

# More than tolerance: Embracing diversity for health

## Discrimination is a health issue

Victoria has a longstanding and positive record in welcoming newcomers. By-and-large we have enjoyed harmonious inter-cultural relations and benefited significantly from the social, cultural and economic contributions of migrants and refugees. Nevertheless the research in the VicHealth report *More than tolerance: Embracing diversity for health* suggests many people from migrant and refugee backgrounds experience discrimination and intolerance and this is compromising their health.

VicHealth conducted this research:

- to raise awareness about the link between culturally-based discrimination and intolerance and poor health;
- to highlight the impact on the community of culturally-based discrimination; and
- to provide a way forward for reducing the impact discrimination has on the health of Victorians from diverse backgrounds.

Although the research focuses on discrimination and intolerance affecting people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, its findings are relevant to addressing discrimination affecting other groups, most notably Indigenous Victorians. The research took a broad view of discrimination as being treated differently and unfairly because of one's background (rather than a legal definition). Although such treatment affects health, this does not mean that it is always against the law.

VicHealth believes it is critical that diverse communities, such as Victoria, remain vigilant to discriminatory attitudes and behaviour.

As well as affecting individuals' health and wellbeing, discrimination harms the wider community by undermining harmonious community relations and social cohesion. It compromises productivity and the benefits of diversity, and places an unnecessary burden on our health, welfare and legal systems.

This research also suggests Victoria has an opportunity to build on the strengths born of its diversity.

More than 40 per cent of Victorians were born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas. Victorians come from over 200 countries, speak more than 180 dialects and follow more than 110 faiths<sup>1</sup>.

Successive State Governments have recognised and promoted cultural diversity. In 2004 bipartisan support saw the *Multicultural Victoria Act 2004* enshrine in law the value of a culturally diverse community, which is united by shared legal and human rights.

Political, business and community leaders alike recognise the state's cultural diversity brings a range of benefits from the knowledge that helps local businesses access international markets to overseas skills and techniques that enhance industry, services and academia; a tourism industry which can cater for visitors from a wide variety of countries; and a vibrant arts and cultural life enjoyed by all Victorians.

The challenge facing Victoria is to harness its diversity and mobilise all sectors of society to reduce discriminatory, unfair and intolerant behaviours and practices that have a negative impact on the health of people from diverse backgrounds.

<sup>1</sup> Victorian Multicultural Affairs Report 2005/6, Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs



## The research

Internationally there is increasing recognition that culture-based discrimination is a common problem with far-reaching health, social and economic consequences for individuals and their communities.

VicHealth and some of Australia's pre-eminent social sciences researchers on the topic have come together to investigate this issue and develop recommendations for future action in the Victorian context.

The result is this important report, which brings together findings from:

- A review of studies into the link between self-reported discrimination and health.
- A telephone survey of more than 4,000 Victorians about their experiences of discrimination and their attitudes towards race, cultural diversity, discrimination and privilege. Bilingual interviewing was available in the five most widely spoken community languages – Vietnamese, Cantonese, Mandarin, Italian and Greek.
- A review of strategies and approaches taken to achieve positive shifts in community attitudes and behaviours.
- A review of past communications and marketing strategies in Australia and internationally aimed at changing discriminatory attitudes and behaviours toward people from different cultural backgrounds.

## The findings

### The link between discrimination and poor health

The report presents a body of evidence, which shows a relationship between experiences of discrimination based on culture, ethnicity and race and a range of health problems. The strongest link exists between depression and discrimination.

Studies also show a strong link between these forms of discrimination and both cigarette smoking and drug misuse.

In terms of physical health, studies have produced varying results. However, a number have found a link between discrimination and increased blood pressure and heart rate and low infant birth weight. Heart disease, weight problems and diabetes have also been found to be linked with discrimination in a small number of studies.

Discrimination is thought to affect health because it results in people developing a negative view of themselves and this in turn affects their self esteem. It may induce fear, stress and anxiety, which can have a negative affect on both the mind and the body. Some people may also try to manage stress in ways which damage their health (e.g. through smoking).

Discrimination has been shown to restrict people's access to the things they need for health and wellbeing such as employment, housing, education, health care and social support.

### The experience of discrimination

Experiences of discrimination affect a large number of people.

#### Discrimination in institutional settings

A sizeable proportion of people surveyed who were born in countries where English is not the main language spoken reported experiencing discrimination due to their ethnic origin at some time.

- Nearly two in five had experienced discrimination in the workplace (three times as likely as those born in Australia).
- 30 per cent had experienced discrimination in education (twice as likely as those born in Australia).
- 18 per cent reported having experienced discrimination in housing (four times more likely as those born in Australia).
- 19 per cent reported having experienced discrimination in policing (three times more likely as those born in Australia).

For most, reported experience was at the less frequent end of the scale, however, concerning proportions reported that they had experienced discrimination often including 7.4 per cent in the workplace and 6.2 per cent in education.

#### Everyday discrimination and intolerance

One third of people born in countries where English is not the main language spoken reported having experienced discrimination due to their ethnic origin in a shop or restaurant at some time. 45 per cent reported having had such experiences at a sporting or other public event.

Again, for most, reported experience was at the less frequent end of the scale. However, nearly 4 per cent reported having experienced discrimination in a shop or restaurant often. 15 per cent reported having experienced discrimination often at a sporting or other public event.

People born in countries where English is not the main language were significantly more likely to experience discrimination due to their ethnic origin, compared to those born in Australia.

## The presence of discriminatory attitudes

The survey measured attitudes towards diversity, difference and discrimination and found that while most Victorians reject racism based on biological differences, and support cultural diversity, many still hold attitudes which might lead to people being treated in ways which negatively affect their health.

