

MERRI CREEK COBURG SAFETY

SURVEY REPORT

SEPTEMBER // 2020



If you have any queries in relation to the Merri Creek project engagement, please contact Nicole Kalms.

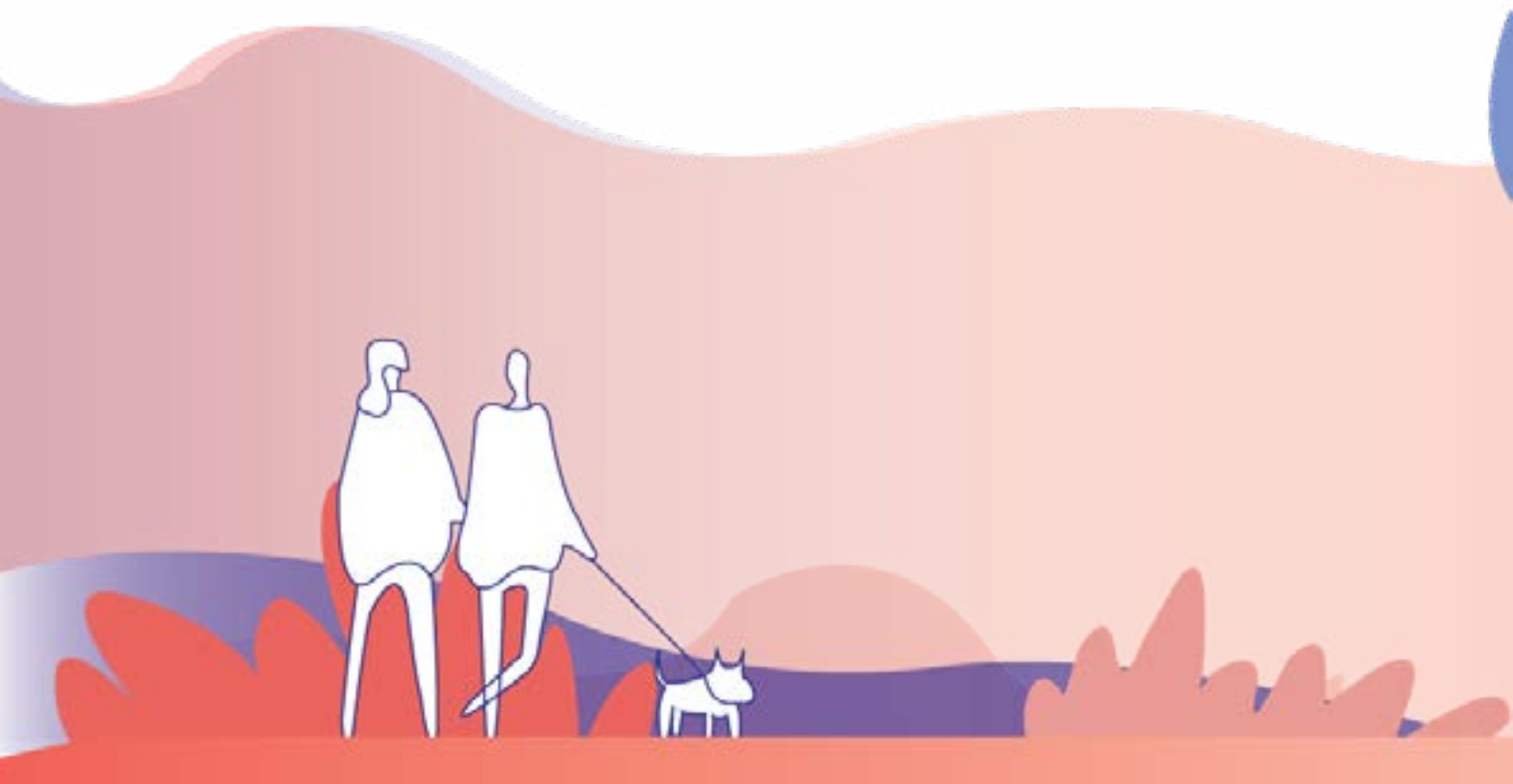
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XYX LAB

The XYX Lab is based at Monash University, Australia. It is the first research group in the world of its kind to address the complex intersections of space, gender and identity through design practice. Situated in the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture at Monash University, it draws on an interdisciplinary team of researchers, including experts in architecture, landscape architecture, urban design, communication design, design theory and design thinking methodologies.

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Executive Summary

Merri Creek (Coburg precinct) Safety Survey Report // 2020

Moreland City Council engaged Monash University's XYX Lab to conduct a women's safety survey of the Coburg section of the Merri Creek between Bell Street and Moreland Road. The engagement followed a violent attack on a woman in December 2019.

The online survey drew over 800 responses from women. The response level demonstrates strong concern in the community and a willingness of women to reflect on their safety and offer solutions.

Safety for women in public spaces is complex because women experience such places differently to men and individual women experiences are coloured by their other identity factors and personal experiences. Women also 'read' the physical and social aspects of public spaces for clues around risk.

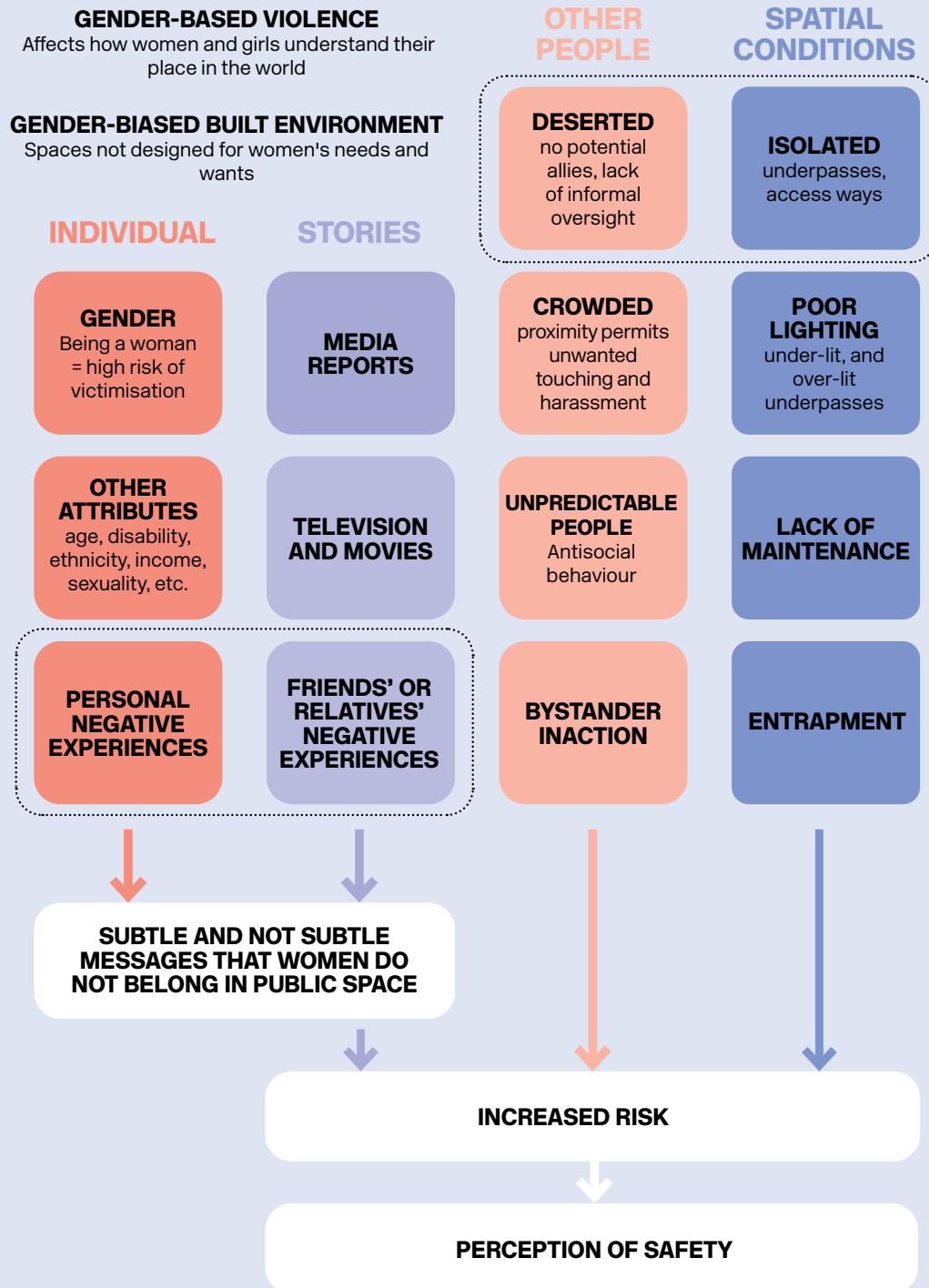


Figure 1:
Factors
impinging on
perceptions
of safety and
increased risk

In response to the threat of gender-based violence and compromised movement through gender-based built environments, women develop precautionary behaviours in order to keep themselves safe. In particular, women curtail their movements through and engagements with public spaces, and try to visually signal that they are on guard.

Merri Creek – the not-so good

It is relatively isolated. Because of this, it is a no-go zone after dark and even during the day some reported the area as unnerving. In the winter months, some women will not use it.

Since the attack, women have been absenting themselves from the Creek area either permanently, or at certain times of the day, or under certain conditions (only going there with someone else, or when they know it will be busy). Some paths in parts of the area are very narrow forcing women closer to strangers and can therefore feel entrapping.

Overwhelmingly, respondents' perceptions of safety in Merri creek are strongly affected by having heard stories of bad things happening there, rather than having necessarily experienced them directly. This suggests that the incidence of bad things is much less than media reports and rumours might claim.

Safety is not only about fear of attack, it is also about feeling welcome and accommodated for. Factors that negatively affect women's sense of belonging include:

- Poor path sharing behaviour by other users means that some women have experienced the area as unwelcoming and threatening.
- Parts of the creek are highly littered and/or smelly making it unpleasant to be in.
- Poor dog management by owners (uncontrolled dogs off leash and inadequate excrement removal) make parts of the Creek area unpleasant and frightening to visit.
- Lack of connectivity with surrounding streets means there are limited ways of accessing and exiting should there be trouble.
- Lack of orienting or wayfinding signage means that some women feel unsafe because they don't know where they are or how close help might be.

Merri Creek – the good

Close to nature. A good place for exercise: running, walking and cycling. Many also use it for leisure activities, such as picnics, dog walking, playing, and some even forage for edible plants. Communing with nature while involved in all these activities is key.

At the weekends in particular, it has a relaxed feel and is full of families and groups of friends.

Many respondents enjoyed walking their dogs and meeting and chatting with other dog walkers in the Coburg Merri Creek area.

It provides a way of avoiding very busy streets.

Joe's Garden near the Harding Street Bridge is very popular and its activities provide strong community cohesion.

Respondents' solutions

Respondents were cautious that too many or particular infrastructure additions and changes to improve safety could too easily be intrusive and destroy the natural qualities of the area.

Lighting: while commonly called for, the survey highlighted nuanced attitudes:

- 40% of the respondents said that more lighting would still not increase their night-time usage
- Lighting may only be useful at certain times of the year, at particular times of the day (dawn and dusk) and in limited locations (the Harding Street Bridge and the underpasses).

Further research would be necessary to determine whether Merri Creek is really a place that people want or need to use after dark, and if lighting would enhance that use.

Some infrastructure would make the area more pleasant to be in and so increase usage. This would also help reduce the isolation of the area.

Other respondents argued that the problem has nothing to do with Merri Creek as a place or its amenities, but with wider cultural gender inequities. They maintain that women will not be safe anywhere until men change their attitudes and behaviours. Proving this stance, the attack took place in daylight in one of the sites respondents thought was the safest.

Because safety is complex, multi-faceted and multi-scaled, solutions need to range from immediate changes to increase usage and foster community to longer timeframe strategies to counter violence against women.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A Council committee is required to coordinate the multiple approaches required for the complex issue of safety for women in the Merri Creek area. We also note that good stories about the area will slowly grow as good things happen there.

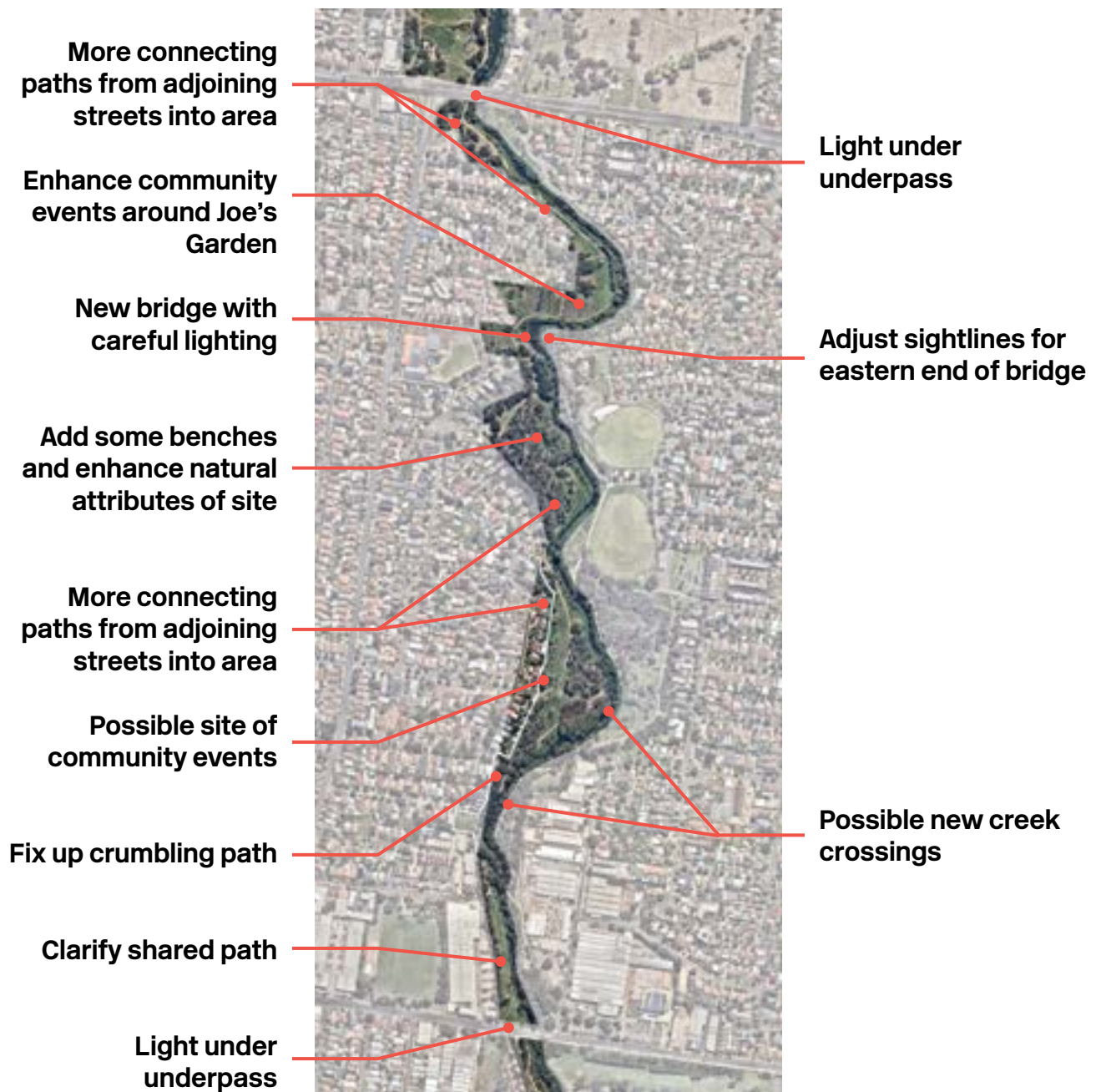


Figure 2: Recommendations Overview

Building Communities

Building resilience through community initiatives. Facilitate and support existing and new local groups to:



- co-design any community-building infrastructure,
- consult on any changes to the corridor's existing infrastructure,
- instigate and/or host community events,
- form support networks.
- support Joe's Garden to build on and broaden its current community connections and events.

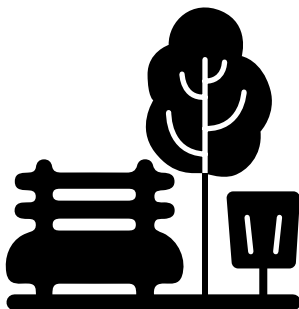
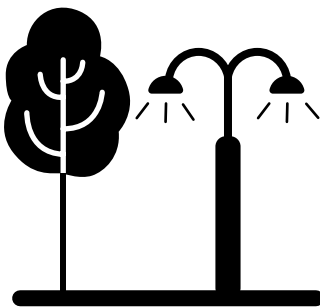
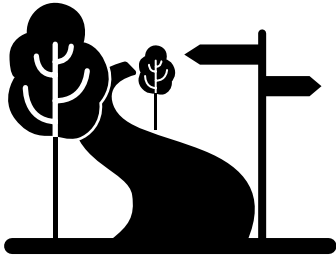
Communication and engagement



- Campaign(s) on the early outcomes of the Merri Creek Coburg Women's Safety Survey, emphasising participation rates.
- Intent to make changes across community engagement and infrastructure with timelines.
- Develop a regular mechanism to encourage feedback of experiences, good and bad.
- Seek responses to the report from key stakeholders (eg. Victoria Police, Merri Creek Management committee and Joe's Garden).
- Communication and engagement around shared path and environs behaviour. In particular, rights and obligations of cyclists, dog owners and general users.
- Align messaging with wider violence against women communication campaigns

Infrastructure and Maintenance

Nature is the key attraction of Merri Creek and any changes should be appropriate to the natural context of the Merri Creek corridor and in consultation with local women users. Appropriate infrastructure can increase usage and reduce the isolation of the Creek area



- Path etiquette – signage and/or paving changes to strongly indicate that this is a shared area to improve different user interactions.
- Increase wayfinding systems and signs so that users know where they are and what is nearby.
- Improve pathways – ensure existing paved paths are well maintained; clearer definition of existing desire paths in non-paved areas; rebuild parts of path north of Site F (note that this began in September 2020).
- Improve connectivity of paths with local street networks (for example Site A up to Nicholson Street).
- Develop more creek crossing options.
- Lighting – while often requested, there was also concern about the detrimental effects of light in such an area and doubt as to whether more lighting would actually increase usage. The exceptions are the key nodes of Harding Street Bridge and the underpasses. Note that better lighting does not mean more lighting.
- Harding Street Bridge – publish notice of maintenance checks; replace with a bridge more suitable to the volume and kind of traffic that traverses it and to improve sightlines at the eastern end of the bridge (note that design work is underway for this and we would strongly encourage engagement with local women in this process).
- More bins and creek maintenance – keeping the area clear of rubbish, flood debris and dog excrement.
- Possible changes to fences backing onto Creek area to improve passive surveillance from adjoining houses and businesses.
- Community-building infrastructure – benches to rest, meet or picnic; community events infrastructure; suitable play equipment; community-facilitated artworks; and possible toilets.

