THE STATE OF VICTORIA’S CHILDREN REPORT 2019

Aboriginal Children and Young People

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**State of Victoria’s Children report series**

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• Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI)

• Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service

• Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation

This report features artworks by Aboriginal children and young people generously provided by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and community, including participants in the VACCA Art Mentoring Program. Additional images have been licenced through the Torch Project, an organisation providing support to Aboriginal offenders and ex-offenders in Victoria through cultural and arts vocational programs.The names of individuals appearing in the case studies and stories included in this report have been changed except where used with permission.

**Language statement**

We recognise the diversity of Aboriginal people living throughout Victoria. While the terms ‘Koorie’ or ‘Koori’ are commonly used to describe Aboriginal people of southeast Australia, we have used the term ‘Aboriginal’ to include all people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent who are living in Victoria, except where other terms are used in quotations, in the name of organisations and programs, or in the stories and information provided for the report by ACCOs and other organisations.

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# MINISTERIAL FOREWORD

It has been 10 years since the State of Victoria’s Children (SOVC) report focussed on outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people. This report revisits the same subject matter, using data from across Government portfolios to explore topics of physical and mental health, educational engagement, and the experiences of children and young people in the community.

As in previous years, improvements and continuing challenges in each area are highlighted, as are key Victorian Government policy initiatives. New in this year’s report is the inclusion of stories, insights and services information from Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), showing the leading role the Aboriginal community holds in providing support and services to Aboriginal people.

As we delve into the investigations undertaken for this report, it is important to note the Victorian Government’s commitment to supporting self-determination for the Aboriginal community. We know that we need to work differently to remove barriers and change our practices to ensure progress in this area, both as a government and in our education, healthcare and criminal justice systems.

And so, working towards this aim, Victoria became the first state to begin formal treaty negotiations with Aboriginal people, after legislation was passed in Parliament in 2018. Treaty is an opportunity to address wrongs and redefine relationships between the state, Aboriginal Victorians and non-Aboriginal Victorians. It is our chance to better recognise and celebrate the unique status, rights, cultures and histories of Aboriginal Victorians.

It is also pertinent to acknowledge the historic injustices against the Aboriginal community in Victoria. As a government, we are proud to be working with the First People’s Assembly to establish a truth and justice commission to discover and document these past injustices, and formally recognise their impacts. Members of the Assembly, charged with creating the framework to guide Victoria’s future treaty negotiations, are talking to their communities, and working closely with the Victorian Government on the truth and justice process.

The Victorian Government also continues to be informed by the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018-2023 report, released in 2018, which outlines the guiding principles for working with Aboriginal Victorians, organisations and the wider community to drive action and improve outcomes.

The data and research collated in the SOVC report shows a mix of findings in the outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people, including their health, social and emotional wellbeing, and engagement with education and post-school pathways.

It also highlights how some of these outcomes have changed over time, while in other outcomes little change has occurred.

Some of the strengths and improvements we have seen include the growing use of early years health and education services, higher levels of achievement in education, and declining rates of young people smoking. In a number of areas, however, we can see that the ongoing effects of colonisation, including experiences of racism, discrimination, trauma and socioeconomic disadvantage continue to present barriers for Aboriginal people.

As a government, we know much more needs to be done. In particular, we must ensure that services provided by the Victorian Government are inclusive, respectful and responsive to the needs of the Aboriginal community.

We also need to continue to back both self-determination and the leading role of ACCOs in providing support and services to the Aboriginal community. The SOVC report serves as an important resource for the Victorian Government and the community sector as we work towards our overall objective of improving outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people.

The Hon James Merlino MP

Deputy Premier

Minister for Education

Minister for Mental Health

The Hon Martin Foley MP

Minister for Equality

Minister for Health

Minister for Ambulance Services

The Hon Natalie Hutchins MP

Minister for Crime Prevention

Minister for Corrections

Minister for Youth Justice

Minister for Victim Support

The Hon Gabrielle Williams MP

Minister for Prevention of Family Violence

Minister for Women

Minister for Aboriginal Affairs

The Hon Luke Donnellan MP

Minister for Child Protection

Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The State of Victoria’s Children 2019 Report draws on available data and research to investigate the outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people living in Victoria, including their health, social and emotional wellbeing, and engagement with education and post-school pathways, as well as the social and historical context in which these outcomes occur. The report also provides information on relevant Victorian Government programs and initiatives, and on the services and experiences of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), frontline workers, and their clients.

