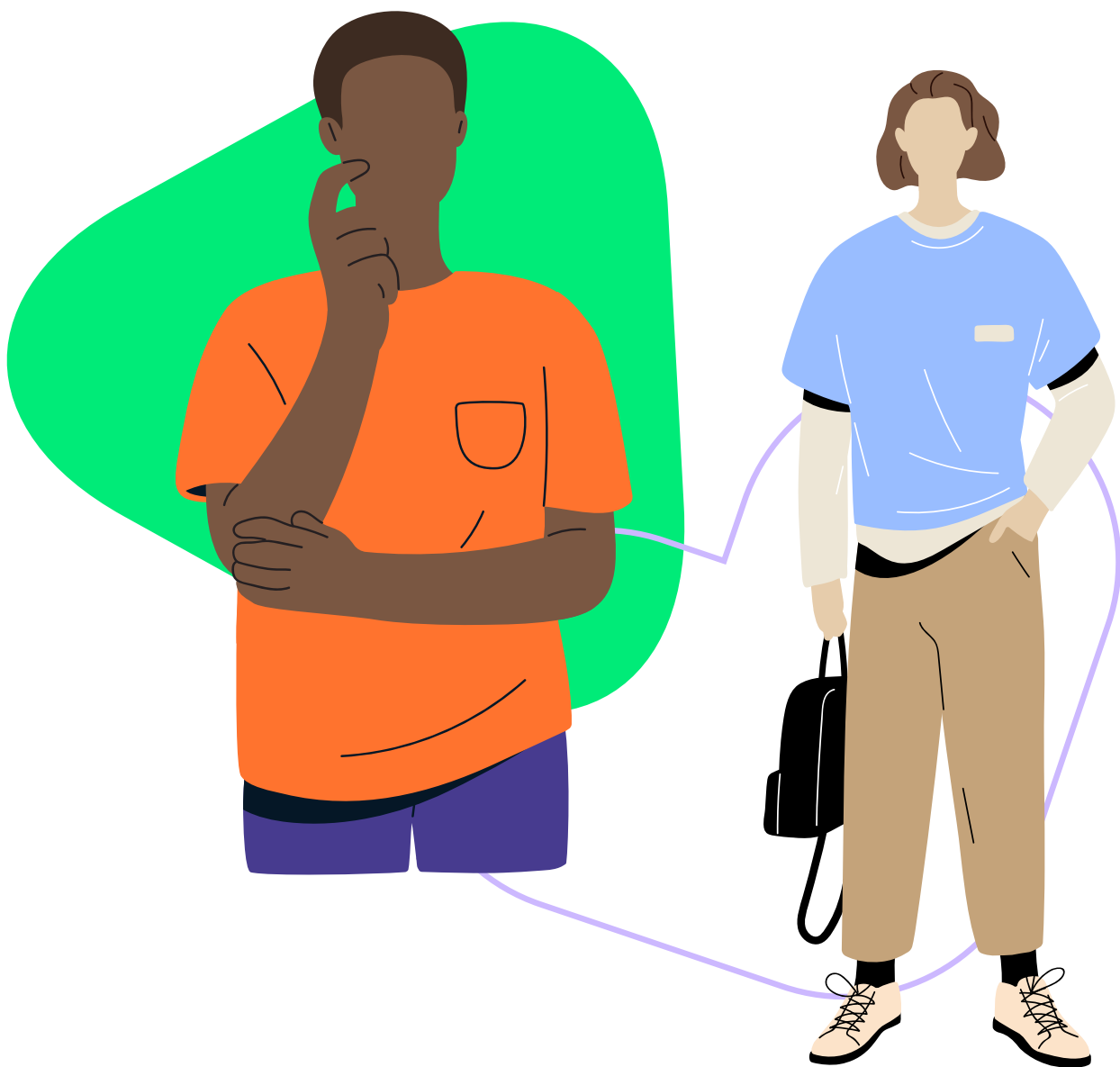


Evaluating the VicHealth ‘Healthier Masculinities Partnership Grants’: *The Human Code – Beyond Gender Expectations in the Macedon Ranges*

Final Report

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Executive summary



“... to tackle harmful masculine norms and achieve greater gender equality.”

In recent years, promoting healthier masculinities has become a key focus in the effort to tackle harmful masculine norms and achieve greater gender equality. However, there is limited evaluation data on programs that promote healthier and positive masculinities in the Global North (Ralph et al. 2020; World Health Organisation 2007), particularly in the Australian context (Stewart et al. 2021).

Contributing to the evidence base, this report presents the evaluation findings from the Human Code project, an initiative run in Macedon Ranges by Sunbury and Cobaw Community Health (SCCH), and funded by VicHealth’s Healthier Masculinities Partnership Grants. We offer recommendations for future community partnerships seeking to promote gender transformative, healthier masculinities work.

This research was guided by three central research questions:

1. To what extent was the project delivered as planned?

2. What can be learned from the process of planning and implementing pilot initiatives designed to promote healthier masculinities?

3. What aspects of the pilot initiatives were effective at increasing participants’ knowledge about and confidence to challenge outdated masculine stereotypes?

The Human Code project brought together a group of organisations and community members that were keen to combat the role of masculine stereotypes as drivers of gender inequality and address negative mental health and wellbeing outcomes among men and boys in the Macedon Ranges. The central partner was Sunbury Cobaw Community Health, a not-for-profit community health organisation that delivers health, wellbeing and community services across the Macedon Ranges Shire. SCCH was responsible for implementing phase 2 of the Human Code project, which is the focus of this evaluation. This phase was executed in partnership with 9 community organisations, who made a substantial contribution by participating in the working group, funding the work and/or helping to design and deliver the pilot programs.

- Central Victoria Prevention and Population Health (CVPPH) – Bendigo Health
- Community Bank Gisborne and District
- HALT (Hope Assistance Local Tradies)
- Macedon Ranges Health (MRH)
- Macedon Ranges Shire Council (MRSC)
- Macedon Ranges Suicide Prevention Action Group (MRSPAG)
- Man Cave Academy
- Tomorrow Man
- Youth Live4Life

The partnership also included VicHealth, as the project funder for the Human Code phase 2, and Monash University, as VicHealth’s designated project evaluator. Accordingly, VicHealth and Monash each contributed close consultation in respect of the project aims, design, re-scoping and implementation, from the planning stage and all the way through the execution of the project activities. Phase 2 of the Human Code project aimed to raise community awareness of the impacts of pressure to conform to outdated masculine stereotypes, and trial strategies to reduce the pressure to conform to outdated masculine stereotypes. In line with these objectives, the project group delivered:

- A series of one-off events delivered to a broad community audience, to increase awareness of gender stereotypes and the values, beliefs, behaviours and attitudes related to ‘unhealthy masculinities’.
- Two place-based, 6-week pilot programs that engaged, educated and supported a group of parents and mentors of adolescent boys to challenge harmful masculine stereotypes in their everyday interactions with young men.

The designated names and broad aims of the pilot programs were as follows:

- **Raising Teenage Boys in the Macedon Ranges:** Designed and delivered by Tomorrow Man in collaboration with the project team. This pilot aimed to educate a group of parents/carers of adolescent boys about the impact of harmful masculine stereotypes, and equip them with tools and strategies to challenge these norms and help their sons live uninhibited, healthy and happy lives.
- **Mentoring Boys in the Macedon Ranges:** Designed and delivered by Man Cave Academy, in collaboration with the project team. This pilot aimed to educate men who mentor adolescent boys about the impact of harmful masculine stereotypes and equip them with practical tools and strategies to better support the mental health and wellbeing of young men in the Macedon Ranges.



To answer the above mentioned research questions, this evaluation drew on a combination of existing administrative data and evaluation tools, and both qualitative and quantitative tools designed specifically for this evaluation:

- **Partnership governance and collaboration:** a one-hour focus group with five key partnership members
- **One-off events:** pre- and post-polling questions in which attendees rated their 'awareness of the impacts of gender stereotypes on men and boys and the people around them'
- **RTB Pilot:** session recordings, pre- and post-polling questions, and the 6 weekly post-workshop surveys that Tomorrow Man administer for their own evaluative purposes
- **MTB Pilot:** session recordings, pre- and post-polling questions, and the post-program survey that Man Cave Academy administer for their own evaluative purposes

As with all research methods, this study has limitations. The data derived from the above sources is predominantly self-assessment data. This means that, for example, the perceptions and reflections of the project team are used to assess the effectiveness of the partnership. This is supplemented by both quantitative and qualitative data in respect of community members' engagements with events and interventions. In this evaluation, some data relates to event attendees' self assessment of their own knowledge before and after the information session. Importantly, due to initial delays with the project, it was not possible to gather follow up data that measured change in participants' attitudes and behaviours over the long term.

This evaluation therefore focused on:

- 1) documenting the challenges and enablers of developing place-based, gender-transformative community initiatives aimed at men
- 2) assessing the project team's success in raising community awareness of the impacts of pressure to conform to outdated masculine stereotypes, and
- 3) measuring short-term increases in knowledge about and confidence to challenge outdated masculine stereotypes brought about by the pilot programs.



Key findings

Successes and challenges within the partnership

- Strong leadership and investment in the project was crucial in pushing the project forward despite a series of significant roadblocks in the first year of funding.
- The working group was effectively formed, highly invested in the work and central to the project's success and eventual expansion
- The project team drew on SCCH's existing internal resources to broaden their reach in the community and support the increased workload of the project when opportunities for expansion arose.
- Seizing on opportunities to maximise impact increased the reach of the project, but 'scope creep' put strains on the staff resourcing.
- Collaborating with external organisations to develop education programs requires clear expectations and processes

Reach and impact of the partnerships activities

- The one-off events had significant reach and were an effective means of promoting and recruiting for the pilot programs

Pilot Program 1: Raising teenage boys in the Macedon Ranges

- Registration for and attendance at the RTB pilot far outweighed the initial target of 20 participants, with 48 parents completing the full 6-week program.
- The RTB pilot effectively catered to participants with a range of existing knowledge levels and provided useful practical tools
- Enabling parents to connect and share with other parents was highly beneficial
- Weekly homework tasks provided opportunities for participants to put learnings into practice

Pilot Program 2: Mentoring teenage boys in the Macedon Ranges

- Recruitment for the MTB pilot proved difficult. The project team implemented a financial incentive scheme to support participation, and successfully recruited 16 participants.
- The MTB pilot effectively catered to participants with a range of existing levels of knowledge.
- The program brought together a diverse mix of participants who mentor boys, which helped to create instances of connection and empathy
- Participants valued the practice of checking-in, but felt that it often occupied too much of the allotted time in the workshops
- It cannot be assumed that would-be mentors of men and boys are equipped to engage in gender transformative work that effectively challenges outdated stereotypes.

Community Mobilisation in the Macedon Ranges

- The project expanded far beyond its original plan, by effectively mobilising a range of stakeholders in the Macedon Ranges community, which led to the development of the Cut the Silence Campaign.
- The project created networks across organisations and has stimulated further demand for and investment in gender transformative programs aimed at men

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

When implementing multiple or different programs, project leads should seek to implement consistent evaluation tools across all programs to be able to effectively measure and compare impacts.

Recommendation 2

Large-scale, place-based health promotion initiatives should create and actively and regularly consult working groups that represent a diverse cross-section of the community. These groups can offer crucial insights into key demographics, local groups and small townships, and can help to promote the project through their personal and professional networks.

Recommendation 3

Community partnerships developing innovative gender-transformative programs should structure delivery in multiple sessions over a long-term period. This allows facilitators to: a) build a foundation of basic knowledge and then gradually move to more advanced content and practical strategies, and b) set homework that helps participants process content, put strategies into practice and reflect on their learnings with the group.

