

Choir research summary

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Individuals and families who migrate face many difficulties and stressors, including language and cultural barriers, reduced social support, and anxiety about finding a satisfactory job (Hovey & Magaña, 2000; Hiatt et al, 2008), which often leads to health complications, inclusive of anxiety and depression (Knipscheer et al, 2000; Weishaar, 2008). Long-term results are an increased dependence on the public health system, disengagement with community life, and educational under-performance for children¹. In a city such as Melbourne, where 25% of the population was born overseas and 60% of current population growth is from migration², these trends are likely to have a significant societal impact over time.

These issues are particularly critical for the city of Melbourne. Melbourne has experienced unprecedented population growth over the past decade, with two-thirds of that growth from overseas migration. Twenty-seven percent of all migrants to Australia settle in Victoria; in 2008/09, this totaled 81,200 people. According to 2006 census data, 26% of the entire greater Melbourne population speaks a language other than English in the home. These populations are marked by low levels of home ownership, high levels of underemployment, low levels of English proficiency, weak social networks, and difficulties accessing transportation. Barriers caused by lack of reliable transportation, poor English skills, and unfamiliarity with the Australian system hinder assimilation into Australian life.

Researchers have identified the following stressors for migrant communities: Communication difficulties, unfamiliarity with the new culture and cultural norms, social situations, climate differences, finding appropriate employment, and reduced or eliminated family and social networks (e.g., Weishaar, 2008; Knipscheer et al, 2000; Nann, 1982; Berry, 1994). Without effective support, migrants are vulnerable to increased health risks, particularly poor mental health, including anxiety and depression (Knipscheer et al, 2000; Hovey, 2000; Graves, 1985). This in turn can lead individuals and families to isolate themselves further from their new society, in an effort to buffer themselves from these impacts.

Isolating behaviours have long-term impacts for individuals, families, and Australian society as a whole. Over time, individuals and families start to feel disenfranchised, which may lead to a wide range of social ills, including academic underperformance by children, chronic underemployment, increased reliance on social and governmental services, and increased participation in anti-social activities such as unlawful behavior. Assisting recent migrants to assimilate into Australian life and culture holds benefits for migrant families and for Australian society as a whole, on a broad range of criteria.

Creativity Australia has developed the *With One Voice* program to alleviate some of the pressures that recent migrants face through participation in community choirs.

Research indicates that participation in choirs has several significant, marked benefits for individuals. Bailey and Davidson (2002) found that members of a choir created for homeless men identified the following benefits from their participation in the choir: a) Depression was alleviated while emotional and physical well-being was increased; b) Public performances increased a sense of self-worth and was a venue for re-engaging with society; c) The choir served as a supportive system for developing social skills and working towards positive goals; d) The mental concentration that singing required meant less time was spent dwelling on personal problems.

Clift and Hancox (2010), in a study examining psychological well-being for choristers in England, Australia and Germany, found that membership in a choir provided six specific mechanisms which impacted positively on well-being and health: An improved emotional outlook; a reduced preoccupation with worries due to the need for focused attention on the music; developing controlled deep breathing, resulting in stress reduction and improved overall health; benefits of social support from other choristers, reducing feeling of isolation and loneliness; and cognitive stimulation, keeping the mind active and providing a sense of achievement. In a national survey of choristers in England, Clift et al (2007) analysed self reports to identify the following benefits to choir membership: It increases feelings of happiness and decreases feeling of sadness or depression; the concentration involved overrides preoccupation with worries; controlled breathing counteracts anxiety; the ongoing learning involved keeps the mind active; the regular commitment requires individuals to leave the house and engage with others.

Many Australian studies confirm these findings locally. Slottje (2010) summarises findings from surveys of community choristers and directors in New South Wales. Primary amongst the responses was a strong sense of group cohesion and belonging. Unwin et al (2002), also researching in Sydney, found that choir members experience an increase in positive emotions when singing. Rix (2004) found that a choir in Adelaide which is made up of community members and those with an intellectual disability is an inclusive venture which meets the social, cultural and emotional needs of its members while providing high quality music. Clarke (1995) reports on the collective joy a community choir in Sydney experiences, resulting in a strong sense of community.

In addition to the above research which emphasises the social and psychological benefits of choir participation, some studies indicate there are health-related benefits. In a study published by Clift & Hancox (2001) exploring the health benefits of choir singing, the vast majority of choir members surveyed (89%) indicated that choir singing lifted their mood. The researchers hypothesise a link between improved emotional state and increased overall health. Research conducted by Kreutz et al (2004) confirmed this link when they found that choir members had increases in positive emotions, which in turn boosted the participants' immune systems.

To summarize, research indicates that membership and participation in community choirs can provide the following outcomes: Improved emotional outlook; improved physical health; increased immune system function; increased cognitive function; increased social connection and support; increased sense of self-worth and achievement; reduced levels of sadness or depression; less time spent dwelling on difficulties. These benefits directly counteract many of the difficulties recent migrants face

Our experiences with the *With One Voice* program confirm these findings. In addition, the social connections that are developed in the *With One Voice* choirs can help individuals to secure employment, find housing, and resolve other tangible, practical issues which they face in daily life.

¹Australia Early Development Index

<http://training.aedi.org.au/>

²Australian Government, Department of Immigration and Citizenship

<http://www.immi.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/15population.htm>