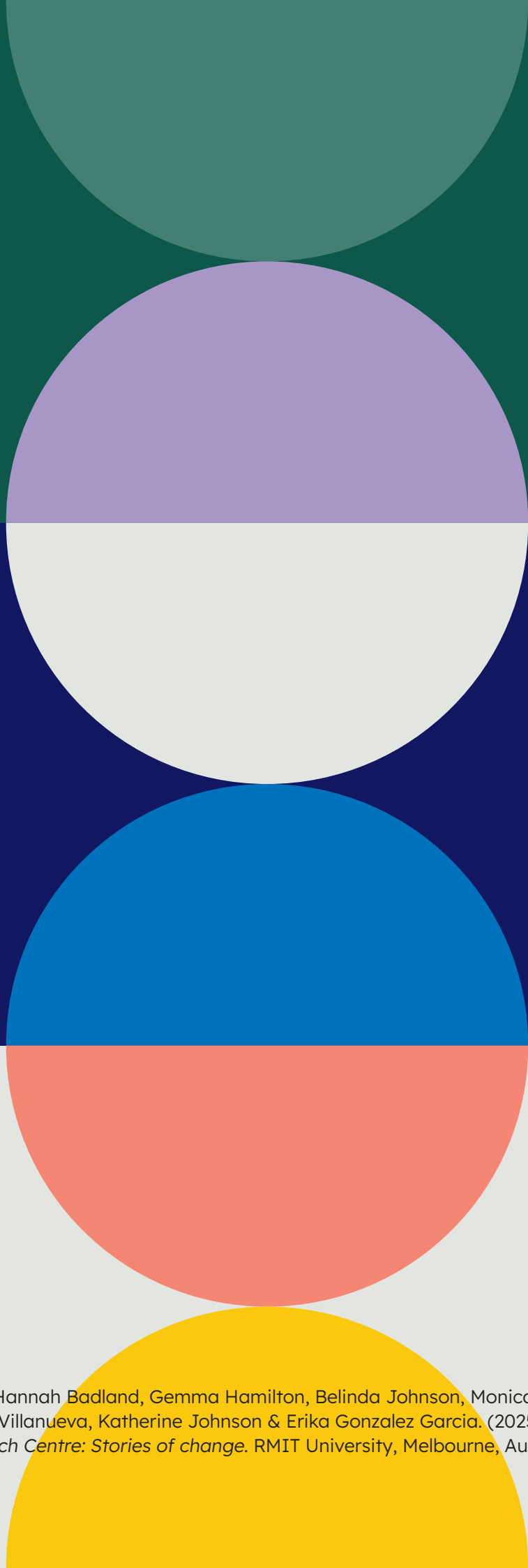


**Social Equity
Research Centre:
Stories of Change**



Citation

Anahita Gangwani, Hannah Badland, Gemma Hamilton, Belinda Johnson, Monica Barratt, Charles Hunt, Karen Villanueva, Katherine Johnson & Erika Gonzalez Garcia. (2025). *Social Equity Research Centre: Stories of change*. RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Social Equity Research Centre acknowledges the people of the Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung language groups of the Eastern Kulin Nation as the Traditional Owners of the lands on which we conduct our transformative research, teaching and other business. We pay deep respect to Ancestors and Elders, past and present, and honour the enduring connection that Traditional Custodians have to Country, including land, air and waterways. We stand in solidarity with First Nations peoples, whose sovereignty has never been ceded.

The Social Equity Research Centre is committed to upholding the knowledge and perspectives of First Nations people and communities with whom we collaborate. Through our research relationships, we seek to transform our partners and ourselves, guided by principles of reflection, reciprocity, and reconciliation. We aspire to co-create knowledge in ways that honour Indigenous people and Country.





**“If we can change
the beginning
of the story,
we change the
whole story”**

**Research that listens, connects
and transforms.**

At the Social Equity Research Centre, we believe research should do more than observe — it should listen, connect and drive change for the better. Based in the School of Global, Urban and Social Studies at RMIT University, the Social Equity Research Centre brings together researchers, policymakers, practitioners and communities to tackle some of the most pressing social challenges of our time.