Recommendation 4

Future partnerships should make a concerted effort to recruit and authentically and actively involve a broad range of organisations in the project activities, as this can promote a snowball effect of community mobilisation that is sustained beyond the allocated funding period.

Recommendation 5

All online resources that are produced for raising awareness should be accessible to be shared via mainstream, widely used social media platforms.

Recommendation 6

Project teams who have finite resources and funding should endeavour to maintain manageable and realistic objectives and avoid 'scope creep'. Plans often need to change in the health promotion space so commitment and flexibility are important; but when projects expand significantly the additional workload and costs may be borne by individuals as well as organisations.

Recommendation 7

For parenting programs, undoing the burden on mothers should be a priority. This is not easy, but can be achieved by factoring in fathers into content design and targeted marketing materials.

Recommendation 8

For all programs, regardless of target audience, differentiated cohort intakes, according to confidence in the subject matter should be considered. That is, those with low levels of self-identified expertise and confidence will need introductory material that might promote disengagement among those who self-identify as having higher levels of knowledge. Provide foundational knowledge for those who need it and then have intermediate and advanced knowledge participants at a relevant point in the program.

1.0 Introduction



“The plural ‘masculinities’, rather than the singular ‘masculinity’ ensures an understanding of masculinity as a set of practices...”

As part of the process of legitimising gender inequality in a variety of life domains, boys and men’s adherence to traditional and rigid forms of masculinity – characterised by dominance, assertiveness, stoicism, aggression and risk taking – poses serious issues for public health. Those who enact these masculine norms face negative physical and mental health outcomes and present a threat to the health and wellbeing of women, gender non-binary people, and indeed other boys and men (The Men’s Project & Flood 2018; Ralph et al. 2020). In response to the ongoing influence of culturally pervasive traditional masculine norms, there have been increasing efforts at the level of research, policy and community action to set about promoting and normalising ‘healthier masculinities’, characterised by equality and respect, non-violence, reflection and self-awareness, emotional expression and vulnerability, and accountability.

The plural ‘masculinities’, rather than the singular ‘masculinity’ ensures an understanding of masculinity as a set of practices, attitudes and ideals that varies in esteem and expression across historical and cultural contexts. Indeed, it also ensures that we understand that the expression and cultivation of ‘positive masculinities’ is plausible, even if not necessarily easy to culturally ingrain (Messerschmidt 2018; Ralph and Roberts 2020).

This highlights that it is the stereotypes, attitudes and behaviours and their associated effects that need to be tackled, rather than men who enact them, per se. Further, there is a need to understand that the associated problems of outdated masculine norms are not located only within poorer or more marginalised communities, but instead extend to all tiers of social and economic hierarchies in all communities (Roberts and Elliott 2020).

In mid-2020, VicHealth launched [‘Masculinities and Health: A framework for challenging masculine gender stereotypes in health promotion’](#). This framework acts as a planning tool for individuals and organisations engaging in health promotion, emphasising that:

“...all health and wellbeing initiatives can be strengthened by considering the influence of masculine stereotypes, from mental wellbeing or healthy eating initiatives, through to preventing violence against women or preventing harm from alcohol.”

The launch of the framework was followed by a round of competitive VicHealth funding opportunities, including The Healthier Masculinities Partnership Grant (HMPG), aimed at a diverse range of organisations to help propel community wellbeing and health promotion initiatives into unchartered territory. Applications for HMPG funding invited local government, in partnership with relevant community organisations, to work towards developing, trialling and evaluating initiatives that seek to promote healthier masculinities. Evaluation data from these initiatives will help VicHealth build the evidence base about what types of programs effectively engage men and boys in gender equality, particularly efforts to transform harmful masculine stereotypes and norms. Central to this was examining how community partnerships collaborate in pursuit of these goals, and the kinds of initiatives that are effective in engaging and educating communities.

This is important because, as suggested by [Promundo's recent review of evidence about what works to engage boys and men in gender equality](#), community mobilisation likely plays an important role in ensuring intervention efforts are successful in creating positive change.

The present evaluation report relates to one of the projects funded under the HMPG opportunity: The Human Code (stylised in project marketing as #thehumancode), a place-based project in the Macedon Ranges that aimed to make significant steps towards freeing local men and boys from the expectations of outdated masculine stereotypes.

Context: The Macedon Ranges Shire

The Macedon Ranges Shire is located 50km northwest of Melbourne, on the traditional lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung, Taungurung and Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung peoples. According to council estimates from 2021, it is home to over 51,000 residents, spread across nine towns and a number of smaller rural settlements (MSRC, n.d.). It has a diverse local economy made up of 3,386 businesses operating mostly in healthcare, construction, education, retail and hospitality industries (MSRC, n.d.).

The [2018 Suicide Prevention Area Profile by the North Western Melbourne Primary Health Network](#) found that the Macedon Ranges has a suicide mortality rate that is significantly higher than the Victorian rate, and 85% of suicide deaths in the Macedon Ranges in 2010-19 were men. Men in the Macedon Ranges are also twice as likely than women to be hospitalised due to alcohol use, and rates of alcohol-use related serious road injuries among men have exceeded the Victorian rate since 2015. Finally, while reported family violence is lower than the state average, it increased by 11.9% between 2018-2019, exceeding increases in other areas of Victoria. Research indicates that a higher prevalence of suicide, risk-taking and violence among men can be linked to masculine norms such as self-reliance, male dominance and competitiveness (The Men's Project and Flood 2018). Community members and organisations in the Macedon Ranges have thus committed to better understanding how this correlation plays out in their community, and developing place-based solutions to address it.

1.1 The organisations involved

The Human Code project brought together a group of organisations and community members that were concerned about the mental health and wellbeing of men and boys in the Macedon Ranges, as evidenced by the significantly higher rates of suicide in the region. The partnership sought to gain an understanding of community attitudes towards masculine norms and expectations, and use this research to inform interventions that engage and empower men, boys and the broader Macedon Ranges community to challenge and shift these norms. The first phase was a research project funded by the North Western Melbourne Primary Health Network and carried out by Orygen, which

sought to develop “a place-based understanding of the unique factors (risk, protective and perpetuating) faced by Macedon Ranges boys and men in relation to doing harm and being harmed” (Trail et al. 2021). The second phase, funded by the VicHealth HMPG, focused on translating these findings into community interventions. This phase was planned and implemented by Sunbury and Cobaw Community Health, informed by a large number of relevant community stakeholders, and delivered in collaboration with Tomorrow Man and Man Cave Academy. This evaluation focuses solely on phase two.

Central Partner: Sunbury and Cobaw Community Health

Sunbury and Cobaw Community Health (SCCH) is a not-for-profit community health organisation that delivers health, wellbeing and community services to an area of over 1700 km² from Sunbury to beyond the borders of Macedon Ranges Shire. SCCH employed a Project Coordinator to run the Human Code project, under the auspices of the SCCH Health Promotion Team Leader. As the lead agency, SCCH had ultimate oversight of the project.

Community stakeholders: The working group

In Phase 2 of the Human Code project, a working group comprised of local organisations and community members was created to guide and shape outreach and education. There were nine key members from a range of local organisations including SCCH, Macedon Ranges Shire Council, Macedon Ranges Health, Central Victoria Prevention and Population Health (CVPPH), Youth Live4Life, and HALT (Hope, Assistance, Local Tradies), as well as a volunteer member of the Gisborne Men’s Shed, a youth representative who was remunerated for their time, a local pastor and two other interested community members. To prepare for their

participation in the project, the working group attended an online *Unpacking the Man Box* session delivered by Jesuit Social Services on the 21st of September, 2021. The group then met on seven occasions between the 26th of October 2021 and the 11th of May 2022 to provide ideas and feedback on the proposed pilot initiatives and community consultation exercises, and to help promote the project through their networks and social media channels.

External Partner: Tomorrow Man

Tomorrow Man is a not-for-profit organisation that facilitates gender-transformative workshops for boys, teachers and parents in schools, and men in sporting clubs, workplaces and communities, with the aim of redefining masculine norms, and empowering men and boys to live happier and healthier lives. The organisation currently offers seven specialised programs including a six-module 'Student Program' and a range of one-off community workshops, which have been delivered to over 62,000 men and boys across Australia. For this project they collaborated with SCCH to create a new 6-module program for parents and carers called 'Raising Teenage Boys in the Macedon Ranges' delivered over a 6-week period.

External Partner: Man Cave Academy

Man Cave Academy (MCA) is a branch of The Man Cave, a preventative mental health and emotional intelligence charity that empowers communities to raise generations of healthy young men in Australia. Having run their school-based gender-transformative programs with over 27,000 boys across Australia, The Man Cave created MCA to "share our experience, learnings, and methods with adults in the lives of boys we work with so that they can continue our impact through conversations that make a difference" (MCA, n.d.). The Academy currently offers three programs, including a one-day workshop called *The art of engaging boys* (also offered as a self-paced online course), a 60-90 minute presentation called *What's going on for boys*, and a 3-hour experiential module called *Check-In Training*. For this project MCA collaborated with SCCH to create a new 6-week (2-hour-modules) program for mentors of boys called *Mentoring Boys in the Macedon Ranges*.



1.2 The project plan

This project has two phases with the following aims:

Phase 1.

Better understand community attitudes in the Macedon Ranges towards masculine norms and their effect on men's mental health and related behaviours

Phase 2.

Raise community awareness of the impacts of pressure to conform to outdated masculine stereotypes and trial strategies to reduce the pressure to conform to outdated masculine stereotypes.

In Phase 1 of the Human Code project, Orygen conducted a multi-method study that aimed to develop a place-based understanding of what masculinity means to men and boys in the Macedon ranges, and how this affects their mental health and shapes violence and risk-taking behaviours. The [report](#) offers seven key findings:

1. People in the Macedon Ranges suggest they need more information around supporting men's mental health, identifying distress, and how and where to seek help.
2. Challenges finding meaningful social connections mean that many men in the Macedon Ranges experience loneliness, social isolation and a reduced sense of belonging.
3. Younger men were more likely to endorse risk-taking behaviour and violence than men aged above 30.
4. A perception remains for some men that they must solve their own problems and cannot talk about their emotions, leading to delays in reaching out for help when experiencing distress.
5. Outdated gender roles that place pressure on men to be the main breadwinner can sometimes have negative impacts on men's wellbeing. Some men who are not the main breadwinner feel less valued in the community.
6. Pressure to fit in and belong leads many men to feel as though they need to hide their true self from others in the community.
7. Contrary to non-males, males in the Macedon Ranges were twice as likely to believe that they treat all genders equally and are confident to act on gender inequality.

On the basis of these findings, SCCH initiated Phase 2 of the project – the development of two innovative, place-based community interventions. The key strategies for this phase were:

1. Build capacity of governance group to understand gender stereotypes
2. Recruit two organisations/groups to pilot strategies informed by local data
3. Implement agreed strategies to increase understanding of the impact of outdated masculine stereotypes

Per these strategies, at the outset of Phase 2 the project team and working group attended an online *Unpacking the Man Box* session delivered by Jesuit Social Services to gain a deeper understanding of gender stereotypes and their impact on men. With the support and guidance of the working group, the SCCH project team worked with Tomorrow Man, Man Cave Academy and other community organisations to develop and deliver a series of gender transformative training and education opportunities for the Macedon Ranges community. The plan included:

- A series of one-off events delivered to a broad community audience, to increase awareness of gender stereotypes and the values, beliefs, behaviours and attitudes related to 'unhealthy masculinities'. This included:
 - an online *A night with the folks* delivered by Tomorrow Man, open to all parents in the Macedon Ranges community
 - a *More than the game* session delivered by Tomorrow Man to Gisborne Cricket Club, and joint promotion of the Cut the Silence campaign aimed at raising awareness of men's mental health and promoting help-seeking behaviour, during Men's Health Week
- an *A day with the blokes* session delivered by Tomorrow Man at the Macedon Ranges Shire Council Depot, and joint promotion of the Cut the Silence campaign aimed at raising awareness of men's mental health and promoting help-seeking behaviour, during Men's Health Week
- a community engagement barbecue for tradesmen at Middy's Electrical Wholesaler delivered in partnership with HALT during Men's Health Week
- a presentation during a 'Men's Health Week'-themed community lunch held in Kyneton to promote the project
- Two place-based, 6-week pilot programs that engaged, educated and supported a group of parents and mentors of adolescent boys to challenge harmful masculine stereotypes in their everyday interactions with young men.

