



Research summary

Gendered neighbourhoods: Exploring women's and men's perceptions of safety in the Latrobe Valley

Introduction

The purpose of this document is to provide an outline of research recently conducted in the Latrobe Valley for interested stakeholders. On August 2, 2023, Chloe Keel presented findings at the Latrobe Valley Authority. This document provides a summary of the key points for discussion.

Fear of crime and the place people live

Fear of crime can have significant consequences for people and communities. For individuals, high levels of fear of crime can be associated with poorer mental and physical health, impeded social functioning, and a decreased quality of life^{1 2}. These negative consequences can also have broader impacts on suburbs, such as lower levels of community cohesion^{3 4}.

We know that the places people live influences the way in which they think about crime⁵. Compared to urban and suburban settings, however, there has been limited research exploring fear of crime in rural environments. Rural places have a range of contextual features that may be important community members' perceptions of safety. Understanding how the rural environment shapes fear of crime for women and men is important for improving community perceptions of safety and wellbeing.

The current study

The current study sought to explore women's and men's perceptions of crime and safety in a regional community with high levels of gendered violence. Specifically, men and women who were 18 years and older and living in the Latrobe Valley, Victoria, Australia were interviewed about their perceptions of their local area, safety, and social networks.

Participants were recruited through advertising via local Facebook groups, disseminated through organisational networks including Latrobe City Council, local headspace, Centre for Multicultural Youth, Latrobe Health Authority and others. Posters and flyers were put up in local cafes, pubs,

¹ Jackson, J., & Stafford, M. (2009). Public Health and Fear of Crime: A Prospective Cohort Study. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 49(6), 832–847. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azp033>

² Stafford, M., Chandola, T., & Marmot, M. (2007). Association Between Fear of Crime and Mental Health and Physical Functioning. *American Journal of Public Health*, 97(11), 2076–2081. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2006.097154>

³ Brunton-Smith, I., & Sturgis, P. (2011). Do Neighborhoods Generate Fear of Crime? An Empirical Test Using the British Crime Survey*. *Criminology*, 49(2), 331–369. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.2011.00228.x>

⁴ Skogan, W. (1986). Fear of Crime and Neighborhood Change. *Crime and Justice*, 8, 203–229. <https://doi.org/10.1086/449123>

⁵ Brunton-Smith & Sturgis, 2011.

libraries, shopping centres and notice boards in Morwell, Moe, Traralgon and Churchill. Overall, 39 semi-structured interviews took place (10 online and 29 in person throughout Latrobe).

All interviews were recorded using digital recording devices. The interviews ran for an average of one hour. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by Smart Docs. The interviews were coded and analysed using NVivo software. This process entailed encoding statements into the most appropriate themes.

The study sample

The final study sample consisted of 39 residents of the Latrobe Valley who were over the age of 18. Figure 1 highlights the suburbs within Latrobe Valley in which participants lived. Over half of the sample lived in Morwell (20 participants) and 9 participants lived in Traralgon. There was also 4 participants who lived in Moe South/ Newborough, 3 who lived in Koornalla, 2 lived in Churchill and 1 lived in Glengarry. Approximately 70% of the sample had lived in the Latrobe Valley for 10 years or more (28 participants), with an additional 4 participants having lived in the Latrobe Valley for 5 to 10 years and 7 living in the Latrobe Valley for 1 to 5 years.

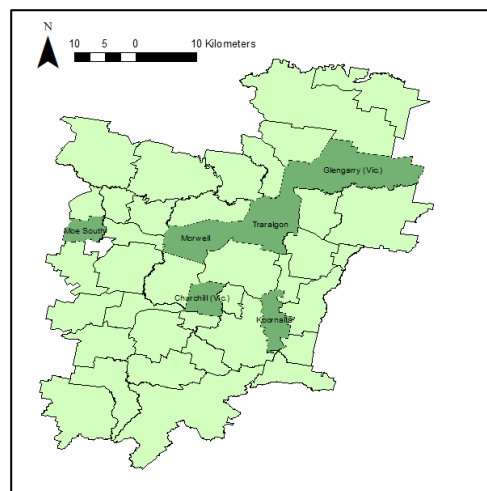


Figure 1 Map of Latrobe Valley with participants home suburbs highlighted

The sample included:

- 22 females, 14 males, 1 gender neutral and 1 participant was assigned female at birth but identified as non-binary/gender fluid.
- 2 participants identified as Indigenous.
- 3 participants were born outside of Australia.
- 9 participants were living with a disability.
- 9 participants identified as LGBTQI+.