BACKGROUND/CONTEXT

In December 2019, a young woman jogger was violently attacked in Merri Creek just north of the Harding Street Bridge. The attack elicited a strong community response with around 1,000 people taking part in a Reclaim Our Merri Creek March in the following week. Moreland City Council responded by pledging to work with Victoria Police and the Merri Creek Management Committee to "understand safety improvements that can be made to the corridor."¹ And Victoria Police stepped up patrols of the area to reassure the public.

Commitment 2:
All genders can
access public
space, sports and
recreation and feel
safe.

Moreland Gender Equality Commitment

The council engaged Monash University's XYX Lab to conduct a safety survey to understand how women² users of the Creek area understood safety in the area and what they thought might help. This project represents the ongoing undertaking by MCC to pursue different ways of materialising their Gender Equality Commitment, Preventing Family Violence in Moreland Strategy 2016–2020, and Active Women and Girls Strategy. All of these are pertinent to this report as well as the Moreland Human Rights Strategy, Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing 2017–2021, and the Community Engagement and Public Participation in Moreland Policy.

Through this community safety survey the project aimed to:

- Identify opportunities to increase the feeling of safety in the precinct
- Reduce the opportunity for crime in particular crimes against women to occur
- Increase community participation and foster local social capital
- Connect to a range of other existing initiatives



¹ ABC News (2019); Papworth (2019)

² When Monash University's XYX Lab uses the word woman or women, we recognise that they are not a homogenous group. Women represent enormous diversity in their cultural background, socioeconomic status, where they live, their sexuality, ability/disability, and age. We use the word inclusive of all women, including cis-women, trans-women and intersex women.

Women's experiences in public space

In general, women experience public space differently to men.³ Gender bias, which permeates our society and culture, is the major cause of this discrepancy. In particular, women's safety in public space is very complex and not always well understood by those who determine how places are designed, developed, governed, and maintained.

Gender bias is “prejudiced actions or thoughts based on the perception that women are not equal to men in rights and dignity.”⁴

There are many consequences of gender bias, but the main ones that impact the access, inclusion and experiences of women in public space are gender-based violence and gender-biased built environment. Note that both of these also reinforce gender inequality and bias.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Although crime statistics show that women and girls are generally far more at risk of gender-based violence in their homes and from people they know,⁵ these statistics do not count the multiple and often daily incidents of sexual harassment that profoundly impact upon women's experiences of public space. Nine in every ten Australian women have experienced such harassment and many modify their behaviour in public space as a result and are both consciously and unconsciously on guard.⁶

Sexual harassment ranges widely from so-called compliments to sexual assault – some forms of which might seem to be innocuous to men. When it occurs in public spaces, it continuously reminds women that they are vulnerable to the kind of violence that occurred along the Merri Creek in December 2019. And that incident joins the high-profile rapes and murders in Melbourne of journalist Jill Meagher (2012), pastry chef Renae Lau (2014), high-school student Maša Vukotić (2015), comedian Eurydice Dixon (2018), and international student Aiiia Maasarwe (2019). The frequency of

such severe cases is less relevant than the impact they have on women's confidence to feel safe in public.⁷

Therefore, while men might think that their actions and comments about and towards women in public are just a bit of fun, women cannot know where this 'bit of fun' might lead. Ignoring a comment can lead to verbal threats and physical confrontation, responding to it can be seen as an invitation for more, and reporting can lead to dismissal and trivialisation of their experience by those in authority. Quite simply, all forms of sexual harassment have an ongoing and too often debilitating impact on women's ability to engage in public space – although the degree of that impact will depend markedly on the individual woman based on many factors, including her age, ethnicity, sexuality and socio-economic background.

GENDER-BASED BUILT ENVIRONMENT AND PLACES

Public spaces and infrastructure are usually legislated and designed for and cater to an abstract generic user. Some maintain that this abstraction is 'gender-neutral' or 'gender blind', but in the context of endemic gender bias and inequality, this alleged 'neutral' user is invariably male.⁸ On a par with how tools and equipment are typically designed for the male body (which is usually larger than the average female body)⁹, public spaces and places tend to be designed to accommodate male activities, priorities and preferences.¹⁰ Infrastructure and public spaces that privilege the needs of one group simply reinforce the status quo, promote a gendered hierarchy and deliver the message that women do not belong in public space.

Without understanding the impacts of gender bias, gender-neutral and gender blind are false concepts. The built-in gender biases of the 'norm' act as implicit biases, meaning that their intrusion into our thinking and designing is not always conscious. Therefore, gender considerations need to be at the forefront of consciousness.

3 Vera-Gray (2018); Community Crime Prevention (2020a)
 4 Definition from the European Institute for Gender Equality.
 5 ABS (2017)
 6 Johnson and Bennett (2015); Plan International (2018)
 7 Vera-Gray (2018)
 8 Phadke et al. (2013)
 9 Criado Perez (2019)
 10 WICI and Metropolis (2018), 9

PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES – EVERYDAY CHOREOGRAPHIES OF SAFETY

In response to the seemingly constant threat of gender-based violence and compromised movement through gender-based built environments, women develop safe-keeping practices or precautionary measures in order to keep themselves safe or assuage feelings of unsafety in public space. In particular, women self-restrict or curtail their movements through public spaces and visually signal that they are on guard or not a viable target.

Common precautionary measures are:

- Not going out after dark,
- Not going out alone,
- Avoiding public transport or parts of it at certain times,
- Increasing their walking speed in unlit or perceived dangerous areas
- Walking in a concentrated, manner (head down and disengaged),
- Always carrying a visible phone,
- Carrying keys in the hand,
- Carrying an alarm.

Most women employ more than one of these measures at a time and what is notable about these practices is their interaction and embodiment in the everyday experiences and habits of women. Women are taught and learn these measures from a young age and the lessons intensify as they reach adolescence. From this moment, young women practise behaviours often without thinking as they internalise them through repetition. Precautionary and safekeeping measures thus become an everyday choreography of safety that women perform in order to use public space.

Women not only learn to be on guard and take precautions, but to 'read' the physical and social environment they are passing through for clues around risk. Women tend to be wary of the following and their combination:

- Dark places,
- Spaces that might be physically entrapping offering no easy means of escape,
- Isolated spaces with no one around,
- Places occupied only by men or youths or by people they perceive might behave unpredictably (such as alcohol and drug-affected),
- Unmaintained, graffitied, unkempt and dirty and

smelly spaces as these tend to signal decay and might foster the presence of unpredictable people and criminal behaviour,

- Evidence of illicit drug use also signals decay, that criminal behaviour occurs in the area and that there is a possible lack of patrolling or policing.

Key to improving this situation is to gather information about women's experiences and to use these to inform policies and actions. This report and project looks at addressing the limitations to women's movement in the Coburg Merri Creek area and how to encourage safe access through the inclusion of women's ideas and experiences in any proposed changes.

Commitment 1:
All genders have equal visibility, access to self representation and leadership opportunities.

Moreland Gender Equality Commitment

Area analysis

DEMOGRAPHICS

According to 2016 census data:

- 51.1% population of Moreland City Council area identified as female

Using ABS Statistical Areas, we selected those living within easy reach of the Coburg Merri Creek area. This includes some living in Darebin LGA (see Appendix A for areas included). In the immediate vicinity of the area, women comprise 52% of the population. Nearly one in every five of the women were in the 25–34 age group. Just 0.5% were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. 59% spoke only English and the same proportion spoke English at home, with 16% speaking an Asian language.

MERRI CREEK USERS DATA BREAKDOWN

While there is no available data on pedestrian or leisure usage along Merri Creek, the not-for-profit Bicycle Network undertakes a census of cyclists across Australia. On March 3 2020, 228 cyclists were tallied along the western side of the Merri Creek trail in the morning.¹¹ This indicates that the area is used by some as part of their commute. The number of men was more than double the number of women (70 female, 158 male), a disproportion that replicates those across other municipalities in the City of Melbourne.

There are a number of reasons posited for this including:

- Because of higher caregiving or household responsibilities, women tend to undertake more complex trips or trip chaining.¹² These trips may not be possible by bike.
- Cultural factors that require women to appear more groomed and carefully dressed creating barriers in cycling to work or social events. This is more pronounced for women of colour.
- Sexual and verbal harassment are commonplace experiences for women riding bikes and prevents women from feeling safe when cycling.¹³

Table 1: Demographic data
for those living close to Coburg Merri Creek area

Age	#F	#M	% all F
<15	643	608	16%
15-24	499	509	12%
25-34	795	779	19%
35-44	669	588	16%
45-54	552	495	13%
55-64	386	379	9%
65-74	216	189	5%
75+	331	222	8%
TOTAL	3,448	4,091	
			% all females
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander			0.5%
Language spoken at home			
Northern European including English			59%
Other European languages			18%
All Asian languages			16%
Other or not stated			6%

Overall, this gender discrepancy in cyclist numbers is a reflection of gendered social conditions that impact upon women's use of public space, specifically a diminished right to occupy it.

CRIME STATISTICS SNAPSHOT OF MORELAND AND COBURG

Although much sexual harassment in public is not considered a crime, there is some data available for crime and victimisation. The Australian Crime Statistics Agency (CSA) collates this official data for both the wider Moreland City Council area and for Coburg.¹⁴ See also Appendix B. The data discussed here covers the years 2010–2019.

CRIMES AGAINST THE PERSON

While most offences against the persons categories trended upwards from 2010 to 2019, the most marked increase was in the 'Stalking, Harassment' category, which almost tripled from 2018 to 2019. Some of this dramatic increase is probably due to increased reporting, which is in turn a reflection of changing social values that increasingly view sexually predatory behaviour (such as stalking and harassment) as harmful, not just 'boys being boys'. Notably, while crimes such as murder and against property have halved, sexual assault rates are stubborn and increasing.¹⁵

OFFENCES BY LOCATION TYPE

The environment or location where a crime occurs (or is perceived to occur) is an important consideration in crime prevention and fear of crime. The CSA categorises three broad location types: Residential, Community, and Other. Under the location type Community in Coburg area, the street/footpath are the most common place for an offence to take place, followed by public transport sites, and then open spaces (such as Merri Creek). In the Other location type section, 'recreational space' was the second most common place for an offence to occur, with the first being retail spaces (usually because reporting of theft is required for insurance claims). Urban greenspaces are an under-researched area in criminology, but statistics from the CSA show that criminal activity is occurring in these spaces. As such, these spaces warrant investigation.

¹² Scheiner and Holz-Rau (2017); McGuckin and Murakami (1999)
¹³ Leverant (2016); Allatt (2018); Foster (2010)
¹⁴ Crime Statistics Agency
¹⁵ Price (2019).

METHODOLOGY

The project used an online survey to gather information about women's perceptions of safety in the area. The survey was based on the Women's Safety Audit's guidelines modified by Monash University's XYX Lab team to reflect the specificity of the Merri Creek urban greenway and accommodate the digital platform. Distinct sites were selected along the Moreland side of the Coburg Merri Creek and these are reflective of different types of spaces found along the longer

corridor. Recruitment was led by the Moreland City Council. The survey consisted of both questions with set answers, and those providing for open-text answers. Open-text questions were then thematically analysed by Monash University's XYX Lab team. All these elements of methodology are discussed in detail below.

Women's safety audits

Women's Safety Audits (WSA) are a proven highly effective and internationally acknowledged method for gathering information on safety for women. The first of these was developed in the late 1980s in Toronto by the Metropolitan Toronto Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children.¹⁶ The approach is women-focused, and WSAs have since been adopted and adapted to suit local conditions and changing technologies across the world.

Urban planning and feminist literature from the 1970s increasingly looked at the exclusion of women's knowledge in the planning and building of public space and how this has led to urban cityscapes that did not reflect women experiences or needs.¹⁷ Groups and individuals' experiences are affected by their relationship to power and WSAs were developed as a tool to begin redressing this systemic problem. They are specifically crafted in opposition to some traditional academic knowledge-making processes that allege to be gender neutral.¹⁸ In particular, WSAs emphasise the importance of the emotional and experiential knowledge of women,



16 Whitzman et al. (2009); Lambrick and Travers (2008)
 17 Spain (1992); Whitzman (2013)
 18 Greed (2003)

positioning them as experts of their experiences of space. As such, they align with current preferences in socio-geographical and urban political research that increasingly prioritise bottom-up approaches to issues by including local stakeholders in problem-solving processes.¹⁹

At the heart of WSAs is a small group of six to ten women in the community in which they reside gathering on a site reflecting and commenting on a checklist of aspects of the physical and socio-spatial environment.²⁰ Audits differ depending on different kinds of spaces (such as streets, residential areas, parks, markets and public transport). Part of any audit are physical environment issues like lighting, surveillance and sightlines. However, women are also asked to consider social matters, such as how many women are in the space, what they are doing, and, in particular, are there reasons and opportunities for women to gather in the space. Simply, are there women who are inhabiting public space, not just quickly passing through it, keys in hand as a ready defence. This ability to inhabit is central to perceptions of belonging and safety and to the sense that women are actually entitled to take up space in public places. Crucially, as the participants identify the factors that make them feel unsafe or safe, they also suggest ways to make the space a better and safer place for women.

The strength of WSAs is that they:

- Are participatory, providing strong community engagement and empowerment,
- Support and legitimise women's first-hand accounts giving women users of urban space equal standing to 'professional experts', such as urban planners, designers and police,
- Increase women's sense of safety and use of public space by improving various elements of built environment and by changing community behaviours and LGA policies,
- Have some overlap with barrier-free design and so can also lead to more inclusive places for people with disabilities.

WSAs now come in different forms. Digital crowdmapping platforms, such as *Safetipin* and *Free to Be*, allow women to use geo-locative software to pinpoint precisely where they feel safe or unsafe, and why. *Safetipin* now also generates safety scores for the different parts of the cities where it is active.²¹

Project Design

Monash University's XYX Lab originally intended to facilitate onsite, in-person WSA's in the traditional manner but, due to the unprecedented circumstances of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the project was moved online. While this was a necessary move, the transition pivoted the project from the traditional into the powerful and emerging area of digital research. Sharing experiences via digital platforms has proven to connect, empower and support women and girls, and has enormous potential to effect positive change.²² The *#MeToo* movement is a strong example of that potential.

There are a number of reasons why the virtual or online environment approach is so useful and appropriate for this kind of project:

- it can democratise the research process giving more autonomy and power to participants,
- it opens the research process to far more participants or users, which works to break down structural barriers, such as class and race,
- the increased numbers of women participating or sharing in virtual spaces works to effectively challenge dominant narratives,
- it can provide a cover of anonymity and safety for women who wish to disclose instances of gender-based violence but fear reprisals from others methods of disclosure.

While open, online crowd-mapping options, such as *Safetipin* and *Free to Be*, have provided a welcome space for women to connect, share and become involved in activism, they can also attract trolls and be where women may experience online abuse.²³ As such, crowd mapping was not considered an appropriate platform for the project. This risk also meant that the Council's online, public consultation forum, *Conversations Moreland*, was deemed by the Council to be not appropriate (although the Council instituted an open-to-everyone crowdmap for commenting upon safety for the whole of Merri Creek).²⁴ Instead, *SurveyMonkey* was selected as it allowed the prioritising of very localised, gendered knowledge production to be incorporated alongside the relevant environmental information. It is also accessible via a variety of devices: laptops, tablets and mobile phones.

¹⁹ Nikkiah and Redzuan (2009)

²⁰ WICI (2011)

²¹ <https://safetipin.com/>

²² Kalms (2017)

²³ For example, *Free to Be*, Plan International (2018), 9

²⁴ Moreland City Council, Help make Merri Creek a safe and welcoming place for all

However, the WSA format needed considerable adaptation. First, to fit an online survey format. The WSA methodology consists of groups of women visiting and talking with prompts from the facilitators. Prompts are required because many of women's reactions to and actions in public space occur at an unconscious level (such as their precautionary measures discussed earlier). Turning these prompts into questions that would draw out the 'unconscious' risked generating leading questions.

Second, adaptation was required because the environment between Bell Street and Moreland Road along the Merri Creek does not fully fit into the WSA 'park' typology. A park implies a level of design and maintenance which this part of the Creek area does not always exhibit. It is instead an urban greenway – a strip of undeveloped land, relatively natural and even wild. There is growing political and social interest in this type of space mainly attributable to the range of positive effects greenways are purported to have on their immediate neighbourhoods, including:

- Improved environmental conditions, such as temperature regulation, air and water purification and increased wildlife and vegetation habitats,²⁵
- Provide a space for recreational use for communities,
- Health inequities between low and high socioeconomic status people in areas with greenways is less than those with no green spaces,²⁶
- Psychological benefits – mitigating stress, fatigue and depression.

However, much of the research into greenways has failed to be gendered. As with other public spaces detailed above, women may not experience urban greenways in the same way as men, and part of the aim of the survey was to uncover these experiences.



25 Hamada and Ohta (2010); Elmqvist et al. (2015)
26 Mitchell and Popham (2008)

Survey Design

The online survey had three main sections and 145 questions, although not all required answering. The sections were:

- Section 1: Usage, including a series of quick questions about the six sites.
- Section 2: More detailed questions about each of the six sites. Participants could select as many of these as they wanted. Some elected to do none.
- Section 3: Demographics.

SITE SELECTION

Six sites were selected along the Coburg side of Merri Creek between Bell Street and Moreland Road. Each of these represents a different kind of space or spatial typology, making the results of the survey possibly applicable to similar sites in other parts of Moreland. Sites A, B and C are on the official Merri Creek Trail consisting of a sealed path. The Trail crosses the creek into Darebin at the Harding Street Bridge (Site C). Sites D, E and F are south of the bridge and are more informal areas.

QUESTIONS FORMAT

The majority of questions had set answers, but 29 had an 'Other' option which allowed for open-text answers. Another nineteen questions were free text only – these were in Section 2 of the survey seeking detailed information about each of the six sites, plus one 'Final remarks' question. In these questions, women could detail their experience and do so anonymously. All open-text questions were coded to identify dominant themes which arose out of the comments themselves. The collation of women's stories in this manner creates a vehicle to challenge current understandings of space.²⁷ For each site, a slider question asked participants their perceived safety or lack of safety in the site.



Figure 3: Overall site map

Visual prompts for the six sites were included in the survey. Each site had been documented with photos and three images were selected to represent each site to complement a map. Maps on their own were considered not sufficient information for participants to orientate themselves.

