (Young & Glasgow 1998; Berkman & Glass 2000; Giles *et al.* 2005). Conversely, social isolation has been shown to be associated with increased death rates (Berkman & Syme 1979; Rosenfeld 1997), particularly from heart disease (National Heart Foundation 2003) and suicide (Durkheim in Haralambos & Holburn 1995). In Victoria, socially isolated people have been shown to be more likely to be experiencing poor self reported health and psychological distress (DVC 2004). After reviewing the international evidence the National Heart Foundation has called social isolation an independent risk factor for heart disease and increased mortality that is as important as conventional risk factors such as smoking and obesity (National Heart Foundation 2003).

Close personal networks have also been found to be sources of benefits for children and young people. In disadvantaged families, strong positive close personal ties have been found to reduce the impact of disadvantage on the psychological wellbeing of children by giving them a sense of personal security (Attree 2004). Positive close personal ties have also been shown to be important for young people's success at school and decrease the likelihood of them leaving early (Coleman 1988; Wolfe & Haverman 2001; Vinson 2004; Attree 2004).

An Australian longitudinal study of aging found that networks of friends and confidants generated health and wellbeing benefits for older people (Giles *et al.* 2005). These benefits were generated through a number of mechanisms including healthy social habits, emotional support and material assistance (Giles *et al.* 2005). Networks with children and relatives were not found to have the same protective effect (Giles *et al.* 2005).

While close personal ties can generate benefits for individuals they also have the potential to have significant costs. At their worst, close ties can be violent and undermining, as is the case in domestic violence and child abuse. Some close personal networks can be stifling and can marginalise individuals, as has been shown for some young gay people in rural areas in Victoria (Hillier *et al.* 1996). Other close ties have been shown to have more minor costs, for example where grandparents feel overburdened by child caring responsibilities (Ipsos Mackay 2005). Reviews of the international literature have concluded that the social interactions related to close personal ties have the potential to have as many costs to individuals as benefits (Lincoln 2000; Attree 2004).

Close personal networks

There are an enormous number of policies across government that impact on the *wellbeing* of close personal networks and that can therefore impact on the benefits they generate. These include policies that provide groups with resources (such as employment, education, taxation and housing) and services (maternal and early childhood services, parent support services). There are also a range of policies that lessen the costs of close networks, such as those alleviating childcare burdens or family violence.

It is difficult however, to create policies that *build, or increase the numbers of,* networks of close family and friends. For example, it is not possible to replace the members of older people's close networks who die over time. For this reason, the focus of DVC's indicators is on the broader associational and community networks described in the next section. These are amenable to public policy intervention and, as will be seen, can provide significant support to individuals, alleviating social problems such as social isolation in older people.

Evidence about close personal networks in Victoria

Two indicators of close personal networks are included in DVC's *Indicators of Community Strength*. The first is a measure of an absence of these ties, or social isolation (an inability to get help from friends, family and neighbours when needed), and the second is a measure of a low level of resources (an inability to raise \$2000 in two days in an emergency). This second indicator is not a measure of close personal ties per se, but of the resources that individuals in networks have at their disposal. As will be seen in the section on *Disadvantage and networks*, networks with limited access to resources often have difficulty building the broader associational and governance networks that bring a wider range of benefits.

The following section examines what we currently know about social isolation and low resource networks in Victoria.

Social isolation

There is significant variation in social isolation across population groups and localities.

In Victoria in general, socially isolated people are more likely to be: men; seniors (aged over 65); overseas born; non-English speaking at home; those on low incomes; and public housing tenants. In the more detailed Whitehorse survey no Chinese-Australians reported being socially isolated, but high rates were found in low income residents (31%); public housing tenants (29%); the unemployed (29%); those unable to work (28%); and the non-English speaking at home (17%) (Pope 2005a). The greater propensity of low socio-economic status groups to be socially isolated has been noted in the international literature (Granovetter 1983;

Tigges *et al.* 1998) and is discussed further in the section *Disadvantage and networks*.

