The People's Report #1:
Exploring community-led action to
address discrimination in Merri-bek

Evaluation Report

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Author: Dr. Emanuela Savini, Public Value Studio

The People's Report

is a model designed to provide deeper, more nuanced understanding of issues important to community in a way that is underpinned by a strong connection, sense of trust and a model of reciprocity.

We acknowledge Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people as the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waterways in the area now known as Merri-bek. We acknowledge that sovereignty of those lands has never been ceded and right of all First Nations people to self-determination. We celebrate and pay respect to Elders past and present.

Photo credit: An image of the Ballerrt Mooroop site by Petr Svoboda.

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Introduction

The People's Report pilot was designed to generate deeper, more nuanced understandings of issues that matter to the Merri-bek community, using an approach grounded in trust, reciprocity, and shared ownership. Drawing on Participatory Action Research (PAR), the project shifted the dynamic from research *on* communities to research *with* communities. Its premise is simple but powerful: those with lived experience and close ties to their communities are best placed to elicit insights that might not otherwise surface, while also developing their expertise as civic leaders. This shift created a level playing field between "researchers" and "participants," recognising both as knowledge holders.

The pilot aimed to increase understanding of how discrimination manifests locally; identify purposeful, community-led actions; strengthen belonging and connection; build confidence in civic participation; and provide meaningful professional development for the Community Researchers. Developed with Community Researchers, it was guided by two questions:

— *How can we make our communities more welcoming, where people are less likely to experience discrimination?*
— *How can we support communities to feel more capable and motivated to respond to discrimination?*

Through a comprehensive program of induction and training in ethics, facilitation, and engagement design, Community Researchers were carefully equipped to lead conversations within their own networks. Their efforts were supported by scaffolding from the project team, including planning templates, ethical protocols, discussion guides, mentoring, and regular check-ins. With this foundation, each researcher was able to design and carry out engagements in ways appropriate to their communities while still working to the agreed research questions. The process not only generated valuable insights but also built lasting skills in research, analysis, and leadership.

The pilot demonstrated the power of this model: it created richer insights into lived experiences of discrimination, built community capacity, and generated strong themes and recommendations for action. At the same time, the project showed how difficult it can be to develop recommendations that are both actionable and community-led without the policy context that council staff bring, making collaboration in the analysis stage essential. This approach harnessed the expertise of both council staff and community, moving beyond models where data is collected and interpreted by staff or consultants alone to one where community members contribute their own insights, resulting in recommendations that were more grounded and authentic.

Overall, *The People's Report* showed what is possible when communities are not just consulted but entrusted to lead. It stands as a promising example of how councils can support more reciprocal, community-centred, and empowering forms of engagement.

The People's Report Methodology

This project was undertaken using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach. PAR is a recognised methodology that shifts research from being conducted *on* communities to being conducted *with* them. In this project, five Community Researchers were recruited, trained, and supported to design and implement engagements within their own networks. This ensured that the knowledge produced was grounded in lived experience and offered more nuanced, context-rich insights into how discrimination is experienced and how communities envision solutions.

The following section describes the process that was undertaken, from recruitment and training through to data collection, analysis, and the development of recommendations.

Recruitment of Community Researchers

The recruitment process began with 29 applications. From these, 10 candidates were interviewed, and five were ultimately selected.

Final selection of five Community Researchers was based on alignment with the project's evaluation objectives, including:
- Strong connection to under-represented cohorts.
- Ability to approach conversations with openness and without confirmation bias.
- Commitment to a solutions-focused orientation.
- Strong interpersonal and facilitation skills.
- Alignment between their professional/personal aspirations and the potential outcomes of the project.

Induction and engagement planning

Community Researchers then participated in a full-day induction workshop. This introduced the purpose of the project and clarified the research questions, which centred on how communities might become more welcoming and how people could be better supported to respond to discrimination.

The day also included:
- Anti-racism presentation – led by Associate Professor Mario Peucker (Victoria University).
- Ethics of engagement training – covering informed consent, voluntary participation, and cultural safety.

- Facilitation skills – discussion and activities to build confidence in leading group conversations.
- Engagement planning – introduction of a structured template for designing engagement activities.

Using the template provided, each Community Researcher developed an Engagement Plan, which required them to consider:
- Who their engagement would focus on and why.
- When and where the engagement would take place.
- Which methods and discussion prompts would be most effective.
- How to ensure cultural safety and ethical practice.
- How discussions would be documented and consent obtained.