Site A

Bell Street, Bowden Reserve



The Merri Creek Trail at this point narrows, is hilly at the northern end but generally observable from across the creek. The path is elevated from the creek and leads north through an often vandalised underpass to sporting and recreational areas north of Bell Street.

Site B

Market Garden



This section of the Merri Creek Trail is generally elevated from the creek. While open on the west and north to the market garden, this section cannot be seen from the eastern side and there are no nearby houses.

Site C

Harding Street Bridge crossing



This site is a suspension bridge with a narrow pathway and is the only formal connection between the eastern and western sides of the creek in this stretch. Bridges and connection points along the Merri Creek are somewhat infrequent unless the user ascends to street level. There are two stepping-stones crossings south of the bridge before Moreland Street, but these are often covered over by creek water and are less safe crossings.

Site D

Nature reserve off Grant Street



This area has high levels of vegetation and includes an informal BMX bike area. A number of informal, unsealed tracks crisscross the area. The area is hilly and drops right down to creek level and there are no impediments limiting access to the water.

Site E

Off Leash Dog Area, Egan Reserve



This area has an uneven topography and has both a large open space and some tall trees towards the creek. There is some limited seating and the land slopes close to the creek level. A number of informal, unsealed tracks crisscross the area.

Site F

Moreland Road to timber bridge



There is a single informal, unsealed track or path here which is at times narrow and heavily vegetated. The reserve area here is also narrow and quite steep and the path drops quite close to creek level, particularly immediately north of the timber bridge.

Recruitment

The project aimed to attract as diverse a group of women as possible. Previous research has found that an individual's fear in public space and the way they respond to an environment they are exposed to are affected by their different intersecting identities.²⁸ Women are not an homogenous group, as noted earlier, and individual women will have a nexus of intersecting identities (such as race and gender and age and access to wealth) that contribute to and exacerbate or alleviate constraints or oppressions in different circumstances.

While word of mouth and wider media campaigns are important means of disseminating surveys, this form of snowball sampling may not target or reach groups that historically have been marginalised or have reason to distrust institutions like councils and universities. Pip Carroll, Festivals Assistant of Moreland City Council, was seconded to liaise with Monash University's XYX Lab and undertake the main recruitment. Pip drew on her close ties with community groups and in the community generally to directly contact leaders in local organisations with information about the project to ask them to circulate it through their networks/members.

Unlike an in-person WSA, the virtual setting allowed for a much greater number of women to participate (the original proposal was for a maximum of 50) creating a more democratised and potentially much greater ability to collect women's knowledge and experiences of the spaces.

The prime digital platform for promoting the project was the Council *Conversations Moreland* public consultation website (Figure 9). This project's site went live on June 15 and also gave access to the open-to-all, geo-locative survey asking participants to pin their favourite places and say why, and areas they thought a problem and suggest solutions.²⁹ The project page received 1,326 unique visitors. Further recruitment techniques by the Council were multi-pronged and consisted of:



Merri Creek Trail near the Market Garden (Site B)

²⁸ Crenshaw (1990): 1241; Pain and Smith (2008)

²⁹ The Conversations Moreland survey is not covered by this report



Figure 4: Conversations Moreland Website

- Thirty **signs** placed along the stretch of Merri Creek alerting users to both surveys with a QR code direct to the Safety Survey (from Friday June 19 until July 22),
- **Letterbox drop** detailing the Safety Survey delivered to 5,000 houses in Coburg within the immediate vicinity of the Creek (June 16),
- **Facebook** general post on MCC page (June 6): 18,000 reach, 1,122 engagements, 76 comments, 37 shares, 94 likes)
- Targeted **social media** advertisements on Facebook (June 16 to July 17): females 18–40, living in Coburg; 14,000 reach, 379 links to survey.
- **Instagram** stories (June 26 to July 7): 4,099 followers, 122 clicks.
- **Direct contact** via email and follow-up phone conversations to community organisations, sporting clubs and groups, community houses, schools, outreach organisations, government organisations, and other interested organisations within the area.
- **My Moreland newsletter** (July 2): 11,000 subscribers, 12 direct link clicks.

Some recruitment methods directed people straight to the Women's Safety Survey, and some to the *Conversations Moreland* site and from there to the Survey. XYX Lab and team members also mobilised their social media networks (Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn) for recruiting and an article by the team mentioning the survey was published in *The Conversation* on July 16.³⁰

The project was launched on June 15 and closed on July 20. Weekly meetings were held to monitor the demographics of responses and allow targeted recruitment.



Limitations

RECRUITING

One limitation of this project was that it required access to a digital device and the internet. While 91% of Australians own a smartphone³¹ (and those who do not can be assumed to have reasonable access to such a device through a relative or friend), there are clear groups that are more disadvantaged by this method of delivery:

- Older populations
- Low socio-economic households
- Homeless populations

In particular under COVID-19 restrictions, local libraries were closed and the access they provide of free wifi and computers is often used by all three of the above groups. To ameliorate this, some small focus groups were planned to target specific demographics after the survey closed, but Lockdown #2 Stages 3 and 4 lasting into September 2020 made this impossible. However, the very high number of respondents to the survey overall was considered sufficient to cover off most groups.

LIMITATION OF SURVEY DESIGN

There were also some limits in the kind of questions asked in the survey. A number of respondents thought that the premise of many of the questions was that the Creek area was unsafe, which they both disagreed with and were concerned fed the fear:

*I understand the goal of this survey is to identify "problem areas" in which girls and women feel less safe, but I wish that there was less emphasis on what makes me feel unsafe as opposed to what makes me feel *safe*. I've never felt unsafe while on the Merri Creek (which is perhaps a privilege to be able to say), and I'd like to have been able to express that better in this survey.*
(25–34, woman, student)

Re. potential users who have avoided the areas entirely due to perception/ their own capacities... I think it's difficult for this to be captured in the survey.
(25–34, person with a disability, LGBTIQ+)



In addition, the unconscious nature of safety precautionary measures practised by women (and which the survey was designed to draw out) was noted clearly by one respondent:

I've never felt unsafe on the Merri Creek Trail, but upon seeing this survey I realised that in actuality that is because I always go in daylight (morning preferably) and with someone. (25–34 years, full-time employed)

The survey did offer opportunities for women to talk about the sites in a positive way. Nonetheless, these comments from respondents concerned that the survey could reinforce negative experiences and associations for other women reflects an understanding that women are influenced strongly by each other's experiences and also by media portrayals of those experiences. This report summarising the results of the survey is part of teasing out perceptions and actual risks for women in the Creek area.

There were also some who chafed at the spatial limitations of the survey arguing that other areas needed attention as well:

Coburg goes further north than bell street, what aren't you asking about that area? (35–44, woman, LGBTQIA+)

I am disappointed to see the survey only considers the area up until Bell street. The area further north is equally if not possibly even more frequented. (35–44, woman, migrant/refugee)

Why is it just this section of Merri Creek that's been looked at? Beyond Bell Street doesn't count?? Again. (45–54, woman, LGBTQIA+)

Some of the survey questions assume that respondents feel unsafe, and thereby encourage the perception that the area is unsafe. (65–74, woman, not working/retired)

As discussed earlier, part of the process of Women's Safety Audits is to ask women to reflect on all the social and physical aspects of an environment in order to understand how these aspects might give clues for individual perceptions of safety. Therefore the survey questions were prompts for this reflection – but could be seen as 'leading' or overly suggestive. In-person WSAs ameliorate this perception through many discussions throughout the process, which is typically empowering for the participants. A digital survey does not permit that.

The acknowledgement of privilege in the first quote above is important to note because, although gender plays a large factor in how safe/unsafe we feel in public space, socio-economic status, race, religion and other identities also contribute to feelings of safety and unsafety. This means that the views of this respondent are unlikely to be shared by all women.

There was clearly a positive response from women in the community to engage with safety and improvement of the amenity. However, any future safety surveys should take into account lessons learnt from this survey and the criticisms received.



Off leash dog area and Egan Reserve (Site E)

RESULTS

In the five weeks of the survey, nearly 900 people linked to it (Figure 5 and Table 2). This was a figure well in excess of expectations and provided a wealth of information. Participants on average took ten minutes to complete the survey.



Social media by Moreland City Council and the XYX Lab was particularly useful for recruitment and resulted in some natural replication into other networks. The Facebook pages *Coburg Good Karma* and *Urban Happiness: Melbourne planning and design ideas* also spread the word.

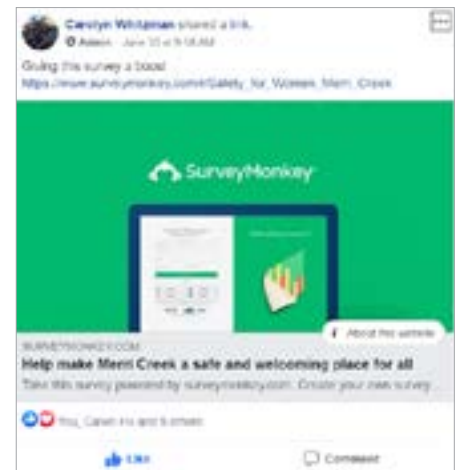


Figure 6: 'Natural' replication of survey across social media

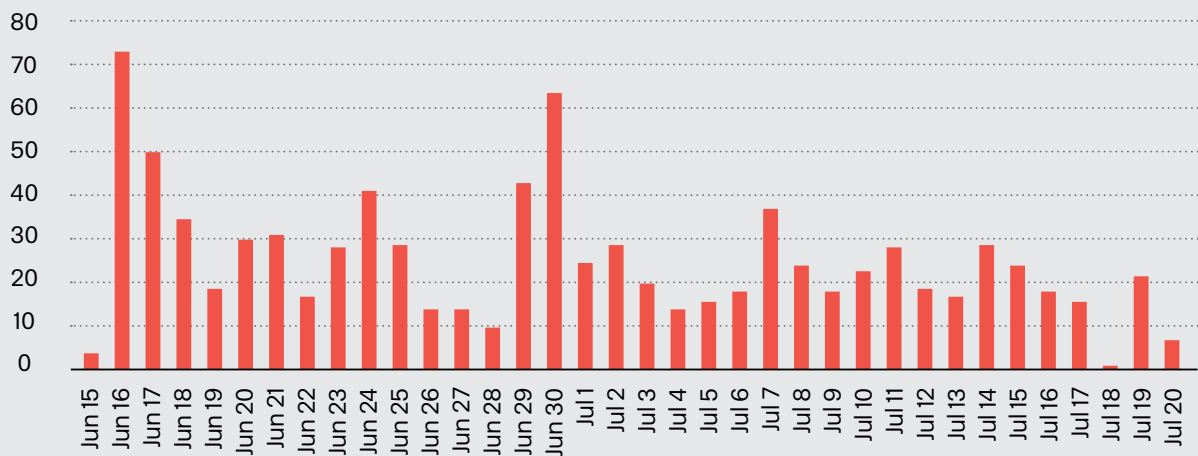


Figure 5: Number of Respondents Per Day

RESPONDENTS

Table 2: Respondents

Total number of entries	896	
'Tourists'	78	
Trolls	1	
'Clean' total	817	% of clean
Users of the Creek area	731	89%
Not current users of Creek area	86	11%

Some of the 896 visitors to the survey were 'tourists' who did not respond to any questions and were presumably scoping out the survey (Table 2). Another 86 were not users of the Creek area and quickly exited after filling in the questions for why they were not users, although these respondents were given the chance to continue with the survey and over half (48) of them chose to do so.

Table 3: Tally of questions answered

No Section 2 responses – Detailed site questions	274	34%
No Section 3 responses – Demographic data (NDD)	255	31%
NDD & not use Creek	50	
NDD & minimal answers	174	
NDD & no Section 2 answers	249	

Not all fully completed the survey with 255 omitting Section 3 (Demographic questions, Table 3). Of those 255, only 6 supplied responses to Section 2 (Detailed questions on each site), and just 100 or 39% completed all of Section 1 questions. Even so, the rest of the not-complete respondents still give useful information on their usage and experiences.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Table 4: Demographics, gender

Female	547
Male	8
Prefer not to say	4
Non-binary	3

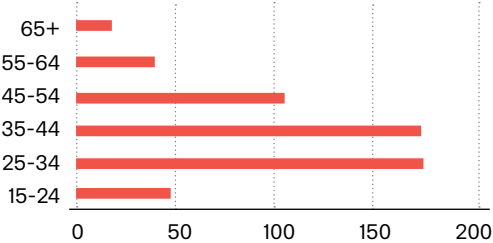
562 respondents supplied demographic data, see tables 4 and 5.

Despite the survey being explicitly for women, a handful of men completed it. One exhorted the council to:

listen to women. For me I feel safe but that doesn't mean there isn't a need for change. (45-54, man, full-time employed)

While as a percentage, the proportion of those

Figure 7 and Table 5: Demographics, age



15-24 years	9%
25-34 years	31%
35-44 years	31%
45-54 years	19%
55-64 years	7%
65-74 years	3%
74-84 years	0.4%
85+ years	

aged 15-24 was not high, over fifty respondents declaring in this age group is still a significant number and large enough for separate analysis. There were also relatively smaller numbers in the older age groups compared to their proportion in the local population overall (Table 1 and Figure 7). Age appeared to be a significant factor in responses.

Table 6: Moreland Council Priority Groups

A woman	539	96%
Migrant, refugee or asylum seeker	23	4%
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	5	1%
A person with a disability	29	5%
Part of the LGBTQIA+ community.	72	13%
Other	3	1%

While five people identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, nine declared themselves from this background in a separate question; this proportion is slightly above the numbers recorded in the 2016 Census (Table 1). 10% spoke a language in addition to English, these languages were from across the world.

Table 7: Employment Situation

Full-time employment	288	51%
Part-time employment	185	33%
Parent	62	11%
Underemployed	35	6%
Retired or not working	22	4%
Student	60	11%

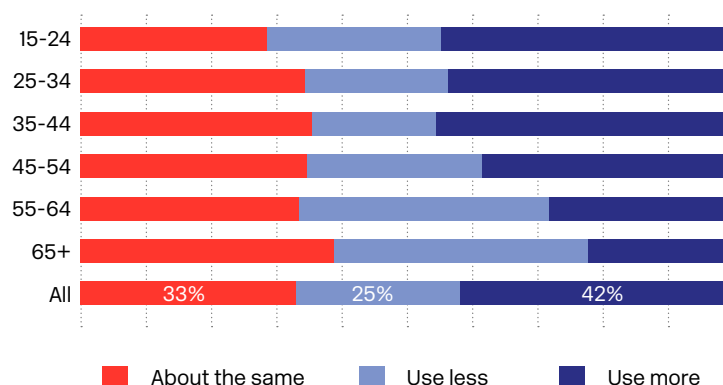
For the employment segment, some ticked more than one box and some did not. The majority of the parents (36) also worked part time, and 11 worked full time. Just 14 were full-time parents.

USAGE

A series of questions delved into what activities the respondents used the Coburg Merri Creek area for and when and how they did so.

Table 8 and Figure 8: Use change since COVID-19

Has your use changed since the COVID-19 lockdown?				
	About the Same	Use Less	Use More	n=
All	33%	25%	42%	562
15–24 years	29%	27%	45%	53
25–34 years	34%	22%	44%	174
35–44 years	35%	19%	46%	173
45–54 years	35%	27%	38%	105
55–64 years	33%	38%	28%	39
65+	39%	39%	22%	18
No age given	30%	26%	44%	255



Usage under COVID-19

Although the survey asked participants in general to respond for their pre-COVID-19 lockdown use and perceptions, two questions directly asked about COVID-19 use, and conditions in the Creek area under lockdown were raised multiple times in the open-text answers. One-third of respondents made use of Merri Creek 'about the same' as prior to COVID-19, a quarter used it less, but the highest proportion used it more (Table 8).

There was, however, a strong difference depending on age: older women were more likely to be using it less than previously and younger women more. Increased use of this urban greenway under lockdown is not unexpected, as people flocked to any nearby open space for their permitted exercise. There is also some evidence that people tend to "seek engagement with nature to further their efforts to summon and demonstrate resilience in the face of a crisis."³²

Other comments noted that parts of the Creek area had become very crowded under lockdown, and therefore in some places it was difficult to maintain physical distance due to the narrowness of the path or track. This concerned older users more than younger, although there were also younger women conscious of this issue:

After covid19 restrictions introduced numbers increased dramatically, with bikes weaving in and out of walkers/

runners. Many people not keeping distance or hogging the path in groups or pairs. Runners passing very close without keeping a distance. Have limited use of path during covid19.

(45–54, woman, LGBTQIA+, full-time employed, parent)

Heavier use during covid has made creek park less safe as often very crowded and too many people not distancing. Several bottleneck sections of path where distancing not possible. Eg near Area F timber bridge.

(45–54 years old, woman part- time employed and retired)

During the pandemic I avoided using this area – it was just too busy and too hard to keep social distance.

(35–44 years old, woman, full-time employed)

In current time, inability to keep social distancing on narrow paths also stops me using this area.

(65–74, woman, person with a disability)

In contrast, other women commented that they had found the space safer than before COVID-19 due to the increased natural surveillance provided by more people in the area. These contrasting responses exemplify how space, how we interact with it and prioritise different perceptions of risk are affected by social and personal circumstances. Space is not solely configured by the physical but also by the social relations that occur within it.

Those who use the area

Most of the respondents used the Creek area for walking, followed by cycling and then running (Figure 9). However, nearly three-quarters used it for more than one activity, and almost half selected three or more activities. While the area does not offer much in the way of formal sporting activities, it does support a range of informal active exercise and leisure opportunities. A small number of local women also use the area to forage for edible plants.

Walking remains the most common use for all age groups, but running was the second most common use for those in the 15–24 age group. Cycling maintained second place for those aged 25–44, but for the over-45s, dog walking pushed cycling out of second place.

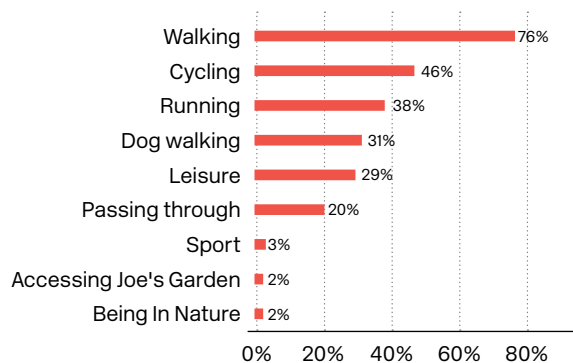


Figure 9: Participant usage

Table 9: Reasons why respondents did not use Merri Creek

Why do you not use the Coburg Merri Creek Area? n=86		
I feel unsafe there	43	50%
I live too far away or use another part of Merri Creek	32	37%
I used to when younger, but no longer	23	27%
I don't have time	7	8%
It's dirty	7	8%
It's smelly	3	3%
My parents/family won't let me	2	2%
I'm not interested in using that kind of space	1	1%
I had a bad experience there	0	0%



Those who do not use the Merri Creek area

86 visitors to the site did not use the area concerned, all of whom supplied reasons why – Table 9.