Pilot: Raising Teenage Boys in the Macedon Ranges

This pilot program was designed and delivered by Tomorrow Man in collaboration with the project team. It aimed to educate a group of parents/carers of adolescent boys about the impact of harmful masculine stereotypes, and equip them with tools and strategies to challenge these norms and help their sons live uninhibited, healthy and happy lives. The program had six 2-hour modules, delivered over 6 weeks:

- **Week 1** – Stereotypes and the impact
- **Week 2** – Your relationship with the stereotype
- **Week 3** – Challenging/Expanding stereotypes
- **Week 4** – How to have tough conversations
- **Week 5** – Taking action
- **Week 6** – Next chapter

The content was designed to gradually build participants' knowledge and skills over the 6-week program. Between weekly sessions, the participants were asked to complete 'homework' in the form of activities and/or conversations designed to help them connect with their sons, and then share and reflect on the outcomes of this homework with the group the following week. This enabled them to embed their learnings and put the principles of the program into practice.

Pilot: Mentoring Boys in the Macedon Ranges

This pilot program was designed and delivered by Man Cave Academy, in collaboration with the project team. It aimed to educate men who mentor adolescent boys about the impact of harmful masculine stereotypes and equip them with practical tools and strategies to better support the mental health and wellbeing of young men in the Macedon Ranges.

The program had six 2-hour modules, delivered over 6 weeks:

- **Week 1** – What’s going on with boys... and what can we do about it?
- **Week 2** – Exploring the Man Box
- **Week 3** – Gender and identity
- **Week 4** – Role models
- **Week 5** – Celebrating strengths
- **Week 6** – Integration and next steps

The content was designed to gradually build participants’ knowledge and skills across the 6 weeks, and the participants were given ample time within the sessions to share personal experiences and learn from one another. Between sessions the participants were encouraged to complete ‘homework’ in the form of reflection activities and/or conversations with their mentees, friends and family members, and share and reflect on the outcomes with the group in the following session. This enabled them to embed their learnings and put the principles of the program into practice.



2.0 Evaluation Methods



“The aim of the focus group was to gather collective reflections on their successes, the challenges they faced and the most significant changes the project brought about.”

This evaluation used qualitative and quantitative methods to examine what works in partnerships seeking to mobilise community members to take part in and further promote gender-transformative programming. A combination of existing administrative data (e.g. Tomorrow Man pre- and post-surveys) and tools designed specifically for this evaluation were utilised. All methods were tailored in close collaboration with the partnership organisations to ensure they were suitable, fair and logistically viable.

2.1 Evaluation tools

Partnership governance and collaboration

To assess the effectiveness of the partnership and their governance and collaboration systems and processes, the Monash research team conducted a one-hour focus group with partnership members towards the end of the two-year project. The aim of the focus group was to gather collective reflections on their successes, the challenges they faced and the most significant changes the project brought about.

Due to organisational policies relating to the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus group was held via Zoom. Five partnership members were in attendance, including the project coordinator and the project lead from SCCH, the general manager of Building Healthy Communities at SCCH (referred to herein as ‘SCCH Executive’), and two working group members (one from Gisborne Men’s Shed and one from Macedon Ranges Health).

Using the ‘most significant change’ technique, the focus group sought an in depth understanding of:

- their overall experience of the collaboration;
- the most and least successful aspects of the collaboration;
- the most beneficial and the most challenging aspects of working with other organisations;
- unexpected or surprising outcomes of the collaboration;
- what they learned from the collaboration;
- the most significant change that came about because of the collaboration, and why this change was so important; and
- how they would improve governance and collaborative systems in future partnerships.

To avoid a question-answer group interview format and instead stimulate an open discussion of these topics, participants were asked to read out and respond to prompts (e.g. 'In my experience, the most successful aspect of the collaboration was...'; 'The most challenging part of working with other organisations was...'). Following this broad discussion, participants were asked to spend 3-minutes individually brainstorming what they believed was the most significant change that came about because of the collaboration, and why this was important. They then shared and discussed their responses as a group.

One-off events

To assess the reach and impact of the one-off events, attendees were asked to take part in live pre- and post-polling exercises, which asked them to rate their 'awareness of the impacts of gender stereotypes on men and boys and the people around them' on a likert scale from Poor to Excellent. Further evaluation of the effectiveness of the event content itself was not within the scope of this project.

Pilot programs

While the one-off events were designed to have significant reach, the two 6-week pilot programs were the centre-piece of the Human Code project. The programs were designed in collaboration with Tomorrow Man and Man Cave Academy, with the aim of developing innovative, place-based solutions to the particular social issues facing Macedon Ranges men and boys and the broader community. This evaluation sought to measure change in the pilot participants' attitudes, knowledge and confidence to implement the tools and strategies they were provided with, and capture reflections on how the interventions, activities and discussions were experienced and received. Notably, it was not possible to measure long term change in participants' behaviour (see Section 2.4).

As with the one-off events, pilot participants took part in pre- and post-polling exercise that asked them to rate their 'awareness of the impacts of gender stereotypes on men and boys and the people around them' on a likert scale from Poor to Excellent. Data for the pilots was also drawn from session recordings and the existing surveys that Tomorrow Man and Man Cave Academy staff administer for their own evaluative purposes, both of which the Monash research team reviewed and analysed.

The Tomorrow Man surveys were administered weekly, and included:

- An open-ended question asking participants to give feedback about their experience of the task they were required to complete as 'homework' between sessions.

- Two closed questions designed to measure change in knowledge and confidence over the course of the program, with an option to provide open-ended feedback after the second question:
 1. On a scale of 1 to 10 how valuable was this workshop in impacting/improving your confidence in raising teenage boys?
 2. Do you now feel better prepared to connect with your teenager(s) after this workshop? (Yes/No)
- A set of questions that were tailored to the content of each week and designed to assess the effectiveness of that specific session (e.g. "After this workshop on a scale of 1 to 10 how confident do you feel to challenge gender stereotypes?"). These questions were a mixture of closed (either yes/no or likert scale) and open-ended.
- Two open-ended questions designed to assess the participants key learnings each week.

The Man Cave Academy survey was administered once at the end of the project, and included:

- One closed question that asked participants to rate how much the workshops increased their capacity to have a positive impact on the boys they mentor on a scale of 1 to 10
- Seven open-ended questions that assessed what the participants' found most valuable and enjoyable about the program, what aspects they found challenging, how the participants' knowledge had changed over time, how their actions were likely to change as a result of the program and what the facilitators could have done differently.

2.2 Evaluation Limitations

The COVID-19 pandemic, and especially the particular types and durations of lockdowns in Victoria, led to many logistical challenges for the partnership and this evaluation. This included shortened timelines and difficulties with participant recruitment and retention for programs, and meant that some activities were significantly delayed and/or run online rather than in person. In addition to this, the organisations involved in this project went through a range of structural changes (detailed further in section 3.1), which created further delays.

As a result, it was not possible to gather follow up data that measured change in participants' attitudes and behaviours over the long term. This evaluation therefore focused on:

- 1) documenting the challenges and enablers of developing place-based, gender-transformative community initiatives aimed at men
- 2) assessing the project team's success in raising community awareness of the impacts of pressure to conform to outdated masculine stereotypes, and
- 3) measuring short-term increases in knowledge about and confidence to challenge outdated masculine stereotypes brought about by the pilot programs.



3.0 Findings



“The significant support for and investment in the project by key leadership figures in the Macedon community health sector was central to the project’s continuation...”

3.1 Successes and challenges within the partnership

- **Strong leadership and investment in the project was crucial in pushing the project forward despite a series of significant roadblocks in the first year of funding.**

Phase 2 of the Human Code project had “a bit of a rocky start” (Project lead, focus group). Macedon Ranges Shire Council (MRSC) was originally awarded the funding from VicHealth, but soon after this the organisation was restructured and the community directorate (and staff who worked on the grant application) were removed. Eventually, Sunbury and Cobaw Community Health was approached and, with VicHealth’s approval, took on lead responsibility for the project:

“So... there was a bit of changing hands, and I think we did start this project a little bit on the back foot because we were still sorting out who was going to be the lead agency and what had gone into the grant application [because] the people who then had to deliver the project [hadn’t been] involved in writing it. And [there was] the extra complicating step of Sunbury Community Health and Cobaw Community Health merging... But once we understood what the needs were and we got [the project coordinator] on board, we were then able to hit the ground running.”
(Project lead, focus group)

The significant support for and investment in the project by key leadership figures in the Macedon community health sector was central to the project’s continuation throughout this tumultuous period:

“I think from a governance perspective, one of the real strengths was... the level at which senior leaders from across the organisation were owning and driving the project... the CEO of Cobaw Community Health..., [the previous] Sunbury and Cobaw Community Health general manager, and... the chief executive of the [CVPPH], all had a great investment in the project and were very supportive of it. And it just helped grease the wheels of what was a clunky period for the project.”
(SCCH executive, focus group)

Part of this commitment stemmed from the connections that leadership figures and project staff have to the Macedon Ranges community, and thus the personal investment they have in creating positive change:

"I've got skin in the game. I've got a little boy, I've got a little girl and I want to see them grow up in a world that's different to the one that we're in currently... Earlier you asked what contributed to the success, I think for a lot of the people who have committed to this work, it's because of those very personal ties in this community, that's kept them going."

(Project coordinator, focus group)

Despite their commitment to the work, the project team still faced reduced timelines and ambiguity surrounding roles, responsibilities and objectives as a result of these initial complications and delays. On reflection, the project coordinator noted that "clearer lines of communication and [the] setting of expectations at the very beginning" would have helped to alleviate these logistical challenges. Funding collaborative community projects may involve risks related to the ever-changing landscape of local government and health promotion. However, engaging a local workforce who have a personal investment in the wellbeing of their community may help to ensure the longevity of a project over time and in the face of adversity. As is corroborated by another recent HPMG evaluation report (Ralph et al. 2022), community partnerships should also seek to establish standardised processes and efficient communication channels across organisations as early as possible, to help overcome potential logistical challenges.

- **The working group was effectively formed, highly invested in the work and central to the project's success and eventual expansion**

The working group was central to the project's success, having offered crucial insights into the many townships across the Macedon Ranges and actively promoted the project's activities through their personal and professional networks. When forming the working group, the project's leadership made a concerted effort to bring together individuals who represented and/or had experience working within the broad range of communities across the Macedon Ranges. This meant not only seeking representation for the various townships, but also the subgroups within those townships including, for example, young people, religious communities and men from male-dominated workplaces such as council workers and tradesmen. This calculated foundational work gave the project team access to a wealth of knowledge about the realities of men's lives in the Macedon Ranges, as well as access to a range of crucial social networks:

"Macedon Ranges is made up of lots of small towns, and I think we managed to hit on a couple of people who are really well connected in their communities... the CEO of Youth Live4Life the suicide prevention charity, he's a Dad [and] a high profile person working in the community... we had [a] Reverend from Woodend who is quite well connected, similarly with [the CEO of the PCP], just lots of strong, personal and professional networks in the area that benefited the project."

(Project lead, focus group)

"[We were] able to draw on the collective knowledge of the people from those partner organisations... the voice of people directly impacted by mental health and wellbeing, the voice of young people, the voice of people who have been in charge of large not-for-profit organisations for a long time, the voice of people who are well connected across the Macedon Ranges Shire."