There are some limitations on the population data available for the Aboriginal community, in part due to the smaller size of the community relative to the general population and because some collections do not always capture Aboriginal status reliably. Where 2019 data is not available the most recent data has been used.

Aboriginal people in Victoria maintain a strong connection to community and culture, including many children and young people who actively participate in cultural activities and events, and whose identities relate to traditional groupings, languages, and country. This is despite the ongoing challenges experienced by communities as consequences of European colonisation, and the intergenerational trauma caused by the dispossession of lands, massacres of communities, government policies of assimilation, and the forced relocation and separation of families, including the taking of children.

## Aboriginal children and young people in Victoria

Children and young people make up a relatively large proportion of Victoria’s Aboriginal population, and this cohort is growing at a faster rate than the non-Aboriginal population.

In 2016, 52 per cent of Victoria’s Aboriginal population was under 25 years old, as compared to only 31 per cent of the non-Aboriginal population (ABS, 2017).

From 2011 to 2016, the Aboriginal cohort under 25 grew by 20.1 per cent, as compared to only 7.5 per cent for non-Aboriginal Victorians in the same age group (ABS, 2017).

In 2014-15, of Aboriginal Victorians aged three to 24 years:

* 44% reported identifying with a clan, tribal or language group.
* 49.2% reported recognising an area as traditional homelands or country.
* 53.2%had participated in cultural events, ceremonies, or organisations in the past 12 months.
* 59% had participated in cultural activities in the past 12 months (ABS, 2016a).

## Areas of strength and improvement

While Aboriginal children and young people are more likely than non-Aboriginal children to experience disadvantages or vulnerabilities, these do not reflect the outcomes for the entire cohort, many of whom are healthy, supported, and safe. Similarly, measures of educational engagement and achievement show a broad range of school experiences and academic abilities, including high achievers. On many measures, the cohort is showing strength, long-term positive trends, or experiencing improvements in the delivery of services.

**High levels of engagement with early years services including immunisation coverage and kindergarten enrolments**

In 2019, 97.3 per cent of Aboriginal Victorian children were fully immunised at five years old, a higher proportion than the statewide result (Department of Health, 2019a).

Aboriginal enrolments in kindergarten have shown a strong positive trend from 2015 to 2019, with an increase from 82.2 per cent to 99.9 per cent (DET, 2020c).

**More young Aboriginal Victorians now have Year 12 or equivalent qualifications**

From 2006 to 2016, the proportion of Aboriginal Victorians aged 20 to 24 years with Year 12 or equivalent qualifications increased from 56.4 per cent to 71.3 per cent (Productivity Commission, 2020).

**There have been gains in primary school literacy**

In 2019, 41.9 per cent of Year 5 Aboriginal children were in the top three bands of NAPLAN Reading, as compared to 33.5 per cent in 2010 (ACARA, 2019a).

**Rates of smoking among Aboriginal young people are declining**

In 2018-19, 25.1 per cent of surveyed Aboriginal Victorian’s aged 15 to 24 were smokers, as compared to 34.8 per cent of those surveyed in 2014-15 (ABS, 2016a; 2020a).[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Fewer Aboriginal students are reporting experiences of bullying at school**

From 2017 to 2019, the proportion of Aboriginal Victorian government school students reporting experiencing bullying at school dropped from 25.9 per cent to 22.1 per cent (DET, 2019a).

**More Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care are being cared for by their relatives or community**

In 2019, 79.6 per cent of Aboriginal children (aged birth to 12) in out-of-home care were in Kinship care, as compared to 59.9 per cent in 2010 (DHHS, 2020a).