Half reported the area as simply not feeling safe. The two young women whose parents or family would not let them use the area also reported feeling unsafe there. In the comments section offered to non-users, the following were typical:

*I would feel unsafe going on my own or with my kids
(35–44, woman, parent)*

*There are other spots to walk, that are safer, prettier and just as close to home.
(No demographic data provided)*

*When I lived close, I used it to walk or ride, but not at nighttime. At nighttime it felt unsafe as it was quiet and dark with little passive surveillance.
(25–34, woman, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, part-time employed)*

None of the 86 reported having had a bad experience there, although one 34–44 year old female had a family member (male) who had been attacked on his bike there, which contributed to her perception that the area was not safe.

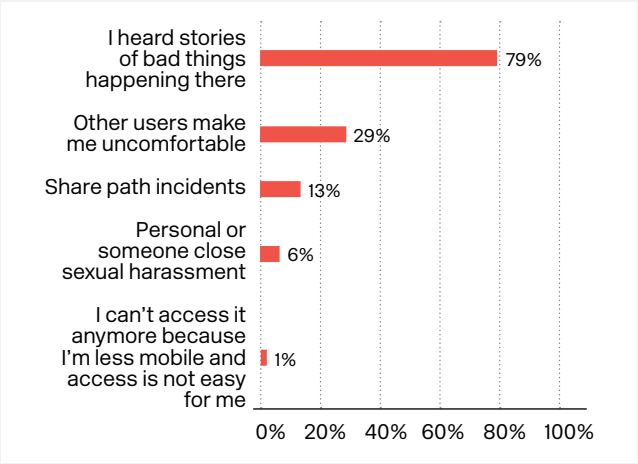


Figure 10: Has an experience led to usage change?

Experiences that changed usage

Users of the Coburg Merri Creek Area were asked if an experience/s in the past had led to usage change. While over half of the 772 responses to that question said 'no' (59%), 316 said 'yes' and nearly all gave details (the survey offered some standard answers plus open-text option).

Overwhelmingly, these respondents had heard of bad things happening in the Creek area; not a direct experience, but one fuelled by the experiences of others and transmitted via media reports and rumour. In particular, 11% of respondents noted the December attack in the free-text option to the question:

My use decreased following the horrific assault on a young woman there. [...] have noticed that I now really only walk along there if I'm with friends or if it's during the day on the weekend. I don't go in the evenings anymore. It's pretty upsetting.
(No demographic data provided)

I have stopped working late at the farm (past 6pm) due to the rape on the Merri Creek.
(25–34, woman, LGBTQIA+, part-time employed)

Twenty (6% of those answering 'yes' to this question) had had an experience of sexual harassment ranging from stalking to indecent exposure, with four (1%) recording physical assault of some kind to themselves or someone they knew.

A man attempted to sexually assault me and I had to run away from him while he followed me on a bike. It was awful.
(No demographic data provided)

Due to many incidents with men and the known rape and torture of a woman recently, I no longer use it because I do not feel safe. I have lived on the Merri Creek for over 30 years and used it nearly every day. Now I will not go there.
(45–54 years, woman, full-time employed)

Given the usage of the area, these numbers and proportions of direct experience of harassment in the Merri Creek area are relatively low. This is not to minimise these incidents but does suggest that their incidence is much less than the media reports and rumours might claim.

Time

Time of usage constituted another series of questions. Afternoon was the most popular time of use, nominated by 70% of the 748 respondents who answered this question. Afternoon was also considered the safest time. However, usage and safest time did not always overlap for respondents, meaning that women were using the area at times that they perceived were less safe.

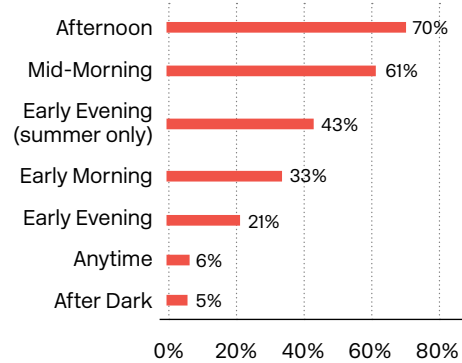


Figure 11: Usage times

Participants were also asked if their use of the Creek area was dependent on the time of year. 59% said 'no' but 41% said 'yes' and 96% of those respondents used it during the lighter days accompanying spring, summer and autumn – generally the daylight savings period. For others, the weather accompanying seasons was a factor. Just 1% of these respondents nominated winter and the cooler months and that was because it was outside of snake season.

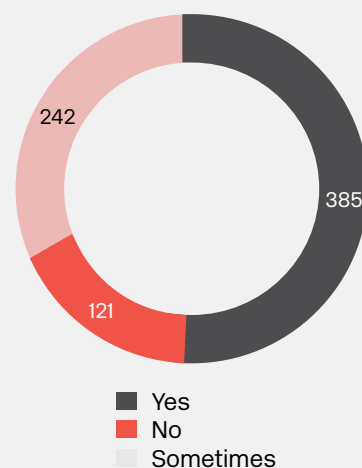


Figure 12: Do you come here alone?

More than half the respondents went to the Creek area on their own, with another third saying that they did so sometimes. Once again, the implication is that women are using the Creek area at times and in ways that they think might be less safe.

Access

Respondents were asked how they get to the Creek Area. 41% (298 of 728 respondents) listed walking as their only mode of transport, but another 29% listed walking and cycling suggesting that mode of access might depend on weather and/or particular use of the Creek on that day. Altogether 81% used walking as one of their means of reaching the Creek. This indicates a high uptake of the survey from those living very locally. However, almost one in five drove to access the amenity, meaning that the attraction of the Creek also stretches beyond the immediate locality.

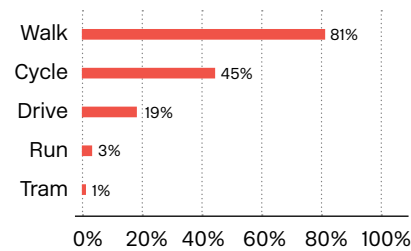


Figure 13: Means of accessing the Creek area

Nearly two-thirds of respondents accessed the area through the multiple entry points along the western side of the creek between Bell street and Moreland Road, with Harding Street and Moreland Road being the most common entry and exit points. One in five respondents came into or left Merri Creek by continuing along the path from the north or the south (via the underpasses under Bell Street and Moreland Road).

There were a number of comments to different questions which expressed the idea that more entry/exit points – in other words, connectivity with surrounding streets – would make the area feel safer. Others noted that some form of signage so users would have an idea where an exit point would lead them would improve their safety perceptions. This is confirmation of previous research that wayfinding is important for women's sense of safety.³³ Table C1 in Appendix C shows that respondents found particularly Sites D, E and F were hard to navigate.

There was no overall pattern of entries that were avoided, although narrow or steep ones were not liked by some respondents, especially under COVID-19 conditions because it meant that physical distancing was not possible. Others were suspicious of the more informal entries (“Those goat trail stairs and various other small exits that look like they have just been put in as an afterthought or formed by people using them rather than actual entry points.”) These entries more generally represent locals forming their own shortcuts and connectivity.

Site usage and safety

COMPARATIVE

The questions in Section 2 allow for comparison between the sites (see also Appendix C).

USAGE

One question asked about what uses respondents had seen in each of the six sites (Figure 14), rather than how they used it as shown in Figure 9. Again walking was the most commonly observed activity in all sites except Site E where understandably dog walking was the most common. Cycling was the second most observed in Sites A, B and C (which are on the paved Merri Creek Trail), walking in Site E, and running in Site F. Leisure use was highest in Sites B, E and D, and passing through a key feature of Site C. Sites C and F were the sites of the most observed anti-social behaviour, but even so this kind of behaviour did not figure highly.

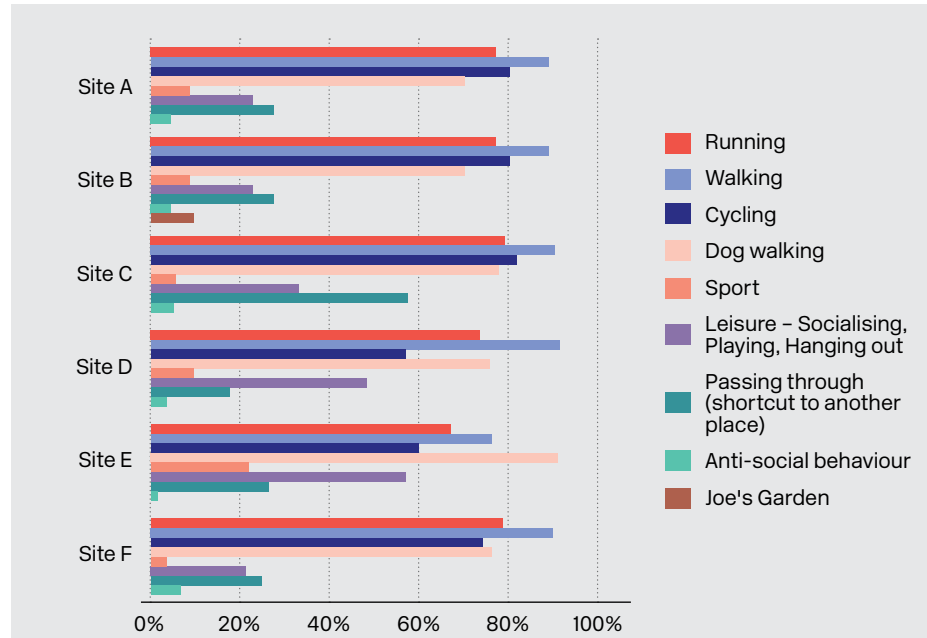


Figure 14: Usage observed, by site

SAFETY IN THE SITES

Respondents were asked to rate each of the six sites on a sliding scale and to detail why they thought the site was unsafe (set answers were given plus the option for adding comments).³⁴

'Feels isolated' was the main reason given for Sites A, D, E, F and the highest overall. Where there are no overlooking houses, businesses or other people around and therefore no passive surveillance, isolation is a key trigger for feelings of unsafety. Site B spikes with the 'hearing stories of bad things happening there' option, as might be expected of the site where the December attack took place. Site C had 'sense of entrapment' as its highest score. The narrowness of the Harding Street Bridge and the blind corner at the eastern end contribute to the sense that this site is entrapping. Narrowness also featured in the open comments for sites A and F as contributing to the sense of unsafety.

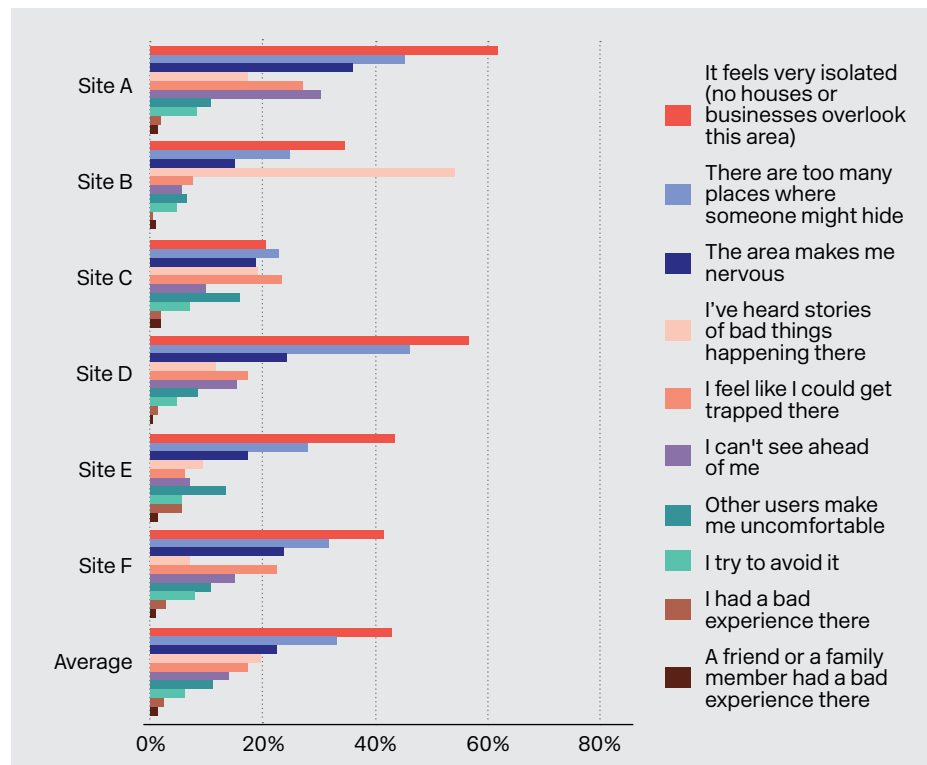


Figure 15: Why do you think the site is unsafe?

Respondents were asked to rate the safety of each site – the average results are in Table 10.

Table 10: Site Safety Average

Safety average (0=safe, 100=unsafe):	
Site A - 55.7	Site D - 44.9
Site B - 36.3	Site E - 34.0
Site C - 38.4	Site F - 42.3

Table 11: Site Safety Rating by Age

	Site A	Site B	Site C	Site D	Site E	Site F	#
15–24 years	58.6	27.6	34.8	50.9	28.1	40.7	53
25–34 years	56.7	35.6	41.5	46.3	32.8	41.9	174
35–44 years	56.6	38.2	39.3	43.3	34.6	44.7	173
45–54 years	56.3	38.8	38.8	44.4	36.8	44.2	285
55–64 years	44.1	42.7	31.4	49.7	25.9	44.1	21

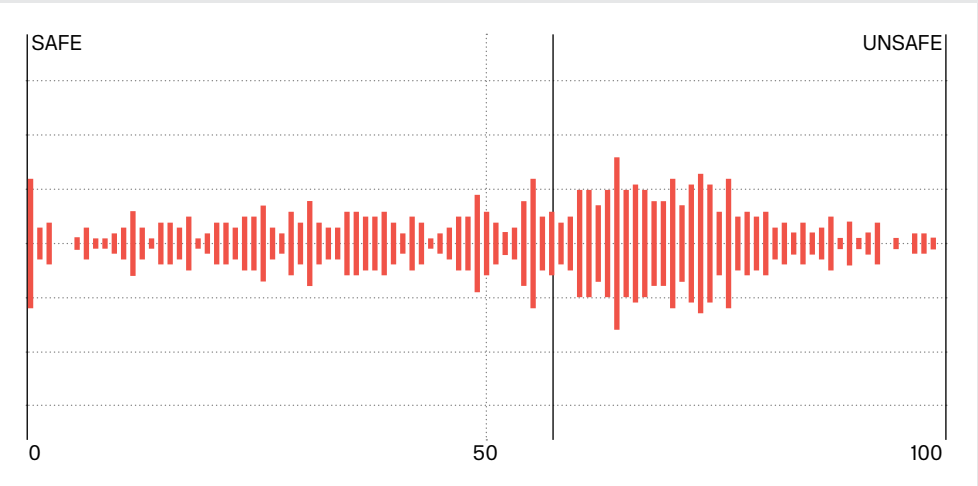
There was some variation in safety rating by age (Table 11). The youngest age group found Site B the safest and each subsequent age group found it less safe. All age groups rated Site A the least safe (15-24 years olds the most) except for the 55-64 years olds who gave that honour to Site D. However, there were not many respondents in this age group (n=21), which could account for this discrepancy.

This sliding scale question produced an average safety rating. However, to some extent, averages ‘bland out’ the results.

The following diagrams show the range of answers to each question. In every site, there are respondents at either end of the scale (evaluating the site place as completely safe or completely unsafe). Site E (Off Leash Dog Area) was considered the safest with nearly a third of respondents ranking the site between 0 and 20. Site A (Bell Street, Bowden Reserve) was assessed the most unsafe. Site B, despite the stories heard and the attack, rated the second most safe site.

