



Where are all the men?

A report into men's participation within
neighbourhood houses

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INTRODUCTION

This report was completed as a part of a practical placement for Master of Social Work at the University of Melbourne. The research-based placement took place from May to August 2018 at Sussex Neighbourhood House; located in the suburb of Pascoe Vale, eleven kilometres north of Melbourne's central business district, and within Moreland City Council's North-West district.

When looking at the cohorts of people who attended Sussex Neighbourhood House and particularly those who were underrepresented, it became clear that 'men' were quite a challenging group to engage with. This led to questioning whether this is simply a local challenge, if it is a wider issue or even culturally systemic for the Neighbourhood House sector. In proactively reaching out to the peak body Neighbourhood Houses Victoria (NHVic), we were provided with the latest unpublished participant research conducted in 2017. The data clarified that gender participation within Neighbourhood Houses significantly differs, being 25% male and 74% female. When looking at the number of *adult* male participants, this number then reduced to 21%. This led to questions as to why there are such different participation rates – in particular, where are all the men? Why are they so underrepresented within Neighbourhood Houses? What are the perceived barriers influencing their low attendance? And are managers or co-ordinators considering this when developing program activities and courses, particularly when a core role of Neighbourhood Houses is to help reduce social isolation and encourage community connection?

Through a literature review it became apparent that little research had been conducted on why male participation was significantly lower than women within community settings and no research on this matter had been conducted specifically within the Neighbourhood House sector. This project was an opportunity to bring attention to the men who are underrepresented in Neighbourhood Houses, understand how men interact within this environment whilst looking for strategies successful in engaging men of all ages, interests and abilities.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of the research is to explore and understand how men currently engage with Neighbourhood Houses, identify potential barriers to participation and to seek the views from Neighbourhood House managers and staff on how to encourage men's involvement in the sector. A literature review was conducted focussing on community organisations, looking specifically at strategies such as Men's Sheds or Elderly Care activities in which engage men in order to increase social connection and reduce social isolation. An online survey using Survey Monkey was developed to easily access respondents across Victoria, whilst providing opportunity to track and receive responses within a short period of time. Neighbourhood Houses Victoria (NHVic) working in conjunction with Sussex Neighbourhood House, approved our survey.

NHVIC distributed the online survey to 368 of the approximate 400 Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria and received 242 responses within a two-week open survey period. Of the 242 responses, 224 houses provided valid data entries (i.e. answered all relevant questions), equating to an overall response rate of 61%.

When looking at geographic location we were able to see a relatively even spread of responses from across the State, with more than 56% of houses participating from each community type.

COMMUNITY LOCATION	NO. OF NH'S (2017)	SURVEY'S DISTRIBUTED	NO. OF SURVEY RESPONSES	% RESPONSE RATE
Metropolitan	193	192	119	62%
Regional/Rural: population greater than 10,000	49	47	27	57%
Rural: population between 3,000 and 10,000	52	48	33	69%
Rural: population below 3,000	83	81	45	56%
TOTAL	377	368	224	61%

The survey consisted of eleven questions; a combination of four open and seven closed questions (see Appendix 1). Results were collated, calculated, then thematically analysed against the research aims as well as the literature; particularly looking at themes of health and wellbeing, culture, and communication styles. Survey questions and their relevant responses were grouped within appropriate headings for analysis. For example, survey questions 2, 3, and 4 were grouped under the heading 'Success in Attracting Men', questions 5 and 6 within 'What Encourages Male Participation', questions 7 and 8 under 'Barriers to Participation', and question 9 under 'Strategies to Engage Men'.

Upon deeper analysis, correlations could be made against NHVIC's unpublished results from the 2017 participant survey, a database of key demographic and other features of over 47,500 Neighbourhood House participants, to highlight and cross-reference validity of responses from both staff and adult male participants. This has been referred to within the Discussion section of the report.

Discussions with Neighbourhood House managers and staff, Committee of Governance board members, Networkers, Moreland City Council workers, our placement supervisor, male volunteers and tutors were casually conducted over a three-month period and were considered in theme development and the discussion section of this report.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Neighbourhood Houses

Neighbourhood Houses were first established in Victoria in the early 1970s by meeting community needs and offering an 'informal, non-threatening and nurturing environment that supported individualising learning' (Australian Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centre, 2003, p.1). With decades of development, there are now approximately 400 Neighbourhood Houses across metropolitan, regional and rural areas of Victoria. Neighbourhood Houses offer Adult and Community Education (ACE) (ANHLC, 2003) and through a range of activities meet the needs of different groups of people, including those with disabilities, new arrivals, under-employed people and older adults. Neighbourhood Houses play a key role in promoting community participation and increasing social inclusion (Ollis, Starr, Ryan, & Angwin, 2017).

