



Community Discussion Paper

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Foreword

I am pleased to present the Scanlon Foundation's discussion paper on the topic of community.

Our communities are the heart and soul of our nation. They are what give people a sense of belonging and unity, and are central to our view of the Australian way of life.

While we know that Australia is by and large a welcoming and cohesive country, maintaining cohesion within communities is an ongoing challenge.

As local areas grow and change and become more culturally diverse, we need to continue to work together and find ways to support the development of stronger, more resilient and productive communities.

Local community groups, governments, organisations and schools play a major role in fostering social connectedness and providing services to support new arrivals.


This discussion paper aims to draw attention to the key issues for local leaders and organisations to consider and inspire discussion and collaboration on key challenges.

Anthea Hancocks

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'A Hancocks', with a stylized, cursive script.

CEO, Scanlon Foundation

Introduction



Communities are linked by social ties, common values or interests, a mutual concern for their immediate neighbourhood, or concerns for issues that might disrupt the sense of togetherness – regardless of religion or ethnic background. Communities are crucial as they are key to building and maintaining a sense of belonging and contribute to our sense of support and self-worth.

So how well does Australia welcome and engage with its new and emerging communities? Are our different communities coming together and interacting as well as they could – and what exactly does 'coming together' mean? What can be done to promote cohesion at a community level?

This paper is designed to provoke discussion on these questions and encourage us to reflect on some of the recent findings of the Scanlon Foundation's surveys.

Since its establishment, the Scanlon Foundation has sought to make Australia an ever more welcoming, prosperous and cohesive nation. We see diversity as a positive thing for our national interest, culturally and economically, and believe that – when it comes to addressing its challenges – there is no substitute for informed discussion.



What is a 'community'?

In dictionary definitions, a 'community' is a group of people living in the same area, who may have characteristics, attitudes, and interests in common, and who may engage in joint activities in a shared setting.

Cohesion in communities has been understood in various terms. For pioneering French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), the focus was on shared consciousness and sustainable cooperation. Durkheim's German colleague Max Weber emphasised the importance of a collective value system, while for the American Talcott Parsons,

social cohesion was about social conformity to an agreed set of standards.

There have been significant advances in the development of understanding of community cohesion in recent decades. For Canadian Judith Maxwell, cohesion required 'building shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities in wealth and income, and generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise and facing shared challenges.' Later, the definition included specific reference to 'sense of trust, hope and reciprocity among all Canadians.'

'I like cultural diversity. I like the quiriness of places ... I like... always knowing what's going on in the community, and the sense of community here is a lot greater than the sense of community that I used to feel when I was younger. I actually really enjoy that. I like ... when Ramadan is on, it's visible, when Eid is coming up, it's visible ... people aren't ashamed about it, it's loud and colourful and that's my kind of environment.'

- Australians Today focus group participant

British conceptual developments were made by a number of social scientists, notably Professor Ted Cattle, in the aftermath of the 2001 and later riots that indicated failure to sustain cohesion. The key elements of community cohesion were specified as:

- A common vision and sense of belonging for community members
- Positive valuing of diversity of backgrounds and circumstances
- Similar life opportunities for those from different backgrounds
- Development of strong and positive relationships between people from different backgrounds in the workplace, in schools, and within neighbourhoods

In *Best Practice Case-studies: Race Equality, Faith Groups & Community Cohesion Issues*, Patrick Loftman suggests that best-practice 'community cohesion' should not only encompass relationships between communities, but also relationships between groups within each community, whether they be defined by age, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, or different ethnic and faith backgrounds.


This connectedness has been at the core of Australia's interpretation of multiculturalism, although some are choosing to refer to connectedness as 'interculturalism' to put greater emphasis on the importance of relationships.

How do you describe
the communities of which you are a part?

What are the features
of your communities that make you feel comfortable?

How do you further
the objectives of your communities?

What works in community cohesion?



Leading research on the promotion of community cohesion has been undertaken in England. A summary of British approaches was outlined in the 2007 summary report, *What Works in Community Cohesion*, based on extensive consultations and evaluation of local initiatives.

The central issue, 'a pre-prerequisite for cohesion', is to tackle socio-economic disadvantage. But embedded disadvantage cannot be overcome in a few years, although some aspects may be alleviated. What then has been shown to work in the short-term? What explains varying levels of cohesion in communities with similar forms of socio-economic disadvantage? Seven are listed below.