Social isolation varies across LGAs from 8% to 22% (DVC 2005a). This will be due in part to the concentration of particular population groups in these areas, and in part to local area factors such as distance and the availability of organisations and opportunities. Areas with high levels of socially isolated people also have low levels of people who:

- feel valued by society ($r = - 0.6$); and
- are members of organised groups ($r = - 0.6$).

Low resource networks

There is significant variation across population groups and localities in the proportion of the population that could not raise money in an emergency.

In Victoria in general, people who could not raise money in an emergency are more likely to be: women; young people (aged 18 to 24); overseas born or non-English speaking at home; those on low incomes and public housing tenants. In Whitehorse (population average of 15%) high rates were found in those unable to work (58%); public housing tenants (47%); the non-English speaking at home (31%); the unemployed (29%); and low income residents (24%) (Pope 2005a).

Variation has been found across LGAs, ranging from 49% to 78% (DVC 2005a). There is no correlation with other participation or attitudes indicators collected by DVC, although the neighbourhood data from a pilot study suggests that at the smaller area level, areas with high rates of people who could not raise money in an emergency also have low rates of community participation.

Associational and community networks

Associational and community networks are the 'looser' connections (sometimes referred to as bridging networks or weak ties) that are established between close personal networks, usually around a common interest or involvement in specific settings, such as a school, workplace, interest group or community organisation (Pope & Warr 2005).

Associational and community networks include those ties formed through contacts in neighbourhoods such as with neighbours, shop keepers or dog walkers. While close personal networks consist of 'people like yourself', associational networks are drawn from a wide range of backgrounds (Szezter 2002).

Benefits of associational and community networks

Associational and community networks can be sources of the same sorts of benefits described above for close personal networks (emotional support, contacts and resources, etc) except they provide a bigger and broader pool from which benefits can be drawn (Granovetter 1983; Pope & Warr 2005). For example, in the area of employment, about half of all job vacancies are filled through networks of close personal and associational networks. Associational networks however, provide more opportunity, and have been shown to compensate for less experience and qualifications (Granovetter 1983; Chapple 2002; Finneran & Kelly 2003). Networks developed through formal types of participation, such as education and volunteering, have been shown to be particularly important for connecting people to career paths and to labour markets that are better paid and more stable (Granovetter 1983; Menchick & Weisbrod 1987; Davis Smith 2000; Chapple 2002).

Another important example is in the area of child and adolescent wellbeing. Associational and community networks have been shown to improve child and adolescent health, increase behavioural and developmental scores, and enhance social and emotional development (Runyan *et al.* 1998; Attree 2004). They reduce parental stress and enhance positive parenting (good supervision, reasonable discipline and a strong parent-child bond) which has been shown to decrease involvement in crime as children grow up (Larzelere & Patterson 1990; Harris & Marmor 1996; Weatherburn & Lind 1998).

Associational networks are not only sources of benefits for individuals, but can also be sources of benefits for communities. The integration they foster can generate positive attitudes such as a sense of belonging, acceptance of diversity, and feeling safe in local areas. Integration can also encourage positive norms and behaviours which have been shown to reduce crime, violence and community disharmony (Sampson *et al.* 1997; Hirschfield & Bowers 1997; Vershney 1998; Sampson *et al.* 2002). Networks can also promote information and innovation sharing which leads to the spread of cultural, business and scientific ideas (Granovetter 1983). And finally, as will be discussed in the next section, networks can inspire residents to work together to solve their problems and improve community life (Perkins *et al.* 1996; Sampson *et al.* 2002).

Associational and community networks are created through participation in employment, education and public life. Public life includes community events, arts, organised sport, organised groups and volunteering. There are a number of studies that have demonstrated the relationship between participation in public life, the building of associational networks, and community benefits.

For example, research into Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres in Victoria has shown that participation in social, educational and recreational programs generates networks that foster a sense of belonging to a community; respect for diversity through exposure to different types of people; and a feeling that participants want to give back to the community (Pope & Warr 2005). Some participants went on to become involved in volunteering, management committees and decision-making activities (governance) in the broader neighbourhood (Pope & Warr 2005).