The health situation of Australian men

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW] (2017) states that men are experiencing poorer health than women in general. Australia's 12 million males experience different health outcomes, which are influenced by various factors such as geolocation, socioeconomic status, age and cultural heritage (AIHW, 2017).

Despite suffering from symptoms of chronic ill health and experiencing health problems, many men seldom have access to emotional and personal support and they tend to evade any form of social support during periods of stress and sorrow (Sixsmith and Boneham, 2003).

Men will face some physical health problems and psychosocial challenges that vary from women as they age (Kosberg, 2005). Courtenay (2003) points out that men are more likely than older women to suffer from cardiovascular diseases and death from cancer. He also noted that men have higher rates of substance related disorders and are at greater risk of schizophrenia.

Reviews indicate that there is an increased risk of suicide attempts among men, especially those who are experiencing loss of a spouse (Koseberg, 2005). In terms of psychosocial challenges, Harms (2010) believes that major life challenges, for example, the loss of role, bereavement, retirement, status and income change

can, in turn, adversely affect the self-concept of older men and they would be more likely to suffer from loneliness, isolation, and depression under these situations.

Men's Social Connectedness (2014), a Beyond Blue report, highlights the importance of social connectedness in reducing issues of isolation, depression and suicide. The men participating in the study, who are in their 'middle years', agreed that cases of social isolation impacted on the *individual*, yet they did not correlate the impact with broader social issues. However, there is vast evidence of a direct correlation between social disconnection and other important social issues such as depression and suicide (p.25). Importantly, almost half the men (45%) who participated in the study indicated that they were not entirely satisfied with the number of their social connections (p.30). This is telling, as men's perception of their relationships and "whether they have someone they can talk to about things that matter to them, has been shown to be most strongly correlated with mental health issues" (p.117).

According to a Victorian Department of Health and Human Services paper, 'Engaging men in healthcare' (DHHS, 2015):

"Australian men tend to have smaller social networks than women, fewer intimate friends, and are less likely to have a close confidante other than their partner. Single fathers with young children report the lowest levels of social support and friendship of men and women in all household types. However, there is evidence that men will open up and discuss emotional issues in 'safe' spaces with other men" (p.30).

The men's shed literature

Men's Sheds are community-based organisations which originated in Australia. They provide a safe and friendly environment primarily for older men to do some trade-based activities, such as woodwork or metalwork. It is widely recognised that the provision of a supportive environment to men who are vulnerable and might be at risk of social isolation is valuable (McGeechan et al., 2017). Flood and Blair's research on the effects of Men's Sheds in Australia indicated that men's motivation for participating in a shed are mostly to socialise and meet new friends (Flood & Blair, 2013). Shed members also considered the shed as a place where they pass on their existing skills and learn new skills and this process in some way improves their sense of purpose and achievement (Flood & Blair, 2013; Hansji, Wilson & Cordier, 2015; Ormsby, Stanley, & Jaworski, 2010). In addition, health benefits are facilitated in a direct way through regular organised health checks and health talks; and in an indirect way including recognition of symptoms as well as health information sharing and relevant and understandable advice from peers (Flood & Blair, 2013).

With years of development, the men's shed movement has spread to England, Ireland, Denmark, Canada, New Zealand and other western countries with its role and function significant in different countries (Ahl,

Hedegaard, & Golding, 2017; McGeechan, Richardson, Wilson, O'Neill, & Newbury-Birch, 2017). Studies confirmed the psychological and positive social impacts on the older men in England and suggested that improved social connectedness was the greatest benefit, including reducing social isolation for those who have experienced loss, as well as regaining lost social networks for those who had worked in a male-dominated industries and were retired (McGeechan et al., 2017). It was evident that older men in Ireland were eager for more learning opportunities which could be met through the sheds by informal learning (Carragher & Golding, 2016). Apart from the male learning space, other reasons attracting men to participate were related to having a degree of control over determining what activities take place as well as what could be used by them (Carragher & Golding, 2016). In addition, the role of shed coordinators was considered to initially be important in order to provide technical support however once the shed members had been established the coordinator would usually take a step back (McGeechan et al., 2017).

Men and community participation

Men's involvement in community centres can be affected by several factors including the type of activities on offer, access to services, distance and travel, activity times and venues and their needs. (Nurmi, Mackenzie, Roger, Reynolds, & Urquhart, 2018; Macdonald, Brown, & Gethin, 2009).