(SCCH Executive, focus group)

Crucially, the working group was not simply a sounding board or source of ideas and guidance. Rather they were meaningfully included in the project's design and in decision-making processes:

"I always felt very included in decision-making or information sharing. I felt like I was always listened to, always happy to take either my professional experience (the work that I do here at Macedon Ranges Health) but also my personal experience, living as a resident of Macedon Ranges."

(Working group member, focus group)

The working group's extensive networks were also central to the effective dissemination of the project's promotional materials. This translated into consistently well-attended one-off community events, and a high level of interest and attendance at both pilot programs (see section 3.2). In addition to this, the working group members played a key role in connecting the project team with hard-to-reach groups of men, with whom they were able to run further programs:

"We thought it'd be a good idea to have an event that hit a male-dominated workplace and [a working group member from] council was able to introduce us to the team leaders at the council Depot, which is mostly sort of the road crews and things like that... and we were able to facilitate a session with Tomorrow Man for that workforce... Similarly [a working group member from the Gisborne Men's Shed] was able to get the Men's Shed to cook the tradies barbecue lunch, and because we had [a working group member] from HALT, they were able to come and deliver a men's health talk at that event... Having everyone at the table meant we could organise those things and have those inroads into organisations and groups."

(Project lead, focus group)

As is apparent here and across the remainder of this report, the working group was pivotal to the project's success and eventual expansion. Alongside the importance of building good partnerships between formally engaged organisations, creating effective working groups can immensely expand a project's knowledge base and networks. This is a key learning that one working group member intends to take into their own workplace:

"I'll be taking that forward and maybe design my own working groups for any activities [Macedon Ranges Health] do, because it really is strength in numbers for something like this, and finding out not only what the [community's] needs are, but local contacts and getting people involved. I think that was probably the biggest learning out of this that I've taken."

(Working group member, focus group)

The project team benefited immensely from the working group's existing knowledge about and networks within Macedon Ranges communities. However, in addition to this, working group members actively engaged in conversations with their networks to inform the design, promotion and implementation of the project:

"When we were trying to understand where to pitch our pilots... [a working group member] took it upon himself to interview several men in his own personal networks about, you know, 'what would be the messages that would hook you? What would turn you off? Why would you participate in this?'"

(Project lead, focus group)

Two key learnings emerged from this informal community engagement. First, that the recent uptick in men's health promotion can be overwhelming for men, but "the thing that would most make them want to look at something is if a mate recommended it" (Working group member, focus group). This information then informed the dissemination strategy, as event attendees were encouraged to promote the program within their friendship circles. The second and most crucial learning was that men may be more motivated to participate in the program if it focuses on how they can help *others*, rather than themselves:

"If you said, 'come along to a session that's going to help you be a better man, or you improve your own mental health', they wouldn't be as likely to do it as if it was like, 'here's something that'll help you be a better mate', or 'here's something that'll help you be a better parent'. So I think that bit of advice was good, because it got us thinking about that hook."
(Project lead, focus group)

According to the project lead, these insights were central to the design of the pilot programs, which, as noted above, focused on engaging and educating parents and mentors of boys and men.

"Having those discussions with the benefit of our working group having actually spoken to people in the community meant we shaped the pilots into pretty successful audiences. In choosing parents of teenage boys, we got 150 parents sign up, which was more than we ever thought we would engage. I think it was really because of some of that feedback... the working group were able to assist us with testing messages and drawing on their personal connections, and then also using their networks to promote them, too."
(Project lead, focus group)

The informal insights gathered by the working group align well with literature surrounding men's hesitancy to seek help for themselves (Johnson et al. 2012; Yousaf, Grunfield and Hunter 2015; Sagar-Ouriaghli et al. 2019), and their increasing propensity to provide not only practical, but emotional support to their friends (Ralph and Roberts 2020). From an evaluation standpoint, this speaks to the immense benefits of: 1) engaging a group of passionate community members who are invested in the success of the program and take initiative to enhance it when possible, and 2) seeking out place-based insights to inform the design, dissemination and implementation of community projects.



- **The project team drew on SCCH’s existing internal resources to broaden their reach in the community and support the increased workload of the project when opportunities for expansion arose.**

The project team was able to draw on a range of SCCH’s internal resources to enhance project delivery and support its eventual expansion. Corresponding with the findings in Ralph et al. (2022), the project team benefited most from their internal communications team:

As well as drawing on existing resources, the project team used some of the Human Code program budget to ensure they had a young person in their working group:

“Our comms coordinator was really, really helpful. She has very strong and supportive relationships with our local media publications, and so we really did manage to get quite a lot of media coverage in support of this project. It was definitely one of the enablers in helping us get the good response we did.”

(Project lead, focus group)

“We also did put some program spend from the Human Code budget towards paying a youth rep to sit on our working group. That was a way where we drew upon our resources to think, ‘well, it’s really important that we’re listening to young people, as well as people of other ages and demographics in the community’.”

(Project lead, focus group)

While relatively nominal, in the sense that it was one young person’s voice, this approach aligns with the increasing understanding of the importance of youth engagement, i.e. ‘any resource, activity, and process within organisations and communities where young people are empowered to share their contributions to influence decisions in a respectful and inclusive environment’ (Aston and Tse 2022). VicHealth’s recent [Youth Engagement Evaluation Framework](#) provides further valuable insights on best principles and practices regarding how resources can be allocated to maximise accessibility for young people to have the opportunity to participate in and contribute to efforts to improve programs and/or policies that are relevant to their lives.

Midway through the delivery of the project, an opportunity arose for the partnership to develop a broader campaign in the region (detailed further in section 3.3). To support this expansion, the project team drew on their program budget, as well as the SCCH’s Building Healthier Communities budget, to hire a contractor:

“When the Cut the Silence campaign developed, our services all rallied around to give support to that campaign. We again used some of our human code budget or some of our own resources to employ a contractor to help deliver that work... We did a lot of work around Men’s Health Week to get that work out, so we did employ a contractor for a short time.”

(Project lead, focus group)

By flexibly drawing on their existing resources and budgets, the partnership was able to maximise their reach in the Macedon Ranges community, and support the expansion of the project over time. Future partnerships should be prepared to be agile in the use of their existing resources and, if opportunities present to expand their work, be prepared to recruit or outsource extra labour where necessary.

- **Seizing on opportunities to maximise impact increased the reach of the project, but ‘scope creep’ put strains on the staff resourcing.**

As above, despite careful project planning that linked the various phases of the broader initiative, a series of challenges (including structural changes that led to a delay in refinement of the project plan and the appointment of the project co-ordinator) disrupted the timeline and coherence. These changes meant that by the time the project coordinator was employed, the project was close to the end of its first year of funding. Ultimately, with the project co-ordinator funded to work two days a week, this made it difficult to effectively manage the project workload:

“I’d probably say the biggest challenge was, I just don’t think two days a week was enough staffing capacity for [the project coordinator] role. She’s done an absolutely amazing job with what she’s achieved in this project, but on two days a week, it was always going to be a big ask. And there were some periods where she was really stretched and stressed and probably working more hours than she should have been.”
(Project lead, focus group)

As a result, the project lead was often required to manage any workload overflow, and allocate more time and energy to the project than was originally planned:

“[The project lead] put in much more [time] than what we had expected or what we thought would’ve been required. But certainly there was no hesitation in doing so. So with two days a week, there were quite a lot of times that emails couldn’t be responded to and things couldn’t be organised while I was in my other role. And [the project lead] just stepped in to do it. So I think that was something that I suppose is testament to the culture, but also so much of the focus being ‘let’s just get in there and let’s just get it done’.”
(Project coordinator, focus group)

This dynamic was also noted as a key challenge in Ralph et al. (2022). While drawing on internal resources and managing overflows proved to be an effective solution to this challenge, both funders and community organisations should be aware of and account for the immense workload that these types of community projects can create. In the case of the Human Code project, the key staff’s passion to ensure impact resulted in numerous opportunities being taken up beyond the initial plan of developing the two pilot initiatives. This strategic and personal flexibility is noted as a factor in the success of the project, but also illustrates how ‘scope creep’ and additions to initial plans have a cost that is often borne by individuals as well as organisations. Future partnerships can learn from the experiences documented here and in other evaluations of healthier masculinity approaches (Elliott et al. 2022; Ralph et al. 2022): project ambitions should from the outset be manageable and realistic within the constraints of the allocated resourcing, but plans can and often need to change in this space. Effectively responding to these changes requires a high degree of flexibility but should be driven by carefully measured decision making.

- **Collaborating with external organisations to develop education programs requires clear expectations and processes.**

Another key challenge noted by the project team related to the development of the pilot programs. As noted above, two external organisations were recruited to collaborate with the project team and develop an innovative, place-based educational program. In one case, this process ran smoothly and the project team did not face any major challenges. In the other case, there were some issues relating to communication and meeting deadlines:

As noted in Ralph et al. 2022, differences in organisational cultures and structures can create tensions and delays in projects run by a partnership. As well as developing clear roles, responsibilities and lines of communication within project teams and community partnerships, it is crucial to establish similar expectations and processes whenever collaborating across organisations:

"We'd have meetings online and there were actions that were agreed upon, and we took there to be an amount of good faith that those actions would be undertaken, but sometimes they weren't necessarily remembered or there was maybe miscommunication or it hadn't been noted. So we certainly faced a fair number of challenges in having to follow things up and to chase things up, which took a lot of our time – time that we didn't really have."

(Project coordinator, focus group)

"I think the learning was not to make the assumption that it was always going to go smoothly. And just to be sure every time we had a meeting, what needed to be agreed upon, and then to follow that up with minutes... Ultimately we got there in the end, we were exceedingly happy with both programs, but it could have gone a little bit smoother."

(Project coordinator, focus group)

During the working group meetings, the project coordinator would create a live Google Doc that all attendees could access and contribute to in real time. This technique may be useful for other community partnerships and projects moving forward, as it might encourage collaboration in shared responsibility for the administrative aspects of a project, as well as the substantive elements.

"On top of developing minutes for the meetings, [the project coordinator] would develop a live Google doc that all working group members could fill in and she would really prompt people, 'jump in there and put different clubs that you know, different networks that you're part of, and if you can put a contact name there', so it was... using an online tool to proactively encourage the working group to do a bit of work outside the meetings, but setting that up and making it easy for them."

(Project lead, focus group)

3.2 Reach and impact of the partnership activities

- **The one-off events had significant reach and were an effective means of promoting and recruiting for the pilot programs**

The table below details the programs and events that were run as part of Phase 2 of the Human Code project, as well as attendance at each event. The consistently high level of attendance at each event indicates both community preparedness for these types of programs, and the effectiveness of the project team's promotional work. In total, the project reached over 470 community members, and had a total of 63 local adults complete a full 6-week pilot program for parents or mentors. Importantly, these participants and attendees were from a range of towns and groups in the community:

There was a particularly high level of interest in the parenting pilot, which had 147 registrations, and despite significant dropout across the 6 weeks, 48 community members completed the program. Attendance at these pilot programs is particularly impressive given they were largely delivered online, which in previous programs has proven to be a major barrier to participation (Elliott et al. 2022). Project workers were, indeed, surprised by the high levels of participation:

"We reached the parents, we reached the mentors, we reached barbers and got them to sign up as champions of the Cut the Silence program, we reached a broad range of people through the Cut the Silence campaign, we reached the tradies through the tradie barbeque, the male-dominated workplace, the sporting clubs... we had the libraries running the Cut the Silence videos during men's health week, we hit a lot of community touch points with the project."