**The number of Aboriginal children people under Youth Justice supervision on an average day has declined**

In Victoria in 2019-20, there were 81 Aboriginal young people aged 10 to 17under Youth Justice supervision on an average day, a 42.1 per cent reduction from 140 in 2015-16 (AIHW, 2020a; DJCS, 2020).

Improvement, however, is not uniform across all outcomes, and there remain areas where outcomes show persistent gaps, where trends are negative, or where children and young people are experiencing high levels of exposure to risk factors. These disadvantages and risks are highly interrelated with intergenerational trauma and the economic exclusion of the Aboriginal community which has limited the opportunitiesfor families to accumulate wealth and social capital over generations. Experiences of racism and discrimination also continue to negatively impact physical and mental health.

Most Aboriginal children are developmentally on track at the time they commence school, and as noted above, significantly more young Aboriginal Victorians now have Year 12 or equivalent qualifications than in the past. However, due to the cumulative nature of learning, those who do begin school behind can find it difficult to catch up.For some, the disadvantages disproportionately experienced by the Aboriginal community can also create barriers to school engagement, potentially limiting future opportunities for further education or employment.

## Vulnerabilities and risks

**Aboriginal children and young people are more likely to experience socioeconomic disadvantage and interrelated issues such as housing insecurity**

At the time of the 2016 Census, 35 per cent of Aboriginal Victorians were living in the most socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, as compared to only 16 per cent of non-Aboriginal Victorians (ABS, 2017)[[2]](#footnote-2).

**Rates of disability and health problems are higher for the Aboriginal community**

Aboriginal young people (aged 15 to 24) are more than twice as likely as their non-Aboriginal peers to have a disability requiring assistance with core activities. They are also more than twice as likely to have caring responsibilities for a person with a disability (ABS, 2017).

**Aboriginal children and young people are more likely to have contact with Child Protection and the criminal justice system**

At 30 June 2019 in Victoria, 26.3 per cent of children and young people (aged from birth to 17) in out-of-home care were Aboriginal, as compared to 19.5 per cent in 2010 (DHHS, 2020a).

In 2018-19, Aboriginal Victorians aged 10 to 17 were nearly 10 times more likely to be in youth detention than their non-Aboriginal peers (AIHW, 2020b).

**Too many Aboriginal children and young people’s lives are affected by exposure to family violence**

Family violence is the primary driver of Aboriginal involvement with Child Protection (Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention & Legal Service Victoria, 2015).

In 34.9 per cent of cases, family violence was the primary reason for Aboriginal young people accessing homelessness services in 2018-19, up from 15.3 per cent in 2011-12 (AIHW, 2019a).

**As with the general population, lifestyle factors such as poor diet and lack of physical activity are increasing the risks of long-term health problems for many Aboriginal children and young people**

In 2018-19, only 3.9 per cent of Aboriginal Victorians aged three to 24 met the dietary guidelines for vegetable consumption (ABS, 2020a).

Of those aged 15 to 24, only 8.7 per cent met the physical activity guidelines, while 24.5 per cent drank sugary drinks seven days per week (ABS, 2020a).

**High levels of stress and negative experiences, such as racism, have the potential to harm Aboriginal children and young people’s health and wellbeing**

In 2014-15, 40.4 per cent of Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 to 24 reported recently experiencing high or very high levels of psychological distress (ABS, 2016a).

In 2014-15, 37.1 per cent of Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 to 24 reported having experienced unfair treatment in the past 12 months because of being Aboriginal (ABS, 2016a).

**A relatively high proportion of Aboriginal children are identified as being developmentally vulnerable at school entry**

In 2018, 42.4 per cent of Victorian Aboriginal children were identified as vulnerable on one or more of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) domains, reflecting little change from 2009 results (AEDC, 2019).

**On average, Aboriginal students miss more days of school per year**

In 2019, Aboriginal Years 7 to 12 students in Victorian government schools missed an average of 37.2 days of school, significantly more than 19.9 days for non-Aboriginal students (DET, 2020a).

**Aboriginal students are less likely to study Mathematics or Science in senior secondary school**

In 2019, 46.2 per cent of Aboriginal government school VCE students undertook at least one Mathematics subject, as compared to 63.1 per cent of non-Aboriginal students (VCAA, 2020).