**Our focus is people — their lives,
their needs, and the systems
that shape both.**

We do research that touches hearts and minds—grounded in rigorous inquiry, but animated by real-world impact and deeply human stories. We partner with people who have lived experience to co-create new knowledge and work side-by-side with communities, governments and industry to inform policy and practice that matters.

At the Social Equity Research Centre, we champion inclusion, diversity, voice and justice. Whether working with youth experiencing housing insecurity, dancers with Down syndrome or interpreters navigating complex healthcare settings, our work starts with the question: How can our research help build a more equitable world?

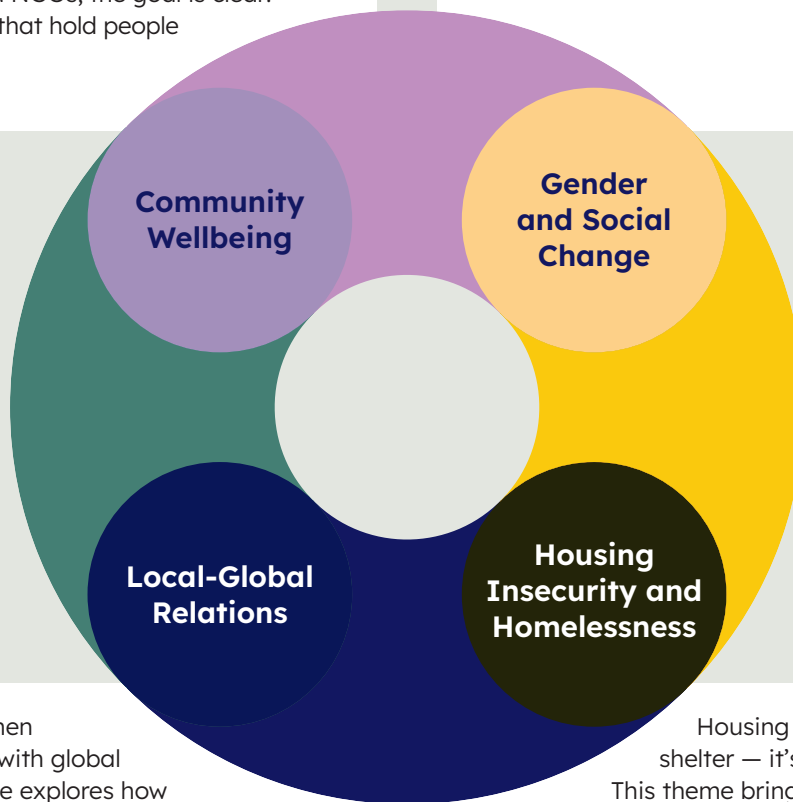
Our Themes



The Social Equity Research Centre is structured around four interconnected themes, each led by experienced academics with strong community and policy engagement.

How do income, housing, discrimination and care shape our lives? This theme dives deep into the social determinants of wellbeing, especially for people facing structural disadvantage. Whether it's tackling economic injustice or improving access to care, researchers combine lived experience with rigorous mixed-methods research to drive meaningful change. Working hand-in-hand with policymakers, community organisations and NGOs, the goal is clear: shift the systems that hold people back.

Gender and sexuality influences everything — from our identities and relationships to the structures that govern our world. This theme tackles the urgent issues of gender inequality, gender-based violence, LGBTQIA+SB rights, and intersectional discrimination. Researchers work across disciplines — from social work to cybersecurity — to inform progressive law, inclusive policy and public dialogue.



What happens when local lives collide with global forces? This theme explores how migration, displacement, technology, climate change and geopolitics are reshaping communities across Australia and the world. From international education to global security, researchers bring a critical, creative lens to some of the most pressing challenges of our time. At its heart, this is about understanding how culture, identity and belonging are transformed in a rapidly changing world — and what that means for justice and inclusion.