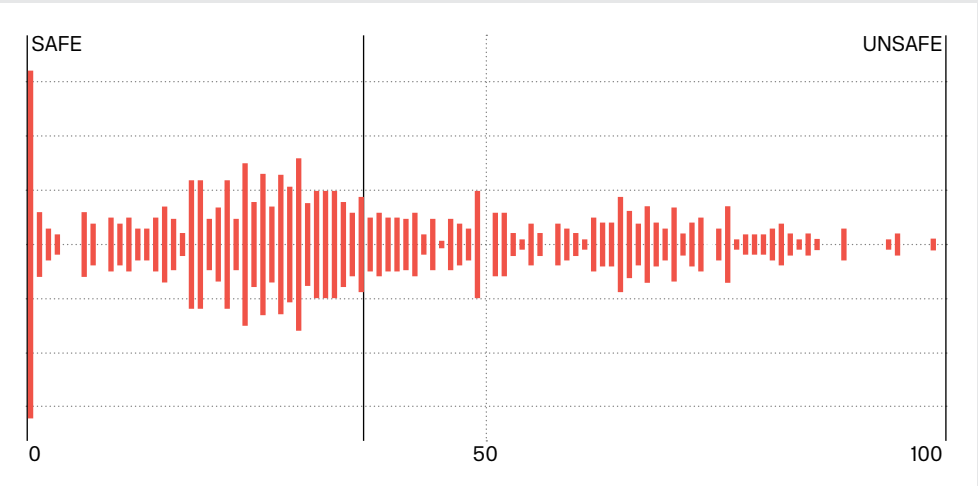
Site A

Bell Street, Bowden Reserve
508 respondents
Site safety average: 55.7



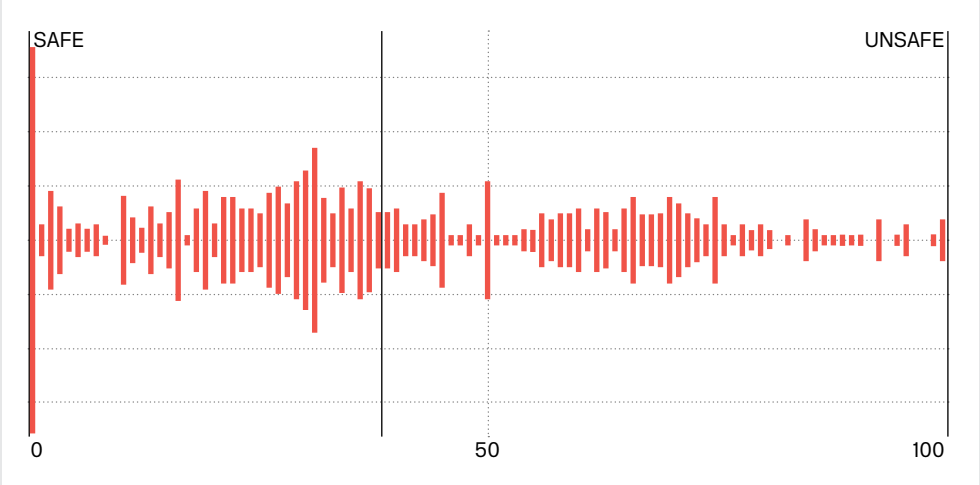
Site B

Market Garden
497 respondents
Site safety average: 36.3



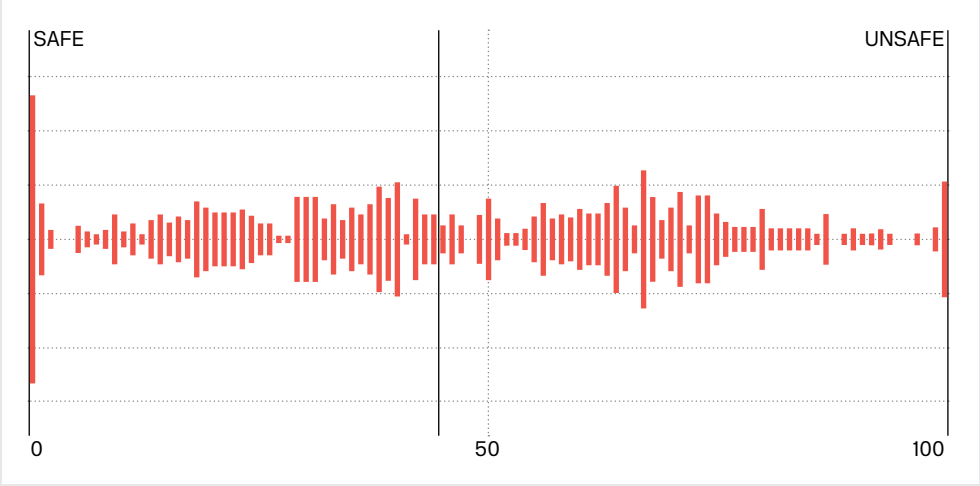
Site C

Harding Street Bridge crossing
475 respondents
Site safety average: 38.4

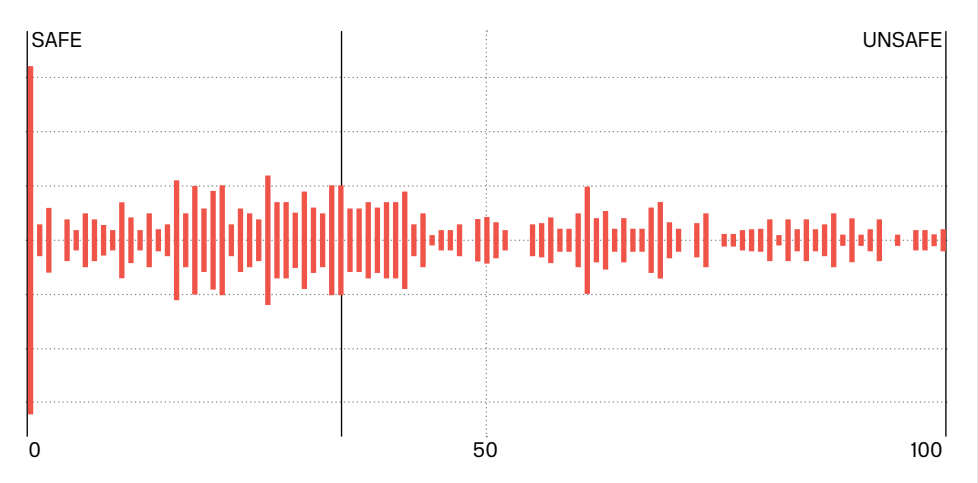


Site D

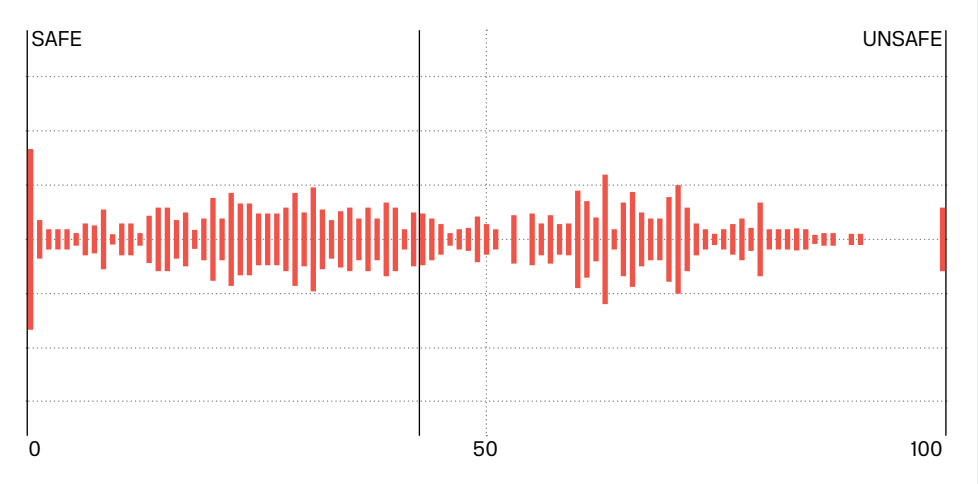
Nature reserve off Grant Street
451 respondents
Site safety average: 44.9



Site E
Off Leash Dog Area, Egan Reserve
389 respondents
Site safety average: 34.0



Site F
Moreland Road to timber bridge
398 respondents
Site safety average: 42.3



INDIVIDUAL SITES

In the series of questions for Section 2 there were three open-ended ones:

- what are the best things about this site
- what are the worst things
- are there things that could be added to the site to increase respondent's usage.³⁵

The following are summaries of these questions which will be further discussed in Section 4 of this report.

Site A

Bell Street, Bowden Reserve

The Merri Creek Trail at this point narrows, is hilly at the northern end but generally observable from across the creek. The path is elevated from the creek and leads north through an often vandalised underpass to sporting and recreational areas north of Bell Street.

BEST QUALITIES OF THE SITE

This site's best assets relate to the natural environment and users' enjoyment of that connection. 127 respondents commented in detail on Site A and 33% identified nature and 27% the creek.

Great plants, birds and waterway – it's so nice to have access to this nature close to the city.
(25–34 years, woman, full-time employed)

I live near nature and that makes me happy.

(35–44 years, woman, full-time employed)

It was also of note that this section was used as means to bypass major roads in the area.

It is an important connection point between other parts of the creek path and corridor and enables you to avoid the traffic and crossing of Bell St.
(45–54 years, woman, part-time employed)

It avoids needing to go on bell st.
(25–34 years, woman, full-time employed)

The vegetation & habitat. Allows students to access Coburg High School via the Merri creek path instead of using busy roads.
(45–54 years, woman, part-time employed, parent)

35

Note that the final question had a list of suggestions with it – “benches, toilets, lighting, play equipment, CCTV, lighting, improved access paths or connectivity to adjoining streets, etc.”



MAIN PROBLEMS

The main problems in Site A that respondents noted were explicitly around darkness and lack of lighting (42%), with the prime site of darkness being the underpass under Bell Street:

No lights, very dark.
(25–34, woman, full-time employed)

It's very dark, a lot of people don't go there too early or late because you can't see.
(25–34 years, woman, full-time employed)

Definitely the lack of lighting under the bridge.
(25–34 years, woman, person with a disability, LGBTQIA+, part-time employed)

The path gets quite narrow and can feel creepy towards the overpass.
(45–54 years, woman, parent, part-time employed)

Other issues with the site identified were cyclists riding dangerously and the presence of litter. Path connections up to Nicholson Street are currently poor.

RESPONDENTS' SUGGESTIONS

The main solution proffered by respondents responded directly to the darkness, stating the addition of more lighting would improve the site (69%). Second to this was CCTV, 37% of respondents noting the presence of CCTV would be an improvement. Both these are a reflection of respondents ranking this site as the most unsafe across the six, but also of the eerie nature and narrowness of the underpass. A quarter also suggested more minor infrastructure, especially benches and playground equipment.

There is lots of opportunity to make this area more interesting and loved. I would love to see more logs, rocks and understorey plantings done in clusters through this area, with defined dirt or gravel paths from the streets coming down to meet the main trail. It would also be great to have some lighting at the under bridge point and some public art done and placed throughout this area.
(45–54 years, woman, part-time employed)



Site B

Market Garden

This section of the Merri Creek Trail is generally elevated from the creek. The path is sealed. While open on the west and north to the market garden, this section cannot be seen from the eastern side and there are no nearby houses or businesses apart from Joe's Garden.



BEST QUALITIES OF THE SITE

Overwhelmingly the best thing about this site agreed upon by 58% of 81 respondents was Joe's Market Garden. Activities associated with the garden were enjoyable and it provided a strong community hub for locals and even those living further away who visit to buy vegetables. There is also some wider open space here and to the north which allows for picnics and some leisure activities connected with nature:

beautiful spot, love the atmosphere of joe's garden and the green space next door that is often used by families and groups of friends for picnics.
(25–34 years, woman, person with a disability, full-time employed)

Joe's Market Garden! Such a great community space for events and meeting with friends, also to buy cheap and sustainable fresh produce. Give them more funding so they can bring more people to the area.
(25–34 years, woman, full-time employed)

working! teaching! singing! dancing! fishing! foraging!
(25–34 years, woman, LGBTQIA+, part-time employed)



MAIN PROBLEMS

The main problem identified in this site differed significantly from the other sites – respondents particularly commented about male violence (19%) as this was the location of the assault that triggered this survey. Many offered social commentary about violence against women:

That men continue to commit acts of violence towards women and that violence against women is still not being adequately addressed in schools (Respectful Relationships training should be mandatory for staff and this should be a cross curriculum priority for all subject areas) and that media spokespeople continue to blame women for atrocities ie: she shouldn't have been out at night/wearing that/in that area at that time. This needs to be addressed at all levels – schools, community and sporting organisations, councils, libraries, mental health services. Teach boys to respect women, teach young men to be connected to community and to services that can support them to make good choices.
(25–34 years, woman, full-time employed)

I don't think the safety issues in the exact area are things I have suggestions for improvements – it is a change our general community attitudes towards women and their right to safety that will increase meaningful safety.
(35–44 years, woman, LGBTQIA+, part-time employed)

Otherwise litter was a concern.

RESPONDENTS' SUGGESTIONS

Despite the level of social commentary, the main solution proposed for this section was still lighting where 43% considered it would increase their usage. Although nearly matching the lighting suggestion at 42% was other infrastructure. Site B was one of the sites considered a good place to locate toilets (12%), benches were also popular (23%), and playground equipment (18%).

It is important to note that while recommendations and solutions slightly favoured lighting, a significant number of respondents also recommended social initiatives primarily building on the community already existing in Joe's Garden.





Site C

Harding Street Bridge crossing

This site is a suspension bridge with a narrow pathway. It is the only formal connection between the eastern and western sides of the creek in the stretch between Bell Street and Moreland Road.



BEST QUALITIES OF THE SITE

The most popular aspect of this site is that it is a very convenient shortcut to the other side of the creek, with 35% of users stating so. This marks the site as different to the others. The second most popular aspect was the bridge itself with 31% of users liking it for offering views down the creek and its rustic aesthetic. The bridge is therefore not only functional as a thoroughway but is also scenic:

Openness, the bridge. Many potential ways to go.
(25–34 years, woman, student)

Being able to cross easily and decide which side of the creek to walk on.
(35–44 years, woman, full-time employed)

Lots of people passing through and multiple use (passing through, passing along, joe's nearby etc), clearer ways in and out.
(35–44 years, woman, part-time employed, student)



MAIN PROBLEMS

The main problem with this area identified is also the bridge, but for different reasons. For these respondents, the bridge is very narrow (23%) and perceived to be rickety. So while the bridge is considered an excellent, functional asset of the site, there are perceived safety problems associated with it:

swing bridge can be quite unsettling to walk on, and is very narrow... We have decided to stop using this bridge altogether.
(25–34 years, woman, person with a disability, full-time employed)

The bridge is terrible – too narrow, rickety and the surface of it is uneven and a safety/falls risk. It is also not accessible for people with disabilities.
(35–44 years, woman, parent, part-time employed)

Bridge too narrow for number of users. (45–54 years, woman, LGBTQIA+, full-time employed)

The bridge is clearly an asset to the community, but there is an evident need for improvements to be made so that it remains safe and functional for its wide range of users. In addition, the eastern end does not allow for a clear line of sight when crossing the bridge of what and who is on the other side

RESPONDENTS' SUGGESTIONS

Again, the main suggested solution for this site was the addition of lighting, with 48% of respondents requesting it. This proportion was the highest of all the sites and reflects the potential for the site to be used in the evening as a shortcut and convenient route for respondents to access trams and the adjacent neighbourhoods. Lighting was even suggested for this site from those who were opposed to it in the other sites for precisely this reason:

This is one area where I would support more lighting along the Harding Street Entrance path. However, if lighting were to be installed, it should be environmentally-sensitive lighting with minimal light pollution / spillage.
(35–44 years, woman, part-time employed)

Benches were the most popular minor infrastructure suggestions by 15% of respondents.





Site D

Nature reserve off Grant Street

This area has high levels of vegetation and includes an informal BMX bike area. A number of informal, unsealed tracks crisscross the area. The area is hilly and drops right down to creek level and there are no impediments limiting access to the water.



BEST QUALITIES OF THE SITE

Overwhelmingly, the best thing about the area was the nature/natural aspect of the site, with 73% people noting this:

love this area as it feels like getting away from the city! some great views at the top of the hill with the little bench seat, and love the winding paths right next to the creek.
(25–34 years, woman, person with a disability, full-time employed)





MAIN PROBLEMS

However, this natural aspect also led to the main problem with the site: the perception that it feels isolated with 21% respondents noting it as such:

there are spots that can feel very isolated when no one is around.
(45–54 years, woman, part-time employed, parent)

it's isolated and feels unsafe at night.
(25–34 years, woman, full-time employed)

The second major issue was litter and perceptions it was dirty, with 20% of respondents noting this, particularly for how it affected the natural qualities of the site:

Litter in the waterway – it's terrible.
(45–54 years, woman, part-time employed, parent)

The rubbish that floods the creek, and the state of the creek.
(45–54 years, woman, parent)

RESPONDENTS' SUGGESTIONS

Once again, lighting was the most commonly proffered solution to encourage extra usage (42%). But 35% suggested more small-scale infrastructure such as benches, drinking fountains, bins, artwork and locale-appropriate play equipment.

lighting, one clear path rather than many smaller ones.
(25–34 years, woman, full-time employed)

would love to see some big murals on the back of people's fences... there's some ad hoc paintings by the owners that are kind of cute, but something, perhaps a giant mural by the first nations community from the area, would help make it feel more cohesive and intentional [...] a few more benches would be good as atm there's nowhere really to sit down except at the top of the hill.
(25–34 years, woman, person with a disability, full-time employed)

Site D is a large area, during the day its key asset is nature, but that becomes its main problem at night leaving respondents feeling a strong sense of isolation in the area.

Site E

Off Leash Dog Area, Egan Reserve

This area has an uneven topography and has both a large open space and some tall trees towards the creek. There is some limited seating and the land slopes close to the creek level. A number of informal, unsealed tracks crisscross the site.

BEST QUALITIES OF THE SITE

The best two aspects of this site were the presence of dogs (48% of respondents), followed closely by 47% of respondents enjoying the open and spacious qualities of the site as well as the treed area near the creek:

Open space. Nice and green for kids and dogs to run.
(35–44 years, woman, full-time employed)

Dog off leash. These areas are few and far between & my puppy needs to run! It's open and spacious, away from cars, and my dog can't get too far. Great place to socialise my dog with other dogs.
(25–34 years, woman, full-time employed)

Off lead for the dogs – lots of friendly dog owners to have a chat with. Feel safer with my dogs. (35–44 years, woman, a person with a disability, LGBTQIA+, not working)

MAIN PROBLEMS

Being able to meet dogs and other dog owners was a highlight of the area but, as elsewhere in other sites, dogs were a point of contention for some respondents, mainly for poor dog control. This was noted by 23% of respondents for this area:

Behaviour of dogs and owners...
(35–44 years, woman, full-time employed)

Off-leash dogs, which should not be allowed in a nature refuge, i.e. Merri Creek corridor.
(65–74 years, woman, not working/retired)

As with many dog off leash areas unfortunately, there is a wide range of dogs that come, some who are aggressive or have no training. Would benefit from some areas where it is fenced for dogs who prefer to play in an enclosed area
(25–34 years, woman, migrant/refugee/asylum seeker, full-time employed)





RESPONDENTS' SUGGESTIONS

Nearly half the respondents desired minor infrastructure, with the addition of benches at 27%, bins at 15%. One respondent also thought a handrail on the steepest parts of the path would increase accessibility for individuals with mobility issues.





Site F

Moreland Road to timber bridge



There is a single informal, unsealed track or path here which is at times narrow and heavily vegetated. The reserve area here is also narrow and quite steep and the path drops quite close to creek level, particularly immediately north of the timber bridge.

BEST QUALITIES OF THE SITE

The best quality of Site F was nature (46%).

Close to nature.
(45–54, woman, full-time employed)

That it's a piece of nature in an urban environment.
(45–54, woman, full-time employed)

Beautiful Nature Serenity.
(55–64, woman, refugee/asylum seeker/migrant, person with a disability, not working/retired)



MAIN PROBLEMS

The main problem with this area was the path quality, nearly two-thirds (65%) noting this. In particular, it is narrow (26%), prone to flooding (21%) and with some parts of the path falling into the creek just north of the timber bridge.

The trail is terrible. It's dangerous even with no one else around.
(35–44, woman, full-time employed)

The area is in serious disrepair and frequently floods, the path should be significantly elevated from its lowest point. It's not safe when flooded
(35–44, woman, full-time employed)

Litter was also noted and the underpass was identified as dark and foreboding:

Low lighting, underpass bridge, lots of places for people to hide.
(15–24, woman, full-time employed)

I don't like going under the underpass.
(25–34, woman, full-time employed)

RESPONDENTS' SUGGESTIONS

Unsurprisingly, many people in their responses suggested repair and maintenance to the path was required. Others wanted new path infrastructure altogether to alleviate the flooding problems. Overall, 56% of respondents wanted aspects of the path improved.