Walsh, O'Shea & Scharf (2012) indicate that men seldom appear to independently seek out information directly as they have largely lived their lives according to traditional masculine values of breadwinner and provider and have been socialised to be self-reliant. This makes it more difficult for service providers to engage with them and gain their cooperation. Men are less likely to admit having problems, seek professional assistance and actively participate in interactive therapies (Baptiste, Hardy, & Lewis, 1996; Courtenay, 2003; Koseberg, 2005).

Men's lower participation in community centres compared to women can also be attributed to limited access to services. Men are usually unaware of available services as they are inclined to get information through close contacts such as friends and families (Macdonald, Brown, & Gethin, 2009). Also, they tend to be embarrassed to ask for help and feel they can manage themselves (Macdonald, Brown, & Gethin, 2009). The "men unfriendly" environment is one of the reasons put forward to explain why men do not access community services, as they tend to be female centric, consisting of mainly female staff and clients (Macdonald, Brown, & Gethin, 2009). The majority of social groups and organisations that offer opportunities for people to be creative and to flourish have been established largely by women and are used largely by women (Carragher & Golding, 2015). Available evidence on membership of active retirement groups suggests they are dominated by women and the activities provided are of little interest to men (McKenna, 2009).

Macdonald, Brown and Gethin (2009) pointed out that some activities are not appealing enough to men and this inhibited their interests in community services such as doing crafts and knitting. Moreover, their research indicated that men would feel uncomfortable to attend organised activities and instead, they like to socialise informally with other men, for example, meeting in a park, a pub or a café and talking side by side.

Sixsmith and Boneham (2003) identified a lack of communication skills to negotiate access as a barrier for men to get involved and hence leaving men distanced from their wider community. They also emphasised that men prefer to interact with programs and services that give them the opportunity to utilise existing skills or knowledge or even learn new ones, contribute to others, engage in physical activity and to be with likeminded people. Macdonald, Brown and Gethin (2009) recommended that information about services be shared in the existing networks where men participate, for example, in clubs and pubs, libraries, and men's sheds.

Macdonald, Brown and Gethin (2009) also suggested that socio-cultural factors need to be taken into consideration when developing programs for men, such as creating smoke-free or alcohol-free environments. Also, activities that enhance masculine values such as independence and self-reliance will be more attractive to men (Carragher, 2017; Macdonald, Brown, & Gethin, 2009). In terms of the points of contact with men, Nurmi, Mackenzie, Roger, Reynolds, and Urquhart (2018) addressed the idea that men should be introduced to male-focused community programs before they retire as this could be a protective measure for the development of loneliness and social isolation that might occur when they retire.

2017 NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSE PARTICIPANT SURVEY

Some facts from the Neighbourhood House participants survey 2017 (unpublished NHVic data) provided clarity in understanding male participation in Neighbourhood Houses through overall demographic, geographic, and service lenses.

- 21.5% of all Neighbourhood House participants are adult males over 20 years of age
- 183 Neighbourhood Houses reported adult male participation above the Neighbourhood House average
- 9 had no male participants
- Of the Neighbourhood Houses with above average men's participation rates, 33% ran a men's shed compared to 20% of the Neighbourhood Houses with below average men's participation rates
- Of the Neighbourhood Houses with above average men's participation rates, 29% attended to use a service compared to 11% of the Neighbourhood Houses with below average men's participation rates
- Of the Neighbourhood Houses with above average men's participation rates, 57% of Neighbourhood Houses were rural compared to 41% of the Neighbourhood Houses with below average men's participation rates
- Men attending rural Neighbourhood Houses are 1.5 times more likely to attend to use a service than in metro Neighbourhood Houses
- Of the Neighbourhood Houses with above average men's participation rates, 61% ran activities determined by men aged 45-64 compared to 39% of the Neighbourhood Houses with below average men's participation rates
- Of the Neighbourhood Houses with above average men's participation rates, 35% of men reported having a disability or long-term impairment compared to 21% of the Neighbourhood Houses with below average men's participation rates
- Of the Neighbourhood Houses with above average men's participation rates, 26% attended to do a course or class compared to 33% of the Neighbourhood Houses with below average men's participation rates

- The age groups with the greatest difference between Houses with above and below average male participation were 20-29 (4% higher rate in above average Neighbourhood Houses) and 45-64 (5% higher rate in above average Neighbourhood Houses)
- Neighbourhood Houses with above average rates of male participation accounted for 60% of all adult male participation in NHs

At the time the Neighbourhood House Participant Survey was undertaken, in Victoria:

- 58% of either unemployed or not in the labour force were women compared to 42% men
- 64% of all full-time employees were men
- 32% of part time workers were men
- 75% of unemployed men were looking for full time work

This data suggests men are less likely to be in a position to attend a Neighbourhood House during working hours as they make up the majority of the full-time labour force and the minority of the people either unemployed or not in the labour force.