Housing is more than shelter — it's a human right. This theme brings together leading researchers with deep connections to practice to tackle Australia's housing crisis head-on. From affordability and policy reform to homelessness prevention, the team works alongside governments, councils and frontline services to challenge broken systems and offer equitable solutions. With a strong track record of national influence, this research is driving the housing justice conversation where it's needed most.

Sexual offence interviewing: Towards victim-survivor well-being and justice

**Social Equity Research
Centre researcher** Dr Gemma Hamilton

Funding body Australian Research Council Discovery Early
Career Researcher Award (ARC DE240100109)



Every year, thousands of Australians report sexual violence to police. Yet too often, the process of reporting — especially the police interview process — leaves victim-survivors retraumatised and unsupported. Many never see their case proceed. Most never see justice.

Led by Dr Gemma Hamilton through the Social Equity Research Centre, this Australian Research Council-funded Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (DECRA) Fellowship, asks a long-overdue question: What if police interviews were built around the well-being of the people who have already been harmed by sexual violence?

Drawing on lived experience, criminology and forensic psychology, Dr Hamilton is exploring how police can interview victim-survivors of sexual violence in ways that promote healing, improve evidence quality and support better justice outcomes.



Only one year in, this work is already creating an impact. Findings have been cited in the Australian Law Reform Commission's landmark 2025 report *SAFE, INFORMED, SUPPORTED*, shaping national conversations on justice reform. Police trainers from Australia are using Dr Hamilton's research to revise training programs through a trauma-informed lens.

“We’re keen to get this right. Thank you for doing the research.”

Trainer, Specialist Investigations Team

The project has been shared through national and international conferences, featured on the Police Science Dr. podcast, and an invited blog for the Australian and New Zealand Society of Criminology — reaching police, policymakers, and researchers around the world.

This research is about dignity. It's about shifting investigative interviewing away from control and towards care, so victim-survivors are not just heard, but respected, believed and supported in their pursuit of justice.

What's next? A global audience of investigative practitioners hear directly from victim-survivors in a panel hosted through the **International Investigative Interviewing Research Group (iIIRG)**. New workshops at RMIT will help ensure that university responses to sexual violence reflect best practice.



“What dance ideas do you like?”
Equity in motion with dancers with Down Syndrome

“It’s actually a social justice issue, it’s not just about switching the world on to that this group of dancers have something to offer creatively and have valuable stories to tell. It’s also making sure that as artists, they can access the materials and the world to inform their work, because that world has not been designed with this group in mind.”

Dr Belinda Johnson

Social Equity Research Centre researchers Dr Belinda Johnson, Dr Tamara Borovica

Project partners Dancekin Collective

Funding body Social Equity Research Centre Ideas Grant 2024



Dance can be a powerful tool for social change. It offers a compelling means of expression that resonates with people with disability. Dance fosters confidence, inclusion, and participation. Yet performance worlds are often not inclusive and continue to marginalise people with disability.

Led by Dr Belinda Johnson and Dr Tamara Borovica, and in partnership with inclusive dance facilitators, dance was explored as a form of human rights expression and disability-led creative practice.

In a series of workshops at WXYZ Studios, dancers with Down syndrome shaped the direction of the research — identifying what matters to them and what future dance opportunities could be. Intentions were clear: dancers want to perform, make digital content, collaborate with dancers of all abilities, and be recognised not just as participants in disability arts — but as artists in their own right.

This applied sociology project didn't just generate knowledge — it catalysed impact. From this research emerged the Dancekin Collective, a new Melbourne-based disability performance company led within the Down syndrome community. Dancekin Collective is continuously creating new work, performing at events, and preparing a show for Melbourne Fringe.