Lighting was nominated by 49% of respondents, particularly for the underpass under Moreland, which is very dark even during the day. Underpasses are part of the gendered imaginary of fearful places (more about this in the next section).



SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS

This section considers the overall emergent themes provided by the survey data. The first theme concerns all users of the Creek area: safety from accidents and incidents due either to other users (shared path incidents) or to the physical condition and attributes of the paths. It is worth noting that many of the contributors to the Moreland Council's map survey repeated the same general safety concerns.³⁶ The risk of these incidents

is not necessarily directly gendered, but many respondents did identify the worst co-users were male. In addition, women experience varying path conditions differently to men and read risk into them. Overall, this risk contributes to a sense that not all people, and women in particular, are welcome or able to enjoy the area.

The second theme explores how the main attraction of the Creek area (green space) is also the quality that makes many women fear it under certain conditions. The final theme elaborates on women's particular experiences of Coburg Merri Creek: namely perceptions of safety, with sub-themes around precautionary measures, the efficacy of lighting and CCTV, the impact of other users, the stories that circulate about the area, reading the site and collective trauma.

Safety from accidents and incidents

SHARED USAGE OF PUBLIC AREA

As with all public spaces, there were clear tensions between different users of the Coburg Merri Creek area,³⁷ in particular between cyclists, dog owners and walkers.

*I feel like many people need to show more respect for all users of the path – not having dogs off leash outside of designated areas, cyclists using their bells, groups leaving enough space so others can pass them.
(25–34 years, woman, part-time employed, underemployed, parent)*



³⁶
³⁷

Help make Merri Creek a safe and welcoming place for all
See also Victoria Walks (2015).

Shared path incidents accounted for 13% of the bad experiences women reported that had changed their usage (see Figure 14). Respondents repeatedly reported poor behaviour by cyclists (not using bell, speeding and verbally abusing those in their way). Dog walkers want the area to remain dog-friendly, but are criticised by those who consider that poor dog management by owners makes parts of the Creek area unpleasant and even dangerous to visit. Cyclists want the area to be more bike friendly and less hazardous for them.

Bad experiences due to conflicting usage had led to altercations and, in some instances, confrontations:

I was walking my two dogs and taking two small children to the playground one morning. As we were walking across Harding St bridge I saw a cyclist coming the other way so pulled my dogs out of the way and ordered my children to the left side of the bridge. Despite this, the male cyclist commented harshly "do your job". I was angry and close to tears [...] On the way back, I noticed a sign post saying 'cyclists dismount' on the bridge. The male cyclist rode across the bridge and abused me when he was doing the wrong thing!
(No demographic data provided)

I was threatened with physical violence when I complained to a quad bike rider about using the bike track for his quad bike. [...] He was approaching me, verbally abusing me and threatening violence... He only stopped because other walkers started filming him and saying they would call the police... I was so shaken I had to be walked home.
(35–44, woman, part-time employed)

Such experiences reinforced for these women the idea that their presence in Merri Creek was conditional, that other users' concerns and needs had priority.

CYCLISTS

Cyclists in their comments tended to call the Merri Creek corridor a 'bike path' and this sense of 'ownership' coloured many of their comments. Other cyclists, while acknowledging the problems of shared usage, also criticised the poor behaviour of some of their number:

As a cyclist, I walk my bike here [Site C] and over the bridge as there are so many people doing unpredictable things – walking across the paths, cycling fast at inappropriate points etc. The multi-use I understand, but fast cycling doesn't mix with leisure walking, dogs off leash, families with small kids.
(25–34 years, woman, part-time employed)

The issue underlying safety is human behaviour, particularly gendered violence. A lot of this violence is perpetrated by cyclists who ride fast and close to pedestrians, endangering their safety by not using bells or verbal warnings, and not understanding that it is a shared path, rather than a bike path. As a cyclist myself I'm appalled by the dangerous practices of these cyclists. This happens on a daily basis.
(35–44 years, woman, full-time employed)

Site C (Harding Street Bridge) was noted by respondents in comments as particularly bad for poor cyclist behaviour, mainly because it is very narrow and although there are signs for cyclists to dismount when crossing the bridge, too many don't. This was followed by Site A where the terrain at the northern end means that there are blind corners and cyclists can build up considerable speed surprising other users. Poor behaviour by cyclists was commonly noted:

I have found that some cyclists have been abusive, and turn a leisurely stroll into a 'high alert' situation. Usually men in serious lycra... They are often rude and selfish, and expect everyone else to get out of their way. I wish there was more signage telling them to slow the hell down and share the path. Kids and dogs are unsafe.
(55–64 years, woman, part-time employed)

It would also be fantastic if cyclists would dismount when crossing the Harding Street bridge. I've had quite a few occasions of close calls crossing the bridge with my 22 month old son walking or in the pram. When cyclists don't dismount they get very close and almost run us over.
(25–34 years, woman, LGBTQIA+, parent, student, part-time employed)

Other respondents note poor behaviour by non-cycling users raising the risk for cyclists and noted that cyclists are not well served in the wider area:

There are not many other safe cycleways in the area e.g. Lygon St/Holmes St/Nicholson St don't have protected cycle lanes
(35–44 years, woman, "Chronic illness and mental health issues (not sure if this counts as disability – I don't identify as disabled)", full-time employed)

People wear headphones and can't hear you're coming on your bike even if you ring your bell or they just stop right in front of you without any warning. People with kids and dogs run all over the path you are trying to get past on your bike but often you can't get around them. It is incredibly dangerous. And I ride really slow!
(35–44 years, woman, full-time employed)

Cyclists' suggestions to improve the safety of the area for them concentrated on matters such as widening the path to allow for passing, reducing tight turns, and remedying awkward, muddy, slippery and steep places.



Improve the quality of the trail e.g. pave it and make it wider so cyclists feel they can ride there more easily without worrying about crashing into a pedestrian or spinning out in the mud.
(25–34 years, woman, full-time employed)

Lighting for bike path (or maybe reflecting path). Improve bike path between Harding and Moreland nature bit.
(25–34, woman, LGBTIQ+)

The tight turn at the eastern end of Harding Street Bridge and places in Sites A and F where regular flooding causes the path to be dangerously slippery or where the path is very narrow were also places that cyclists identified for improvement. (Note that the tight turn at the bridge is probably to discourage cyclists from riding directly onto the bridge.) Some cyclists and some other users wanted complete separation between paths for cyclists and paths for other users.

More separated bike paths would help for commuters to be able to be safe and not endanger walkers on the creek.
(25–34 years, woman, part-time employed)

The signs are not clearly visible and are graffitied. I'd like council to enforce fines for bad cyclist behaviour and provide clear signage.
(No demographic data provided)

Note that some of the cyclists' suggestions may mean more formal and therefore possibly paved cycling paths in Sites D, E and F, which are currently unpaved. Respondents noted that an increasing number of cyclists seemed to be using these areas.

DOGS

Dog walking is a very popular use of the Coburg Merri Creek area, as we saw earlier, and Site E is one of the rare off-leash parks in the vicinity. Many respondents wrote of enjoying walking their dogs and meeting and chatting with other dog walkers in this area. However, poorly controlled dogs, dogs off leash outside of Site E and inadequate excrement removal concerned other users (this was also strongly noted in the Moreland map survey).



SO much dog poo along the path (on the actual path and off the path) it's so gross. I find it difficult to navigate three children and myself around the huge amount of dog poo.

(35–44, woman, parent, part-time employed)

I have never been attacked or bothered by people but myself and my children have OFTEN been menaced and attacked by dogs and intimidated by their owners. I love dogs but dogs running out of control along Merri Creek needs to stop.

(25–34, parent, part-time employed)

People think that their dog being off the lead is ok, even if the dog is not under control. There is wildlife in this area – birdlife especially who are impacted.

(45–54, woman, LGBTIQA+, full-time employed)

Some dog owners are not receptive to requests at all, some are openly hostile when asked to keep their dog at bay / pick up their dog's poo... and I'm not sure what the solution is but certainly signs are not enough. I welcome sporadic council presence (even if it's just 'education' on site).

(25–34, person with a disability, LGBTIQA+)

Some suggest an enclosed off-leash area to help control dogs:

Fence off dogs. It's out of control. We are more scared of dogs than the rapists!

(45–54, woman, person with a disability, migrant/refugee)

An enclosed dog area would be awesome. At the moment there can often be quite intimidating dogs off lead and their owners are not very attentive – have had some frightening encounters with some particularly big dogs whose owners keep thinking their dog "wants to play" without realising how scary their giant dog is when it's trying to jump on you!

(25–34, woman, person with a disability)

Dogs off leash are dangerous to cyclists and speeding cyclists are dangerous to dogs. Some dog owners were also concerned about poorly controlled off-leash dogs attacking or intimidating their dogs. Others considered the Merri Creek corridor to be a nature reserve and highlighted how off-leash dogs are a threat to the fauna.

Path quality and attributes

The paths on the west side of the Merri Creek between Bell Street and Moreland Road vary considerably from wide, paved surfaces to dirt 'desire' lines crossing open ground to dirt/gravel paths. They also differ in their connectivity to other paths, entrances and exits and to means of crossing the creek. Finally, the presence of litter and debris has an impact on overall perceptions of the sites.



The formal path of the Merri Creek Trail (Sites A, B and C) was generally considered good but its narrowness in parts caused difficulties and concerns for multiple users. The narrowness is generally determined by the terrain, the width of the land between the creek and private properties, and/or vegetation. Site F was identified as problematically narrow and is so because of all three factors. Walkers, cyclists and runners alike described Site F and parts of Site A as narrow and dangerous, particularly after flooding. In addition, while some liked the rustic quality of the Harding Street Bridge, its narrowness was a commonly cited problem and a reason that respondents considered it entrapping (Figure 15). One in five of the respondents to the Section 2 questions for Site C wanted the bridge replaced with one more suitable to the amount and type of traffic it receives. Its narrowness and the refusal of too many cyclists to dismount made it dangerous. In addition, a number also found it scary to cross because it wobbles and the uneven surface was deemed discouraging to differently abled.

Some characteristics of the path have particular implications for women. For example, paths that are narrow force women closer to strangers who might grab at them or make unwelcome comments. They can therefore seem entrapping (like on Harding Street Bridge). Or a path in poor condition might make it difficult for a woman to escape:

Path narrow, uneven, falling into creek, making it difficult to keep your footing if you had to move fast. (55–64, woman, part-time employed)

The tight turn at the eastern end of Harding Street Bridge was deemed problematic in terms of safety because it does not allow for a clear line of sight when crossing the bridge of what and who is on the other side. The western end does not have those problems.

There are existing plans to replace the Harding Street Bridge. Monash University's XYX Lab would strongly support community engagement and in particular engagement with local women in the design process to improve the outcome.³⁸ Note also that commencing in September 2020, the path linking Egan and Beau Monde Reserves (between Sites E and F) was closed for demolition of existing path, construction of a new concrete path and retaining wall, minor revegetation works and safety signage. The design and implementation of this project predates this survey and report.

CONNECTIVITY

The connectivity of paths to local streets was important for women. All the sites, except for Site E, were regarded by an average 20% of respondents as needing better connectivity and also options for how they and the creek might be traversed. For women, connectivity allows for choice of path to be able to avoid individuals, groups or possibly threatening situations and is important to a sense of safety.

Would love a bridge to the other side of the creek here – would mean you would feel like there were more paths to exit if you needed. (25–34, woman, person with a disability)

There needs to be a better connection between the areas under bell and Coburg lake area. The path in this section requires probably more attention than some other sections further south. [...] Only if you have consistency can you reach maximum potential of our creek to engage us, and invite us to walk to, cycle it and explore it. (35–44, woman, migrant/refugee)

Related to connectivity was being able to orientate within the surrounding area, in other words wayfinding as discussed earlier:

Lack of [...] entrance/exit signs makes it tricky knowing exactly where you are or how far it is to the next exit. (35–44, woman, underemployed)

More signs about how to get off the track or where you are along the track and exits or info about what is coming up next along the track – maybe an illustrated map every kilometre or so? 25–34, woman, full-time employed)

Any signage needs to provide basic information about where a person is, what is close to them and nearest entrances/exits. This information grounds an individual in the environment and assuages anxieties about being lost, particularly important for women. This would also encourage further exploration of the creek as users are more likely to take different entrances and exits instead of using the same one every time. Maps and information on what is ahead and how far away are useful information.

This was not universal, with one respondent not happy with the idea, demonstrating that, like all interventions in the site, careful and appropriate design is required:

If you put up paternalistic signage in the natural area I will vandalise them myself. (65–74 years, woman, part-time employed)



LITTER AND MAINTENANCE

Previous research has found that maintenance of urban greenspaces plays an important role in both reducing crime and increasing perceived safety.³⁹ In Section 2 of the survey, direct questions were asked about litter (Figures 16 and 17).

Respondents noted that litter was present in all the sites at least some of the time (Sites D and E were the cleanest), and nearly three-quarters (72%) were concerned by this. Poor disposal of dog poo was mentioned frequently in the open-texts comment. Also prevalent in the comments were observations about debris in the creek with some respondents most concerned about the condition of the water and the plastic debris left on the banks of the creek and in the vegetation after rain.

More rubbish bins and signs to put rubbish in bin and pick up dog poo. Also worth considering some kind of mechanism for filtering rubbish from the creek.

*(25–34, woman, full-time employed)
More bins would ensure lazy dog walkers would drop their baggies off – and allow the community to dump rubbish they pick up while walking.
(45–54 years, woman, parent)*

*I really think there is huge potential to make the merri creek into something spectacular. It's so beautiful walking down there on a sunny day. Would be even better if the rubbish in the underbrush, hanging in low lying trees and in and around the creek was cleaned up....So much potential. Please fix up the area for the community.
(35–44 years, woman, part-time employed)*

Rubbish can both smell and make a place unpleasant to be in – both of which discourage engagement. It also indicates that the area is unmaintained and unmonitored and is therefore a signifier of a potentially dangerous place for women (see page 11). Moreover, over 80% of respondents noted that, if there was a maintenance issue, it was unclear who to report to (Table C2 – Appendix C).

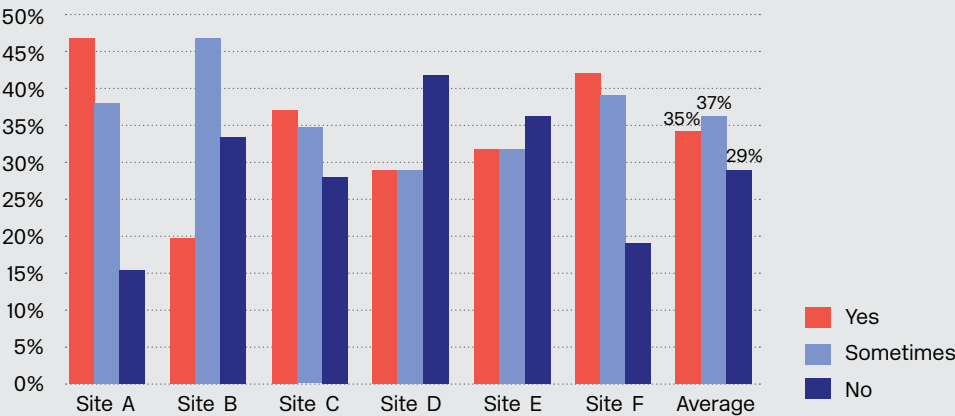


Figure 16: Is there often litter about

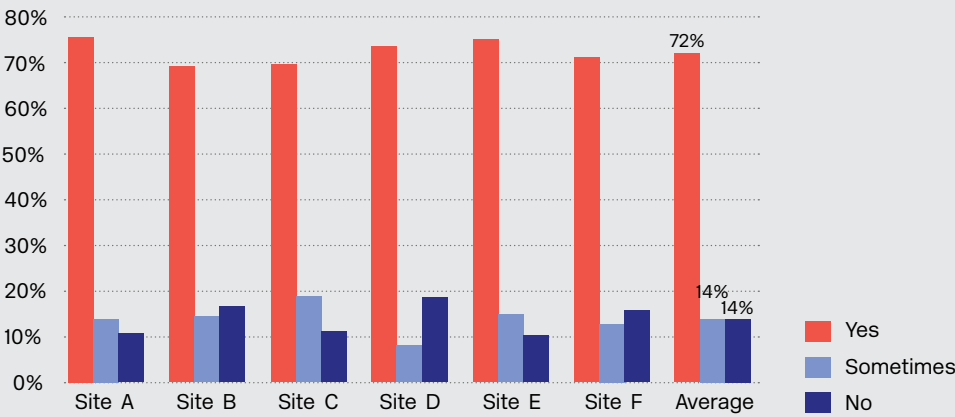


Figure 17: Does the presence of litter concern you?



Green space

Merri Creek is a band of semi-unstructured vegetation and water running through suburban residential (with some higher density developments) and mixed-use areas and it offers the ability to be close to nature. The natural amenity of Merri Creek as a slice of nature within the city was commented upon again and again by participants in many of the open-text questions. Over 40% of the 'Final remarks' question noted it and it was the strongest point of many sites discussed in the previous section:

I love the Merri Creek, it is beautiful and I think there has been a lot of rejuvenation efforts that have really worked.
(25–34 years, woman, LGBTQIA+, underemployed)

It's beautiful and transports you away from suburbia.
(35–44 years, woman, person with a disability, part-time employed)

Feeling of country in the city.
(55–64 years, woman, not working/retired)

This affective response to nature heavily represented in the survey's findings mirrors many other research projects that find positive effects for people from their interaction with nature. Recreational access and connection to nature have important health benefits, in particular mitigating stress, fatigue, depression and improving fitness.⁴⁰ Natural settings located in, among, and in-between built areas provide a much needed mental and visual break for the city dweller and a place of peace and tranquility away from the hustle and bustle of the city – the advantages of which should not be overlooked.⁴¹ Nonetheless, research has shown that some types of greenspace can be more crime-prone than others and support crime and anti-social behaviours.⁴² So while greenspaces can provide community benefits, it is important to ensure they

are well-designed and maintained to ensure that this is what they are doing and not acting as a crime generator.

However, as commented upon in the previous section, the strength of the area contributes to its weakest point in terms of women's safety, isolation:

What I love about it (sense of bush in the city) is probably what makes it feel unsafe when I'm alone or after dark.
(35–44 years, woman, LGBTQIA+, part-time employed, parent)

Unfortunately the things I love about the creek (feels separate from the city/suburbs, open space, natural environment) are also reasons I don't go or feel safe there after dark as then it feels isolated. I wouldn't want to give up the good things to trade for night time safety as I can't see how it could be accomplished and keep with wild elements.
(35–44 years, woman, student, parent, part-time employed)

I wouldn't use the area after dark if I was on my own and walking or running. But the same goes for pretty much any places for a woman. I love the Merri Creek area for the closeness to nature but I do make choices on when and how I use it.
(35–44 years, woman, full-time employed)

While many respondents enjoy the area for the connection to nature that it provides, such spaces are often isolated and as such are particularly frightening at night. In addition, although peace, serenity and/or beauty were noted multiple times as the best aspect of these sites, the constant safekeeping process and risk-based thinking also documented by respondents in their use of the Creek area somewhat reduces that tranquility. It is hard to say to what extent these are affecting the overall experience as thinking processes around safety and precautionary measures are ingrained in the everyday lives of women, with some not consciously recognising the process is happening (discussed earlier).

