

Spotlight

Social cohesion and building equity

The arts can play a powerful role in building social cohesion

In these rapidly changing times, we are being met with pressing challenges of social inequality, marginalisation, economic disruption and a pandemic. While social cohesion in Australia increased during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Australia's levels of national pride, belonging and sense of social justice are now lower than they were before the pandemic.⁶⁵

To respond to these challenges, there is enormous potential in harnessing the power of arts and culture. Arts and creativity connect us, and can play a powerful role in building social cohesion and inclusion. There is an emerging body of evidence of the tremendous potential of arts and creativity to build and strengthen social cohesion.⁶⁶ However, culture is an under-exploited resource for building social cohesion.⁶⁷

Moreover, cultural participation is a human right.⁶⁸ Engagement with arts and creativity plays a crucial role in improving quality of life for all Australians, no matter their background. Cultural inclusion is critical to the health, wellbeing and prosperity of Australian communities, and for the vitality of our future generations. To reap the benefits of arts and culture in building a more socially cohesive society, all Australians must have access.

The arts have a key role to play in strengthening civic infrastructure and combating hate

Creativity enables empathy and human connection in an increasingly polarised world. In these rapidly changing and divided times, creative content and experiences can be harnessed to celebrate diversity and promote mutual understanding.

The results from the 2022 National Arts Participation Survey show that seven in ten Australians agree *cultural and creative experiences help you to understand perspectives that are different to your own* (71% consistent with 71% in 2019). There is stronger agreement among specifically-engaged CALD respondents,⁶⁹ with nine in ten specifically-engaged CALD respondents agreeing *cultural and creative experiences help you to understand perspectives that are different to your own* (90% compared to 78% of CALD respondents overall and 71% of Australians overall).

Footnote numbers correspond to those in the full *Creating Value: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey 2022 Report*.

65 Scanlon Foundation Research Institute 2022, *Mapping Social Cohesion Report*.

66 Engh, R et al. 2021, *WE-making: How arts & culture unite people to work toward community well-being*, Metris Arts Consulting. A New Approach 2020, *Society and Place: Transformative impacts of arts, culture and creativity, Fact sheet 1*.

67 UNESCO 2023, 'Cutting Edge | All Aboard! Culture and social inclusion', Last updated 20 April, www.unesco.org/en/articles/cutting-edge-all-aboard-culture-and-social-inclusion.

68 Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that 'everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.' Cultural rights are, therefore, inseparable from human rights, as recognised in Article 5 of the 2001 UNESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity and can be defined as the right of access to, participation in and enjoyment of culture. This includes the right of individuals and communities to know, understand, visit, make use of, maintain, exchange and develop cultural heritage and cultural expressions, as well as to benefit from the cultural heritage and cultural expressions of others. Other human rights, such as the rights to freedom of expression, the right to information and the right to education, are key to the realisation of cultural rights. There are also cultural rights for specific groups enshrined in a range of international conventions, including in relation to racial discrimination, children, discrimination against women, persons with disabilities, and the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

69 To ensure the 2022 National Arts Participation Survey was representative of those from CALD backgrounds, the survey was translated into six languages. Specifically-engaged CALD respondents refers to this group of respondents.

Darlinghurst Theatre,
Once production.
Credit: Robert Catto.

I probably have been more involved in watching shows on YouTube and really being able to reach out to all the different performers and around the world. I go back a long way and there's certainly been some great performers and people that I probably would've never, ever thought of following, listening to their music, so that's been a real eye opener.

– Focus group participant

Our arts help shape and communicate our collective identity

First Nations cultural expression and innovation – along with the range of identities, experiences and abilities that make up our geographically dispersed communities – are what makes Australia culturally rich and distinctive. Australia's multicultural and multi-faith communities support our vibrant society and economic prosperity.

Arts and creativity can help forge a more inclusive national identity and highlight and build our success as a diverse multicultural nation. Creative engagement can be harnessed to promote a more inclusive cultural identity – an identity that brings together the many identities that make our unique Australian community. In 2022, one in two Australians say creativity and the arts have a 'big' or 'very big' impact on *shaping and expressing Australian identity* (51% compared to 52% in 2019).

Barriers to cultural participation hold us back from our full potential

Policy settings and principles have long recognised that all Australians, regardless of social, physical, geographic or personal



circumstances, should be empowered to engage with cultural experiences. However, inequalities remain in the ways Australians participate in arts and culture, including in relation to income, race, sex and disability.