(Project lead, focus group)

"I was really interested to see how much this work was needed in the community, and is still needed in the community. Not just from the initial registrations, but from the continued engagement while we ran the pilots. It was always a big unknown, especially with one of them being fully online, the other one, mostly being online, and at the end of a couple of years of people having zoom fatigue – six weeks, two hours a night is a lot to ask. But the engagement and the commitment was certainly there."

(Project coordinator, focus group)

As noted above, this success was due in part to the foundational work that was carried out to determine the best target demographic:

"I think that reinforces that it was a good target audience that we landed on. And that was part of that work and that thinking that we did with the working group about: what would motivate people to participate? I think because parents are worried about their teenage boys and because mentors are motivated to be good role models for the young men they mentor, that's what kept people coming."

(Project lead, focus group)



Table 1: Event information and attendance

Event	Session date	Attendance
Unpacking the Man Box – Jesuit Social Services Online	21st Sept 2021	22
A night with the folks – Tomorrow Man Online	1st March 2022	7
Cut the Silence (CTS) Launch Event Macedon Railway Hotel	13th Jun 2022	250 (sold out event)
Middy’s Tradies Barbecue – CTS promotion Middy’s Electrical Gisborne	14th Jun 2022	24*
Kyneton Community Lunch – CTS promotion Kyneton Community House	14th Jun 2022	36
More than the game – Tomorrow Man Gisborne Cricket Club	15th Jun 2022	18
A day with the blokes – Tomorrow Man Macedon Ranges Shire Council Depot	15th Jun 2022	25
Raising Teenage Boys Pilot – Tomorrow Man Online	8th March – 26th April 2022	Registrations: 147 Week 1: 102 Week 6: 48
Mentoring Boys Pilot – Man Cave Academy Online	2nd May – 6th Jun 2022	Registrations: 26 Week 1: 16 Week 6: 15
Total attendance at programs and events		500**

* Attendance data was not formally recorded for this activity as it was a casual community outreach event, this is an estimate provided by the project team.

** This figure represents the sum of the total attendees at all events, not the overall number of community members that took part in the project events. Individual community members may have attended multiple events.

In addition to high attendance, the evaluation data suggests that in the immediate term, the events were effective at engaging and educating the community members. As per the pre- and post-workshop polling data summarised below (Table 2), between 65–93% of attendees self-reported that their ‘awareness of the impact of gender stereotypes on boys and men and the people they live and work with’ had improved as a result of the session they attended. Following each event, the vast majority of participants rated their awareness as Very Good or Excellent. However, due to reduced timelines the evaluation team was unable to collect follow-up data to measure whether this newly acquired knowledge was maintained in the long term, or had a meaningful impact on the attendees behaviour. As noted in the [VicHealth Masculinities and Health Scoping Review](#) (Ralph et al. 2020), increasing awareness of gender inequality does not necessarily translate into support for challenging gender inequality. Given the relationship between raising awareness, changing gender attitudes and behaviour change is unclear and should not be assumed, building in opportunities to measure how programs bring about both attitudinal and behavioural change – seen as discrete categories – over the medium to longer term is a worthy endeavour.

Table 2: Summary of pre- and post-workshop data

Event	% Change	Stage	Poor – Average	Good	Very Good – Excellent
Unpacking the Man Box – Jesuit Social Servicess Attendees: 22 Survey responses: 20	65%	Pre-event	30%	50%	20%
		Post-event	5%	25%	70%
More than the game – Tomorrow Man Attendees: 18 Survey responses: 15	93.33%	Pre-event	46.67%	46.67%	6.66%
		Post-event	6.67%	13.33%	80%
A night with the blokes – Tomorrow Man Attendees: 25 Survey responses: 24	66.67%	Pre-event	29.17%	29.17%	41.66%
		Post-event	4.17%	16.67%	79.16%
Parenting Boys Pilot – Tomorrow Man Attendees: 48 attended final session Survey responses: 42	76.19%	Pre-event	40.48%	40.48%	19.04%
		Post-event	2.38%	14.29%	83.33%
Mentoring Boys Pilot – Man Cave Academy Attendees: 16 Survey responses: 16	75%	Pre-event	31.25%	37.5%	31.25%
		Post-event	0%	6.25%	93.75%

* Survey data was not collected for the Middy's Tradie event as it was a casual community outreach event.

The pilot programs

Though it was not possible to collect long term data for these pilot programs, several data points (detailed further below) support the contention that running multiple sessions over a longer period of time is a more effective format for gender transformative programmes than one-off sessions (Ralph et al. 2020; Elliott et al. 2022). Across the 6 weeks, the facilitators in each program were able to gradually build the participants' knowledge base, and then begin to integrate practical skills to use in their interactions with boys and men. The weekly format allowed time between sessions for participants to reflect on and process this content and begin to apply their learnings. Importantly, too, running the program over a longer time period facilitated the development of connections between participants and in turn promoted a deeper level of vulnerability within the sessions.

For the project coordinator, the connections developed and stories shared between participants in the pilot programs was the 'most significant change' she observed from the project:

"For both the pilots, I logged in for those 12 weeks of those 12 sessions [in total], and it was such a privilege to see some of the changes and to hear some of the stories that were shared... [one of the mentoring pilot participants also attended] one of the tomorrow man sessions that we held during men's health week, and his wife and his son were there. And it was just this palpable feeling in that room where it just opened up and changed things for them. And I had a tear in my eye because it was just realising that this work – as much as you get the evaluation done and you have those stats and the figures and things – it has an impact on real life people."
(Project coordinator, focus group)

The project lead attributed this to the facilitators that were recruited for the project:

"I think that speaks to the skillset of the facilitators. Both Tomorrow Man and Man Cave Academy are real experts, and from all accounts, very engaging in what they do and they create a space where people feel comfortable to share and also then allow some of that change to happen. So I think, being able to engage the expertise that we did was definitely an enabler or a strength of the project."

(Project lead, focus group)

Below we offer the key findings from the evaluation data collected for each pilot program.

Pilot Program 1: Raising Teenage Boys in the Macedon Ranges – Tomorrow Man

Registration for and attendance at the Raising Teenage Boys (RTB) pilot far outweighed the project team's initial target of 20 participants. A total of 147 parents registered for the event, 102 attended the first session, and 48 completed the full 6-week program. For some participants, the size of the group was the reason they decided not to continue the program. When asked what their main learning from the week 1 workshop was, one participant said:

"Nothing. Way too large a group. Didn't feel psychologically safe. I wish you luck but won't be attending any more. Great idea though."

(Participant, Week 1 survey)

For others, this was a heartening aspect of the experience. Answering the same question, another participant said:

"That you are not in this alone. There are a lot of us concerned about our teenage boys and often with similar issues... While a lot of people attended it felt like all who contributed were coming from an open, honest and non-judgemental space. Looking forward to what is to come in the next few weeks."

(Participant, Week 1 survey)

Despite the project team's perception that men in the Macedon Ranges would be more likely to engage in a program if it is to help others (see section 3.1), a vast majority of registrations and attendees were women; only 21 of the 147 initial registrations were men and only 7 out of approximately 48 participants who completed (all or most of) the RTB program were men. This dramatically unequal gendered take up is consistent with wider research that documents father participation in a range of parenting interventions, including child welfare services, childhood mental health disorders and general psychoeducation programs (Panter-Brick et al. 2014). Given research also shows that parenting program effectiveness is optimised by the engagement of both parents, future programs might consider gender sensitive approaches to engagement. For example, Lechowicz et al. (2019) suggests a broad six part strategy: engaging the parenting team, avoiding a father deficit model, increasing father awareness of parenting interventions, ensuring father-inclusive program content and delivery, increasing organisational support for father-inclusive practice, and increasing professional father engagement training.

Nonetheless, according to survey data detailed in Table 3, participants indicated that the program effectively equipped them with the tools and strategies to challenge harmful masculine stereotypes and feel more confident raising and connecting with their teenage sons. Across the 6 weeks, the participants began to feel increasingly confident in their ability to raise their sons, with the group's average score on a self-reported confidence measure increasing from 6.7 to 8.7 out of 10. The steep increase in positive survey responses following the Week 1 workshop may be attributed, at least in part, to the drop out of participants who did not find the program useful. Nonetheless, by the end of the program 100% of participants who completed the survey felt better prepared to connect with their teenage sons.

"I've learned the importance of communication, and a number of techniques to enable better communication between us. I've also got more insight into what it means to be a teenage boy now compared to how it was when I was a teenager."
(Participant, Week 6 survey)

As illustrated by the week-specific survey data, the Week 3 and Week 6 workshops were the most effective, as participants felt most confident to enact their learnings after these sessions, with scores of 8.2/10 and 8.6/10, respectively. However, in their qualitative feedback, the participants highlighted the value of the entire 6-week program:

"I think it is the package, I can't identify just one [that was most useful]"
(Participant, Week 6 survey)

"Every workshop provided something key that I can use with my teen."
(Participant, Week 6 survey)



Table 3: Summary of quantitative survey data

General questions		Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
On a scale of 1 to 10 how valuable was this workshop in impacting/improving your confidence in raising teenage boys?		6.7/10	6.8/10	7.8/10	7.7/10	8.5/10	8.7/10
Do you now feel better prepared to connect with your teenager(s) after this workshop?	Yes	54.17%*	75%*	93.75%	88%	100%	100%
	No	50%	33.33%	6.25%	12%	0%	0%

* One participant responded with both yes and no to this question

Questions relating to week-specific content:

Week 1: Has this workshop changed your understanding of the impact of stereotypes and expectations on teenagers in today's society?	Yes	54.17%*
	No	45.83%
Week 2: After this workshop on a scale of 1 to 10 rate your awareness of your personal relationship with masculine stereotypes?		7.4/10
On a scale of 1 to 10 how valuable was this workshop in impacting/improving your confidence in raising teenage boys?		6.8/10
Week 3: After this workshop on a scale of 1 to 10 how confident do you feel to challenge gender stereotypes?		8.2/10
Week 4: After this workshop on a scale of 1 to 10 how confident do you feel to have tough conversations with your teenager?		7.7/10
Week 5: No content specific question was asked.		
Week 6: On a scale of 1 to 10 how confident do you feel in your ability to articulate to your teenager what they mean to you?		8.6/10

- **The RTB pilot effectively catered to participants with a range of existing knowledge levels and provided useful practical tools**

The pilot began with relatively basic, foundational information about gender stereotypes and slowly built participants' knowledge over time. For most attendees, the foundational content on gender stereotypes was highly useful:

"I think it opened my eyes up to stereotypes... I don't feel like I had ever really thought about them until we talked about them in the first session"
(Participant, Week 6 survey)

"I think I need to embrace their differences more, rather than me being fearful of them being bullied for not being the 'norm'."
(Participant, Week 1 survey)

However, for a handful of participants, it was not new information:

"I was pretty aware of this already I thought so it didn't increase it a lot."
(Participant, Week 6 survey)

"I have studied social sciences, so this was familiar territory."
(Participant, Week 6 survey)

Nonetheless, each week the content became more advanced, and participants found the workshops increasingly useful as illustrated by the abovementioned survey data. Once they had provided a basic knowledge base, the facilitators began to offer participants some key techniques and tools for integrating their learnings into parenting practices:

"The workshops put ducks in a row. I know the stuff but feel the order of subjects are helpful to chip away at the teenager's attitudes"
(Participant, Week 3 survey)

"[I feel] ready to tackle the harder conversations. Understanding why they need to occur and how to approach them with empathy and purpose."
(Participant, Week 5 survey)

"I really appreciate the chance to contemplate my perceptions of stereotypes, and values, and relate them to raising my son, and also the communication strategies, particularly 'holding the space'."
(Participant, Week 3 survey)

"Week 5 we talked quite a bit about sex and how to best talk to our teen. One person mentioned taking baby steps through small conversations rather than trying to do the big 'chat'. I found this notion liberating and it helped me to introduce the topic of sex without feeling that I needed to lay it all on the line at once. This stepped approach feels much more achievable for both me and my teen."
(Participant, Week 5 survey)

Catering to multiple levels of existing knowledge at any one time is a consistent challenge for public health education programs (Elliott et al. 2022). As illustrated by these excerpts as well as the observations, the RTB facilitators effectively balanced conceptual content with practical tools in order to gradually build their participants' knowledge and confidence. However, to help reduce levels of dropout in the initial weeks, future initiatives could potentially consider trialling knowledge-tiered entry. This might, for example, include some foundational knowledge building sessions

aimed at those who self-identify as having limited confidence or understanding of the content, after which such beginners might join sessions aimed at intermediate and higher knowledge participants. In the absence of a knowledge-tiered approach, the current evaluation indicates that it may be useful to inform all participants in advance that – in order to cater to multiple levels of knowledge – the program starts with foundational knowledge and gradually becomes more complex and/or practically oriented.