Many also commented that the strong nature qualities of the area would be at risk with inappropriate interventions:

Of course safety is paramount. But think of safety as a broader thing also, eg mental health safety through the benefits of having a little bit of nature here. Making it more like the streets, with wide concrete paths, lighting, benches, signage, other built environment stuff, that all reduces the emotional safety and amenity of the area.
(45–54 years, woman, LGBTQIA+, part-time employed)

40 Tidball (2012): 5.
41 Keith et al. (2018).
42 Ceccato et al. (2020), 86.

To me it's the combination of areas including the isolated areas and dense trees/bushes that make the creek really special. I understand and support the need for increased safety but if I felt I was being surveyed or areas were cleared out or overlit I would feel less inclined to enjoy the experience as an escape to a natural space.

(45–54 years, woman, part-time employed)

Don't ruin a natural environment because of perceived safety solutions.

(45–54, woman, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, person with a disability)

As such, there was clear resistance from some respondents to the addition of any structures or infrastructure. However, others made suggestions of items that they thought would improve the area:

Benches to the south side of the bridge on the lawn looking over river could help add to amenity and the sense of the social too (better sight-lines from that side).

(25–34 years, woman, person with a disability, LGBTQIA+, part-time employed)

Sometimes when given the choice of Merri Creek vs Coburg Lake I will choose the lake due to the facilities there – toilets, benches, lighting, play equipment etc. all of which are lacking along the

Merri Creek Coburg currently.

(35–44 years, woman, full-time employed)

It is important to consider how infrastructure can play a role in allowing people to enjoy the natural environment. Benches, for example, can provide a space for enjoying and relaxing within it. Individuals with mobility issues, women with children and elderly women all benefit and increase their use when there are rest spots.

Darebin Parklands is a great example of how wildness can still feel safe for women. Multiple points of entry, very clearly regularly maintained facilities for a variety of users. Don't need a playground, a nature focus that keeps people of all ages there for longer visits is a great way to make it feel safer.

(35–44, woman, part-time employed)

Green spaces and urban greenways are highly important spaces within a cityscape with multiple benefits for those who live there, including women. However, for women that very 'get away from it all' quality also means that the same spaces can become frightening at certain times and under certain conditions. These are explored more in the next section.



Perceptions of safety

As noted earlier, women 'read' space safety and respond with what they consider to be appropriate behaviours.

PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES

Women in public spaces often activate precautionary measures, even when they might not describe them as such. They may unconsciously perform particular behaviours or do so knowingly, but such actions have become so routine they sometimes no longer associate the behaviour with fear or safety (see discussion on page 11).

Respondents were asked what kind of precautionary measures they used in each of the six sites of Merri Creek (Figure 18).

There were further precautionary measures detailed in the open comments answers. Walking with a (large) dog helped 5% of the women feel safe and some noted that they would not walk the area unless their dog was with them:

Always walk with my dogs.
(35–44 years, woman, person with a disability, LGBTQIA+, not working)

I always walk with my large dog.
(25–34 years, woman, underemployed)

For cyclists, and some walkers, they traversed the paths at speed:

Only use in the dark on my bike & ride fast.
(45–54 years, woman, LGBTQIA+, full-time employed)

I ride quickly, good luck to stop me.
(35–44 years, woman, migrant/refugee/asylum seeker, full-time employed, parent)

Speed was a tactic used particularly through the underpasses under Bell Street and Moreland Road, and across the Harding Street Bridge. For cyclists, speed was sometimes paired with comments that the respondent might cycle at night in the area, but never walk. Speed walking is a common measure women use in urban areas, speed cycling is less well documented. Given that speeding cyclists were noted earlier as a danger for other users, there is a possible tension here between different kinds of safety. However, the comments seemed to suggest that speed was a tactic used primarily during the hours of darkness and dimmer light (dusk and dawn).

Some of the measures typically used in urban situations (wearing headphones to deter approach and carrying an alarm) were not reported as commonly used in the Merri Creek area.

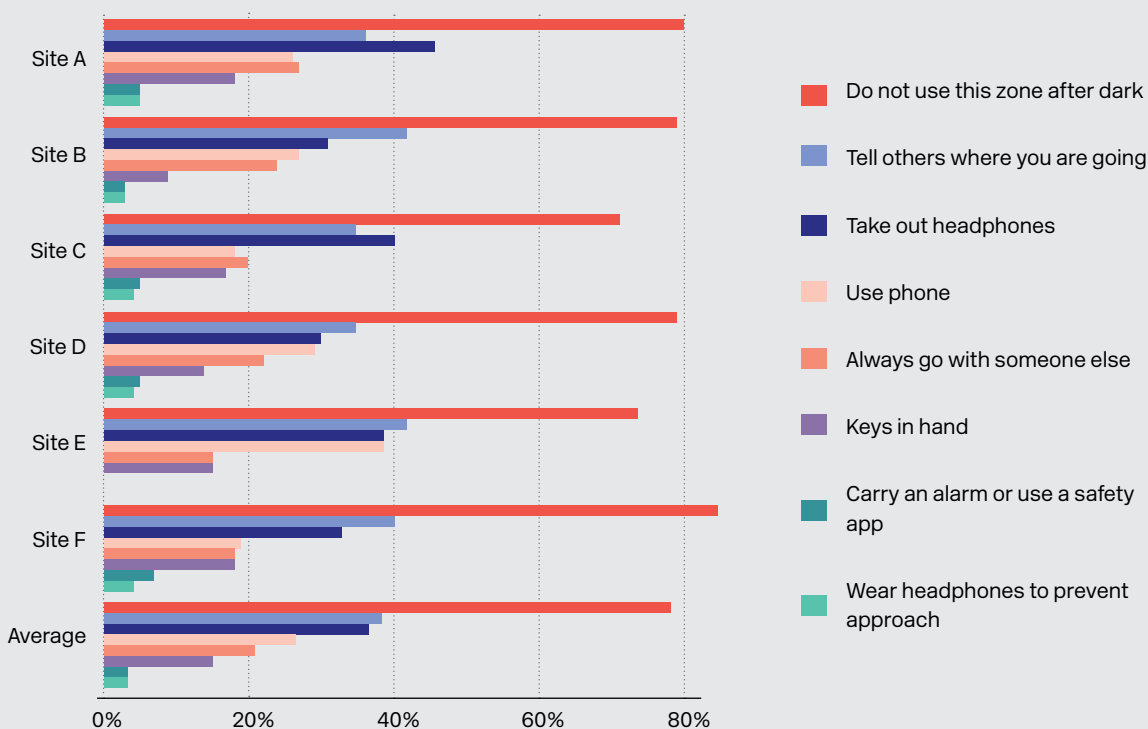


Figure 18: Precautionary measures undertaken by respondents, by site

DARKNESS AND LIGHT

I feel generally safe along the Merri Creek, but I only use it in the day. I would feel unsafe there at night, but I feel unsafe everywhere at night.
(15–24, woman, LGBTQA+)

Darkness is a strong trigger for raising levels of caution and of fear, such that many women curtail their after-dark activities – not just in the Merri Creek area, as the quote above demonstrates. Respondents were directly asked if they used each of the sites after dark and barely one in ten did so (Table C3 – Appendix C). The exception was Site C – Harding Street Bridge, which is a short cut for locals across the creek. Even there, just 21% of 117 respondents used it.

Given darkness is such a trigger, 'more lighting' is typically proffered as a default solution to women's safety issues. We saw this in the summary of each site in Section 3 of this report. Good lighting can definitely improve women's experiences of places at night and allow them to feel safe using places alone in hours of darkness.⁴³ However, the survey also elicited some more nuanced responses to lighting as a safety solution in Merri Creek.

While the time of day was the most important factor influencing respondents' feelings in each site (an average of 89% ticked this box, Table C4 – Appendix C), participants were also asked directly whether they would use the site after dark if it were lit (Figure 19).

On average, two out of five (40%) said 'no' (Site E – Off leash dog area had the highest 'no' response). Just 18% said 'yes'. The rest said 'possibly'. Again, Site C was the most likely to be used, although at 27% 'yes' this is not a very high result and much

less than the proportion of respondents who would still not use Site C after dark even if lit (36%).

There was no open-text answer to this question, but in their responses to other questions women proposed caveats to their 'use if lit', especially not going alone. Even if lit, most of the creek corridor can feel isolated with little passive surveillance – isolation was the dominant response to why places along the creek felt unsafe, as detailed in Figure 15. Isolation is something that no amount of lighting can resolve. This isolated aspect can be one of the joys of the area allowing women to commune with nature, but makes some users nervous even during daylight hours:

I feel isolated and nervous most of the time. I have never ever gone on a walk along the creek or around the lake and felt completely comfortable. Sections along the river are so isolated and I feel like if I screamed no one would hear me so I only use parts of the track.
(25–34 years, woman, full-time employed)

The automatic nature of the 'more lighting' response as the default solution is also reflected in the proportion of those who said that 'No' more lighting would not encourage them to use the area and yet later in the survey they still proposed lighting to improve the safety of the area and increase their usage. 21% of those who suggested lighting as a remedy had said 'no' to the earlier question, compared with half who had said 'yes'.

A number of respondents were also strongly opposed to lighting that would disturb the animal life and be counterproductive to this aspect of the natural amenity of the area.

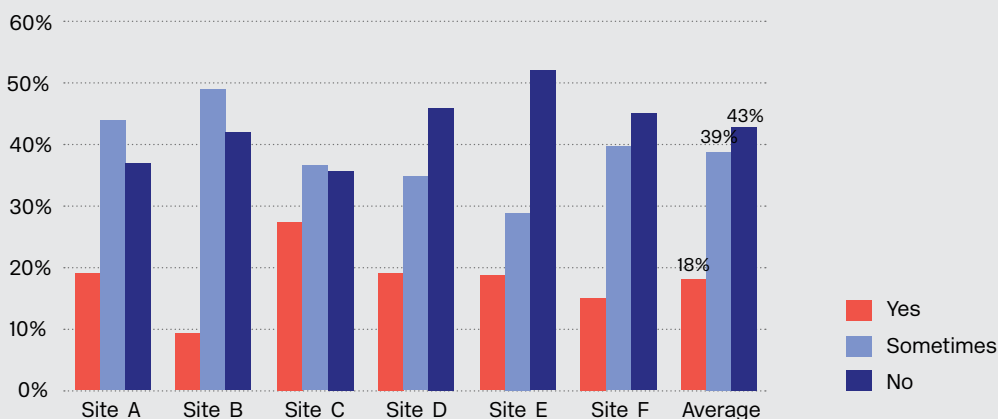


Figure 19: Would you use this area after dark if it was lit?



I have always used the Creek a lot but that's only during daylight. I can't imagine how much you'd need to light it to make it feel safe at night – and that would have consequences for neighbours and wildlife in the area so I don't think that more lighting is really the way to go.

(35–44 years, woman, full-time employed)

Concerned that introducing infrastructure such as lights and removal of natural vegetation will harm the very things that many people value. Lighting would also affect wildlife sleeping and breeding patterns, affecting biodiversity and compromising the ecosystem.

(55–64 years, woman, part-time employed)

Comments tended to suggest that it was cyclists who were most interested in lighting. The majority of those suggesting lighting were those who used the area for more than one reason and so closer examination of the data was not able to reveal this pattern. However, given the earlier discussion of women feeling safer on bicycles and the ability to move fast on them, the likelihood is that it would be women cyclists who would use the corridor after dark. Lighting a path for cyclists can be a different form more subdued – see example on page 70.

I don't use the area at night because it does feel unsafe, often I would ride the path to get somewhere in the day and use roads to ride back to avoid it. So if the area was lit up and felt safe I would enjoy using it as a cycle route for after dark.

(25–34 years, woman, LGBTQIA+, migrant/refugee/asylum seeker, part-time employed)

Comments also tended to suggest that women in full-time employment might be more likely to be interested in lighting. This would enable access to the area for exercise outside of 9–5 when, at certain times of the year, this would

mean being there at dawn or dusk when light is sparse. The data reported earlier of around 40% of respondents only using the Creek area during daylight savings months bears this out (see page 31).

In addition, while many call for 'more' lighting, the quality of that lighting is more critical for women's safety than simply more. Previous research by Monash University's XYX Lab in conjunction with Arup Lighting has clearly found that more light is not necessarily an improvement.⁴⁴ For example, overlighting a space can make women feel like they are hypervisible and therefore rendered more vulnerable.

DO NOT add signs, lighting, toilets or anything else that will destroy the ambience and turn it into a carpark for nutters. [...] I feel like this survey is aiming to provide a justification for decisions about lighting and signage that have already been made.

(65–74 years, woman, part-time employed)

More light would not make it [Site A] feel safer – what about prioritising people over cars, why do humans have to go under a dark bridge and cars have priority in safe, elevated, lit areas?

(25–34 years, woman, part-time employed, student)

Of note, the area of the survey is bracketed by underpasses. These are very particular kinds of space that are typically dark – even during the day – and often narrow and enclosing invoking strong sensations of entrapment. As such, they are very particular places of fear for women.

Low lighting, underpass bridge, lots of places for people to hide [Site F].

(15–24 years, woman, full-time employed)

Lighting is clearly an issue of some contention for Merri Creek (and any green space). Lighting may only be useful at certain times of the year, at particular times of the day (rather than all night) and in limited locations (the Harding Street Bridge and under the underpasses). Further research would be necessary to determine whether Merri Creek is really a place that people want or need to use after dark, and if lighting would enhance such use. Some comments noted that the Creek area was good at night for stargazing because there is less light pollution.

CCTV

Like lighting, CCTV is a common response to safety from social and crime problems and was suggested as a solution to safety concerns by respondents, particularly in Site A where 37% of those making suggestions nominated it. But it was variable across the sites (no one suggested it for Site E) and a number of people objected to its use – particularly for Site B (9%) and even in Site A, 3% were resistant to it.

I don't think CCTV stops crime from happening, and you can't capture everything along the creek path. (35–44 years, woman, LGBTQIA+, underemployed)

The ability of CCTV to increase actual safety is debatable. Some assume that cameras are monitored and help would be immediately at hand should anything happen. But few are so monitored and CCTV is more used as an after-the-incident forensic tool. A recent and major study on crime prevention and CCTV was clear that it

is an effective crime prevention tool in particular settings (notably car parks), but that its efficacy in other environments is very unclear.⁴⁵ A Victorian study observed that while CCTV might make some feel safer, it contributes little to improving a community's capacity to actually be safe.⁴⁶

In addition, CCTV is useful in capturing highly visible instances of violence, such as physical assaults, but it does not usually capture more insidious forms of gendered harassment, such as the leering, staring, groping and verbal harassment that adversely impact on women. While not a highly visible instance of violence, everyday and ongoing experiences of harassment act as a constant reminder to women that they are occupying unsafe, male-dominated public spaces. CCTV at worst can be used to invalidate these experiences since incidents not caught on camera are not considered important or to have occurred.⁴⁷

Given that CCTV is a major infrastructure investment, its use along the creek is unlikely to be either viable or to have a major impact on women's safety.

OTHER PEOPLE

I think overall it's pretty safe. It makes me really angry that women are made to feel that outdoor places are unsafe and they shouldn't feel they can use them. I think we need to increase usage if anything so there are lots of us about. (55–64 years, woman, part-time employed)

It is such a shame that something so special can also feel incredibly scary at the wrong time of day or in the presence of some others. (25–34 years, woman, full-time employed)

Participants were asked if they felt safer when there are other people around (Figure 20). On average for the sites, 70% said 'yes' and a very small proportion said 'no'. This reflects an expectation that other people act as a guard against poor behaviour and, importantly, make the area feel less isolated. It is notable, however, that 45% on average signalled that it depended on who the people were (respondents could select more than one answer).

Observed anti-social behaviour (or the signs of it) is often the reason that 'other people' might not provide a safeguard. This was asked in an earlier question (Figure 14) and although Sites C and F were the sites of the most anti-social behaviour, it was not a high figure and does not align with the results above.



45 Piza et al. (2019).
46 Lee et al. (2020), 62)
47 Piza et al. (2019).

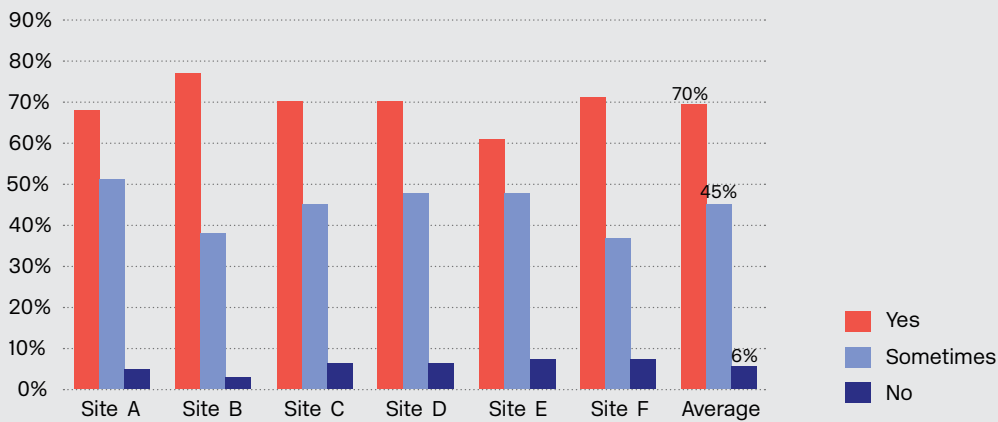


Figure 20: Do you feel safer when there are other people around?

I rarely feel unsafe along the Merri Creek trail due to unsociable behaviour. It is more the condition of the trail in parts and people who can't control off-leash dogs that concerns me.
(35–44 years, woman, student, full-time employed)

Respondents were asked directly about graffiti and its presence did not concern the majority (Tables C5 and C6 – Appendix C), although comments noted that it did depend on the quality and content of it.

Many comments noted the isolation in parts of the area (Figure 15), which refers explicitly to how eerie a place can feel if there is no one else around. As a consequence, on average, one in five respondents did not go to the sites on their own as a precautionary measure (see Figure 18).