### Support for cultural diversity

- 90 per cent agreed, "It is a good thing for society to be made up of different cultures" – only 5 per cent rejected this statement.
- 82 per cent report that they personally feel secure with people from other cultures – 8 per cent disagreed and 9 per cent neither agreed nor disagreed.
- Studies show that maintaining connections with and valuing one's own culture are good for mental health and wellbeing. It is of concern, therefore, that 37 per cent agreed, "Australia is weakened by people 'sticking to their old ways'".
- Substantial proportions of Victorians would also be concerned to some degree if a relative were to marry someone from another cultural background or religious faith. Degree of concern about intermarriage is widely recognised as a measure of degree of comfort with/ social distance from people from different backgrounds.
- Victorians were twice as likely to be concerned if a relative were to marry someone from an Asian than a British background (20% versus 8%), and were nearly four times more likely to be concerned if the marriage was to someone from a Muslim than a Christian background (43% versus 11%). About a quarter of Victorians express concern about inter-marriage to people from Indigenous or Jewish backgrounds.

### Groups that 'do not fit' in Australia

- 36 per cent of respondents identified cultural groups they believe do not belong in Australia (often referred to by experts as 'out-groups').
- Of those respondents who identified 'out groups', 34 per cent mentioned Muslim Victorians, 21 per cent mentioned people from the Middle East, and 12 per cent mentioned people from Asia.
- The identification of 'out groups' is a concern from a health point of view because if it translates into discriminatory behaviour it can affect the health of individuals experiencing it, as well as creating a climate of fear and anxiety which can restrict the activities and aspirations of people in the affected community.

### Recognition of discrimination as a problem

- Almost 84 per cent of Victorians recognise there is racial prejudice in Australia. This suggests there is likely to be community support for efforts to counter the problem.
- However, only 12 per cent recognise that they are personally prejudiced – it is perceived as a problem with others not themselves. This is at odds with the substantially larger proportions reporting attitudes understood to underlie intolerant and discriminatory behaviour (in particular the identification of out-groups).
- 43 per cent of Victorians recognise that Australians from a British background have a privileged position in our society, with 37 per cent denying there is any privilege.

### Discrimination in different areas of Victoria

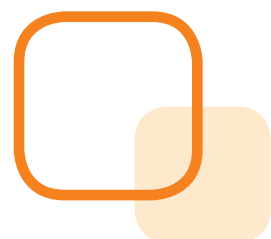
To help guide future efforts to address the problem, the research mapped experiences of discrimination and discriminatory attitudes to geographical areas across Victoria. This geographically-based information also provides insights into what type of initiatives might be used to combat discrimination in specific areas. Some caution needs to be exercised in interpreting local level results, due to the small sample sizes. However a few general patterns emerge.

Although there are some exceptions, there is evidence of a split between a more tolerant community in metropolitan Melbourne and one less so in regional and rural Victoria. This suggests that government efforts to resettle refugees and skilled migrants in regional and rural areas need to be accompanied by programs to encourage cultural understanding and harmony.

The research showed that while discriminatory attitudes and experiences are reported across Metropolitan Melbourne, they were more likely in the fast growing outer-metropolitan areas to the west, north and south east of Melbourne.

In many of these areas population is growing rapidly and becoming increasingly culturally diverse. For some of these communities it is the first time they have welcomed newcomers to Australia in substantial numbers. Unsurprisingly this is posing challenges and raising issues within those communities.

There are many pressures on outer-suburban growth areas. However these areas also have a unique opportunity to build the foundations for intercultural understanding and tolerance at an early stage. This will help to prevent future problems and make sure that these communities reap the benefits of diversity.



## Embracing diversity for better health

The report provides a framework for policy makers, health professionals and communities alike to develop ways of reducing discrimination and improving the community's health.

Preventing discrimination will provide social, economic and health benefits for all Victorians.

Efforts to reduce discrimination cannot be one-dimensional – a range of strategies which complement and reinforce each other is likely to be the most effective approach.

A focus on developing local solutions that take into account local circumstances and pressure points will be the most effective way of tackling discrimination, in particular communities and regions.

VicHealth's recommendations arising from this research include:

### Maintaining and building on positive developments

That the Australian and Victorian governments continue to support activity to promote diversity, with a view to building on the positive attitudes identified in Victoria in this research.

### Priority settings, areas and target groups

That planning of future activity to reduce discrimination be:

- guided by the regional variations in attitudes and experiences identified in this report;
- targeted to addressing attitudes toward Victorians from Muslim, Middle Eastern, African and Asian backgrounds;
- targeted to workplaces and educational settings given that these are settings in which discrimination is particularly likely to occur and the importance of employment and education to both current and future health and wellbeing; and
- targeted to children and young people, given evidence of the particularly damaging health impacts of discrimination in childhood and adolescence (especially through its impacts on identity formation and educational attainment).

### Building our knowledge about what works

There is a need to further develop the evidence and knowledge base for reducing discrimination. Consideration should be given to a research trial, which would:

- be supported by government, non-government, philanthropic and corporate partners;
- be implemented in one or more specific geographical area;
- be developed in partnership with local government, media, businesses, schools and community groups, including migrant and refugee groups;
- be implemented across a range of settings and sectors (e.g. workplaces, schools, community organisations, sports clubs);
- use multiple and reinforcing methods;
- address both interpersonal and local-level institutional discrimination;
- trial innovative methods and approaches;
- involve high-level expert support from relevant disciplines (communications and marketing, geography, behavioural science, social psychology, community development); and
- be rigorously evaluated.



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