As some were from socially isolated and disadvantaged populations, this resulted in these groups having a voice in decision-making processes and service delivery in their local area (Pope & Warr 2005).

A survey in the US showed that students that participated in sport and other community organisations outside of school had better relationships with parents, teachers and friends; were more likely to enjoy school; and were more likely to do homework (Harrison & Narayan 2002). They were less likely to be truant; smoke cigarettes; use marijuana; vandalise property; get into fights; be sexually active; and be sad or have suicidal thoughts (Harrison & Narayan 2002). Students involved in activities such as clubs, bands or volunteer work that connected them to the broader community had the highest rates of healthy behaviours and the lowest rates of risk behaviours (Harrison & Narayan 2002).

These positive outcomes were also found in an evaluation of a school program designed to enhance school and community connectedness, but this study also demonstrated that it was not just that healthier students participate, but that the participation led to benefits for students (Alperstein & Raman 2003).

A review of studies in adults has also shown that participation has an independent and positive effect on their health, rather than that healthier people participate (Young & Glasgow 1998).

In Australia, areas with high levels of participation in community oriented activities have been shown to have lower levels of crime (Carach & Huntley 2002). Researchers suggested that a doubling in the rate of membership in community organisations has the potential to reduce violent crime by up to a third and property crime by up to ten percent (Carach & Huntley 2002).

Not all participation has been found to be positive for individuals, even when supplying a community benefit (Ziersch & Baum 2004). Some associational and community networks can lack diversity and become divisive and separatist (Szreter 2002). Organisations need to have certain characteristics to bestow benefits. These include having: an organisational culture that is focused beyond individuals and that promotes a sense of community; a structure that is highly accessible and provides meaningful role opportunities; and leadership that is inspiring, talented, shared, and committed to both the setting and to members (Maton & Salem 1995).

The size of associational and community networks is more easily influenced by government policy than the size of close personal networks. Governments can support the building of associational and community networks by planning spaces where people can mix and meet, providing infrastructure for activities that allow people to participate, funding events, building the capacity of organisations so they can encourage and support community participation and reducing barriers to participation such as cost and transport. Strategies for building associational and community networks are briefly discussed in the last section of this report.

Evidence about associational and community Networks in Victoria

The DVC *Indicators of Community Strength* currently include five indicators of types of participation in public life that can build associational and community networks:

- attendance at community events;
- participation in organised sport;
- membership of organised groups;
- volunteering; and
- parental participation in schools.

The indicators focus on a range of activities that require different amounts of commitment from participants.

While there is significant variation in all forms of participation across population groups and local areas in Victoria, for brevity, this discussion will focus on volunteering. The discussion is focused on non-volunteers to highlight the policy issues related to non-participation.

Non-volunteers

In Victoria in general, non-volunteers are more likely to be: men; young people (aged 18 to 24); overseas born; non-English speaking at home; those on low incomes; and public housing tenants. In the more detailed Whitehorse survey (average 33%) no Chinese-Australians reported volunteering and low rates were also found in young people (19%) and the unemployed (18%) (unpublished data).

These findings support those of other Victorian research (Pope 2005b) and suggest there are barriers preventing participation by some population groups.

The barriers that have been described for young people, those born overseas/non-English speaking at home and low socio-economic groups include a lack of confidence, cost, difficulties dealing with unfamiliar formal structures, inappropriateness of tasks offered, and negative attitudes held by organisations towards different population groups (Ferrier *et al.* 2004; DVC 2005c; Gerard 1985; Lasby 2004; IVR 2005).

Rates of volunteering have also been shown to vary considerably across LGAs in Victoria, from 35% to 81% (DVC 2005a). This is likely to be in part due to the concentration of particular population groups in local areas, and in part to the characteristics of local areas such as distance, the capacity of local organisations and local opportunities.