- 1 **Activities that encourage positive relationships between different groups**, are vital in building trust, empathy and respect.
- 2 **Goal directed activities**: to be meaningful, interaction needs to be more than simply mixing, for example at a social event. Activities should focus on real life issues and have short-term outcomes.
- 3 **Agency**: initiatives need to empower local communities and ensure that programs are directed to specific local priorities. Resources are required to foster the development of leadership within marginalised groups.
- 4 **Projects among young people are a priority**: youth are more vulnerable to disengagement and alienation, and they are the future of their communities.
- 5 **Balance between universal provision and assistance to meet the immediate needs of specific groups**: there is a risk that resentment will be created if some groups are perceived to be unfairly assisted. Attention needs to be directed to maintaining a sense of equity and fairness.
- 6 **Coherent and clearly articulated communication strategy** to build understanding across groups and to challenge misconceptions and stereotypes. Communication strategy needs to be developed with the participation of community members, not simply for communities, and have a focus on tangible issues.
- 7 **A rapid response capability**: capacity to respond to challenges to community harmony, for example, an immediate response to letter drops by racist organisations, or to hostile incidents involving members of groups that have capacity to escalate.

A 2015 evaluation of short-term impact on community cohesion was undertaken by the British Government's *What Works Centre for Wellbeing*. The evaluation involved workshops, interviews, online questionnaires and community sounding boards. The major findings of the report related to:

Social networks – relations and support between people in a community, both in close relationships and friendships, and between neighbours and acquaintances.

Participation – people feeling that they are included in decision making, are listened to, and have access to information.

Environment – green and open space, cleanliness, local facilities including public transport, childcare.

Safety and security – feelings of trust and belonging in the community, sense of safety, feeling safe walking home at night.

Source: <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/community-wellbeing-about/>



What can surveys tell us?

'We are the most successful and harmonious multicultural society in the world. Our multicultural success is at the heart of our national identity. It is intrinsic to our history and our character.'

– Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, 16 June 2016

Australia is a multicultural success story, a view supported by international country rankings and a wealth of surveying, in addition to the Scanlon Foundation surveys conducted since 2007. Recent arrivals consistently register a high level of optimism and Australians continue to be positive about multiculturalism: an average of 85% of respondents in three national surveys conducted between 2013-15 agreed with the view that 'multiculturalism has been good for Australia.'

The findings reported in the Scanlon Foundation's Australians Today report show that amongst recent arrivals dissatisfaction is at a low level: just 6% indicate that they are dissatisfied and only 13% indicate that they are unhappy.

Maintaining that success, however, presents an ongoing challenge. Australia has experienced sustained population growth through immigration since 1945, with a substantial increase in the last two decades. In 1996, the population of Australia was 18.3 million, in 2016 it is over 24 million.

The Scanlon Foundation surveys provide Australia's only systematic tracking of opinion on a broad range of issues related to social cohesion, immigration and cultural diversity.

Since 2007, eight national, four regional, and three experimental online surveys have been conducted, with total respondents now in excess of 35,000. The surveys focus on five domains of social cohesion:

- 1 Belonging:** indication of pride in the Australian way of life and culture; sense of belonging; importance of maintaining Australian way of life and culture.
- 2 Worth:** satisfaction with present financial situation and indication of happiness over the last year.
- 3 Social justice and equity:** views on the adequacy of financial support for people on low incomes; the gap between high and low incomes; Australia as a land of economic opportunity; trust in the Australian government.

4 Participation: vote in an election; signing of a petition; contact with a Member of Parliament; participation in a boycott; attendance at a protest.

5 Acceptance and rejection: view on immigration from many different countries; reported experience of discrimination in the last 12 months; view on government support to ethnic minorities for maintenance of customs and traditions; prospects of life in three or four years.

The 2007, 2009, 2012 and 2013 Scanlon Foundation Local Area Surveys and the focus group component of the Australia@2015 Survey were concerned with areas of high immigrant concentration. If increasing ethnic diversity in communities is affecting social cohesion, then these areas can be expected to provide an indication of impact.