When looking at age cohorts in Neighbourhood Houses, the largest difference in gender participation was seen within the 30-44-year-old group, where men make up 19.5% of the cohort compared to 80.5% of women. This could potentially be attributed to operational business hours of the Neighbourhood House and availability to access during those times are limited due to employment participation. It is therefore not surprising that women's participation rates are higher participation than men within this cohort, particularly during the years where women disproportionately take on traditional child rearing roles. Notably, of the 19.5% of men attending Neighbourhood Houses between 30-44 years of age, 30.1% of these men classify themselves as having a disability (compared to 11.6% of women).

2018 MEN'S PARTICIPATION SURVEY FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

SUCCESS IN ATTRACTING MEN

Almost 86% of the 224 Neighbourhood House staff respondents to the 2018 male participation survey stated that they had one or more activity that was successful in attracting adult men to their house. When asked to describe these activities *specifically targeted to men*, some key themes emerged. The top theme was 'Men's Shed' (27% of respondents), followed by 'Men's Cooking Education Classes' (14%), and 'Men's Discussion/Support Groups' (11%) which included Older Men's Groups, Men's Forums, and Mental Health Support Groups, for example.

Some Neighbourhood Houses commented that their success was due to understanding the demographic of men in their local area; for example, if their community has a high number of employed men, they deliberately schedule activities outside business hours, or on weekends. Furthermore, where there is a large percentage of new and young families in a community, a Dad's Playgroup was developed as a way to engage and support men (and families) in the area.

When asked to describe the activities where houses see high levels of adult male participation, although *not* specifically targeting men, a range of varied themes emerged. The number one theme (18% of respondents) was around Fitness and Recreation, where more than 68 responses saw high male participation in activities such as gentle exercise, cycling groups, walking groups, yoga, strength training, table tennis, martial arts, community gym, and indoor bowls.

The second most common theme was Business and Technology, where 14% of respondents see male participation within their Computer and IT classes, Tax Help, Small Business Support, Robotics and Computer Programming, and iPhone and Tablet help for example.

The third highest theme was Art & Craft, where 10% of respondents see high male participation within their Painting, Creative Writing, Pottery, Leathercraft, Photography classes, and many more. It is worth noting that Art & Craft classes for people with disability were included in this analysis, which may attribute the higher number of male participation rates.

Further consistent themes included Gardening/Community Garden, Food/Community Meals, Language classes (including English as Alternative Language), Music (e.g. Ukulele, guitar, singing groups), Cooking Education Classes, and Games (e.g. Cards, Chess Club). Social Support groups are also highly attended by men, particularly Alcoholics Anonymous and Gambling Support, as well as general discussion groups around particular interests such as Philosophy, History, Film, and Travel.

WHAT ENCOURAGES MALE PARTICIPATION?

When asked what encouraged adult men to participate in Neighbourhood House activities/courses, 96% of respondents ranked that 'type of activity' was important, fairly important or very important (67% said it was *very important*), followed by 'other men in the activity' (80% important to very important) and that the 'activity was easy to get to' (79% important to very important).

Respondents deemed having an 'informal location', 'activity targeted to adult men' and 'men determining the program design' as the next most important ways to encourage male participation; 72%, 70% and 67% respectively. Interestingly, respondents rated having 'male tutors or facilitators' and 'activities scheduled outside of business hours' as being the least important factors in encouraging male participation. Several participants were aware that the scheduled time of the program/activity depended on the age of the man they were targeting. For example, one respondent said,

"it is important for younger men that activities are scheduled on weekends and in the evening and this is when we run sustainability activities, community garden group, shed activities and some cultural groups as these activities attract a mix of ages".

Some houses considered scheduled time as not so important, stating;

“after hour timing is not so important to our cohort who tend to be retired or people who are unemployed or living with a medical condition or disability”.

Some respondents indicated that offering free food would attract more men to participate, whilst others pointed out the importance of using secondary data such as local council statistics and Census data to gauge what might be needed in the community.

There are different pathways that lead participants to attend a Neighbourhood House, therefore we asked respondents what they considered to be the main referral process/s for adult men to participate in their Neighbourhood House. The top two referral processes for male participants (both 78.13% of respondents) were ‘suggested by a partner or family’ and ‘encouraged by a friend who already participates’, which reflected the literature on referral processes for both Home Care and Men’s Shed participation. The third highest response was ‘self-referral’ (75.52%) followed by ‘saw a leaflet or brochure’ (65.10%). Only 13.54% assumed it mandatory for adult men to attend, such as completing a Community Correction Order, whilst 5.21% of respondents were unsure how adult men were referred. When provided an ‘other’ option with comments section, two strong themes presented. The first was being referred through social media advertising (Facebook) and the second, most importantly, was being referred by their doctor or health practitioner.

BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

There are many reasons why men may or may not participate within their Neighbourhood House and we sought to find out potential barriers which could potentially restrict or even actively discourage male participation. One reason could be that a Neighbourhood House does not or cannot offer a program that men wish to attend. We asked if Neighbourhood Houses had received requests from men for specific programs or activities that they could not offer. Whilst the majority of houses declared that they had not received requests that they couldn’t implement (77.63% said ‘No’), forty-nine respondents said ‘yes’ they couldn’t implement a program or activity (22.37% of respondents). We then asked the ‘yes’ respondents to tell us what type of activity was requested by men and what the Neighbourhood House’s barrier to implementing it is/was. Noting that this was an open-text box for comment with no pre-determined answers provided, the overwhelming response for activity type (45% of responses) was ‘Men’s Shed’. It is important to note that almost 16% of total responses also included specific trade activities, such as welding, or woodwork, which could be facilitated by a ‘Shed’. Therefore, we could attribute over 61% of responses being for ‘Shed’ activities, with 70% of these responses coming from metropolitan Neighbourhood Houses. The

second highest response was for 'Social Support' type programs (18%), such as Mental Health programs, anger management, life skills for men series, or even a men's discussion group, with 63% of these responses from regional or rural Neighbourhood Houses. The third highest response was for Cooking Education (11%), which saw a 60%/40% split between Metro and Regional/Rural houses respectively.

The barriers to implementing these programs were quite consistent; for 'Shed' activities, barriers were predominantly around budget restriction or lack of space to facilitate. 'Social Support' activities seemed predominantly restricted through lack of appropriate tutors, staff or volunteers to facilitate. Barriers for implementing 'Cooking Education' appeared to be a mix of all three; finding appropriate tutors, cost-efficiency and lack of facilities/equipment.

To further assess potential barriers for men in participating within a Neighbourhood House, we provided a list of potential barriers and asked respondents to rate their perceived importance from 'not at all important', to 'very important'. Examples provided included;

- Cultural and social views of masculinity
- Stigmatised environment
- Unaware of service
- Physical access (e.g. ramps, lifts, etc)
- Financial cost
- Transport limitations
- Limited proficiency in English
- Lack of programs in relevant community languages
- Lack of confidence
- And 'Other'

An overwhelming 87.5% of responses indicated that being 'unaware of service' was the number one barrier to participation (rating it important to very important), with 40% rating it as very important. Some respondents assumed that men would access programs if they knew about them, stating that;

"marketing and program awareness is always an issue for neighbourhood houses."

Surprisingly, the number two ranked barrier was 'Lack of confidence', with over 75% of responses rating it important to very important. The third highest response was 'Cultural and social views of masculinity', with

more than 56% of respondents rating it important to very important for male participation in their house. Five respondents stated that men's perception of a Neighbourhood House as a place for women inhibited their interests to join in;

"many of our migrant men's ethnic groups see the neighbourhood house as a place for women"

"sometimes a view by men is that the neighbourhood house is mainly for women and children"

By contrast, Neighbourhood Houses did not see 'Physical access' aspects such as ramps or lifts as a challenge for them, with almost 61% stating its importance as only slightly or not at all. Interestingly, one third of the respondents identified language as an obstacle for adult men to participate in their Neighbourhood House, with almost 34% believing that 'limited proficiency in English' or 'lack of programs in relevant community languages' rated important to very important.

STRATEGIES TO ENGAGE MEN

When engaging and communicating to different cohorts, multiple strategies can be utilised by an organisation. The survey asked Neighbourhood Houses what strategies they have successfully used, giving them five options, plus an open 'other' comment option. The strategy options included;

- Activities targeted to adult men
- Partnerships/relationships with other service providers/organisations (e.g. Community Health Organisation etc.)
- Partnerships/relationships with other community groups (e.g. sports clubs, men's sheds, CFA etc.)
- Targeted advertising (e.g. advertising in men's shed newsletter/talk to the men's football team)
- Consulting with adult men about their needs

Partnerships with Community groups saw the highest response, with almost 60% of respondents choosing this as their main strategy, closely followed by Consultation with adult men (58%), and Partnerships with other service providers (56%).

When analysing the data across community type, the response split between Metropolitan and Regional/Rural strategies were quite even. Metropolitan Neighbourhood Houses use Targeted Advertising as their most popular strategy (57% versus 43% for Regional/Rural), whereas Regional and Rural houses

seem to utilise their relationships with community groups slightly more than their Metro counterparts (51% versus 49% for Metropolitan).