The project team provided one-to-one support to refine these plans, offering guidance on the design of questions, the use of consent forms, and strategies for keeping conversations solutions-oriented.

Data collection and analysis

Equipped with their plans and materials, Community Researchers went on to implement their engagements in ways appropriate to their contexts - ranging from informal community gatherings to discussions embedded in everyday activities. A mid-point group meeting in February 2025 allowed researchers to share challenges, successes, and peer support, followed by individual check-ins in March to monitor progress and prepare for analysis.

To support consistency, researchers were asked to complete an analysis worksheet. This guided them to summarise who they had spoken with, describe recurring themes, highlight divergent perspectives, and compile suggestions linked to the research questions. They were encouraged to include direct quotes where possible and to capture "out-of-the-box" ideas that might otherwise be overlooked.

On 15 March 2025, the group came together for an analysis workshop. Each researcher presented their findings, after which the group collectively identified connections, contradictions, and overarching themes. Through facilitated discussion, the researchers refined these into a smaller set of shared themes and drafted recommendations linked to each. This process balanced individual reflection with collective sense-making, reinforcing the collaborative ethos of PAR.

The initial recommendations were consolidated into *The People's Report*.

From recommendations to action

Recognising that further work was needed to clarify how recommendations could translate into concrete action, a follow-up workshop was convened on 9 September 2025 with Community Researchers and Merri-bek City Council staff. In this session, participants explored what it would mean for actions to be genuinely community-led, identified the types of support needed from council, and discussed how responsibility might be shared. Importantly, this workshop also addressed how to "close the loop" with the 64 community members who had contributed their stories.

Additional Evaluation Data

Alongside these community-led processes, the evaluation also drew on a mid-point survey with Community Researchers, participant surveys, interviews with each Community Researcher, and interviews with council staff. These additional data sources provided further insights into the strengths and limitations of the approach.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics and cultural safety were embedded throughout the process. Community Researchers were trained to ensure informed consent, to emphasise participants' right to withdraw at any time, and to establish confidentiality within group settings. Engagement plans explicitly required reflection on how participants' comfort and safety would be supported. While these standards sometimes felt unfamiliar at the outset, they became a central part of practice and reinforced the integrity of the process.

Reporting on Outcomes

This evaluation report presents the outcomes of the project, considering both the recommendations developed through *The People's Report* and the extent to which the process achieved its evaluation objectives. These outcomes are examined using evidence drawn from the community-led engagements as well as the surveys and interviews with Community Researchers, participants, and council staff described above.

Evaluation Framework

The People's Report pilot project had five key objectives. Outcomes for each of these was determined through various indicators and measures described in each section of this report.

Objective #1: Increased understanding of discrimination and how it manifests in the Merri-bek community.

Indicators	Measures
Community members engaged through The People's Report are from backgrounds and lived-experiences that are less commonly involved in Merri-bek's engagement and consultation processes.	Community Researchers have connections to community members that are less likely to participate in traditional consultation/engagement processes
Data collection and analysis provide new insights or deeper understandings regarding behaviours/barriers that were not as evident without The People's Report.	Council staff responsible for community engagement, Human Rights Policy and the Social Cohesion Plan feedback on findings and recommendations of The People's Report.

People that are less commonly involved in engagement

Overall, Community Researchers interviewed 64 people as part of their engagement. This included individuals from diverse ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds, such as:

- People from Pakistani, Nepalese, Vietnamese, Taiwanese, Greek, Turkish, Bangladeshi, Indian, Lebanese, Chinese and Australian-born backgrounds.
- Migrants who have been in Australia for varying periods (from less than a year to decades), that moved to Australia as international students, employment or 'for a better quality of life'.
- People aged 18 to over 70 years old.
- People from a range of faith backgrounds including Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist and non-practicing.
- People from a range of professions such as electronics engineer, senior accountant, researchers, dentists, teachers, software developer, mechanics, cleaner, used car dealership owner, doctor, university graduates specialising in science and technology, construction manager and retired individuals.

Some interviews were conducted in Urdu and Nepalese.

Reaching Underrepresented Communities

The project successfully engaged people from backgrounds and lived experiences less commonly involved in Merri-bek's consultation processes, including professionals, small business owners, and young people. Community Researchers consistently reported that participants would have been unlikely to share information without the established trust and connection fostered through the project. Trust, safety, and belief that consultation would lead to real change were critical factors encouraging participants to share more openly than in traditional processes.