The surveys in areas of relatively high socio-economic disadvantage and immigrant concentration present a complex and far from uniform picture. Among many positive findings are the respect for democracy and the Australian 'way of life.' But there are also negative indicators, including lower levels of trust and sense of safety. There is also indication of disaffection with immigration levels amongst a minority of third-generation Australians (defined in the survey as those born in Australia with both parents born in Australia) and a potential openness to discriminatory immigration policies.

With such a high level of acceptance of multiculturalism, why do we continue to see high levels of reported discrimination in immigrant communities?



Neighbourhood trust and safety

Challenges facing attempts to foster community cohesion in areas of large immigrant populations are the relatively low level of personal trust and sense of safety, the heightened experience of discrimination, and stereotyping and misconceptions that impede mutual understanding and respect.

Robert Putnam, Harvard University's Professor of Public Policy, argued in an influential study that ethnic diversity has a negative impact on social cohesion.¹ Putnam's argument was based on a United States survey of 30,000 participants. He concluded that in areas of ethnic diversity there was, among other outcomes, lower confidence in the ability to influence the decisions of local government and local leaders; less expectation that people will work together on community projects; lower likelihood of giving to charity or volunteering; lower indication of life satisfaction; and lower perception of

quality of life. Putnam concluded that 'inhabitants of diverse communities tend to withdraw from collective life.'

The Scanlon Foundation's survey found evidence consistent with Putnam's findings, although the explanation of outcomes is open to more than one interpretation.

Level of personal trust was considered using the combined data of the eight Scanlon Foundation national surveys (2007-15). When level of trust is analysed using the Australian Bureau of Statistics Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), which provide a ranking of postcodes from most to least disadvantaged, the three most disadvantaged deciles (or the 30% most disadvantaged) have markedly lower levels of trust than the three least disadvantaged, ranging from 42% (SEIFA 1) of respondents agreeing that 'most people can be trusted' to 63% (SEIFA 10).

'Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or you can't be too careful in dealing with people?', cross-tabulated with SEIFA deciles.

	SEIFA 1	SEIFA 2	SEIFA 3	SEIFA 8	SEIFA 9	SEIFA 10
'Can be trusted'	42%	44%	43%	51%	56%	63%
'Can't be too careful'	53%	53%	54%	46%	40%	34%

Source: Scanlon Foundation national surveys, 2007-2015.

¹ Robert Putnam, 'E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century', *Scandinavian Political Studies*, vol. 30, no 2, 2007, pp. 137-174.

When areas of low socio-economic status are considered together with areas of immigrant concentration, there is heightened indication of low levels of personal trust. The 2012 Scanlon Foundation survey conducted in four ethnically diverse and low socio-economic areas found that indication of personal trust was just 32%, compared to 52% in 2012 Scanlon Foundation national survey. Almost the same result was obtained by the Australia@2015 survey - 32% of respondents in the same four local areas indicated agreement that 'most people can be trusted', compared to 50% in the 2015 Scanlon Foundation national survey.

A relatively low proportion of respondents in these local areas agreed that they felt 'very safe' or 'fairly safe' when walking at night in their local area. The 2015 Scanlon Foundation national survey found sense of safety at 68%, but on average close to 20 percentage points lower in the four local areas, including 36% in Hume and 42% in Bankstown.

When asked 'how worried are you about becoming a victim of crime in your local area?', 73% of respondents to the 2015 Scanlon Foundation national survey indicated that they were 'not very worried' or 'not at all worried', again an average almost 20 points lower in the four local areas, including 46% in Hume and 48% in Greater Dandenong.

'Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or you can't be too careful in dealing with people?'

	National Survey	Hume	Greater Dandenong	Bankstown	Fairfield	Four local areas - average
'Can be trusted' 2012	52%	29%	37%	29%	32%	32%
'Can be trusted' 2015	50%	23%	37%	39%	28%	32%

Source: Scanlon Foundation local area survey, 2012, 2015.



Experience of discrimination

The impact that experience of discrimination has on an individual cannot be judged simply by counting the number of incidents. Some individuals may remain relatively unaffected by repeated experience of discrimination, while for others, even just one incident which may seem relatively minor can entrench a lifelong feeling of isolation.

Numbers are a start, however.