Analysis of the 'other' comments saw three key strategy themes. The first being the importance of having men on staff and or male volunteers at the front desk or on the Committee of Governance. Interestingly this contradicts responses from what 'encourages male participation' where having male tutors / facilitators was ranked as one of the least important factors. The second theme was around the concept of running 'free' activities, which saw male participation increase. The third theme was the importance of conducting a community needs assessment to understand what men in the local community want and how they wish to engage.

DISCUSSION

In analysis of the survey data, new themes appeared that both complemented and contradicted the literature. The following discussion section links both literature and previous NHVic data to newly discovered themes within the latest survey results. Discussion themes have been analysed within the context of the research aims; in exploring and understanding how men currently engage with Neighbourhood Houses, identifying potential barriers to participation, and assessing strategies to encourage men's involvement in the sector.

TYPE OF ACTIVITY

The Men's Participation Survey respondents indicated the importance of activity type in engaging men and whilst particular activities and courses may attract high male participation, the benefits from the activity differ, as well as the depth of 'engagement'. The attributes of courses and activities can have quite different outcomes for an individual, therefore the value of the outcome needs to be considered when developing programs. Some activities are transactional in nature, whilst others are proven to provide health and wellbeing outcomes for men. If a key role of Neighbourhood Houses is to reduce social isolation, we therefore need to look at male participation through the lens of meeting a social need and to increase health and wellbeing outcomes.

In NHVic's unpublished data from 2017, they asked participants 'What is the main benefit for you in coming to the house / centre?'. Participants who said they were attending the Neighbourhood House for advice / help, to attend a course / class or a support or social group, saw the biggest benefit of the Neighbourhood House as 'improving their personal wellbeing or confidence'. Interestingly, those that said they were attending the Neighbourhood House for a service or to volunteer, saw the main benefit as 'helping their community'. Unsurprisingly, those that perceive their interaction with the Neighbourhood House as purely transactional may not be conscious of incidental benefits to their health and wellbeing.

This then raises the question of how programs are inherently run; for example, a computer course could be considered transactional in nature, however, if this course operated in a small group setting with a social tea-break included, there is the potential benefit of meeting new people and making friends, which indirectly results in a positive health and wellbeing outcome. Participants coming in to 'use a service', for example to visit the social enterprise bakery, access Centrelink or attend a one-on-one Tax Help session, receive a transactional benefit and not necessarily one of improved personal wellbeing. Neighbourhood Houses are also heavily influenced by the availability of funding with particular criteria which can shape the nature of activities on offer. Perhaps one way to increase government funding support particularly for health and wellbeing programs, is for houses to develop clear key performance indicators and therefore proving successful outcomes for participating individuals.

OPERATIONAL HOURS

The operational hours and activity scheduling at a Neighbourhood House may have more impact on male participation than survey results assume. In question five, we asked respondents what they think encourages male participation in their House. More than 53% deemed that having activities scheduled outside business hours was of only slight importance or of no importance at all (25% of no importance).

It remains unclear as to what extent the existing cohorts that use a Neighbourhood House is reflective of the community need or is limited *because* they do not offer activities outside of business hours for those who are employed. It seems Neighbourhood Houses generally have multiple activities for those who are retired, however fewer activities cater for a younger, employed demographic. In saying this, there are some Houses which have a clear understanding of the make-up of their community and their scheduling needs, with one stating;

"It is important for younger men that activities are scheduled on weekends and in the evening and that is when we run sustainability activities, community garden group, shed activities and some cultural groups because these activities attract a mix of ages. Community lunches and computer groups mainly attract older men and we hold those during school hours."

According to research conducted by the Men's Health Information and Resource Centre at the University of Western Sydney (2009), in order to minimise potential risk of social isolation post retirement, it is important to engage men in healthy group or social activities prior to retirement age. This establishes a

sense of practice with socialising outside of employment, which therefore reduces barriers to participating in later years.

There is also a sense of catering to those who already participate, rather than asking those who do not. This dilemma reinforces the need for Community Needs Assessments, in order to understand a local area, and ask them what they would like to see from their Neighbourhood House. This has the potential to open up a whole new range of programming and to increase participation.

LACK OF CONFIDENCE

Question eight of the survey asked respondents to consider what they see as barriers to participation for men in their House and surprisingly, the number two ranked barrier was 'Lack of confidence', with over 75% of respondents rating it important to very important. The high response rate prompted further consideration of how the question was interpreted in the context of being a barrier in attending a Neighbourhood House. We clearly identified the limitation in the framing of this question and the interpretation it then becomes open to.

One respondent commented in the open text response that getting tutors to run activities was a barrier and that this was 'due to their lack of confidence' in running a successful program. Other respondents commented on general male apathy or not wanting to appear 'needy' as other barriers related to 'lack of confidence'.