Several Community Researchers reflected that participants disclosed things they would not normally share in conventional engagement:

> *"I had two people tell me directly like, 'If this was anyone else, good luck getting a word out of me.'"*

Personal relationships enabled open conversations that revealed genuine lived experiences. Community Researchers noted:

- *"So they see me as a very trustworthy person. That's why they share."*
- *"I am the familiar face for them... they feel comfortable to talk with me."*
- *"I don't think they would share with other people... maybe because they don't feel safe or don't feel that their opinion or experience would be valued."*

One Community Researcher noted participants' excitement about being involved:

> *"They were quite excited for the research report. They had never heard about something like a research report on racism before."*

Generating New Insights and Deeper Understandings

Council staff found The People's Report both useful and insightful for informing future work. The report surfaced important themes, reinforced existing priorities, and provided strong evidence drawn directly from community voices that is valuable for strengthening internal advocacy. One staff member reflected:

> *"The weight of it being the community members that have essentially undertaken the research is significant... it's a piece of evidence we can draw from."*

A standout insight concerned language. While translation for accessibility was well recognised, the Report brought deeper attention to the emotional and symbolic importance of language in building belonging:

> *"What I think is less well understood is how much it means to someone's sense of belonging to see things in their own language. We've still got a way to go with that."*

The findings demonstrated that having evidence directly sourced from Community Researchers added significant weight to policy discussions and strengthened the case for community-led action on discrimination and social cohesion.

Objective #2: Identification of purposeful and impactful potential community-led action that addresses discrimination in Merri-bek.

Indicator	Measures
The People's Report outlines a range of suitable recommendations for community-led action that addresses discrimination in Merri-bek.	Feedback from Council staff responsible for Human Rights Policy and the Social Cohesion Plan.

Identifying Purposeful Community-Led Action

Council staff indicated that the People's Report pointed toward purposeful and impactful community-led actions to address discrimination in Merri-bek. The themes and recommendations captured strong community appetite for self-determined, locally led initiatives, particularly in language visibility, leadership development, and intercultural engagement.

One staff member reflected that community leadership is essential for success:

> *"If you launch a local anti-racism network, it won't work if it isn't community-led. Services can talk all they want about action, but if it's not led by people, it's not going to work."*

Another staff member noted the report surfaced clear signs that community members want to drive action, strengthening future work under the Social Cohesion Plan:

> *"I think this would probably add a lot of weight to us strengthening anti-racism efforts in our next iteration of the plan."*

The findings reinforced a growing emphasis on anti-racism and provided additional evidence to strengthen this focus:

> *"There's much stronger focus on anti-racism now. And I think that's going to need to be strengthened in our next iteration... this report would probably add a lot of weight to us doing that."*

Insights about community aspirations for self-determined action could help shift Council's approach toward more enabling and supportive roles for communities, rather than solely service delivery.

Leadership Development and Intercultural Engagement

The report's emphasis on leadership was seen as highly valuable. Staff discussed opportunities for Council to support leadership development within communities, particularly by fostering networks, mentoring emerging leaders, and supporting

initiatives that build intercultural skills and reduce barriers within and between communities:

> "Mentorship and leadership support are areas we don't do enough of currently. There's a real opportunity here to strengthen that."

A follow-up workshop with council staff and Community Researchers explored the recommendations in greater depth, clarifying responsibilities and identifying possible pathways for action. This collaborative session demonstrated the value of bringing together community expertise and council knowledge to translate community aspirations into concrete initiatives.

Staff viewed the People's Report as successfully identifying community-driven aspirations and laying a strong foundation for future community-led action that could transform how Council approaches anti-racism, leadership development, and social cohesion.

Objective #3: Contribute to sense of belonging and community connection amongst community members and groups involved.

Indicator	Measures
People who participated in consultations have a sense they are contributing positively to a more a welcoming community – which can then lead to increased sensed of belonging and community connection.	Anecdotal feedback provided to Community Researchers. Survey of community members who participated in the consultation/engagement activities.