56 per cent of Aboriginal government school VCE students undertook at least one Science subject, as compared to 63.5 per cent of non-Aboriginal students (VCAA, 2020).

**Aboriginal students may experience greater uncertainty about completing school and their post-school destinations, especially male Aboriginal students**

In 2019, 26.6 per cent of male Aboriginal government school students in Years 10 to 12 were unsure about their intention to complete Year 12, as compared to 14.2 per cent of female Aboriginal students (DET, 2019a).

26.7 per cent of Aboriginal students (male and female) were unsure about their post-school intentions, as compared to 18.1 per cent of non-Aboriginal students (DET, 2019a).

The information contributed to this report by ACCOs and frontline workers highlights the leading role taken by the Aboriginal community in providing services to support its most vulnerable members. While it is the responsibility of government to ensure that high-quality mainstream services are available to all Victorians, Aboriginal organisations are best placed to understand the particular needs of the Aboriginal community. Due to Victoria’s history of discriminatory government policies, many Aboriginal people have a strong distrust of government, and there remains significant work to be done in making mainstream services welcoming, culturally safe, and relevant for the Aboriginal community.

The stories of those accessing ACCO services also demonstrate the significance of Aboriginal identity and connection to culture as a source of strength and support for those facing adversity. For Aboriginal children and young people, community events, ceremonies, and the cultural education programs run by ACCOs are an important resource.

**Functions of ACCOs supporting children and young people:**

* Advocacy and policy advice
* Child Protection and transitions from out-of-home care
* Cultural education
* Educational support and tutoring
* Family violence support
* Healthcare and wellbeing programs
* Housing and accommodation
* Life skills programs
* Mentoring and life coaching
* Outdoor recreation and camps
* Parenting and family support
* Playgroups
* Promoting healthy lifestyles
* Sports carnivals and community events.

The various outcomes gaps experienced by the Aboriginal community are highly interrelated, and cannot be addressed in isolation, or without acknowledging the ongoing impact of colonisation and discrimination. Recent policy and initiatives across the Victorian government demonstrate growing awareness of issues of systemic disadvantage and cultural safety, as well as recognition of the rights of the Aboriginal community to take a leading role in the decisions that affect them, and an emphasis on supporting self-determination.

## Victorian initiatives progressing Aboriginal self-determination

**The Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018-2023**

The whole of Victorian government framework for working with Aboriginal Victorians, organisations and the wider community to drive action and improve outcomes, with a focus on enabling self-determination through systemic and structural transformation.

**Korin Korin Balit-Djak: Aboriginal health, wellbeing and safety strategic plan, 2017-2027**

The Department of Health and Human Services’ (DHHS) overarching Aboriginal policy framework, encompassing policy agreements, frameworks and strategies driving Aboriginal services and programs, and system wide reform.

**First Peoples’ Assembly of Victoria**

The 32-member First Peoples’ Assembly of Victoria is the first democratically elected body of Aboriginal Victorians in Victoria’s history, and includes one young adult member. The Assembly is working in partnership with the Victorian Government to establish the elements necessary to support future treaty negotiations.

**Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreement**

A long-term partnership between the Aboriginal community and the Victorian Government aimed at addressing the drivers of offending, providing culturally safe services, and remedying justice policies with disproportionate impacts on the Aboriginal community. The fourth phase of the Agreement commenced in 2018, with increased emphasis on Aboriginal community decision-making, program design, and delivery.

**Implementation of Section 18 of the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 (Vic)**

Section 18 enables the Secretary of DHHS to transfer powers and functions for Aboriginal children on protection orders to Aboriginal organisations.

**Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026**

An integrated 10-year plan for improving learning and development outcomes for Aboriginal learners of all ages across early childhood, schools, training and skills,

and higher education, developed in partnership with the Aboriginal community.

**Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort: Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework**

A whole of Victorian government 20 year roadmap for reducing homelessness, developed by the Aboriginal community for the Aboriginal community, with implementation overseen by Aboriginal leaders and senior government officials. The purpose of the Framework is that Aboriginal Victorians achieve quality housing outcomes in a generation.

