



VICLANES

Victorian Lifestyle and
Neighbourhood Environment Study

What does it mean for local government?

VicLANES is a unique study which includes individual, household and environmental information from 4913 households in 50 areas across Melbourne, Australia. The study was funded by VicHealth. The 50 small areas selected were from 19 local government areas and were high socio economic status (SES) (richer), mid SES and low SES (poorer) areas.

Why is this study special?

Most studies collect information from individuals or the environment but not both. In contrast, with VicLANES we have collected information about the local areas (eg walkability) and from people living in those areas. This means it is one of the first studies in the world to look at how socio-economic and environmental characteristics influence physical activity, dietary behaviour and alcohol consumption.

Why should it interest councillors?

Local government has statutory and other responsibilities for many areas that impact on public health and wellbeing, and there are growing calls for councils to become more involved in health promotion. Given the resource constraints and competing priorities of councils it is imperative that they have a solid evidence base on which to act in order to best utilise resources. Councils often say that there is not enough research available that is relevant to their ways of working and their populations. VicLANES is hoping to fill some of the research gaps and provide information in a user-friendly way.

Local government partnerships

Throughout 2006, University of Melbourne researchers have been working with two metropolitan local governments (Knox and Brimbank) and the Victorian Local Governance Association so that the results from VicLANES can be translated into the activities and decisions of local councils.

The information provided by VicLANES is important because the rising obesity rates in Australia have, in part, been attributed to the lack of healthy food choices and opportunities to be physical active. The rising obesity rates

obviously have flow effects for councils in terms of providing services for adults with early onset chronic diseases such as diabetes and heart disease.

The researchers from the Universities of Melbourne, Monash, Deakin and Queensland University of Technology have collected information on:

Food

- The purchase of healthy or less healthy foods
- Where food is purchased
- Perceptions regarding the availability and price of healthy and less healthy alternatives
- Attitudes and knowledge about diet

Physical activity

- Types and frequency of physical activity
- Perceptions of availability, quality and affordability of recreational facilities and safety of the local area
- Activity level of other household members and the perceived influence on the respondent's level of physical activity
- Individual determinants of physical activity (cognitive factors, enjoyment of physical activity, motivational factors)

Alcohol

- Frequency and amount of alcohol consumed
- Location of purchase and consumption of alcohol
- Type of alcohol consumed

Characteristics of the local environment

- Walkability of areas – detailed audits
- Presence of recreational facilities
- Presence of food shops including supermarkets and fruit and vegetable stores, fast food and convenience stores
- Price and availability of healthy and less healthy food alternatives
- Presence of alcohol outlets
- price and availability of common alcoholic beverages

The data produced from this study represents a goldmine of evidence for local government.

Some of the results so far

1. The degree of disadvantage in an area is an important predictor of **adult weight with an average height man or woman being an average of 3kg heavier in poorer areas.**

2. People living in the most socio-economically disadvantaged areas are less likely to:

- be 'sufficiently active for health' .
- purchase fruits and vegetables
- purchase groceries that are consistent with dietary guidelines (ie low fat, high fibre, low sugar)

They are more likely to:

- eat fast food and live near fast food outlets

3. In general, women spend more time walking than men and older people are more likely to walk. For both men and women, longer walking tracks, pedestrian crossings, and a mixture of land use all increase the likelihood of walking. The presence of destinations, such as transport infrastructure (eg bus stops), household convenience and other retail stores, religious and educational institutions, and entertainment facilities also increased the likelihood of walking for both men and women.

Analysis of VicLANES data is continuing but the findings so far support the need to focus on improving local environments to increase physical activity participation and healthy food choices.

Future possibilities

Ongoing analyses will include a focus on some of the following:

- The relationship between the price and availability of foods and food purchasing behaviour
- How do the characteristics of areas promote cycling?
- How does the presence of fast food stores influence fast food intake and body weight?
How do people's perceptions of their neighbourhood vary between socio-economic groups and for men and women?

How can councils use this information?

- The evidence can be included to assist in setting priorities in Municipal Public Health Plans. The MPHP Framework identifies the environments for health as built, social, economic and natural environments.
- To create/improve on walking/cycling/footpath strategies
- To build alliances with community health centres, Primary Care Partnerships and other agencies
- As evidence when submitting grants for large and small scale projects.
- To help set health promotion priorities

A report outlining findings from VicLANES will be available later in 2006.
More information www.kcwhs.unimelb.edu.au/viclanes

Contact Amanda Tattam, Community Liaison, Research Translation Officer at the Key Centre for Women's Health in Society, University of Melbourne.

atattam@unimelb.edu.au