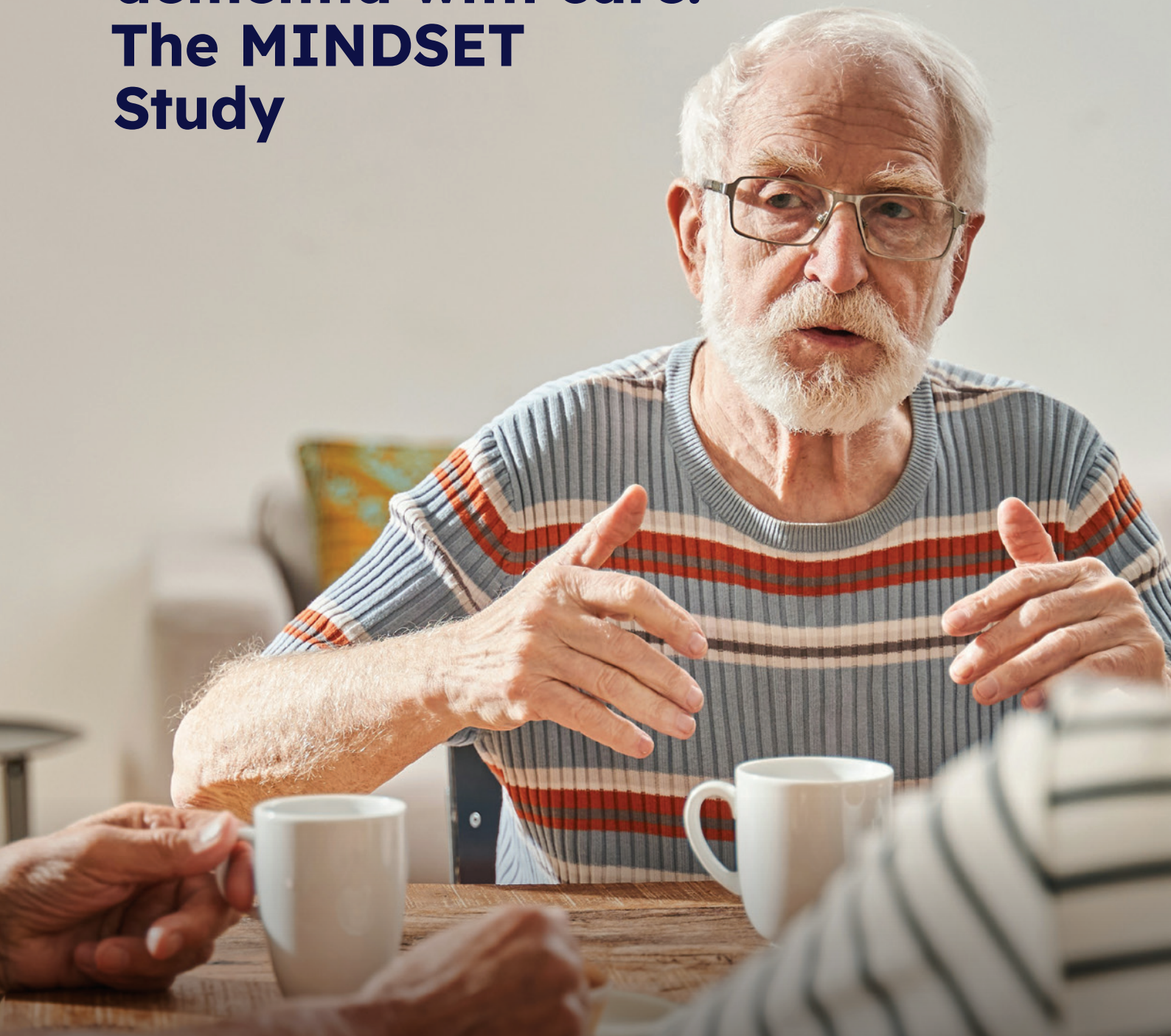
By having dancers with Down syndrome as co-creators and emerging co-researchers, the project advances inclusive, impact-driven research that shifts practice in real time. It also strengthens the bridge between disability and mainstream dance sectors.

At the Social Equity Research Centre, we believe creative practice is a powerful way to challenge assumptions and build equity. This is research that moves — and changes — the world.

“...ideally, we'd love to take the things that we learn and contribute that back and keep developing a global movement of a dance sector that can build capacity and opportunities for people with Down syndrome and ultimately bring that to the broader community who will benefit enormously from what they don't know they don't know.”