A large proportion of the sample had an experience of Domestic and Family Violence and/or Sexual Violence (21 participants). Of those who had this victimisation experience, 59% were female, 35% were male and 78% were LGBTQI+.

Key findings

The next section provides a brief summary of key findings from the interviews as it relates to perceptions of safety, community problems and changes residents' would like to see in their community.

Feeling safe in Latrobe

Residents were asked about their feelings of safety in regards to their local area and the Latrobe Valley more broadly. Residents most often reported feeling unsafe when there were unpredictable people present in public spaces. This was true for women and men. Residents described these people as '*drug affected people*', '*people hanging around in big groups*' and '*young people*'. Residents reported feeling safer in the suburb they lived compared to other suburbs in Latrobe due to their familiarity with the area.

Residents' felt safest in their homes. Participants described a number of target hardening actions they took, such as installing security cameras, that ensured they felt safe. This action was often taken in response to either experiencing or hearing about property damage in the area. Participants who were renting or under financial pressures could not make these changes to their homes and often felt less safe.

Community concerns and problems

There were a number of concerns in the community and community problems that residents' discussed and these impacted their sense of security and safety. The three most common were Domestic and Family Violence and Sexual Violence, a loss of jobs in the region and transport limitations. These are briefly detailed below.

Domestic and Family Violence (DFV) and Sexual Violence (SV)

- DFV and SV was identified as central issues for the area. Participants either experienced DFV and SV in the community, knew someone who had experienced DFV and SV in the community or witnessed DFV and SV in the local area. This shaped the way women discussed their safety in Latrobe. Male participants also discussed DFV and SV in regards to a fear for others in the area.
- According to the latest National Community Attitudes towards Violence against women survey, the majority of Australians do not think violence against women occurs in their community. The participants I spoke to were aware DFV and SV was occurring. This is important for future research in the prevention space. There are implications for primary prevention interventions, particularly those that seek to mobilize communities, as the community context and knowledge of violence will require targeted solutions.

A loss of jobs in the region

- The loss of jobs for the region was a significant concern for residents. Participants who had lived in the Latrobe Valley for more than 10 years discussed the impact of the closure of the power station and changing employment landscape in the region.
- The loss of jobs in the area was linked to a loss of infrastructure. Participants described the empty store fronts in the Morwell main street as an example of this.
- One participant described the area as having '*lost a lot of self-confidence*' as a result of these job losses.
- Many participants linked the loss of jobs, and subsequent socioeconomic disadvantage to an increase in all crime and violence in the area.

Transport

- Participants described unreliable and expensive public transport as a key community problem. Participants described the '*lack of transport*' as putting them in a '*vulnerable position*' due to long wait times for buses and trains.

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- Young female participants in particular described public transport as often becoming unsafe, either waiting at train/bus stations or being on the train due to the behaviour of adult men towards them.
- One participant worked in transport and described high levels of violence towards drivers. This participant did not feel safe in their workplace and has since changed jobs after a number of drivers were attacked.

Desire for change

Participants discussed positive change in the region and actions by council that had lead them to feel safer.

- Residents' spoke highly of new infrastructure in the area particularly near Morwell train station. One participant said *'I don't think twice about going through that subway, but in the old days, you would avoid it'*.
- A small group of participants used the Snap Send Solve application. Participants who had used the application described a positive experience with prompt responses to community problems. One recommendation to come from the research is an increased awareness of the application as only residents who personally knew someone who worked for the council appeared to use the application.

There were a number of changes residents' wanted to see in the Latrobe Valley area.

- Participants' described an increase in unhoused people in the area. While the presence of unhoused people at times made residents' feel anxious or unsafe, they expressed a desire for more proactive action to support unhoused people. One participant summarised this well *'You can't just move that person on, because they move on. They don't – the problem isn't solved'*.
- Participants' wanted an increase in safe spaces for LGBTQI+ residents in Latrobe. During the data collection the first Gippsland Pride festival was held. Participants' who identified a LGBTQI+ described wanting more social spaces in the region in which they were safe from harassment and violence such as a dedicated gay venue or bar.
- Participants' at times felt isolated from others in their community and wanted increased opportunities for community connection. One participant told me *'I really do think our community has the answers'*. These opportunities for connection could be collaborative spaces, inclusion of a broader snapshot of the community at council meetings and making public places more *'people friendly'* to enable *'people wanting to be in these spaces'*.
- Participants who had a disability wanted increased transport options for wheelchair users. One participant who used a wheelchair told me *'I know when I send them things about accessibility and/or things that are dangerous for people in wheelchairs, they ignore me, or they tell me it's fine for prams and then ignore me.'*

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