LGAs with low levels of volunteering also have low levels of other types of participation including:

- attendance at community events ($r = 0.8$);
- membership of organised groups ($r = 0.9$);
- parental participation in schools ($r = 0.8$); and
- people on decision making boards or committees ($r = 0.8$) (a governance network indicator).

Population groups, including those in local areas, that have low levels of volunteering may not be accessing the benefits of associational and community networks. Compared to volunteers, non-volunteers are less likely to like their local community (DVC unpublished data) and less likely to feel safe on their street at night; that multiculturalism makes life in the area better; that they are valued by society; and that there are opportunities to have a say on issues that are important (DVC 2004).

They have also been shown to be less likely to report their health as excellent or very good and more likely to be experiencing psychological distress (DVC 2004).

LGAs that had low levels of volunteering (and therefore of other forms of participation as shown above) also had low levels of people that:

- felt safe on their street alone after dark ($r = 0.8$);
- felt valued by society ($r = 0.6$); and
- felt there are opportunities to have a real say on issues that are important ($r=0.6$) (the latter two indicators are discussed in the following section).

They also, however, have low levels of people who think multiculturalism makes life in their area better (-0.05).

The findings above are not causal and we cannot know from them alone if participation leads to better health and more positive attitudes or if health and positive attitudes encourage participation. However, reviews of the international literature in this area have shown that the positive effects on health and wellbeing are not just because healthier people participate, but that participation has an independent positive effect on health and wellbeing (Young & Glasgow 1998).

Governance networks

Promoting community connectedness through participation has many benefits for individuals and communities. One of the important outcomes is that it can lead to some people becoming involved in governance in local communities. Broad community involvement in governance means it is more likely that the design and use of assets and services will be appropriate to a community's needs.

Governance networks (sometimes called linking networks) are the networks that link close personal or associational and community networks to institutions and therefore to power, resources and ideas (Woolcock 1998). Governance networks include all levels of government and all other organisations that make decisions in, or about, communities.

Benefits of governance networks

Strong and inclusive governance networks give a community the ability to identify and assess issues, enter into public policy debates and take action to get things done. Strong governance allows a community to turn their economic, natural, social and cultural assets into specific outcomes such as employment, increased economic opportunities, adequate social welfare provision and improved community facilities (Browning & Cagney 2002).

Associational and community networks and governance networks are closely linked.

Research shows that participation in governance networks is built through more general forms of associational and community participation (Perkins *et al.* 1996; Sampson *et al.* 1997). For example, there is evidence that participation in volunteering, recreational and arts activities, sport, and community oriented organisations foster the social interaction, information sharing and feelings of solidarity that make people more likely to want to contribute to the common good and solve their problems collectively (Perkins *et al.* 1996; Sampson *et al.* 1997; McQueen-Thomson *et al.* 2004).

There is also evidence that general forms of participation prepare people for more complex forms of civic engagement and problem solving (Perkins *et al.* 1996; Verba *et al.* 1995; Baum *et al.* 1999). In this sense associational and community networks are 'training grounds' for people to take on roles within governance networks. Volunteering, for example, has been shown to build skills and confidence in community members and this enables them to take part in decision-making activities (Perkins *et al.* 1996; David Smith 2000). It also gives people experience in how to assess issues, appreciate public policy debates, and take action to get things done, including the design, development and delivery of services (Verba *et al.* 1995; Perkins *et al.* 1996).

Importantly, involvement in associational and community networks can increase the likelihood that different types of people will become involved in the policy arena (Davis Smith 2001). This can ensure that policies are adopted that take into account the full range of interests in communities (Milner 2001).

A review of the international literature found that the involvement of a diverse range of citizens in governance is affected by how governance networks recruit groups they would like to be involved (Skidmore *et al.* 2005). Inclusive recruitment occurs when organisations have an 'outwardly' oriented culture and value a broad range of experience and knowledge (Skidmore *et al.* 2005).