- **Enabling parents to connect and share with other parents was highly beneficial**

Alongside the usefulness of program content, the participants emphasised the benefits of connecting with other parents and having space to be vulnerable about the difficulties they face with their teenage children:

“Each week through break out rooms, group exercises and people sharing their experiences has shown me that I am not alone and there are ways to navigate through these challenges.”
(Participant, Week 6 survey)

“Knowing that I am not the only one with struggles and listening to everyone’s stories and hearing all the ideas and tools to use being bounced around within the group.”
(Participant, Week 6 survey)

These responses are consistent with a variety of studies on parental programs, which illustrate the value of parents coming to realise that the situation they face with their own children is a common experience (e.g. Butler et al. 2020, Garcia et al. 2018, Rafferty & Beck 2020, Shorey et al. 2018). This value includes feeling not alone, allowing parents to put their own issues into perspective, an ability to learn from the experience of others, and stimulating higher levels of pro social support and empathy (Shorey et al. 2018).



- **Weekly homework tasks provided opportunities for participants to put learnings into practice**

Each week the facilitators would set homework tasks for the participants to complete ahead of the next session. These included, for example, doing something out of the ordinary with their son(s), asking their son about gender stereotypes, or researching one of their son's interests. Often participants did not complete the tasks, with between 8 and 17 participants confirming that they had undertaken the homework task on any given week of the program. However, those who did complete the allocated tasks reflected on their usefulness:

"I like having tasks between sessions as it fosters new questions or ways of thinking that are outside of the norm."
(Participant, Week 3 survey)

"Great learning opportunities to be able to share, practice and learn how to create connections with my boys"
(Participant, Week 3 survey)

"The homework gives practical application to the skills we are learning. A chance to put things into practice, reflect and share ideas as a group."
(Participant, Week 4 survey)

Even when participants were unable to complete the task, it encouraged them to reflect on techniques and opportunities to connect with their children:

"I sadly didn't make the time to research the topic my son is obsessed with, then tonight there was a perfect opportunity to connect with him and I hadn't done the research! Learnt a valuable lesson from that!"
(Participant, Week 5 survey)

Importantly, participants who completed the tasks often noted that they were effective at fostering connection:

"My son seemed pleasantly surprised when I suggested we go & 'shoot hoops' together after school."
(Participant, Week 5 survey)

"Researching a topic my teen is passionate about but I know nothing about was fantastic. He was shocked when I asked him to explain a few things about Minecraft to me, but then talked about it for almost an hour. He now feels comfortable telling me about all the games he plays. I feel like we now have better and more open conversations. I hope this will lead him being comfortable in talking about more serious topics."
(Participant, Week 5 survey)

Pilot Program 2: Mentoring Teenage Boys in the Macedon Ranges – Man Cave Academy

The Mentoring Teenage Boys (MTB) pilot aimed to recruit 12–15 participants. Consistent with a general trend in the research literature, recruitment to a mentoring program proved difficult (Van Dam et al. 2021). This appears to be an especially common experience for programs looking for men to be mentors (Smith et al. 2019). Initially, the program garnered interest from around 14 individuals, though four were women and were thus deemed ineligible to participate. To increase uptake, the project team offered several key local organisations a financial incentive to encourage their volunteers or employees to participate in the program:

“We ended up having to offer an incentive to clubs (\$500) if they sent along 2 or more members to attend the program. This was taken up by Gisborne Cricket Club, Gisborne Men’s Shed, [Kidzflip] and Macedon Woodend Scouts Group. We also offered to pay a number of male casual youth workers from Council to attend.”

(Project coordinator, general correspondence)

As noted here, a total of four organisations received the \$500 incentive payment (intended to fund further mentoring initiatives for boys and young men within the organisation), and each sent two representatives to the program. The stipulation that organisations send at least two representatives was based on the rationale that culture change is most effective when it is supported by two or more people within an organisation or setting. A further three youth representatives were paid \$30 per hour (\$60 per session) to attend, as the project team wanted to provide young, casually-employed youth workers with a funded professional development opportunity, which they often miss out on. Through this initiative, the project team recruited 11 participants at a cost of \$2,840. To gauge whether this financial incentive factored into the participants’ decision to register for the program, the project team sent out a short survey and 2 participants responded. Though one participant said they would have signed up regardless of the monetary incentive, the other said that it did factor into their decision. However, they added:

“Knowing what I do now, I would certainly have signed up for the program for free, and will be recommending it to others as well.”



As noted above, a total of 16 men took part in the MTB program. The participants came from a range of organisations, and represented a range of age groups (see Figure 1 and 2).

Likely due in part to the incentive initiative, the program achieved almost 100% retention as all 16 participants were in attendance for the majority of the full 6-week program. In addition to this, the pre- and post-polling data demonstrates that the percentage of participants who rated their 'awareness of the impact of gender stereotypes on boys and men and the people they live and work with' as Very Good or Excellent increased from 31.25% to 93.75% – the highest level across the project. Though the facilitators did not administer an evaluative survey weekly, the qualitative data collected in Week 6 offers some important insights into the participants' experience of the program, what worked, and what could be improved.

Figure 1: MTB participants' occupation or volunteer position

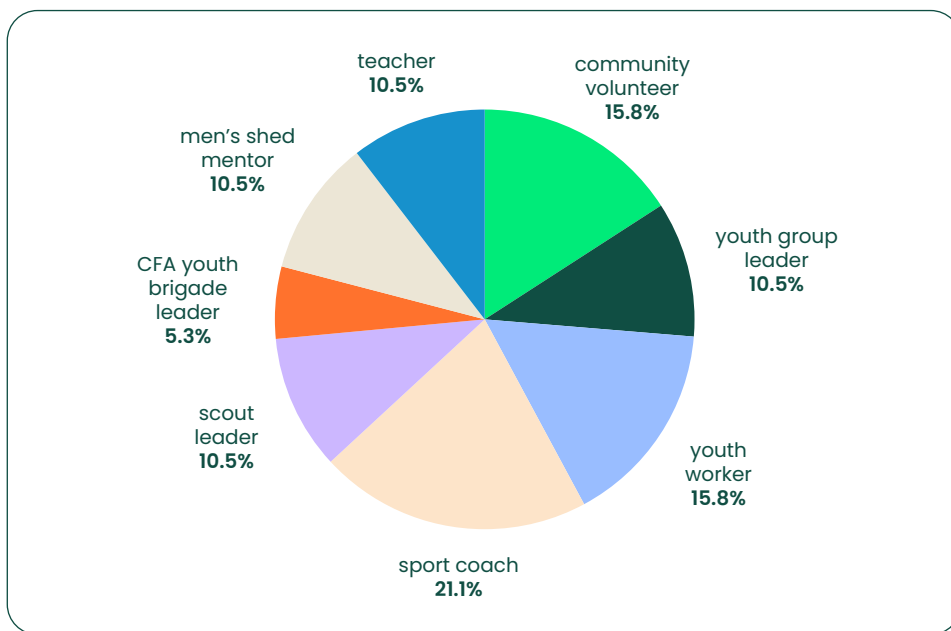
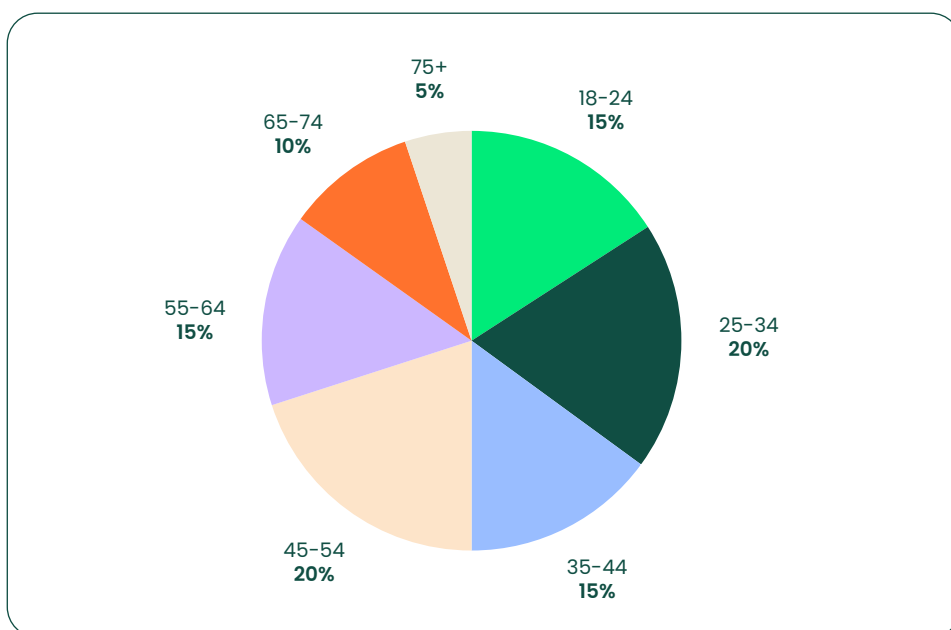


Figure 2: MTB participants' age



- **The MTB pilot effectively catered to participants with a range of existing levels of knowledge**

As per the pre-polling data, the MTB participants had a broad range of existing knowledge with an almost even split between poor/good, average and very good/excellent. For some participants, the biggest impact of the program came from the more basic content on harmful masculine stereotypes:

Interestingly, 31.25% of participants rated their knowledge about harmful masculine stereotypes as either Very Good or Excellent prior to the program. Yet even those with high levels of knowledge found the content to be highly useful:

“Through our conversations, I became aware that characteristics like vulnerability, which I thought negative or at least not ‘manly’, were a strength to be developed. I saw how other men opened up to boys and other men and this helped them connect.”
(Participant, post-pilot survey)

“I think that I had a reasonable understanding of the impact of gender stereotypes on men and boys prior to the workshops but the workshops have been really useful in providing tools to work through that.”
(Participant, post-pilot survey)



“As someone that already had what I would consider a broad understanding of gender stereotypes and their impacts, this workshop truly took those elements I understood and both built upon them as well as constructed further context. By providing the information within a group context, verbally and through relatable ‘un-academic’ language we were able to deeply connect with what are very human issues. The delivery of this program was highly commendable and I’d recommend it to any man who wishes to learn more about the issues that come with manhood.”
(Participant, post-pilot survey)

This post-survey data suggests the program effectively communicated foundational content for participants with lower levels of existing knowledge, while also consolidating and building upon the existing knowledge of other participants. As noted by a participant, “There was a natural progression of ideas and introduced tools that made the whole process a very solid learning experience.”

- **The program brought together a diverse mix of participants who mentor boys, which helped to create instances of connection and empathy**

As with the RTB pilot, the MTB participants emphasised the benefits of connecting with like-minded men in their community:

“The connections made with the people sharing their stories – they’re inspiring me to try harder in all my relationships”
(Participant, post-pilot survey)

“Getting to meet and hang out with a bunch of guys with a demonstrated commitment to young men in the Macedon Ranges, and a desire to make a difference, has been inspiring.”
(Participant, post-pilot survey)

In particular, the participants noted the value of bringing together men with diverse experiences and areas of expertise:

"Hearing the combined wisdom and experience of the group, from the very articulate youngsters all the way up to the eldest members. Truly amazing experience."