Mx Tristan Sinclair, Dancekin Collective

Interpreting dementia with care: The MINDSET Study



“In multilingual and multicultural societies, translating and interpreting services play a vital role in ensuring equitable access to public services. This project brings that mission to life.”

Associate Professor Erika Gonzalez

**Social Equity
Research Centre
researchers**

Associate Professor Erika Gonzalez Garcia



Project Lead

Professor Bianca Brijnath, La Trobe University

**Project
partners**

National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI), Dementia Australia, Australian Institute of Interpreters & Translators (AUSIT), the Migrant and Refugee Health Partnership, the NSW Health Interpreting Service, All Graduates Interpreting and Translating Service, Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) National, and the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care.

Funding body

National Health and Medical Research Council Partnership Project (APP 2005759)

Imagine navigating a dementia diagnosis when English isn't your first language — and neither is your interpreter's training.

Until recently, most interpreters supporting cognitive assessments in Australia had received little or no preparation in dementia care. Many didn't know what to expect. Some had never supported cognitive assessments before. Yet the stakes couldn't be higher for patients and families, especially in Australia's culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

That's where the MINDSET Study comes in.

This **world-first project co-designed a training program with interpreters, clinicians, carers and agencies to improve interpreter-mediated dementia assessments.**

The need was clear: "We need training — now," interpreters told the team.

What followed was a rigorous research program grounded in equity, care and real-world applications. A randomised controlled trial showed the training significantly improved interpreter readiness and confidence.

Since then, the course has been scaled nationally, reaching 865 interpreters across 97 languages, with a 99% pass rate.

To ensure long-term sustainability, the training package is now freely available through the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI), alongside core resources shared via the Open Science Framework.

“After this training, I finally felt ready to support a patient and their family properly.”

Interpreter, NAATI

In just a few years, **MINDSET has equipped 14% of all interpreters in Australia** — many of whom had never supported a cognitive assessment before. Through simulated assessments, interpreters gained new confidence, skills and clarity in a deeply sensitive clinical setting.

And the ripple effects are growing. MINDSET is now informing Action 4 of the National Dementia Action Plan and has sparked a new European trial.

This research is about making sure that no matter your language, background or diagnosis, you are heard — and supported.

This is research that changes systems — and changes lives.

Drug checking to reduce overdoses: From crisis to care

A teenager dies after taking what she thought was MDMA — but it wasn't.

A man overdoses alone, unaware his cocaine contained a powerful synthetic opioid.

Over 2000 drug induced deaths occurred in 2022 across Australia*.

Penington report 2024

Social Equity Research Centre researchers

Associate Professor Monica Barratt and Dr Isabelle Volpe

Project partners

The Loop Australia, Harm Reduction Victoria, and Students for Sensible Drug Policy

Funding body

RMIT's Strategic Impact Fund 2024, National Health and Medical Research Council Investigator Grant (APP 2042605)



These aren't rare tragedies. They're happening across Australia — and they're preventable.

Across Australia, powerful synthetic drugs — including novel opioids and benzodiazepines never intended for human use — are quietly circulating in illicit pills, powders and capsules.

Ramifications? A growing wave of accidental overdoses and avoidable deaths.

This is the driving force behind this harm minimisation research program led by Associate Professor Monica Barratt: building the evidence, momentum and partnerships needed to introduce **drug checking services** that can save lives.

Drug checking lets people know what's really in their drugs — and talk, without judgment, with health workers about the implications. Around the world, drug checking is a proven harm reduction tool. In Australia, it's only just becoming a reality.

Working alongside community organisations like **The Loop Australia, Harm Reduction Victoria,** and **Students for Sensible Drug Policy,** this research flips the script. It starts with people who use drugs — the very group most often left out of conversations that affect them. Their voices helped shape a national feasibility study, a global scan of best practice, and an expert report produced by Associate Professor Barratt from the Social Equity Research Centre for the Coroners Court of Victoria.