It is also fostered by practical arrangements and rules that are not too difficult for newcomers (Skidmore *et al.* 2005). Certain practices, such as inappropriate meeting times or a lack of childcare, are 'institutional filters' that prevent participation in public processes by marginalised population groups (Skidmore *et al.* 2005).

A number of studies have demonstrated the benefits for communities in having strong governance networks. It has been shown that these communities are more effective at attracting and maintaining resources such as recreational space, community health services, clinics, police and fire services (Wilkinson 1998; Gillies 1998; Szreter 2002; Browning & Cagney 2002). Reviews of studies have also shown these communities are more likely to generate relevant and effective initiatives and services (Gillies 1998) and are more effective at lobbying in response to proposed cuts in services (Sampson *et al.* 1997).

A final benefit of strong governance is that it fosters a greater belief in the value of government in communities (Szreter 2002). Involvement of the community in governance creates a positive feedback situation in which involvement leads to better services and infrastructure, which in turn gives the community more faith in government, which in turn increases the number of people willing to become involved in governance networks and policy debates. It has been argued that when people are disillusioned with government, they stay engaged predominantly in close personal networks (Szreter 2002).

Evidence about governance networks in Victoria

The DVC *Indicators of Community Strength* currently include two indicators of types of participation in governance:

- have any of the groups you are a member of taken any local action on behalf of your community in the last twelve months?; and
- are you on a decision making board or committee such as a corporate board, school council, sports club committee, church committee, body corporate or resident action group?

For brevity, the following discusses participation on decision making boards or committees and focuses on those that are not involved to highlight the policy issues related to non-participation.

Those not on decision making boards or committees

There is significant variation in participation on decision making boards or committees across population groups and local areas in Victoria.

The population groups least likely to have participated on decision-making boards and committees are women, young people (aged 18 to 24), those born overseas, the non-English speaking at home and public housing tenants.

Across LGAs the proportion of the population that are on decision-making boards and committees varied from 14% to 39% (DVC 2005a). Areas with high levels of participation on decision-making boards and committees also have high levels of people who:

- are members of a group that has taken local action ($r = 0.7$)
- are not socially isolated (can get help from friends, family and neighbours when needed) ($r = 0.6$);
- have attended a community event ($r = 0.6$);
- are members of an organised group ($r = 0.8$);
- volunteer ($r = 0.8$);
- like living in their local community ($r = 0.6$);
- feel safe on their street alone after dark ($r = 0.6$);
- feel valued by society ($r = 0.7$); and
- feel there are opportunities to have a say on issues that are important ($r = 0.6$).

Population groups or local areas that have low levels of participation in governance networks may not be accessing the benefits. The DVC *Indicators of Community Strength* include two indicators of the benefits of strong governance: do you feel valued by society?; and do you feel there are opportunities to have a real say on issues that are important?

In Victoria in general, the population groups least likely to feel valued by society are women, those aged over 65, those born overseas and non-English speaking at home and public housing tenants. In Whitehorse (average 53%) the groups the least likely to feel valued by society were those unable to work (10%), the Chinese (29%), students (33%), those doing home duties (41%), young people aged 18 to 24 (44%), the non-English speaking at home (44%), single parents (44%), the unemployed (45%) and those not born in Australia (45%) (unpublished data).

In Victoria in general, the population groups least likely to feel there are opportunities to have a say are men, young people (aged 18 to 24), those born overseas and non-English speaking at home and public housing tenants. In Whitehorse (average 42%) the groups the least likely to feel there are opportunities to have a say on issues that are important were students (9%), young people aged 18 to 24 (17%), single parents (29%); and public housing tenants (33%) (unpublished data).

LGAs that have high levels of the population that feel valued by society also have high levels of those that:

- feel there are opportunities to have a say on issues that are important ($r = 0.9$);
- volunteer ($r=0.6$);
- are members of organised groups ($r=0.5$);
- are on decision making boards or committees ($r=0.7$); and
- like living in their local area ($r=0.6$).