(Participant, post-pilot survey)

"By having a real mix of men in the group, I heard stories about how other men moved from boyhood to manhood and how they struggled with meeting expectations of being a "man". Just like me! I reflected on my struggles with the same stages of my life and the process helped me develop my story. I can use this to be more empathetic when relating to the boys and young men that I am involved with."

(Participant, post-pilot survey)

As well as sharing knowledge and creating networks, the facilitators effectively created space for the participants to be vulnerable about their own experiences as men, and to discuss the difficulties they face in their work with teenage boys. In one session, a participant opened up about their experience as the father of a child with severe disability, which led another to share that his young son has a terminal illness, and finally the facilitator discussed his own experience with miscarriage. Through these conversations, the participants developed deep connections:

"The community that was fostered over these sessions and the capacity to share without judgement."

(Participant, post-pilot survey)

"The value of transparency and authenticity. There is way too much masking that goes on in male-to-male relationships and the sense of connectedness that emerged when we were prepared to be vulnerable and open with each other was really powerful."

(Participant, post-pilot survey)

This aspect of the program was challenging to some men, but proved to be an important feature of their learnings.

"The most challenging thing for me was opening up. I am not used to speaking up so much about my feelings and telling stories about my life and my interactions."

(Participant, post-pilot survey)

"Sharing with a group is not something that comes naturally to me. Often I felt the kinds of things I could share were just too insignificant compared to some of the truly eye opening stories from other members of the group. Their openness was amazing and as I say, inspiring."

(Participant, post-pilot survey)

- **Participants valued the practice of checking-in, but felt that it often occupied too much of the allotted time in the workshops.**

Check-in circles are a key technique used by The Man Cave, and was thus a central aspect of the Man Cave Academy's MTB program. Each session began with a check-in, and ended with a check-out. As noted above, this process helped to normalise vulnerability and in turn create deep connections between participants. However, as there were 16 participants, the process often occupied 30-45 minutes of each 2 hour session. Some participants noted that, while useful at first, this left less time for structured content:

"Maybe there was a bit [too] much time spent on check ins and general chat. Would have liked a bit more time spent on content."
(Participant, post-pilot survey)

"Perhaps being a bit more prescriptive of the expected content with checking in so there is a bit more time for lesson content."
(Participant, post-pilot survey)

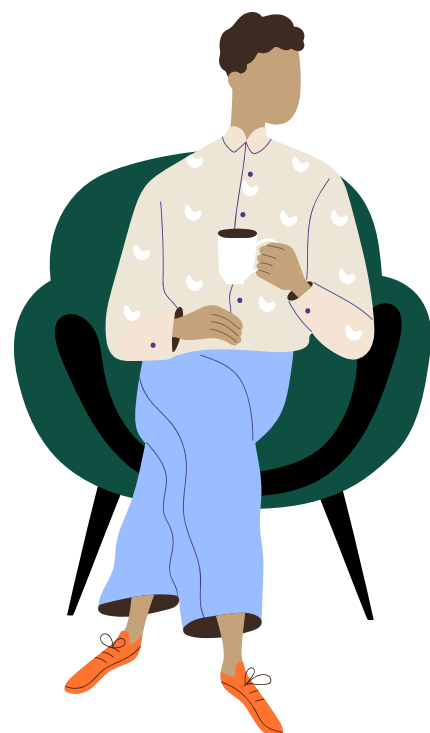
"What I felt was missing was a more clear outline of how the class worked. It seemed, especially early on, that it was really open ended and unstructured. Just a check in, a topic for the night, and check out. I always thought early on that we were getting to know each other and the real class was going to start at the next session. This might also have been why it worked. Because it was so open, it gave us room to talk more and not be talked to."
(Participant, post-pilot survey)

Another participant noted that there could have been more practical tips included in the program:

"Some more practical guidance/tips on ways to bring the concepts to life."
(Participant, post-pilot survey)

While creating networks and connections between mentors in the Macedon Ranges is a highly useful and positive outcome, gender-transformative programs should balance this with substantive content and practical strategies to produce more long-term change. Nonetheless, the soft skills of effective listening and practising vulnerability do appear to improve participants' relationships with their mentees in subtle, everyday ways:

"[I'm] still working on how to implement what I learned into our Scouts program. I know one thing, my interactions with the Scouts and my friends and family have already changed because I feel like I am taking more time and being more real, less distracted when I interact with them. I know this makes me a better mentor already."
(Participant, post-pilot survey)



- **It cannot be assumed that would-be mentors of men and boys are equipped to engage in gender transformative work that effectively challenges outdated stereotypes.**

Men engaged as mentors for the purpose of cultivating positive masculinities are often not offered formal training before starting their role (Smith et al. 2018). The data presented thus far underscores the importance of training mentors, not simply in the technical skills required for mentoring, but also in respect of challenging the stereotypes and culturally endorsed versions of masculinity that they themselves might hold. That is, combined with the qualitative data detailed above, we are reminded that installing men as mentors in programs or in communities is not an automatic good; indeed there is a sizable literature that raises concerns about the over-reliance on men role models as instigators of positive change in masculinities (Ruxton et al. 2018; Martino 2008). The reflections of the MTB participants suggest that the program could be useful in combating the risk of re-masculinisation that is associated with male role models who have not been sufficiently trained or lack an understanding of the harms of masculinity (Martino 2008; Ralph et al. 2020).

However, conducting all-male gender-transformative training programs may inadvertently reify some harmful gender tropes. In the quote below, one MTB participant takes issue with the presence of the project coordinator (a woman) in the workshops, noting that the participants had to censor their true opinions in her presence:

"I say this 'carefully'... but I think more thought needs to go into having a female involved in these discussions. This is not meant to be exclusionary, but the dynamics of male-to-male communication is significantly affected by the presence of a woman in the mix and it would have been good to allow the guys to be fully present without concerns about 'political correctness'. I feel that this would allow men to self-regulate and both express and address 'difficult' issues and comments openly. This is a responsibility we all need to accept within 'male only' groups and I think the facilitators of this session would have been more than capable of working through that in the context of 'unfettered' communication."
(Participant, post-pilot survey)

This comment is underpinned by the assumption that most men hold 'politically incorrect' views about women, suggests men are not capable of voicing or critically reflecting on these views in the presence of a woman, and thus indicates that the participant still holds some problematic views about men and masculinity. While it is an outlier, it offers a reminder of the types of ingrained norms and understandings that such programs must face and, ideally, actively seek to address. As per the [United Nations Population Fund and Promundo](#) (2010: 14), gender transformative programs should "seek to transform gender relations through critical reflection and questioning of individual attitudes, institutional practices and broader social norms that create and reinforce gender inequalities and vulnerabilities".

3.3 Community mobilisation in the Macedon Ranges

- The project expanded far beyond its original plan

As well as producing two well-attended pilot programs and a series of one-off events, the Human Code project effectively mobilised a range of stakeholders in the Macedon Ranges community. Notably, the community engagement carried out by working group members led to the development of the *Cut the Silence* campaign.

Case Study: Cut The Silence Campaign

As part of his participation in the Human Code working group, Karl [pseudonym] a representative from a local Men's Shed took the initiative to reach out to several advertising executives about donating their time and expertise to help SCCH reach its target markets for the pilots. Mark [pseudonym], a senior advertising creative and Macedon Ranges local, responded to Karl's request and provided some general advice about marketing the programs.

As a father of sons, one of whom lost a friend in a road accident resulting from risky behaviour, Mark understood how masculine stereotypes could negatively impact young men, and felt strongly about breaking the stigma associated with men and mental illness. As well as offering expertise to the working group, he proposed a health promotion campaign featuring well-known local men talking about men's mental health while sitting in a barber's chair given, in his eyes, this is one of the few opportunities

men have to open up about their struggles. In collaboration with the Macedon Ranges Suicide Prevention Trial Site Coordinator, SCCH, NWMPHN and the Macedon Ranges Suicide Prevention Action Group (MRSPAG), Mark developed the Cut The Silence Campaign.

"Cut The Silence is a campaign to get men of all ages talking about emotions and personal challenges, with the aim of supporting mental health and preventing suicide"

The campaign involved:

- **A series of videos** featuring well-known Australian actor, director, writer and comedian Shane Jacobson interviewing five high profile Macedon Ranges men about the importance of looking after themselves and their mates.
- **Five local barbers signed on as Cut The Silence ambassadors and participated in 'Conversations for Life' training (an introductory suicide prevention course).** 'Cut the Silence' promotional materials, including postcards and decal stickers were displayed in their barbershops, with accompanying QR codes that link customers to the interviews, a mental health toolkit and a comprehensive list of local and national support services.
- **A campaign launch event** held during Men's Health Week at a local music venue, with performances from two local musical acts and a nationally renowned headline act. Tickets were \$15, and \$5 from each ticket sale was donated to MRSPAG.

Notably, the launch event sold out, with 250 attendees. This was a huge success of the campaign, not simply because of the scale, but because the event reached a younger demographic of men:

"We were really able to reach a non-traditional audience... I think if we'd just had our regular old 'invite your stakeholders along to launch a campaign', we would not have gotten 250 people there. And we probably wouldn't have gotten the same kinds of people there that we did... there were lots of young guys at that gig and I don't think they would have necessarily been reading the local paper or, you know, they wouldn't have had the messages put in front of them if we'd just gone through our regular sort of channels."

(Project lead, focus group)

The centrepiece of the campaign, however, was a series of online videos in which Shane Jacobson spoke to high profile Macedon Ranges men about men's mental health. Some of the key messages from these videos are illustrated by the following quotes:

"I wonder if the message should be... that they should say to their mates... 'hey look mate, just so you know, if ever you needed to chat because stuff wasn't okay, I'd be open to hearing about it."

(Shane Jacobson, Cut the Silence video)

"I think it's having the time to chat, making the time to chat, like a long walk or a lunch where it's just the two of you"

(Tom Gleeson, Cut the Silence video)

"Now I'm a bit older and a bit more mature, it's much easier for me to reach out because I've done it previously and it genuinely makes you feel better. It takes that weight off your shoulders."

(Matt Dick, Cut the Silence Video)

Despite high levels of attendance at the Cut the Silence promotional events and launch, Karl expressed disappointment at the number of views the videos have received.

"Despite all of the success of the launch of the Cut the Silence campaign, I must say personally, I'm a bit disappointed in the number of hits we've got on the website for the various videos. I was expecting that to be a good bit higher... we need to look at further publicising that to try and get that message a little bit wider."

(WG member, focus group)

Though, as noted in the table below, three of the videos have fewer than 400 views, the other two have 8,085 and over 10,100 views, bringing the cumulative views to approximately 19,000. There is likely impetus to explore why certain public figures have drawn more attention or more effectively disseminated the content throughout their networks. However, according to the project coordinator the low number of views with the videos is partly due to the sharing permissions:

"Just as a reflection/feedback regarding [Karl's] observation about the low number of views for the Cut the Silence videos. It was a stipulation of those responsible for the videos that they were to be made available only through the MRSPAG website... as a result, this has limited the ability for these videos to be promoted and shared widely."

(Project coordinator, general correspondence)

Relatedly, the lack of active engagement with the videos in terms of ‘comments’ and ‘likes’ (as per Table 4) may stem from the material only being available on the MRSPAG website, rather than in a format that is sharable on mainstream social media platforms. According to the project lead, these restrictions were in place to ensure the more high-profile celebrities had a level of control over where their image was shared and by whom. However, sharing material on online platforms that have cultures of active engagement is paramount to moving beyond passive viewership and generating data that can be used to evaluate effectiveness of and receptiveness to such campaigns.