More than half of **women** surveyed would like to attend more events (55% compared to 43% of men). However, women experience a variety of barriers to arts attendance. Women are more likely than men to **experience difficulties getting to arts events** (32% compared to 25%) and to find the **cost of tickets and/or entry** (61% compared to 49%) and the **location of arts events** (43% compared to 36%) barriers to attending arts events.

CALD respondents are more likely than non-CALD respondents to cite **difficulties getting to arts events** (32% compared to 28%); **a lack of information and awareness** (33% compared to 26%); **difficulties finding time** (33% compared to 24%); and **friends/family are not interested** (30% compared to 24%) as barriers to arts attendance.

First Nations respondents are more likely to identify *a lack of information and awareness* as a barrier to arts attendance (38% compared to 27% of non-First Nations respondents).

Respondents with disability face more barriers to arts attendance than respondents without disability. Respondents with disability are *less likely to attend arts events* (58% compared to 70%) and are **under-represented** in festival audiences overall (40% compared to 45%). Respondents with disability are most likely to *experience difficulties getting to arts events* (34% compared to 27% of respondents without disability) and more respondents with disability see *safety concerns* as a barrier to arts attendance than people without disability (29% compared to 18%).

Socio-economic disadvantage can play a powerful role in limiting access to arts and culture.⁷⁰ Those living in areas ranked by the ABS as having greater levels of relative socio-economic disadvantage are less likely to attend arts and cultural activities. Australians living in **Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) indexes 1–3** (areas with relatively greater disadvantage in general) are less likely to attend a live arts event compared to those in **SEIFA indexes 8–10** (areas with relative lack of disadvantage and greater advantage in general) (60% compared to 74%).⁷¹

While three in four respondents in the highest household income bracket (more than \$200,000) attend arts events and festivals (77%), only half of those on a **household income of under \$40,000** attend arts events and festivals (52%).

Those with **lower incomes** strongly prioritise making arts and culture accessible through **free and low-cost events**. Around three in four respondents with a household income of under \$40,000 rank *ensuring free or low-cost events are available* in their top three priorities for public or private arts investment (73% compared to 64% with a household income of more than \$100,000). Income can also impact how Australians creatively participate in the arts. Respondents with an income

below \$40,000 are the least likely to **read for pleasure** (61% compared to 73% of those earning \$100,000 or more).

Similarly, the types of employment in which Australians are engaged in can affect cultural participation. Three quarters of **employed Australians**, either full time or part time, **attend arts events and festivals** (77%), compared to 58% of respondents receiving a **carer/parenting payment**, 50% of respondents who are **unemployed for medical reasons**, and 36% on **disability benefit**.

In addition, while First Nations and CALD respondents are highly engaged in the arts, a high proportion report feeling *cultural and creative experiences are not really for them*. Two in five First Nations respondents and one in three CALD respondents report feeling *cultural and creative experiences are not really for people like me* (39% of First Nations respondents compared to 27% of non-First Nations respondents; and 31% of CALD respondents compared to 27% of non-CALD respondents).

These seemingly contradictory results, also observed for some groups in previous iterations of the survey, suggest an ongoing disconnection between active participation and engagement, and perceptions of the arts as expensive, hard to access and narrowly defined. They also resonate with observations about the **under-representation of non-dominant cultures and groups in audiences for certain forms of publicly funded arts and culture**.

Research underway from Deakin University shows that while some Australian arts organisations recognise the need to change the profile of audiences, more than half have done little to diversify their longstanding white, middle-class audiences.⁷²

The results from the National Arts Participation Survey add important context to the body of research that seeks to understand who has access to arts and culture and why, and will inform future research in this area.

⁷⁰ See Australia Council 2023, *Widening the Lens: Social inequality and arts participation*.

⁷¹ Socio-economic circumstances can be understood using the ABS's Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA). SEIFA ranks areas based on their relative levels of socio-economic advantage and disadvantage from 1–10. There are four different SEIFA indexes and in this analysis, we have used IRSAD (Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage). A low score indicates relatively greater disadvantage in general. For example, an area could have a low score if there are many households with a low income, many people with no qualifications, or many people in low skill occupations. A high score indicates a relative lack of disadvantage in general. See the ABS website for more detail: abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/seifa.

⁷² Deakin University 2023, *Changing Organisations to Diversify Arts Audiences: Summary of findings from national survey*.