# INTRODUCTION

It is not possible to report on outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people in Victoria without acknowledging the ongoing effects of the context of colonisation. There is a growing body of evidence showing that for First Nations worldwide, the trauma caused by colonisation, genocide, and the suppression of culture lasts for generations after the initial events (Lehrner & Yehuda, 2018; Evans-Campbell, 2008). This intergenerational trauma is the result of the impact the experiences have on community and family relationships and functioning, as well as the biological effects of psychological stress that are passed from parents to children, placing them at greater risk of physical and mental illness (Yehuda, et al., 2014; Lev-Wiesel, 2007), and creating barriers to engagement with education and employment.

In the Australian context, the contemporary challenges experienced by Aboriginal communities, including gaps in social, health, education, and economic outcomes, are directly related to the intergenerational trauma caused by the dispossession of lands, massacres of communities, and systemic racism in society and government, including policies of forced assimilation and programs of child removal (Menzies, 2019; Griffiths, Coleman, Lee, & Madden, 2016; Silburn, et al., 2006).

The history of the Aboriginal community in Victoria, however, is a story of survival, resistance to injustice, endurance of culture, and the pursuit of self-determination. Aboriginal individuals and organisations have been at the forefront of advocacy and service provision for their communities, supporting their most vulnerable members, maintaining culture, petitioning governments, and educating the non-Aboriginal community on the issues that affect them.

While the data and research collated in this report shows that on average Aboriginal children and young people continue to experience higher levels of disadvantage across a range of social, economic, health, and educational outcomes, it also shows that there is diversity in outcomes and examples of success that need to be recognised. Many Aboriginal children and young people are healthy, safe, and achieving well in their education, and while there are many areas for improvement there are also outcomes in a number of domains showing positive long-term trends.

Outcomes cannot be meaningfully improved independently of acknowledging and addressing the underlying social, economic and historical basis of inequality (Calma, Dudgeon, & Bray, 2017), and ensuring cultural safety, which entails addressing the issues of racism and unconscious bias in the provision of health, education, and social services (Phillips, 2015). Areas of concern exist where outcomes gaps have remained substantial, and where improvement has not occurred. With respect to these, further government actions are required, working closely with the Aboriginal community and progressing the agenda of self-determination.

## The scope of this report

The 2019 State of Victoria’s Children Report draws on available data and research to investigate the outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people living in Victoria. Throughout the report, relevant Victorian Government programs and initiatives are highlighted, as are related objectives from the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework (VAAF) 2018-2023 (State of Victoria, 2018a).

The report also includes examples and stories from Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and frontline workers that show the breadth of services being led by the Aboriginal community, as well as the complex intersection of issues affecting some of its members.

The report is divided into three parts:

**PART 1**

Victoria’s Aboriginal population examines demographic data, and children and young people’s cultural identification and participation. This section also covers factors of disadvantage that disproportionately affect the Aboriginal community, including those related to low socioeconomic status, disability, housing insecurity, and contact with Child Protection and the criminal justice system.

**PART 2**

Health, and social and emotional wellbeing reports on health services

access, aspects of healthy lifestyle, and topics falling within the broader concept of social and emotional wellbeing. This includes factors known to have an impact on academic, social, and health outcomes, such as experiences of bullying, violence, and discrimination.

**PART 3**

Education and post-school pathways examines Aboriginal children and young people’s engagement and achievement in education, from kindergarten through to post-school pathways into further education, training, and employment.

## Notes on the data

The report draws together data from across Victorian Government departments and agencies, as well as from national and non-government sources. Reflecting the different purposes of these collections, there are differences in sampling and how prevalence is expressed (for example as population ratios, or number of individuals), as well as in the years or time intervals for which data is available. In several cases data is not available for the 2019 year and the most recent available data has been used.

It is important to note that there are limitations on the availability and quality of data for the Aboriginal cohort, which has implications for the analyses presented in this report. Some datasets used in the preparation of previous State of Victoria’s Children reports, such as the Victorian Student Health and Wellbeing Survey (VSHAWS), do not have a large enough sample size to confidently present results for Aboriginal students.

