

Research Summary

Community wellbeing in the Latrobe Valley since the Hazelwood mine fire

April 2025

Analysis aims

Our aim was to investigate how community wellbeing has been affected by events since the mine fire, as well as considering the impact of other social and economic factors. We also wanted to identify the strengths and capacities of this community as well as the areas of vulnerability which may need further investment and support.



Del and Bev from Morwell's *Friends of the Rose Garden* group holding their entry into the "Our Hopes for the Future of Morwell" exhibition



Background

The fire in the Morwell open cut brown coal mine adjacent to the Hazelwood Power Station blanketed the town of Morwell and the surrounding area in smoke and ash for six weeks in February and March 2014. The smoke event was recognised as one of the most significant air quality incidents in Victoria's history. It caused considerable community concern within Morwell and the broader community. In response to these concerns, and following extensive community consultation, the Hazelwood Health Study was established to examine the impacts of the mine fire. The Study involves multiple research streams targeting different health outcomes and different vulnerable groups.

The Community Wellbeing Stream researches various aspects of community wellbeing in the Latrobe Valley, including the factors that contribute to current and future changes in wellbeing.

Meet the team

Susan Yell

Matthew Carroll

Michelle Duffy

Damian Morgan

Larissa Walker



What we did

We conducted interviews in 2020-21 and again in 2023 with community members who live and/or work in the Latrobe Valley and with representatives of community organisations (a total of 60 interviews, 30 in each round). We analysed these interviews to identify key themes relating to our research questions.

Hazelwood Health Study website: <http://www.hazelwoodhealthstudy.org.au/>



What we found

There have been many events impacting community wellbeing and recovery since the mine fire.

Some of these events were perceived to have had largely negative impacts on the community, including closure of the Hazelwood Power Station and other large employers, smoke from the Black Summer bushfires, other bushfires and floods, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Experiencing repeated adverse events has led to fatigue in the community but has also built resilience. In contrast, a number of developments were viewed positively, including the Latrobe Health Assembly, Latrobe Health Advocate and Latrobe Valley Authority, and local government and grassroots initiatives.

A timeline of the events impacting the region is provided on the next page.



Various factors impact current and future wellbeing in this region.

Community wellbeing in the Latrobe Valley varies; some groups are doing well, but there are also pockets of severe disadvantage. The major factors perceived to influence community wellbeing across our two rounds of interviews were the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the transition away from carbon-based energy production, and social issues arising from socioeconomic disadvantage and intergenerational trauma.

These factors have impacts on health, mental health, the economy, education, services and social connections, particularly for disadvantaged groups. For some, but not all, the transition away from carbon is viewed as an opportunity to build a different basis for future economic prosperity without sacrificing the health of the community and the local environment.

The community also has a range of strengths which can be built on to improve community wellbeing.

These include the increasing ability of community members to make their voices heard on issues that concern them, increasing collaboration and innovation among organisations, a strong community spirit, vibrant community groups, a strong volunteer workforce, and exceptional leaders in service organisations.

There are mixed views on whether community wellbeing in the Latrobe Valley will improve in the future, however, most were cautiously optimistic.



The relationship between community wellbeing and personal wellbeing is complex.

Community-wide events can impact individuals differently. Community factors which most impacted individuals related to social connections, the economy, the environment, and services and infrastructure. Individuals drew some of their capacity to cope with adverse events from connections with family, friends and the wider community, but also from within themselves.

The negative impact of the mine fire on personal wellbeing is decreasing as time passes, while there is an increase in its positive impacts. Some people feel a stronger commitment to the area due to positive changes as a result of the mine fire.





Considerations

The findings of this report would be useful for organisations and government bodies seeking to better understand the range of factors affecting community wellbeing in the Latrobe Valley.

While we interviewed people from a broad range of backgrounds, occupations and age groups, their views may not represent the full range of views of the diverse communities that make up the Latrobe Valley.



Where to from here

We will disseminate our findings to interested groups and stakeholders. We hope to continue researching how the Latrobe Valley community negotiates the challenges of transition and recovery from multiple adverse events.

A detailed report describing these findings can be found at:
<https://hazelwoodhealthstudy.org.au/study-findings/study-reports>

The HHS is led by Monash University with collaborators from the Menzies Institute for Medical Research, Federation University, The University of Adelaide, University of Newcastle, James Cook University and CSIRO.

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