While a number of studies indicate that men tend to have higher self-esteem and confidence than women (Orth et al, 2010, Critcher & Dunning, 2009), men are not a homogenous cohort. A number of factors affect levels of self-confidence as well as confidence in services. For example, recent migrants with lower English language and cultural proficiency (Beste, 2015), people with low educational attainment (WHO, nd) and older adults (Orth et al, 2010) have all been identified as experiencing lower levels of confidence or self-esteem. In the context of Neighbourhood House practice where a number of disadvantaged groups participate at rates equal to and above background population, and the emphasis on inclusion, access and equity as principles of the Neighbourhood House sector, their perceptions may reflect consideration of men in target cohorts where confidence levels may be lower.

The ambiguity of this question means we are unable to draw conclusions with confidence.

UNAWARE OF SERVICE

Survey results showed that most respondents considered lack of awareness of service as the biggest barrier to men's participation. Although Neighbourhood Houses have made efforts in advertising and promoting activities through channels such as social media, emailing to members, and local brochure and newsletter distribution, awareness continues to be a significant challenge. Some possible reasons may be that senior men are less active on social media and younger men are occupied with work. This is consistent with literature, outlining that online information is at times not readily accessible to all men and their varying comfort levels using computer technology or mobiles (Nurmi, Mackenzie, Roger, Reynolds, & Urquhart, 2018).

Men who participate in Neighbourhood Houses were typically recommended by peers or encouraged by partners or family members as the main referral pathways. This is also consistent with literature on Men's Shed referral, stating that it is predominantly the man's partner who actively encourages them to participate (Golding, Kimberly, Foley, & Brown, 2008). Furthermore, according to Macdonald, Brown and Gethin (2009), men are more likely to attend an activity through word of mouth, specifically through a partner or friend's recommendation, as they naturally consider these sources as trustworthy and reliable.

The survey data showed other referral opportunities through doctors and local health practitioners encouraged male participation within a Neighbourhood House. This is a clear and beneficial channel for houses to educate health professionals of their local offering of health and wellbeing activities and to have trusted and credible advocates in the community. In building these relationships, these facilities could be a potential canvas for promotional material (and cross-promotion of health material in a Neighbourhood House), or simply enable a Neighbourhood House to be added to health and community referral posters and local directories (for example, Moreland City Council's poster from MerriHealth).

MALE TUTORS / FACILITATORS

Although survey results showed that having a male tutor or facilitator was considered one of the least important factors in encouraging male participation, some respondents claimed the opposite, stating that having men as tutors, on the front desk, as volunteers, as staff or on the Committee of Governance, was an important strategy in engaging men. Although there is little information illustrating the importance of male

tutors and facilitators to encourage male participation, it can be presumed that the requirement of a male tutor or facilitator depends on the type of activity and its intended goal. For activities with general skills development as a primary goal, such as language or computer technology classes, the gender of tutors is not seemingly important. However, for activities with practice skills relating to male-dominant industries (i.e. trades-based such as woodwork or metalwork), or traditionally female dominant industries (i.e. textiles and knitting), a male tutor may be more beneficial for male participants, for the sake of sharing similar communication and learning styles (Macdonald, Brown, & Gethin, 2009). Furthermore, it is clearly important to consider male facilitators for social support groups (i.e. Men's Discussion Group), in order to build a relationship of trust and rapport with an individual. For recreational activities however, successful participation rates are usually reflected by the facilitator's content and personality and not necessarily impacted by gender. It is important to engage in participant feedback and ask if gender (both participant and facilitator) impacts the benefits the participant gains from the activity.

OTHER COMMUNITY COMMITMENTS

One significant limitation in this research is in finding out how big a problem male participation within Neighbourhood Houses actually is. Although there is ample evidence that men are more likely to suffer from depression as a result of isolation and loneliness than women particularly after retirement age; what we do not know is how prolific the problem is. Even though Neighbourhood Houses are not seeing high levels of male participation, gender differentiation could be more so apparent within particular community types or even local suburbs, depending on what other activities are available in the area. One respondent commented that although they were not seeing high male participation in their Neighbourhood House, men were engaged with other organisations in their community for example Church groups, cultural clubs, the Returned and Services League (RSL), Rotary, or sporting clubs. This is where community partnerships could become more important for the future to sustain activities, make them financially viable, effectively utilise space and facilities and build stronger community networks.