Participant Survey
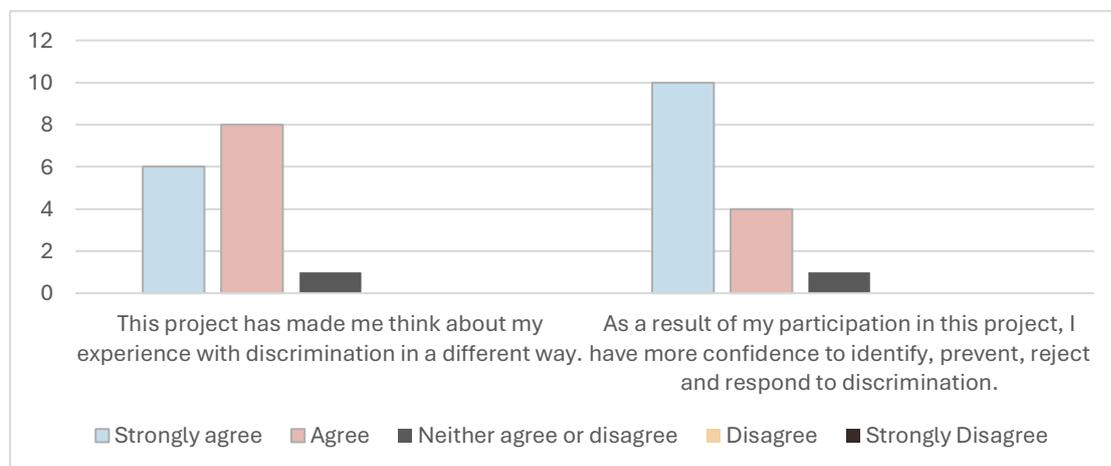
Community Researcher Survey
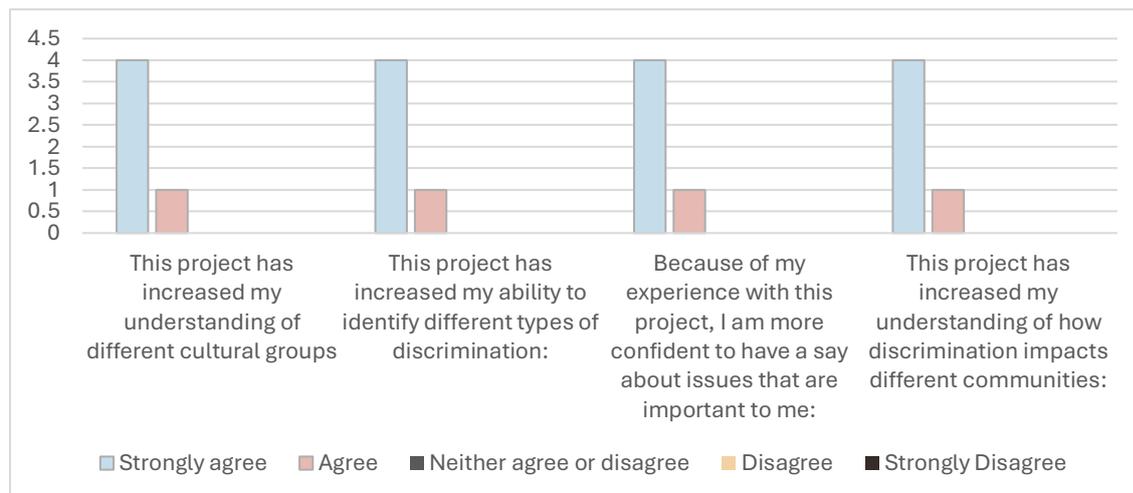
Feedback from the Community Researchers indicated that the project had a positive impact on fostering a sense of belonging and strengthening community connections among participants. Across the interviews, researchers reflected that engaging with the project provided participants with a rare opportunity to share their experiences, be heard, and feel part of a broader community conversation.

Many Community Researchers noted that participants felt more visible and more valued through their involvement. Some observed that participants were excited to contribute because it gave them a platform where their voices mattered:

> *"They felt comfortable and safe. They were happy that someone was listening to their stories, and that their experience would be taken seriously."*

Similarly, they highlighted that the opportunity to be part of a project connected to Council made participants feel included in civic life:

> *"They were happy that Council was actually asking them. They felt important. They felt that they belonged to this community, that their opinions are needed."*

The act of engaging in conversations led not only to individual reflection, but also to new connections between people. One Community Researcher described how conversations often extended beyond the interviews themselves, sparking further dialogue within families and friendship networks:

> *"They told me, after talking to me, they also discussed these things with their friends and family. It opened more conversations."*

Another similarly observed that being asked about issues such as racism and inclusion - often for the first time - encouraged participants to think about their collective experiences and built a sense of solidarity:

> *"Some people realised they were not alone in what they had gone through. It helped people feel more connected, like 'oh, it's not just me'."*

However, Community Researchers also noted that for some participants, particularly those sharing experiences of discrimination for the first time, the conversations could be emotional or challenging. This underscores the importance of ensuring future projects include appropriate support for participants, especially when surfacing sensitive experiences.