The impact? In 2021, the Coroner made history, recommending that Victoria implement drug checking — a call repeated six times since. By June 2024, the Victorian Government had committed: services would launch at festivals and through a fixed and at a centrally located site in Melbourne.

Since then, over

1,300

samples have been tested, and

700+

health conversations held — each one a chance to reduce harm and challenge stigma.

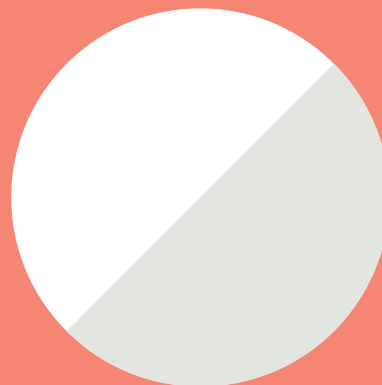
Backed by a new **National Health and Medical Research Council Investigator Grant,** this five-year program will continue to ask bold questions: How can we design drug checking services that work — not just in theory, but in practice, for everyone?

Because when evidence, policy and lived experience come together, we don't just reduce overdoses. We rewrite the rules on care.

Penington report 2024 — <https://www.penington.org.au/australias-annual-overdose-report-2024/>

“Monica’s work in this space is not only world-leading, it’s grounded, practical, and has made a real difference to how we deliver harm reduction on the ground.”

Cameron Francis, CEO, The Loop Australia



Protecting civilians in UN peace operations: Influencing global policy and practice

Social Equity Research Centre researchers

Professor Charles Hunt

Project partners

International Peace Institute, Stimson Center, United Nations University-Centre for Policy Research, Challenges Forum, Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australian Government Australian Civil-Military Centre

Funding body

Australian Research Council Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (ARC DE170100138), the International Peace Institute, UN University Centre for Policy Research



What does it mean to protect civilians — not in theory, but in the chaos of war?

This is the question at the centre of Professor Charles Hunt's long-term research program at the Social Equity Research Centre. For over two decades, Professor Hunt has led global work for the protection of civilians in United Nations peace operations, by asking how global institutions can do better to prevent violence and uphold human rights in conflict-affected societies.

His research investigates how peacekeepers interpret their mandates, how protection strategies are implemented on the ground, and how the voices of conflict-affected communities can influence international responses. The program brings together fieldwork in sites such as South Sudan, Mali, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo with policy partnerships across the UN system and member states.

The result is impact — both deep and wide.

Professor Hunt's research has shaped major recent **UN policy processes**, including the Secretary-General's New Agenda for Peace and the UN's revised approach to atrocity prevention and protection policing. His findings have been used in UN peacekeeper training, mission planning, and national policy development.

Governments including Australia, Germany, and the US have commissioned Professor Hunt to inform their engagement in global peace operations. His field handbook on protecting civilians has become a core resource for civil-military teams responding to humanitarian crises.

From expert briefings in capitals and at the UN to public interviews on ABC, BBC and Al Jazeera, his work has helped shift the narrative — showing that meaningful civilian protection demands more than boots on the ground. It requires evidence, accountability, and a commitment to local engagement.

This is research that builds safer futures in the world's most fragile places.

“While working in South Sudan, I had the opportunity to see Charles conducting his own field research. He put together methodologically rigorous group engagements that created dynamic and open spaces for South Sudanese participants, not only generating important information for his publications, but also helping to bridge the often deep divides between the international community and local actors. I find this extraordinary for academic research, and it speaks to Charles’ ability to speak to different communities, finding commonalities that can help the UN develop more empirically-based and constructive policies.”

Adam Day, Director, United Nations University – Centre for Policy Research



LGBTQIA+SB lives, intersectional stories, and suicide prevention that listens

*LGBTQIA+SB is an acronym representing the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Sistergirl, and Brotherboy communities



**Social Equity
Research Centre
researchers**

Professor Katherine Johnson

Project partners

Suicide Prevention Australia, Switchboard Victoria,
University of Sydney, Roses in the Ocean,
RMIT Social Change Enabling Impact Platform

Funding body

Suicide Prevention Australia Innovation Grant



“I learnt about intersectionality and how different identities come together in the context of suicidality. And the importance of knowing each consumer is an expert and has existing coping strategies and know what they need.”