This reinforces the importance of Neighbourhood Houses conducting a Community Needs Assessment for their local area; to map and understand existing organisations that are operating, which may provide networking opportunities or partnerships. In saying this, perhaps there is too much expectation placed on some Neighbourhood Houses to cater for everyone, when they are only one avenue for a community to engage with.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations have been developed based on a combination of the following;

- Successful male participation examples and insights provided by Neighbourhood Houses through 2018 survey data
- Literature research outlining evidence-based practices
- The authors interpretation and linkage to the above

1. Conduct a Community Needs Assessment to understand your audience

Understanding the needs of a local community and being able to help fulfil any potential gap, is a guaranteed method to increase participation and encourage interaction. For some communities this may result in understanding the demographic of the area such as: the employment rates (which can impact the scheduling of activities, for example outside business hours or on weekends), dwelling types, ethnicity and cultural considerations and household dynamics (i.e. young families or retired couples). Understanding community demographics can ultimately impact the types of activities or services required. Although community needs assessments require time and resources, they are well worth the investment to ensure Neighbourhood Houses remain relevant in the community and future proof their offering.

2. Develop and implement a sector wide marketing and communications strategy

An overwhelming 87.5% of responses indicated that being 'unaware of service' was the number one barrier to participation (rating it important to very important), with 40% rating it as very important.

It is recommended that a sector wide marketing and communications strategy be developed, led by NHVic. There is an opportunity to build awareness of the Neighbourhood House brand overall with consistency and efficiency. Communications should direct people to the NHVic website and encourage individuals to search

for their nearest Neighbourhood House. Consistent and clear communication of the sector ensures that Neighbourhood Houses become top of mind awareness for everyone, particularly when people are moving to new suburbs around the state.

Within this communications strategy a resource toolkit could be provided to all Neighbourhood Houses, including a yearly events calendar, particularly to promote health and wellbeing days through social media content, for example, Are You Ok? Day or Movember.

3. Consider the referral process in direct marketing and communication tactics

Referral processes for men are predominantly through word of mouth from their partners or friends. Neighbourhood Houses could consider directing their marketing attention to these individuals. Implement 'bring a buddy' days or house 'open days' to encourage families (and men) to come along. By making men feel comfortable within a space they are more likely to be open to seeing the range of activities on offer.

Educate local doctors and health professionals in the area of your Neighbourhood House offering, particularly of courses/activities which lead to health and wellbeing outcomes for men. Use these professionals as a strong referral source and advocates for the house. As mentioned in the discussion section, building these relationships could result in a potential canvas for promotional House material for health-related events or activities.

4. Evaluate your activity offering

As the 'type of activity' was considered the most important method in engaging men (96% of Neighbourhood Houses chose this), it is recommended to regularly assess and evaluate the program offering. Within this evaluation consider what else is being offered in the community, understanding that there is not necessarily a need to compete with other organisations and instead provide a point of difference for men in the community, for example running a Dad's Playgroup on a Saturday or facilitating a Repair Café.

Although there are clearly activities which have proven success in male participation such as Men's Sheds and Men's Cooking Education Classes, it is understood that these activities require specific facilities or infrastructure, materials, and funding which are not always readily available. It is recommended to consider a range of fitness and recreational activities from martial arts to walking groups which are cost efficient, are proven to have strong male participation (if the activity is suitable to men in your community), and lead to tangible health and wellbeing outcomes. Research by Macdonald, Brown, and Gethin (2009) outlined the importance of side by side communication for men rather than face to face and therefore strategy focused

activities such as board games, cards, or chess are considered popular, whilst also providing benefits to personal wellbeing.

5. Evaluate your event offering

Neighbourhood Houses have seen success with bigger annual events such as community festivals, however one recommendation to consider is hosting frequent events at a smaller scale. Some Neighbourhood Houses exemplified success with family events such as 'star gazing nights' or a 'community picnic', which engages men and families in a relaxed setting. Literature also examined talks or educational conference events, where male participation was increased due to interesting topic discussions or hearing from an 'expert in their field'. This could be facilitated by individuals and organisations with a high profile, such as Mental Health First Aid officers or The Heart Foundation or even a local community member who can volunteer their professional material.

Watching sporting events is another opportunity to engage men in a casual Neighbourhood House environment. Hosting family Grand Final events is a great way to engage the community with a friendly football game, food and watching the match on TV.

6. The Way to a Man's Heart is Through His Stomach

Food, cooking, and the concept of free meals was a consistent theme throughout the data. This may be a great method in bringing men to the house for initial engagement however bespoke strategies need to be considered to encourage longer-term participation within a specific Neighbourhood House or area.

7. Further research to consider – talk with men!

The limitation of the survey data was that it was only directed to and responded by Neighbourhood House staff. As the data holds their opinion, there is no way to know for sure what is preventing men accessing the service. The best result will always come from talking with men! Finding out their barriers to participating, asking them what they like doing, ask them how they want to engage and what is important to them. Only by understanding these details will Neighbourhood Houses truly understand how to increase male participation.

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