

## Report card on measuring community strength in Victoria: 2004

This report card gives the 2004 update of Victoria's indicators of community strength. The 2001 to 2003 indicators were released by the Department for Victorian Communities (DVC) last year in the report *Indicators of Community Strength in Victoria*.

### How the indicators were created

The indicators were taken from the Department of Human Services' Victorian Population Health Survey – an annual, ongoing, telephone survey of 7500 Victorians over the age of 18.

The sample is selected by random digit dialling and the person with the nearest birthday is selected for interview. It is impossible for a survey of this type to ensure that equal numbers of men/women and age groups answer the phone and the data are therefore weighted to the age, sex and geographic distribution of the population.

The survey is conducted in English and in six other major community languages: Mandarin, Cantonese, Vietnamese, Italian, Greek and Macedonian.

More information about the survey can be found in the report Victorian Population Health Survey 2003 available at [www.dhs.vic.gov.au](http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au)

### Future work

In early 2005, DVC will release a report of the indicators broken down by each Local Government Area. It will then begin to examine the influences on community strength; the relationship the indicators have with other important outcomes such as education and community safety; and the role that government plays in community strengthening strategies.

DVC will also work with the VicHealth funded Victorian Community Indicators Project to help local government identify their own local indicators and to develop a broader set of indicators of community wellbeing across Local Government Areas in Victoria.

In addition to work in Victoria, DVC is working with the Australian Bureau of Statistics to develop a consistent set of indicators that can compare aspects of community wellbeing across places and jurisdictions nationally.

### Contact us

For information about this work please call DVC's Strategic Policy and Research division on (03) 9208 3849 or visit [www.dvc.vic.gov.au](http://www.dvc.vic.gov.au)

### Minister's Comments

Our own experience tells us that stronger communities, communities with high levels of social capital, are better places to live in.

But our research shows that stronger communities do more than this. They produce better educational outcomes, have better health status and higher levels of prosperity.

That understanding drove the Bracks Government's decision to establish the Department for Victorian Communities.

It's an approach that puts a priority on working with communities – working with people and organisations at a local level to find practical solutions to local problems.

And it's an approach with an optimistic message – Victorians do care and they do want to be involved.

That belief is supported by this latest report on community strength indicators. Despite a changing world and the social pressure this change produces, Victorians are still very positive about their local community. More people now say they feel safer, valued and involved in their community.

Most encouragingly, 90% of Victorians still feel they can get help when they need it. This social support is at the heart of what makes a community strong. It reflects Victorians' willingness to offer real support to people experiencing disadvantage or misfortune, both within their local community and abroad.

Over the next 12 months, the Victorian Government will therefore make further substantial investments in the ability of stronger communities to reduce disadvantage in Victoria.

**JOHN THWAITES MP**  
Minister for Victorian Communities

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## Background

In 2004 DVC released a report outlining time trends in a set of indicators of community strength for Victoria. The indicators covered topics including attitudes to community life, ability to get help when needed, and levels of participation. This report card updates the previously reported time trends with new 2004 data.

While the DVC indicators focus on the outcomes for communities of community strengthening actions, the exact combination of ingredients needed to create those outcomes is not well understood. It is increasingly clear however, that government, business and community each have a contribution to make.

DVC measures community strength in order to monitor the overall effect of community strengthening actions over time. The indicators, along with other research that DVC is undertaking, will become part of an evidence base that can be used to better describe the process of community strengthening.

## Attitudes to community life

	2001	2004	
Feeling safe on the street alone after dark	55%	61%	↑
Feeling there are opportunities to have a real say on issues that are important	36%	46%	↑
Feeling valued by society	42%	53%	↑
Feeling multiculturalism makes life in the area better	57%	66%	↑
Enjoys living among people of different lifestyles	69%	74%	↑

Despite living in a world with new uncertainties and pressures, an increasing number of Victorians feel positive about the local community they live in. More Victorians say they feel safe on the street alone after dark; that there are opportunities to have a real say on issues that are important to them; and that diversity improves life in their local area.

Since 2002 Victorian Government departments have been working together to create new approaches to some of the issues that affect community life. Results of this partnership approach include the Women's Safety Strategy, the Indigenous Family Violence Strategy and an extensive state-wide community consultation about the new Multicultural Victoria Act and the Local Government (Democratic Reform) Act. DVC has also held eight *In the Community* meetings in metropolitan and regional Victoria, which model new ways of bringing local communities together to create local solutions to local issues.

## Participation

	2001	2004	
Volunteers (yes)	21%	23%	↔
Volunteers (yes and sometimes)	32%	31%	↔
Is a member of an organised group – sports, school, church community action or professional group	68%	63%	↓
Is a member of sports group	29%	29%	↔
Is a member of school group	15%	16%	↔
Part of a group that has taken local action on behalf of the community in the last twelve months	33%	39%	↑
Attendance at a community event in the last six months	45%	50%	↑

Levels of participation in volunteering and sports and school groups have remained stable over the last four years. Membership of all groups declined from 2002 to 2003 but has remained stable since. The number of people who are members of groups that have taken local action in the last twelve months, or who have attended community events, has increased.

Over the last year the State Government has launched a range of new strategies for improving participation. These include the Volunteering and Community Enterprise Strategy which encourages people to contribute to their community through activities like volunteering, and the Healthy and Active Victoria strategy which aims to increase participation in physical activity, and increase involvement in local community activities.

## Ability to get help when needed

	2001	2004	
Can get help from friends family or neighbours when needed	92%	93%	↔
Could raise \$2000 in two days in emergency	79%	82%	↔

A very high percentage of Victorians still feel they are able to get help through social networks when they need it. The ability to raise money in an emergency is significant because of the buffer this provides against sudden minor emergencies (e.g. a car breaking down) cascading into more significant problems (e.g. inability to get to work).

The social disadvantage behind the twenty percent of Victorians who say they cannot raise \$2000 will be a priority issue for the Victorian Government during 2005.

## Conclusions

Aspects of community strength have improved over the past four years in Victoria but there is still work to be done. Community strength can be improved through relatively simple actions by communities, governments and businesses. This includes better land use planning, encouraging participation in sporting, recreational, cultural and civic life, promoting and supporting community leadership, and ensuring there is an economic component to community strengthening strategies.

The DVC indicators allow us to monitor, discuss and act on new strategies. They put a spotlight on important community strength issues and allow these issues to be debated. This ensures opportunities for policy action in this important area are not lost.