In the 2012 Local Area Survey, respondents were asked if they had experienced discrimination 'because of their skin colour, ethnic origin or religion over the last 12 months?' The surveys found that 22% indicated experience of discrimination in the local areas of immigrant concentration, compared to 12% in the national survey.

The Scanlon Foundation's 2013 Local Area Survey found reported discrimination among recent arrivals at 22% amongst those of English speaking background, and 41% of non-English speaking background.

The largest sample of overseas born was obtained by the Australians@2015 survey, providing scope for analysis by a number of birthplace groups. The survey found that 11% of those born in the

United Kingdom indicated experience of discrimination over the last twelve months, 24% born in Vietnam, 39% born in India or China, 50% New Zealand, with the largest proportion amongst Indigenous Australians and those born in African countries.

'Have you experienced discrimination because of your skin colour, ethnic origin or religion over the last 12 months?'

Country of birth	Experienced discrimination
United Kingdom	11%
Italy	13%
Turkey	15%
Iran	23%
Vietnam	24%
India	39%
China	39%
New Zealand	50%
Australia - Indigenous	59%
Zimbabwe	75%
South Sudan	77%

Source: Response 'yes', selected birthplace groups, Australia@2015 survey.

The most common forms of discrimination are verbal abuse and actions that make people feel that they do not belong. The next level is workplace discrimination. Less common, but with the potential for greater impact, are physical acts involving property damage and physical assault. Relatively high levels of discrimination on public transport were reported by those born in India, China, South Korea, and African countries.

Some 5% or less of respondents of most birthplace groups reported discrimination when in contact with police, compared with over 20% of those born in sub-Saharan African countries.

Discrimination is often a very cruel response to fear, what ways can we reduce fear in our communities to reduce discrimination?

Making a difference

More than fifty focus groups conducted for the Australia@2015 survey highlighted local issues and initiatives that made a difference in local communities. These included:

The quality of schools and the role of Principals

'I think the school plays a key role as well in terms of bringing the community together and [fostering] togetherness and unity ... When there was a lot of fighting in the schools, that was also translating into the homes. But when the school is really strong [it] builds that community.'

– Australians Today focus group participant.

Participants in the Australians Today focus groups discussed the transformative influence of school Principals, of 'massive changes' through the leadership of one person, and praised schools in which diversity was actively celebrated, rather than simply tolerated. *'Once the schools educate that it's all right to understand each other, ... like getting to know multi-cultures are implemented in schools, ... (students) learn to respect each others' cultures.'*

Other participants considering attitudes to diversity contrasted experience of New Zealand, where 'the government values the [Maori] language, acknowledges the Maori, the people of the land. When the government values it then it's a ... domino effect, the young will learn it and it's embraced.'

Generating a sense of commonality around everyday issues

'There's a lot of programs that Moreland Council's trying to help us with, to get the community together. There's a place called 'Open Table,' where every first week on a Saturday the community comes together to have lunch. ... You get youth and all the people ... together. They used to have a lot of soccer programs here as well for youth. Just pretty good community over here.'

– Australians Today focus group participant.

Issues that are tangible and meaningful in day-to-day life – be they good schools, clean streets or safe parks – were found to be more effective in generating a sense of commonality. Neighbourhood forums and local groups that focus on improving the local area and local services were found to be a good way of bringing people together.

Working in a range of languages and cultural awareness

'He went to Job Network and the [receptionist] ... just [gives him a form and tells him] ... 'Take, sit there, fill it out and bring it back.' And the guy took [it], stood there, doesn't understand anything, he didn't write anything. After two minutes he [came] ... back, he said, 'I don't know how to write.' And the girl said, 'Okay, I don't have much time to sit down with you.'

– Australians Today focus group participant.

While developing language skills among non-English speakers is a vital part of community cohesion, it is also a long-term project. Providing interpreting and translating services is an essential way of ensuring that non-English speakers stay connected.

Focus group participants also discussed the impact of liaison officers in schools, the police force and local hospitals. Where a person deals with a service provider from their own culture there is trust, enhanced understanding of needs and problems: *'you walk in, ... okay, he knows what I'm talking about ... because I can talk in my language and he can ... understand what's up ... Plus I find with our elders, they tend to open up and trust more.'*

Challenging stereotypes

'We are lumped as one by the media or some politician, while in reality we are not as one, we are extremely diverse'

– Australians Today focus group participant.

