

# A Conversation about Community Safety

The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) brought together representatives from a diverse range of culturally diverse, religious, and community groups. This is a summary of the facilitated conversation on the topic of community safety.

“If society has a problem it is sometimes projected on minority groups especially when times get tough”

Quote from ECCV Conversation about Community Safety

## Key Consultation Insights

### Key points

The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) hosted a meeting of a group of representatives from faith-specific groups, community organisations, and peak bodies with an interest in cultural diversity to have an open conversation on community harmony on 29 August 2017 at the Islamic Museum of Australia.

Group members were asked three questions to guide the conversation on community harmony:

- How safe do you feel?
- What makes people safe in your community?
- What can we do to make that better?

This document summaries the discussion of the participants.

### Personal safety

Participants discussed their views on issues related to personal safety.

One of the participants emphasised that he felt safe in Australia in terms of crime but wouldn't sometimes feel safe to express his point of views.

A woman who wears visible religious dress made the point that she doesn't feel as safe as in previous years when walking in the street and altered to her situation that she needed to be more vigilant.

One person expressed her frustration about having to justify her faith all the time: “I feel I'm constantly defending my faith. People are challenging me and get surprised to hear my views and that I am just an ordinary person. “

Another participant underlined that she felt unsafe when walking her dog.

“I have been walking my dog in the past few months at night and I don’t feel as safe anymore. I used to not lock doors and now I lock doors.”

One participant made the point that health and wellbeing are key to community safety and less so global occurrences. The person highlighted the importance of the accessibility of public transport and local health services and that her perception of safety was associated with her relationships to the neighbours. Generally she felt very safe in the community.

One participant raised concerns about prevalent Antisemitism in Australia and the discomfort and insecurity this causes:

“Since I was seven years, there has been Antisemitism all the time, even in Caulfield that you think is all Jewish. I get hate mail and chastising messages on the Internet. There are Nazi swastikas going up in my local area every week and are painted on people’s homes and cars. It is a bit scary even just going to the synagogue. “

A participant mentioned that he felt physically safe and lived in a neighbourhood with fairly low crime rates but that used multiple identities to adapt to the situations he encountered.

A participant expressed his views that Australia can feel less safe in areas with diverse population groups. The point was raised that it is important for individuals to actively define one’s own safety and to be flexible in one’s choices:

“For me safety is about choice. I made the conscious decision to live in a quiet neighbourhood.”

One participant raised issues relating to people irresponsibly using mobile phones while walking in the streets. It was mentioned that the irresponsible usage of mobile phones created discomfort for many people especially for people who had mobility issues.

### **Fear as a factor**

Participants raised their concerns about fear being used to influence people in a negative way.

The participant commented that “fear mongering can make people hate other people who they actually don’t hate” and that “fear makes people go on the defensive who might not be racist.”

A participant raised his concerns about scapegoating minority group and made the point that:

“If society has a problem it is sometimes projected on minority groups especially when times get tough.”

### **Media and fear**

Participants highlighted the importance that media outlets played in the context of in fostering certain perceptions and attitudes.

One participant pointed to the power of the media: “Politicians and the media can escalate blame and fear towards minorities as a distraction or way of entrenching their power. “

Another participant mentioned that there is an over-reporting of national security issues in the media.

“I just get very uncomfortable with the trend towards criminalisation and law and order. What is going on with that concentration on law and order? They push the national security barrier way too hard. It is whatever the media decides they are going to push and then sometimes the politicians push that too.”

A participant also mentioned the conflicting nature between the right to freedom of expression and the expressions of hatred.

One participant underlined the importance of the code of conduct of journalist and its relevance in the context of responsible media coverage.

### **Suggestions for improving community safety**

Participants were asked what could be done to improve community safety. One of the suggestions that were made was reinvigorating the ‘Neighbourhood Watch’ program of Victoria Police.

One participant underlined how essential it is to create local jobs and employment and to focus more on community education rather than building “security walls”.

One solution that was brought forward was to focus more on building accessible and safe public places and community spaces.

An observation was made to include a broader range of people in conversations on community safety. A participant expressed his views “that it would be good to reach out to One Nation supporters who are as fearful as us.”

It was further suggested holding community roundtables in attempt to bring security personnel and community members closer together and to enhance people's knowledge on safety in the community.

"I love to see a roundtable discussion where you get security people talking to community members."

### Future Directions

ECCV advocates the following:

- A culturally responsive roundtable discussion on how to keep oneself safe in the community and at home.
- More displays in public places that showcase diversity and make people feel more included.
- Discussions of community organisations with the Victorian Government on issues of community safety and social inclusion such as
  - The safety of people and families who visibly identify as being religious
  - The safety of shops and homes which are owned by culturally diverse people
  - The safety of culturally diverse people in their neighbourhood
  - The safety of vulnerable people such as people with a disability and seniors
  - Enhanced employment opportunities for culturally diverse community members.
- Victorian and Local Government initiatives that continue to focus on building accessible and safe public places and community spaces.

### About ECCV Social Cohesion Policy Briefs

ECCV is the peak advocacy organisation for ethnic and multicultural groups in Victoria and consults with communities when their voices are not heard in the policy process. ECCV's social cohesion policy briefs are short snapshots from our roundtable discussions on social cohesion issues. They are not forums or education events. Culturally diverse community members, leaders and service providers are invited to attend both open and closed discussions on what is an evolving and complex issue.

To respond to the increasing rate of social change and also government policies on social cohesion, ECCV has developed a new way of consulting, analysing and sharing insights from each roundtable that give a voice to multicultural Victoria on issues that matter. We post our briefs online within three weeks. The briefs are a combination of direct quotes from participants, policy analysis and human observation grounded in ECCV's 43 years of consultation with multicultural Victorians.

To receive future ECCV Social Cohesion Policy Briefs please subscribe by emailing [eccv@eccv.org.au](mailto:eccv@eccv.org.au) with the subject 'Subscribe to Social Cohesion PB'.

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