When i am alone along the secluded parts of the track i do feel nervous.
(25–34 years, woman, full-time employed)

I rarely go to these areas alone but feel resentful of that.
(35–44 years, woman, part-time employed, parent)

Again, this sense of being on one's own can be one of the attractions of the area, but it is not always comfortable.

THE STORIES ABOUT A PLACE

As women move through public spaces, they 'read' them. They read the material and immaterial qualities of a location – such as darkness, sightlines, other people, entrapment, anti-social behaviour, presence of litter and evidence of poor maintenance – and they read them in the

context of their own personal experiences and memories. These are all aspects of the social and physical environment that impact on perceptions of safety and form the atmospherics of a location or, more colloquially, the 'vibe'. That vibe is strongly informed by what might be called the gendered imaginary of fear in public places – places that are dark, isolated, desolate, with poor sightlines and that feel entrapping are to be more feared than others (see discussion page 11). Strongly contributing to that fear are the stories that circulate around particular sites (see summary diagram in Executive Summary). Places gain a reputation for safety and unsafety; sometimes that reputation might be very localised within a family or group of friends but others will learn of it through the media.

While it is important to acknowledge that all women are different, the collective experience of fear of men and unpredictable people in public spaces (and of public spaces themselves) through such stories shapes womanhood almost universally.⁴⁸ In particular, women tell stories and provide advice to one another in order to protect each other. This socialised behaviour of shared storytelling and safekeeping tactics, often beginning at a young age, binds a collective experience of womanhood:

I have been warned at one point when I was on my own by another woman passing by with her dog.
(25–34 years, woman, full-time employed)

In the context of Merri Creek, by far the greatest contributor to the vibe was the stories respondents had heard – this came through in both set answers and in the comments. Figure 10 showed that 79% of respondents said that they



had “heard stories of bad things happening” in the Merri Creek area and that had changed their use (see discussion earlier). Figure 15 analysed the main reasons respondents considered a site unsafe and hearing bad stories ranks fourth. But this spiked for Site B to over 50% of respondents, indicating the penetration of media reports about the attack into the community. For many respondents, these stories override both the attributes they acknowledge of Merri Creek’s ‘vibe’ as an area of natural beauty and their own personal experience:

Yes I feel unsafe but only because of what I've heard and read.

(35–44 years, woman, full-time employed)

I feel relatively safe walking along the creek but the story of the woman being attacked and sexually assaulted in relative broad daylight was really scary.

(35–44, woman, full-time employed)

One of the shocks of the December 2019 attack was that it occurred in Site B, an area that women did not read as unsafe:

Although I feel really safe in this section [Site B], I know that a woman was raped here so of course, makes you question your own assessment of whether the place is safe.

(35–44 years, woman, not working/retired)

The sexual assault was a major surprise – you don't really feel unsafe generally south of Bell St. I use the Merri Creek most days, so it really shook my sense of trust in the community.

(25–34 years, woman, full-time employed)

The attack also happened in daylight and so negated the key safety precaution respondents deployed of avoiding the Creek area after dark.

I mostly feel safe along the Merri Creek path because i go at well-lit times of day. However i know that doesn't guarantee safety & there are people out there who would commit crimes anytime of day.

(25–34 years, woman, full-time employed)

From what can be gleaned from media reports, the December 2019 attack was the kind that women fear (or, rather, are taught to fear) most: a random attack by an allegedly ‘crazed’ lone man.⁴⁹ The ‘it could have been anyone’ slips very easily to ‘it could have been me’, particularly for women who use the area on a daily basis. In the gendered imaginary of fear in public places, the lone rapist is a narrative that is commonly presented in fictional media, television and film and female storytelling.⁵⁰ This narrative configures all male strangers as potential rapists and all women are exposed to it, either directly or indirectly, throughout their lives. When an assault occurs that fits that narrative, it is usually widely reported in the media and the locale of the attack is absorbed into the gendered imaginary.

No one will ever forget how easy and local and how everyday that activity was that ended so brutally and the impact on that young person's life. It was very graphically reported and I am always reminded of it when I happen to be alone on the river and usually turn back. It is a trauma that is a blight on the merri creek which will never feel safe again for a lot of people.

(55–64, non-binary, LGBTQIA+, student)

It's [Site B] been tainted with the horrible rape that occurred there. Makes me very scared to run there, even during the day.

(35–44, woman, parent)

49 Pearson et al. (2019)
50 Fanghanel (2016).

Although women fear this kind of attack, it is relatively rare in general. Only a small proportion of the respondents had directly experienced any form of physical assault in the area (see page 30 and 31), however, it may be that those who have experienced assault no longer use the area nor responded to the survey.

It's extremely rare for public stranger violence to occur, the main danger is our fear and hesitation to get out and relax and exercise. (45–54, woman, LGBTQIA+, part-time employed)

Nonetheless, it takes just one such attack to perpetuate the gendered imaginary of fear.

COMPLEXITIES OF SAFETY

Until gender equality and violence against women is addressed as a national crisis and adequate resources allocated to it we will never be safe. (45–54, woman, full-time employed)

Safety and perceptions of safety for women are very complex. Perceived safety and fear, in particular, is both a multi-faceted and multi-scaled phenomenon, a combination of an individual's

characteristics (such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, socio-economic background and so on, as previously discussed) and the environments to which they are exposed.⁵¹ In addition, and importantly, there are far wider gendered social, cultural and economic factors that impact. Countering these go well beyond the vibe and specifics of a location.

A number of respondents maintained that Merri Creek itself had little to do with the attack that has amplified fear among women in the community:

I think the problem is individuals in our society who have mental health issues, traumatic histories etc. This does not excuse their behaviour, but it is reality. Better lighting or CCTV on the creek will not solve this. This is a far bigger issue. [...] We have a lot to fix in our society before we can be truly safe in spaces like the creek at night. (35–44, woman, part-time employed)

Safety is about a complex set of issues around law enforcement, parole and mental illness. Ruining natural places with lighting and exit signs won't address systemic issues that allow disturbed people enough freedom to prey upon other humans. (45–54, woman, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, person with a disability)

There are many factors leading up to an assault – it was a terrible thing that happened – but lights and other infrastructure won't guarantee it won't happen. (55–64 years, woman, part-time employed)

These respondents identify social inequalities (such as under-funded programmes for mental health) and wider social and cultural attitudes to women as leading to the attack. They are doubtful that any infrastructure changes of any kind will result in the necessary changes to male behaviour and significantly ameliorate female fear. They advocate instead for better education and support for programmes that promote social justice and equity:

Of course safety is paramount. But think of safety as a broader thing also, eg mental health safety through the benefits of having a little bit of nature here. [...] If the state wants to protect us, educate about family violence and change men's behavior. (45–54, woman, LGBTQIA+, part-time employed)

Teach boys to respect women, teach young men to be connected to community and to services that can support them to make good choices. (25–34, woman, full-time employed)





However, education to shift behaviours and attitudes requires a long strategy to counter systemic issues. The complexity of safety for women requires strategies that cover multiple time frames. In other words, there are both immediate practical and strategic gender safety needs,⁵² and all to be deployed. While infrastructure changes do not and cannot challenge systemic issues, they do offer practical solutions in the short term, which can make a difference to perceptions of safety.⁵³ For example, changes can make a place more attractive to women to use and that increase in numbers and variety of use contributes to a sense of safety.

COLLECTIVE TRAUMA AND COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

Despite the observations that the location may have had little to do with the attack, this high-profile assault has now become synonymous with Merri Creek. The December attack represents a collective trauma by those who continue to use the area and/or live near it. Collective trauma is a way to understand how women have responded to the assault with increased fear, implementing more precautionary measures and, more generally, by not using Merri Creek in the way they had previously.

Collective trauma is experienced through both space and community. Research in the Australian

context on recovery and response to collective trauma favour community-based interventions that look to promote psychosocial recovery.⁵⁴ Simply, connection to community is crucial to help to build resilience and wellbeing for those who have experienced trauma. In addition, there is a strong connection between perceptions of safety and community building, with an improvement in one improving the other.⁵⁵

It is an important community asset but I have been put off by recent events and don't feel safe to be there by myself. Would love a way to reclaim that space for all of us.
(45–54 years, woman, full-time employed)

Social reconnection initiatives were suggested by many respondents and some have been instigated already, such as a Merri Creek female running group:

I also think more community events in the space would help foster more of a sense of community and make it feel safer, and that people will watch out for one another when needed. I like the idea of giving more funding to Joe's Market or the neighbourhood house to put on such events in the Merri Creek (moonlight cinema, concerts) would really enhance the value of Merri Creek as a location.
(25–34 years, woman, person with a disability, full-time employed)

⁵² World Bank (2020), 49.

⁵³ Community Crime Prevention (2020a).

⁵⁴ Ajduković (2013).

⁵⁵ Lee et al. (2020), 62.



Artworks by Dvate in the area leading to Harding Street Bridge, July 2020.⁵⁶

Joe's Market Garden! Such a great community space for events and meeting with friends, also to buy cheap and sustainable fresh produce. Give them more funding so they can bring more people to the area – so they could build infrastructure like a stage and portable equipment like lighting so that acoustic events could take place at night! This would make the whole creek – particularly this isolated area – more welcoming and feel safer. (25–34 years, woman, full-time employed)

The Merri Creek is such a special area and while I do not always feel safe there alone as a woman I would like to see creative, community ways to address safety and use rather than thinking just about infrastructural changes to the spaces. I think this would be most meaningful if it was First Nations led and taken as an opportunity to make a wonderful community asset an example of creative community thinking leading to increased climate, racial and gender justice. (35–44 years, woman, LGBTIQ+, part-time employed)

What I'd like to see is more community events which bring our beautiful community together, we could even discuss this topic down by the creek. This would change culture where a light will not. Imagine! night walks, bonfires, music nights, story telling. (25–34 years, woman, LGBTIQ+, part-time employed)

I rarely use the area after dark, but I think I'd be much more likely to do so if there were community events held there, not due to increased lighting, for example. (25–34)

Community artworks were also suggested by a number of respondents as a means of improving the area to encourage more usage and foster community, particularly along some of the existing fencing. In July 2020, as part of a Council-funded project commissioning murals in graffiti hotspots, the fence along the entry to Merri Creek from Harding Street received a series of murals depicting Indigenous fauna. Such artworks are an important element for building community, as are those which involve the community in their devising.⁵⁷

Support for community initiatives like this was strong, with many respondents appreciating the survey and the call for their suggestions:

Thanks for running this survey, and for taking the issue seriously. (25–34 years, woman, LGBTIQ+, full-time employed)

Thank you for doing this survey, I run daily alone along the creek and really love being in nature, although sometimes I do feel a bit nervous, and after the incident at Joes garden I actually stopped running for a while along the creek. I think that enhanced safety measures would be greatly welcomed by many women including myself. (25–34 years, woman, full-time employed)

Building resilience through community initiatives and infrastructure is crucial. The council by commissioning this survey has begun the process by providing a space for community collaboration, recognition and response. Next steps include further engagement with the community for any changes to the Merri Creek corridor to foster inclusive and gender-sensitive design.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Photos from <https://www.facebook.com/ArtsMoreland/>

⁵⁷ Murray (2012).

⁵⁸ Community Crime Prevention (2020a).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations are grouped into three areas, each of which is equally important and all are needed to 'reclaim' the Merri Creek for women users:

- Communication and engagement,
- Infrastructure and amenities,
- Buildings communities

In order to be effective, it is strongly recommended that the Moreland City Council institute a committee or some other organisational structure to oversee the implementation of the multiple strands required to improve safety for women in Merri Creek and beyond. We also note that good stories about the area will slowly grow as good things happen there; this is a long term commitment.

COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT:

Communication campaign(s) that target the whole community about:

- The early outcomes of the Merri Creek Coburg Women's Safety Survey, including using the stories of women's 'lived experiences' (eg selected quotes) to support the campaign(s) and engage the community
- The intent to make changes across community engagement and infrastructure
- Communicate the intent for cultural change in Moreland as a result of the survey
- Communication and engagement around shared path user behaviour. In particular, rights and obligations of cyclists, dog owners and general users.



Engage:

- Develop a regular mechanism to encourage feedback of experiences and communicate the ways for women to do this: *Conversations Moreland*, an app, and/or designated personnel (the latter fosters a more resilient form of community building)
- Seek responses to the report from key stakeholders (eg. Victoria Police, Merri Creek Management committee and Joe's Garden).
- Align messaging with wider violence against women communication campaigns

Consider using a range of social media outlets (FaceBook, Instagram and LinkedIn) and aligned stakeholders for the messaging and outreach, including the ones used on the original campaign for survey participation.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND MAINTENANCE:

Nature is the key attraction of Merri Creek and any changes should be appropriate to the natural context of the Merri Creek corridor and in consultation with local women users. Appropriate infrastructure can increase usage and reduce the isolation of the Creek area.

- Path etiquette – signage and/or paving changes to strongly indicate that this is a shared area to improve different user interactions.
- Increase wayfinding systems so that users know where they are, what is close, and nearest exits and amenities.
- Improve pathways – ensure existing/paved paths well maintained and adjacent areas clear so people can move off path to make room for other users (where possible); clearer definition of existing desire paths in non-paved areas to avoid mud after rain, protect plants, etc; rebuild parts of path north of Site F where it is falling into the creek (note that this began in September 2020).
- Improve connectivity of paths with local street networks, for example Site A up to Nicholson Street.
- Develop more creek crossing options.
- Lighting – while often requested, there was also notable concern about the detrimental effects of light in such an area and

considerable doubt as to whether lighting would actually increase usage. The exceptions are the key nodes of the Harding Street Bridge where better lighting would facilitate its use as a shortcut, and the underpasses where appropriate lighting might ease concerns. Note that better lighting does not mean more lighting.

- Harding Street Bridge – some distrust in its physical safety. Notice of maintenance checks and approvals might be useful to allay those concerns. Preferably replace with a bridge more suitable to the volume and kind of traffic that traverses it (note that design work is underway for this and we would strongly encourage engagement with local women in the design to ensure gender-sensitive design). Consider the blind corner at the eastern end of the bridge to improve sightlines.
- More bins and creek maintenance – keeping the area clear of rubbish, flood debris and dog excrement.
- Possible changes to fences backing onto Creek area to improve passive surveillance from adjoining houses and businesses.
- Community-building infrastructure – popular suggestions were benches to rest, meet or picnic; suitable play equipment; community-facilitated artworks; and possible toilets.

BUILDING COMMUNITIES

Building resilience through community initiatives. Facilitate and support existing and new local groups to:

- co-design any infrastructure,
- consult on any changes to the corridor's existing infrastructure,
- instigate and/or host community events,
- form support networks,
- support Joe's Garden to build on and broaden its current community connections and events.

CASE STUDY EXAMPLES



Photograph from <https://inhabitat.com/roosegaarde-studios-bike-path-is-a-twinkling-road-inspired-by-van-gogh/>

PATH LIGHTING

Van Gogh-Roosegaarde Cycle Path
Nuenen, Netherlands.

The path is illuminated by a collection of painted dots representing Vincent Van Gogh's painting *Starry Night*. The specialist paint allows the path to gather energy during the day and then glow in the dark. This form of illumination is more gentle to both the eye and natural surroundings. If the weather does not generate enough power, a solar panel powers the coated surface and LED's to the side of the path.



Photograph from <https://www.artolution.org/gender-equality-1>
Artolution <https://www.artolution.org/gender-equality-1>

ART

Artolution

Artolution is a global non-profit organisation that promotes and supports gender equality through community-based public art projects in different countries across the world, although not yet in Australia. In particular, it uses collaborative art making as an opportunity to mobilise and empower local citizens and communities to talk about and create projects that address gendered violence in public space. While Moreland City Council supports public artworks, this collaborative form of generating such works also empowers and builds strong communities.



Photograph from <https://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/things-to-see-and-do/things-to-do-blog/outdoor-cinema-in-the-suburbs>

EVENTS

Outdoor Cinemas

Outdoor cinemas provide a community gathering event and provides space for other community engagement, such as local food and drink vendors selling their products. Local schools and community organisations can use the events as small scale fundraising opportunities.



Photograph from <https://www.lightbureau.com/project/jorpelandsholmen/>

LIGHTING

Jørpelandsholmen , The Light Bureau, Norway.

The island of Jorpelandsholem is connected to the mainland via a pedestrian bridge leading to a 2.1 km nature walk. In a collaboration with the local municipality, the Light Bureau balanced artificial light visually against the night sky to ensure that views across the water and sky would be maintained and avoid glare. Light levels were also kept low to not overpower and damage the natural environment. Bespoke fixtures generated low lighting and protected against the natural elements. By matching both the level of lighting and the built fixtures/materials to the natural environment, the lit nature walk enhances the experience of the island.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Statistical Areas

Figure A1: ABS statistical areas around the Coburg Merri Creek area for demographics, page 13



Appendix B – Crime Statistics Summary, Moreland

Figure A1: ABS statistical areas around the Coburg Merri Creek area.



Appendix C – Additional Tables

Table C1

If you were unfamiliar with this particular area, are the ways in and out clear (signage, clear view, etc)?

	Site A	Site B	Site C	Site D	Site E	Site F	Average
Yes	22%	23%	44%	12%	19%	18%	23%
Not Sure	35%	38%	26%	38%	21%	31%	32%
No	42%	39%	30%	49%	60%	51%	45%

Table C2

If there is a maintenance issue, is it clear who you could report this to?

	Site A	Site B	Site C	Site D	Site E	Site F	Average
Yes	17%	19%	20%	13%	20%	15%	17%
No	83%	81%	80%	87%	80%	85%	83%

Table C3

Do you use this area after dark?

	Site A	Site B	Site C	Site D	Site E	Site F	Average
Yes	10%	11%	21%	9%	10%	6%	11%
No	90%	89%	79%	91%	90%	94%	89%

Table C4

What influences the way you feel about the site?

	Site A	Site B	Site C	Site D	Site E	Site F	Average
Time of day	94%	85%	88%	90%	86%	90%	89%
Weather	29%	30%	26%	38%	28%	47%	33%
Week day/Weekend	19%	19%	19%	21%	25%	20%	21%

Table C5

Is there much visible graffiti/street art around?

	Site A	Site B	Site C	Site D	Site E	Site F	Average
Yes	22%	23%	44%	12%	19%	18%	23%
Not Sure	35%	38%	26%	38%	21%	31%	32%
No	42%	39%	30%	49%	60%	51%	45%

Table C6

Does the graffiti/street art concern you?

	Site A	Site B	Site C	Site D	Site E	Site F	Average
Yes	13%	3%	17%	5%	5%	10%	9%
Sometimes	24%	14%	17%	13%	20%	18%	17%
No	64%	84%	67%	82%	75%	72%	74%