Disadvantage and networks

As has been highlighted by the Victorian data, not all population groups are equal in terms of participation in the networks described in this report. Economically disadvantaged groups in particular, appear to participate less in all three types of networks and are therefore less likely to have access to the benefits networks provide. This section briefly describes the literature on networks and disadvantage. Disadvantage is a key area of interest to the Victorian Government as outlined in the social policy statement *A Fairer Victoria* (DPC 2005).

The international literature suggests that economically disadvantaged people are more reliant on close personal networks, as these are often the only network they have access to (Szreter 2002). This is because they are often locked out of the forms of participation (in education, employment and public life) that help build broader associational and governance networks. While resource sharing through close personal networks is often vital for the survival of economically disadvantaged individuals, these networks are themselves often also resource poor, and therefore generate fewer benefits or can strain others within the networks (Granovetter 1983; Szreter 2002).

Studies in poor neighbourhoods overseas have shown that residents have fewer links to those who are employed/university educated or who live outside the neighbourhood (Granovetter 1983; Tigges 1998). They are also unlikely to be part of governance networks that could give them access to resources lacking in their immediate environments (Szreter 2002). Poverty therefore appears to 'encapsulate' and isolate the networks of poor communities into local areas (Szreter 2002).

This can mean that the resources needed to sustain basic institutions in urban neighbourhoods such as schools, voluntary organisations and churches are not drawn into these areas (Browning & Cagney 2002).

Participation has been shown to alleviate some of the negative outcomes of economic disadvantage. For example, increased networks and levels of volunteering and membership of groups have been shown to be related to decreased levels of imprisonment and low birth weight in disadvantaged communities in Victoria (Vinson 2004). A study in Britain has also found that volunteering mediates the negative effects of disadvantage, with volunteers from disadvantaged backgrounds (or those who had left school early) having similar levels of psychological well-being as professional, educated non-volunteers (Gerard 1985).

The process of increasing participation in disadvantaged communities may be different than in more well-off communities. It may need to start with small social, recreational or educational activities, as members of disadvantaged communities are often disempowered (Howe & Cleary 2001). These smaller personal activities have been shown to make people aware of their abilities and the possibility of what could be achieved from collective involvement (Howe & Cleary 2001). As was seen in the Neighbourhood House research in Victoria, these activities can lead some participants from disadvantaged populations to go on to participate in decision-making processes, which gave them a voice about service delivery in their local area (Pope & Warr 2005).

Building networks

It is not the purpose of this paper to detail policies for building networks, but this section briefly outlines DVC's broad policy priorities. DVC's interest is ultimately in strengthening governance networks which requires increasing connectedness through associational and community participation. This requires: 1) engaging communities to determine their priorities for participation, including in governance; 2) developing plans to outline how participation in both associational and governance networks could be increased; 3) and creating partnerships that can put the plans into action.

Community engagement

Increasing connectedness requires determining a community's visions and aspirations for participation, including in governance. When these are determined through forms of community engagement they will be more successful, as they will take into account a community's demography, culture, local economy and enthusiasms (Montgomery 2005).

Community engagement strategies include a broad spectrum of activities from seeking the community's opinion through focus groups and needs assessments, through to actively sharing decision making power through citizens' juries and partnerships with residents' associations. Some have argued that traditional methods of community engagement such as committees and surveys may be unappealing for some communities and may be a considerable barrier to increasing the representativeness in decision-making beyond the 'usual suspects' (Skidmore *et al.* 2005).

Community plans

Once visions and aspirations have been determined they need to be documented in local plans. Plans should outline:

- *The desired participatory activities* in areas such as education, arts, sport, recreation, leisure, volunteering and including leadership and governance;
- *The community infrastructure* that may be needed to support these activities - although infrastructure is not always necessary and can be counter productive if communities are burdened by its management (Montgomery 2005);
- *The capacity building that may be needed for the local organisations, clubs and institutions through which people participate.* Not all organisations within communities are 'participation ready' because of a lack of resources or skills or because organisations do not know how to recruit people from different population groups within communities; and
- *Ways to reduce barriers to participation such as cost, transport and organisational barriers.*

Partnerships for change

Partnerships then need to be established with external government agencies, local organisations and businesses that can pool their resources to create the change outlined in community plans. Partnerships combine the considerable knowledge and resources available across organisations and encourage problem solving that can deal with the complexity of issues.