Anonymous

What if suicide prevention centered not just on those affected, but on those who've been marginalised and too often overlooked in mainstream approaches?

That question drove this research that set out to listen deeply to the lives, identities, and struggles of **LGBTQIA+SB people**—especially those from **First Nations** and **culturally diverse backgrounds**—and to understand their experiences of suicidal distress and support.

Led by Professor Katherine Johnson and an interdisciplinary team, the project brings together researchers, community organisations, like **Suicide Prevention Australia, Switchboard Victoria, University of Sydney** and **Roses in the Ocean**, and people with lived experience of suicide to generate insight that health systems have often ignored these people.

The result was a **world-first qualitative study grounded in intersectional lived experience for suicide prevention**. Participants shared their stories of navigating stigma, racism, isolation, queer community connection, and family rejection—with many saying they'd never been asked about their suicidality before.

But this wasn't research for the shelf.

The team used these findings to create **composite narratives** that are now transforming how practitioners understand suicide risk. This research is at the heart of a novel training program delivered by Switchboard across Victoria's hospital outreach suicide response services, already reaching

143 staff

across

18 sites.

The research has also shaped **policy briefings** for Suicide Prevention Australia, informed service delivery guidelines, and reached international audiences through publications, podcasts, and national peak body webinars. It's already helping services rethink their assumptions and speak more meaningfully to the lived realities of **LGBTQIA+SB people at the intersections** of race, gender, culture and identity.

This is suicide prevention that affirms, includes, and dignifies.

The place effect: Building cities that support our youngest citizens

Social Equity Research Centre researchers

Dr Karen Villanueva, Ms Tasma Eddy,
Dr Amanda Alderton, Professor Hannah Badland

Project partners

Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Royal Children's Hospital, Jesuit Social Services, Cardinia Shire Council, Mitchell Shire Council, City of Port Phillip, Australian Urban Observatory, Play Australia, Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation, VicHealth

Funding body

VicHealth Impact Research Grant



What does it take for a child to thrive — not just at home, but where they live, play, and learn?

Using data from over **47,000 five-year-olds**, our researchers looked at how the neighbourhood **built environment** — things like parks, housing, traffic, childcare, and shops — shapes **early childhood development** across Melbourne.

The findings were striking. Children living in the most disadvantaged areas had the poorest development outcomes. Children growing up in outer suburbs and growth areas often lived in places with

Fewer local services.
Less access to public transport.
Fewer childcare centres.

These differences can affect a child's development and life trajectory before they even start school.


But the team didn't just crunch the numbers. They listened.

In growth areas like Cardinia Shire, they spoke with parents about their everyday lives — the long drives, the libraries and playgroups that made them feel connected.

Their stories added depth to the data. One thing was clear: places matter. And families knew exactly what they needed.

This mix of **big data and real stories** is now being used to guide smarter decisions. With partners including **VicHealth, Cardinia Shire, Mitchell Shire, City of Port Phillip**, and **Jesuit Social Services** along with **Play Australia** and **Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation**, the research is shaping policy conversations about urban equity, early development, and child-friendly design.

Because if we want all kids to have the best start, we can't just focus on schools and services. We need neighbourhoods that grow with them — full of safe, welcoming places to play, learn, and belong.



“But just affordable housing didn’t attract me to the area. I think it was the safety and also the sense of I felt I belonged to a community. When I came to this area, that’s what I felt I like.”

Parent of young child in
Melbourne growth area suburb

When we transform the places children grow up in, we change their opportunities. And when we centre equity in every street, service and system — we change the story, for everyone.



Contact us

Social Equity Research Centre

School of Global, Urban and Social Studies

GPO Box 2476

Melbourne VIC 3001

E serc@rmit.edu.au



SERC website