Stereotyping and misrepresentation divides communities. An example are the stereotypes of Muslims which fail to recognise diversity, including divisions between the secular and the religious and between the different streams of Islam; generational differences between the young, middle aged and elderly; and between national and ethnic groups. Australia's Muslims are as diverse as the rest of the Australian population.

In focus group discussions, Muslim respondents indicated concern at what they saw as deterioration in relations, linked to media misrepresentation and the actions of some politicians who are seen as inciting division within the Australian community.

'We had a healthy respect for western media as being impartial and presenting facts, but ... recently we found that there has been a change and it's much more biased. The last couple of years there has been noticeable bias [in] media reporting against Islam and Muslims in general. And there is a lack of understanding ... [of] our community ... The sense is they will always report front page about the negative and always report page 70 about the positive. ... I think it's impacting negatively on people's quality of life ... Everyone likes SBS because it's ... unbiased.'

– Australians Today focus group participant.



How do you or your organisation contribute to the social cohesion in your community?

What can be done to improve community cohesion by voluntary organisations, businesses and local government?

Logan-Inala case study

An example of the potential for positive impact on community cohesion can be found in the Logan-Inala area in Brisbane.

One of Australia's disadvantaged areas, Logan's 33,000 residents include more than 3,000 people from New Zealand, close to 1,000 from Samoa, and people from Asian, African and Middle Eastern countries.

In the Australians Today focus groups, a number of respondents made favourable comments concerning the personal involvement of councillors and their support of community, and praised improvement in some schools and the support provided by voluntary organisations. Logan City Council was seen in positive terms, working to create harmony and supporting a range of initiatives, and effectively marketing events and services through the local newspaper and social media.

Events discussed included a family day in the park, free activities for the kids, Get to Know Your Neighbours events, Christmas Carols, and Christmas in the Park. There was also discussion of upgraded facilities in parks.

One participant observed that: *'the mayor's awesome, advertising availability for a ten minute chat and cup of tea to discuss resident concerns.'* Following the tragic loss of life in a house fire, *'the council and the mayor just embraced the needs of the community to come together ... [The mayor was] amazing*

... She sort of understood that the community needed to grieve and how they specifically needed to do that. She made that happen for them. Arranged transport, had a venue. A huge venue. Put it out there for everyone to attend. She's genuinely concerned and had compassion for the people.'


While there were many positive comments, there was also discussion of significant problems: the pace of change, extent of poverty, difficulty finding jobs, theft, drugs, insecurity, and the segmentation of groups. Immigrants who settled in the region discussed their experience of discrimination and stereotypical labelling. The Australians Today report finds that Logan-Inala remains an area with a relatively poor Social Cohesion Index score, compared with a number of other areas surveyed.

Index of Social Cohesion, selected Local Government areas

Local area	Index score Negative
Hume	116
Auburn/ Bankstown	115
Logan/ Inala	111
Brimbank	93
Fairfield/ Liverpool	93
Greater Dandenong	90
Stirling	88
Moreland	88

Source: Australia@2015 survey.

Conclusion



Australia has a population of 24 million people, forming many communities across its 7.6 million square kilometres. Our citizens have come here from all around the globe, bringing new customs and cultures.

The Scanlon Foundation's research series shows that we have much to be proud of as a nation in bringing communities together, but there is still much to be done.

Local neighbourhoods matter. There is strength in our diversity, with the vast majority positive in their appreciation of the Australian way of life, the rule of law, and democracy. We want to believe that in Australia there is equality of opportunity and hard work is rewarded.

Maintaining social cohesion within communities presents ongoing challenges. No two communities are the same. Focus group outcomes highlight the importance of listening and reflecting on what can be done better. As a participant in the Australians Today project asked: 'The surveys that we did today and this talk that we're doing, ... is this really going to help? Like the stuff that we're saying, is it going to help?'

Through research such as that conducted by the Scanlon Foundation, and instigating discussion among community groups, it is hoped that positive change can indeed be achieved. We invite you to be part of the process of ongoing change.



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2820


Contact



foundation@scanlonfoundation.org.au

03 9629 1490

scanlonfoundation.org.au

 @Scanlon_Fdn