Governments also need to consider ways to more effectively respond to community visions. This may include better collaboration between different levels of government or departments around the delivery of services to local areas, finding new ways to provide funding and examining ways information technologies can make government easier to work with.

The case of young people in Trafalgar

The Trafalgar Community Development Association, in partnership with the Baw Baw Council and the Department for Victorian Communities, have developed a strategy to improve life in the town, including for young people. Youth forums have been run to assess the needs of young people and baseline *Indicators of Community Strength* have been collected to monitor the effect of the strategy over time. The indicators have been collected for the general population and will soon be collected in the town's high school.

The indicators show that Trafalgar's young people (aged 18 to 24) are the age group least likely to participate in community or governance networks and the least likely to feel there are opportunities for them to participate in these networks.

Without opportunities to build broad community networks the young people in Trafalgar will miss out on the benefits. This is illustrated by the survey finding that young people are the least likely age group to feel valued by society or that multiculturalism makes life in the area better. The younger students in the forum also clearly articulated the link between boredom and risk taking and anti-social behaviour. Other data sources also describe high levels of unemployment, early school leaving and migration out of the town in younger age groups.

The partnership has engaged Trafalgar's young people and is providing an avenue for them to be involved in decision-making through the forums. It is incorporating the findings into the Trafalgar Strategic Plan. The solutions identified by young people to improve their community connectedness and participation fall across the categories of activities, community infrastructure, local organisation capacity building and reduction of barriers.

Some examples of the options identified include:

Participatory activities – education, arts, sport, recreation activities, volunteering

- FreeZA event (All Ages Drug and Alcohol-Free Entertainment)
- increase ongoing activities such as sporting activities and 'things other than sport': arts, drama, dance, computing classes, markets, etc
- increase one off activities such as fundraising/fetes/fairs, shopping trips, underage 'rages', movie nights

Community infrastructure

- create a youth drop in centre
- improve library services including increasing hours of opening and increasing facilities such as internet access
- improve existing sporting facilities
- create walking/running tracks
- create new leisure facilities such as a skate park and swimming pool
- food businesses that provide a place for young people to 'hang out' (and opportunities for employment experience)

Support and capacity building for the local organisations, clubs and institutions through which people participate

- improve access to facilities like the town hall to run activities
- create more after school clubs such as social and computer clubs

Reducing barriers to participation: cost and public transport

- improve transport, particularly to special events in other towns
- reduce cost of events and activities

Conclusion and future work

In Victoria we have begun to develop an indicator set that describes aspects of the social organisation that underpins community strength. This report provides an explanatory framework for the indicators and examines what we currently know about the importance of connectedness within communities.

The indicator set will continue to be developed. For example, in the neighbourhood pilot survey some new questions were added to explore whether community members feel there are opportunities to participate in aspects of community life such as recreation, volunteering and in community organisations. Some of these questions will be included in the repeat of the LGA level survey early in 2006.

Our work on indicators will ultimately be shifted into the *Community Indicators Victoria* project – a VicHealth funded project working with Local Government to develop a broader indicator set of community wellbeing at the LGA level (www.communityindicators.net.au). This set will incorporate some of DVC's *Indicators of community strength*, but will also report more broadly across seven domains of community wellbeing identified as important by Local Government: social, learning, economic, built environment, natural environment, culture and democracy/citizenship. This broader indicator set will be a vital resource for local planning.

DVC will continue to use the indicator data to examine community strength and its relationship to other outcomes that are important to government such as crime and education. It will also continue to examine the barriers to certain population groups participating fully in community life and this will add to the international evidence outlined in this report.

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