Table 4: Video views at 8th August, 2022

Guest	Views	Likes	Comments
Stephen Curry Comedian	358	1	0
Tom Gleeson Comedian	170	0	0
Matt Dick Former AFL player	8085	0	0
Pat Devlin Singer/Songwriter	211	0	0
Jeremy Forbes CEO Hope Assistance Local Tradies (HALT)	10.1k*	0	0
TOTAL	18,924**	2	0

* exact view count not available

** minimum approximate value, given exact view count for Jeremy Forbes' video was not available

Despite these minor setbacks, the campaign is a significant example of the community mobilisation brought about by the Human Code project:

“From my perspective, we achieved more than the original objectives, largely because we uncovered [Mark]. That was the key, I think, with not only his original inspiration for the theme, but with all of the contacts that he had. When we were first looking to make contact with the advertising industry, it was only to get some information. For that to turn into what it did, and the fact that we have those videos now forever, their value can be continued. Which, I mentioned before, we need to do what we can to try and improve the reach of those videos too, because the message in those is really quite good. So I think we very much exceeded what our original expectations were.”

(Working group member, focus group)

- **The project created networks across organisations and has stimulated further demand for and investment in gender transformative programs aimed at men**

High levels of attendance and participation in the project's activities have highlighted community interest in the core issues that the partnership has set about promoting. This has in turn generated calls to further fund ongoing gender transformative work aimed at men in the Macedon Ranges:

"We've only just touched the tip of the iceberg. And certainly at the end of those programs, there was a lot of feedback that we need to do more. What else can we do? Where can we go from here?"

(Project coordinator, focus group)

Illustrating this, a local cricket club expressed an interest in implementing gender transformative programs following one of the Human Code events:

"We paid for the facilitation of a Tomorrow Man session at the Gisborne Cricket Club during Men's Health Week, and the club were really impressed with the content and now want to roll that out to all of their coaches. And that's, I think one of the biggest rural cricket clubs in the Southern hemisphere. They saw that as really valuable content for their leaders and their coaches to be hearing. I've been thinking I should get in touch with them and say, can we help you write a grant submission or something?"

(Project lead, focus group)

In addition to this, Macedon and Woodend Scouts Group have expressed interest in engaging Man Cave Academy to provide mentoring support for their scout leaders; Macedon Ranges School Wellbeing Network have committed to delivering more gender-transformative education opportunities for parents and students in the Shire; and Gisborne Men's Shed are developing processes to support mentors interested in working with young shed-men. As well as stimulating this external interest, the project has strengthened SCCH's reputation in the community and promoted the development of partnerships with other community organisations:

"[The project] improved SCCH's reputation in the community, amongst participants of both pilots who attended the majority of the workshops and with groups like the Gisborne Men's Shed, Gisborne Cricket Club, Macedon Woodend Scouts – all of whom have expressed an interest to do further work with us in the future."

(Project coordinator, general correspondence)

These expanded networks have introduced a number of funding opportunities for SCCH. For example, SCCH are partnering with Macedon Ranges Shire Council to deliver a gender-equitable education and support program for first-time dads in late 2022/early 2023. In addition to this, there has been interest from local and national banks to continue and expand the Human Code project:

"[We] obtained funding from Community Bank Gisborne & District (a member of their executive team attended the Raising Teenage Boys pilot) and they are now considering future funding opportunities with SCCH"

"We now have a fairly strong relationship with the local Bendigo bank who gave us some money to help fund this work. Their community engagement manager came on board as a participant in one of the projects, really helped us to promote them within the bank's sphere of influence, and all the little clubs and groups that they support through their community funding scheme. But now, our organisation is in talks for future work that they're going to fund."

(Project lead, focus group)

Lastly, and importantly, attendees at the MTB pilot have created their own informal community of practice, and now plan to meet regularly to continue sharing their experiences, learning from one another and creating opportunities for collaboration. Below is an exchange that occurred during the focus group:

Project coordinator: After the [mentoring pilot] had finished there was a strong expression of interest that the group would like to stay in touch. And so I sent that out probably two weeks ago, and one of the men just said, 'Hey, how about we do a comeback tour? Would we all like to meet up at the Vic again?' And five people turned up last night, and... there were some ideas thrown around in there, and I think that they're planning on meeting every second Monday [of the month].

WG member: I was at that last night and it was a very wide ranging discussion given that we didn't have an agenda or a chair, but we covered a lot of ground, which was not only enjoyable, but quite thought provoking in a number of respects.

SCCH Executive: I think it's incumbent on us... to keep listening to some of those ideas. And if a gem turns up or an idea that you think is worth pursuing, make sure you filter that back to us and it could become the seeding for another funding submission, or it could be something that we can even support through our core budget. Or we might be able to drop a discussion topic in and say, 'any chance you can weave this in because we're interested to know what the community is thinking about this.' I think that's a great outcome from a sustainability point of view.

This exchange illustrates the networks that have been developed through the project activities, and the capacity for these networks to produce ongoing investment in gender transformative work in the Macedon Ranges. Alongside the successes of the Human Code project itself, this demonstrates the significant impact that place-based, community-led projects can have.



4.0 Concluding discussion



“Achieving this success relied on the project team overcoming a number of significant challenges in the early stages of the project...”

Phase 2 of the Human Code project undertaken in the Macedon Ranges set out to raise community awareness of the impacts of pressure to conform to outdated masculine stereotypes and trial strategies to reduce the pressure to conform to outdated masculine stereotypes. The primary strategies to achieve these objectives were to 1) build capacity of the governance group to understand gender stereotypes; 2) recruit two organisations/groups to pilot strategies informed by local data; and 3) implement agreed strategies to increase understanding of the impact of outdated masculine stereotypes. On these three measures, the project was a success.

Achieving this success relied on the project team overcoming a number of significant challenges in the early stages of the project. The impact of COVID-19 substantially delayed data collection for Phase 1 of the project, which was intended to inform Phase 2 (the activity considered in this evaluation report). In addition, there were near unprecedented structural and organisational changes that resulted in several transfers of project accountability and, initially, a degree of confusion about if/how the project could be continued. These circumstances ultimately led to two key challenges – something of a fracture between Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the overall project, and a significant delay in the recruitment of the project co-ordinator and the associated start date of Phase 2. The first issue is not necessarily a concern of this evaluation, but it is worth stressing that the execution of the project plan did not rely on Phase 1 as much as was anticipated.

The second issue did, however, have a profound impact as numerous elements of the foundational work with communities and associated network building began approximately ten months into a two-year project. This resulted in an enormous amount of pressure on all members of the partnership, including senior staff at SCCH and the CVPPH, but on the project lead and project coordinator in particular. At the outset of their involvement, the project lead and project coordinator faced a near-overwhelming task of trying to understand and align Phase 1 and Phase 2, in order to plan the required activities for Phase 2. Accordingly, the necessary strategic planning was sometimes mixed with opportunistic activity. To the credit of all involved, in far from ideal circumstances, a streamlined, flexible and productive approach prevailed.

After engaging an external provider (Jesuit Social Services) to upskill the working group, the Human Code project was successful in leveraging a variety of different resources and networks across the partnership to engage and inform the local community about the significance of promoting healthier masculinities. The initial project plan had included additional objectives around, for example, improving men’s access to health and social services, but these were removed or reduced in priority due to the logistical and structural challenges described above. All such challenges were beyond the control of the project staff, but were responded to admirably and with notable commitment to ensuring the project proceeded as optimally as possible.

The campaign of awareness raising activities was wide ranging and ran prior to, during and after the pilot project interventions that targeted individual participants. The range, reach and momentum of this activity is notable. The two pilot programs are commendable for following best practice and were clearly research-informed across a number of dimensions, including: being designed in consultation with local expertise via the working group of community stakeholders; being complementary to existing programs that target boys' attitudes by aiming to upskill the spheres of influence in boys' lives (parents and other community mentors); and ensuring multiple hours of programming across six sessions, rather than one-off interventions. The combination of numerous, diverse and imaginative community-level awareness raising activities and targeted pilot interventions (and the associated knock on effect of both) has ensured not only a wide and diverse reach, but has sparked ongoing interest in and concern for further gender transformative work among individuals and organisations.

More substantively it has also enhanced the levels of knowledge on the issue of healthier masculinities and improved confidence to enact these learnings among those who attended the pilot programs. One area of concern here, though, is the ongoing unequal burden left to mothers in parenting support programs. While this was somewhat offset by the male-only focus for participants in the mentoring pilot program, the overall lack of interest from fathers reflects society-wide, deeply problematic gendered norms that differentiate men's 'public' responsibilities and women's responsibilities in the private domain of the home and/or family. Another issue that can be raised in retrospect is that the two organisations who delivered the pilot projects did not use the same data collection techniques, meaning that comparisons of impact on a weekly basis were limited.

Raising awareness on a broad scale and increasing confidence and knowledge for a number of local parents and local community mentors is an important part of the process of normalising healthier masculinities in the Macedon Ranges. However, the research literature on the barriers to enacting and sustaining change at the level of behaviours, rather than solely at the level of attitudes, clearly indicates that there is no quick fix to overcoming widespread commitment to, and damage caused by, traditional masculine norms (Ralph et al. 2020). As such, to be optimally effective, the type of community mobilisation activity detailed in this report must be seen as necessitating long-term commitment. This will mean, for local councils and community organisations, ensuring that commitment to gender transformative work remains on the agenda and requires repeated investment of time and resources (perhaps through a combination of internal and external funding) in order to do the work at an appropriate scale.

Relatedly, while plans can and often do change from initial proposals, adequate resourcing and appropriate budgeting is vital. The above logistical challenges notwithstanding, the project success at least in some part rested on the additional unpaid work of the project co-ordinator and the additional work done by the project lead. This is clearly sub-optimal and not sustainable for the people involved.

There is much for future partnerships to learn from the experiences, challenges and successes achieved of the Human Code project.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

When implementing multiple or different programs, project leads should seek to implement consistent evaluation tools across all programs to be able to effectively measure and compare impacts.

Recommendation 2

Large-scale, place-based health promotion initiatives should create and actively and regularly consult working groups that represent a diverse cross-section of the community. These groups can offer crucial insights into key demographics, local groups and small townships, and can help to promote the project through their personal and professional networks.

Recommendation 3

Community partnerships developing innovative gender-transformative programs should structure delivery in multiple sessions over a long-term period. This allows facilitators to: a) build a foundation of basic knowledge and then gradually move to more advanced content and practical strategies, and b) set homework that helps participants process content, put strategies into practice and reflect on their learnings with the group.

Recommendation 4

Future partnerships should make a concerted effort to recruit and authentically and actively involve a broad range of organisations in the project activities, as this can promote a snowball effect of community mobilisation that is sustained beyond the allocated funding period.

Recommendation 5

All online resources that are produced for raising awareness should be accessible to be shared via mainstream, widely used social media platforms.

Recommendation 6

Project teams who have finite resources and funding should endeavour to maintain manageable and realistic objectives and avoid 'scope creep'. Plans often need to change in the health promotion space so commitment and flexibility are important; but when projects expand significantly the additional workload and costs may be borne by individuals as well as organisations.

Recommendation 7

For parenting programs, undoing the burden on mothers should be a priority. This is not easy, but can be achieved by factoring in fathers into content design and targeted marketing materials.

Recommendation 8

For all programs, regardless of target audience, differentiated cohort intakes, according to confidence in the subject matter should be considered. That is, those with low levels of self-identified expertise and confidence will need introductory material that might promote disengagement among those who self-identify as having higher levels of knowledge. Provide foundational knowledge for those who need it and then have intermediate and advanced knowledge participants at a relevant point in the program.

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VicHealth acknowledges the Traditional
Custodians of the land. We pay our respects
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