Overall, the project meaningfully contributed to a greater sense of belonging and community connection among participants. It created spaces for sharing, validation, and dialogue, and reinforced the idea that community voices matter in shaping local action.

Objective #4: Increased awareness around benefits of civic participation and greater confidence in being involved in future public participation.

Indicators	Measures
People who participated in consultations feel that they have been listened to and express confidence that The People's Report will inform the Human Rights Policy and Social Cohesion Plan.	Anecdotal feedback provided to Community Researchers. Survey of community members who participated in the consultation/engagement activities.
Participants indicate increased interest in participating in future consultation/engagement activities in Merri-bek.	Anecdotal feedback provided to Community Researchers. Survey of community members who participated in the consultation/engagement activities.

The majority of participants' surveyed expressed that they project had made them more confident to have a say about issues that are important and to participate in community consultations.
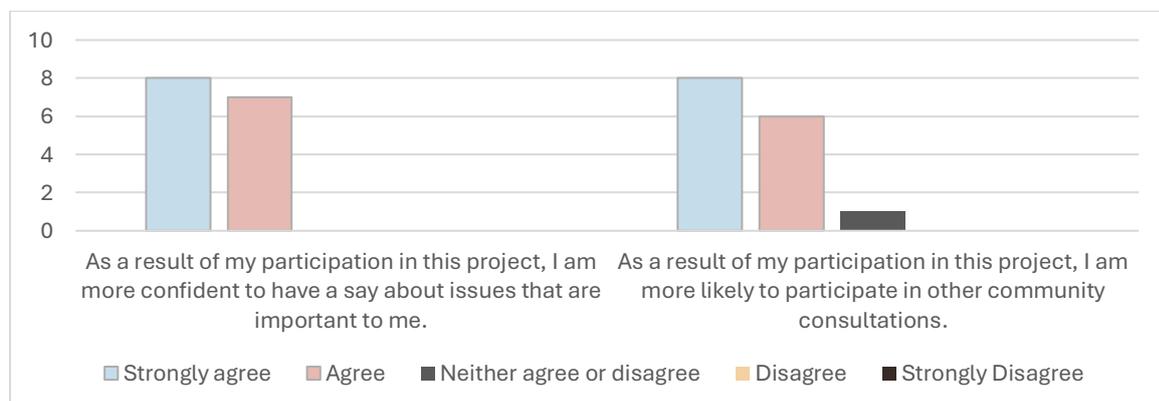
Building Confidence in Civic Participation

The project demonstrably increased awareness of civic participation and built confidence for future public involvement among both participants and Community Researchers.

Community Researchers identified that transparent communication about the project's purpose and impact was crucial for encouraging participation. As one explained:

> *"At first, we need to make them aware about what is the project, what we're going to do, what is the objective of this project, and what is the future plan. If we can share these things with them, definitely they would participate more."*

This transparency helped participants understand how engagement processes work and why their input matters - demystifying civic participation and making it more accessible.

Building Community Research Capacity

The project also equipped Community Researchers themselves with skills and networks for ongoing civic engagement. As one reflected:

> *"This program has really set me up… developing professional relationships with members of the community that I could lean back to for feedback."*

This dual impact, building confidence among both participants and Community Researchers, creates a multiplier effect, strengthening civic capacity across the community. Community Researchers now serve as ongoing civic connectors, bridging engagement gaps and supporting continued community participation in Council decision-making.

The project demonstrated that when people understand how their contributions influence decisions and see pathways for continued involvement, they become more confident, capable, and motivated participants in democratic processes.

Objective #5: A meaningful professional development opportunity for community members who become Community Researchers.

Indicator	Measures
Community Researchers express having gained skills that will support them with their future aspirations – either personal or professional.	Anecdotal feedback provided to project team and Council staff. End of project survey and interview data.

The project successfully provided a meaningful professional development opportunity for the Community Researchers involved, with each researcher reflecting on the personal and professional skills they gained through the process.
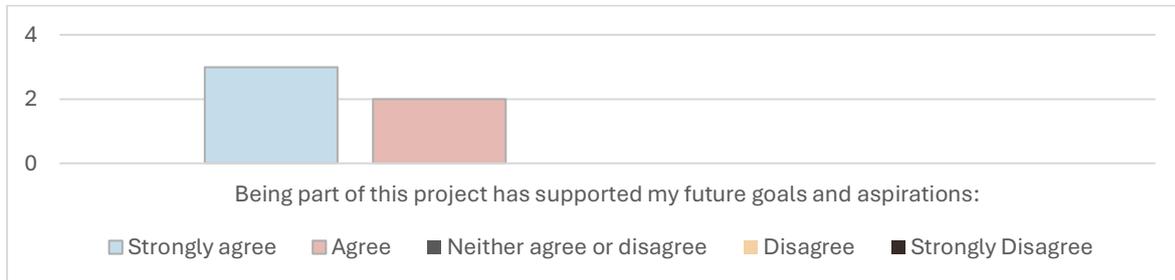
One Community Researcher shared that participation helped them significantly improve skills they identified as critical for both their personal and professional aspirations as a new migrant to Australia:

"I learned a lot... The most important thing I learned is about privacy maintenance. It helped me to improve how to maintain privacy when communicating on sensitive topics, and it built my communication skills and empathy as well."

Another Community Researcher, described the experience as highly valuable for building their professional readiness, particularly in their intended career pathway towards related work:

"For me, this was definitely critical. It set me up with being able to engage with real experiences of hate crime, not just something on paper... I've now created professional relationships I can lean back on for feedback even during university."

Another highlighted that the project helped develop active listening skills:

"Engaging with people about discrimination required true listening and empathy without judgment. These are very important skills for leadership roles and inclusive workplaces."

In addition to building specific skills such as interviewing, communication, and professional networking, the experience also contributed to participants' confidence in engaging with community projects and pursuing future opportunities. Several researchers spoke about how the opportunity had not only supported their career development but also strengthened their emotional connection to their communities and broadened their perspectives.

Reflections

A key strength of *The People's Report* was the role of Community Researchers - trusted community members who led engagement within their own networks. Their connections and cultural knowledge enabled more nuanced understandings of community experiences and aspirations and gave access to spaces that Council could not otherwise reach. Consistent with Participatory Action Research (PAR), the approach was not extractive but reciprocal: knowledge was co-created with communities, building trust while generating insights that were both meaningful and actionable.

The project also demonstrated the value of shifting authority in research and consultation. Instead of Council or external consultants directing the process, community voices were centred from the outset. This built leadership capacity, strengthened mutual trust, and fostered a sense of shared ownership over both the process and its outcomes.

Importantly, the role of Community Researchers extended beyond data collection. They gained valuable professional skills in communication, ethical facilitation, analysis, and leadership, and several have since been involved in further projects under the Social Cohesion Plan. At the same time, they carried significant responsibilities - including the emotional labour of managing participants' expectations and the risk of disappointment if actions do not follow. It is precisely this risk that points to a crucial distinction of the model: unlike traditional consultation processes, it creates a relationship of accountability, where Council and project partners hold greater responsibility to the community members involved. In doing so, the model demonstrates its strength as more reciprocal, community-centred, and ultimately empowering.

Concerns were raised about confirmation bias and the reliance on existing networks. While it is true that Community Researchers engaged people they already knew, PAR scholarship shows that these trusted relationships can actually yield richer data, as participants are more likely to share candidly with those they trust. Nonetheless, power dynamics must be carefully managed: for some, speaking with a stranger may feel safer, while for others, familiarity fosters openness. Future projects could experiment with pairing Community Researchers or encouraging cross-community interviewing to balance trust with independence, reducing bias while retaining the benefits of embedded networks.

Although discrimination was a complex and sensitive topic, the model's success suggests far broader application. Community Researchers were able to engage people who are often absent from consultation, elicit more honest and nuanced insights, and strengthen collective ownership of outcomes. This approach could be adapted to a wide range of government priorities - such as housing, transport, environmental initiatives, or civic planning - offering commissioning organisations a more empowered way to centre communities in shaping future policy and programs.

A final note

This Evaluation Report considers the project methodology and its outcomes. It is accompanied by a separate report titled **The People's Report #1: Exploring community-led action to address discrimination in Merri-bek** which is a direct outcome of the Community Researchers' work. The People's Report provides data and recommendations that the Community Researchers identified through their analysis of data they collected from 64 interviews with community members.

Please contact The Public Value Studio at hello@publicvaluestudio.com for any questions or a copy of the accompanying report.

Acknowledgements

There were many people who made valued contributions to this project—from those who provided feedback during its earliest stages, when it was just an idea, through to those who helped shape and deliver the work as it developed.

In particular, we would like to acknowledge the five Community Researchers - Rida Zehra Abidi, Volkan Oguz Demirel, Ha Nguyen, Mukta Singh, and Lela Zhou - who showed extraordinary dedication throughout the process. Their commitment, insight, and care were central to the success of *The People's Report*.

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