There are also reasons why people may not identify or be identified as Aboriginal when completing government surveys or accessing government services, leading to an underrepresentation in government data. In the 2016 Australian Census, for example, the estimated undercount of the Victorian Aboriginal population was 15.8 per cent, or 8,999 people (ABS, 2018a). Community services data collections have also been identified as having missing or inconsistent Aboriginal identification data (AIHW, 2004).

The types of issues affecting each type of data collection are often different and can relate to population surveys, educational and clinical assessments, and other sources of government data failing to accommodate Aboriginal language or cultural norms, affecting their results (Marmor & Harley, 2018). Issues may also be the result of services failing to collect demographic information, or of individuals not providing personal information that they do not perceive to be relevant to the service.

It needs to be recognised, however, that many Aboriginal people may not be identifying because of low levels of trust in government agencies, which have historically been responsible for discriminatory programs against the Aboriginal community, including the separation of children from their families (the Stolen Generations), and which may not be providing welcoming or culturally safe services for Aboriginal people.

A recent qualitative study exploring Victorian Aboriginal participation in the Australian Census of Population and Housing found a diversity of attitudes to government data collection. While some participants acknowledged data to be valuable for service planning, others felt that there was limited usefulness to Aboriginal people, that the process failed to engage meaningfully with the community, and that in some cases participation in government data collection was another unwelcome ‘extension of government control and surveillance over their lives’ (Andrews, 2018, p. 45).

For these reasons, the data presented in this report should be interpreted as indicative within the limitations described above.

# PART 1: VICTORIA’S ABORIGINAL POPULATION

Estimates of the Australian population prior to colonisation vary significantly. Early European estimates regarding the regions now bordered by the state of Victoria were that they were home

to around 60,000 Aboriginal people (McCalman & Smith, 2016), but these are not currently considered to be a reliable source.

These Aboriginal people, however, are known to have constituted multiple nations and a diversity of cultures, with as many as 39 languages spoken, several with additional sub-dialects (Clark, 2005). Victoria’s Aboriginal community descends both from these nations as well as from Aboriginal families and individuals who moved to the area following European settlement, some involuntarily transported by colonial authorities, and others seeking economic opportunities, such as occurred during the gold rush (McCalman & Smith, 2016; Cahir, 2012). In contemporary times, interstate migration has continued to contribute to the community, bringing aspects of language and culture from other parts of Australia (VACCHO & LaTrobe University, 2014).

While some experiences are shared by Aboriginal communities across Australia, there are also differences that have implications for understanding the determinants of health, educational, and socioeconomic outcomes. For example, in comparison to other states and territories, the Aboriginal community in Victoria is widely dispersed across the state, and there are no remote communities (Markwick, Ansari, Sullivan, & McNeil, 2015). Further, Victoria’s Aboriginal population itself is not a homogenous demographic.

Part 1 of this report examines demographic data, children and young people’s cultural identification and participation, as well as some of the factors of disadvantage that disproportionately affect the Aboriginal community.

## Key findings

* Victoria’s Aboriginal population is relatively young, with those aged from birth to 24 years making up 52 per cent, as compared to only 31 per cent of the non-Aboriginal population (ABS, 2017). Victorian Aboriginal children and young people are also more likely to live in regional centres and less likely to live in Greater Melbourne, as compared to non-Aboriginal Victorians in the same age group.
* Aboriginal culture is an active and important part of many children and young people’s lives. Of Aboriginal Victorians aged three to 24, almost half identify with a clan, tribal or language group (44 per cent), and/or recognise an area as traditional homelands or Country (49.2 per cent) (ABS, 2016a). Many also participate in cultural, events, ceremonies or organisations (53.2 per cent), and cultural activities (59 per cent).
* Victoria’s Aboriginal community is diverse and encompasses families from a broad range of circumstances and experiences. As compared to the non-Aboriginal population, however, Aboriginal Victorians are more likely to experience socioeconomic disadvantage and interrelated issues such as housing insecurity (ABS, 2017). This is directly related to the history of colonisation, dispossession of lands, and discrimination, which have limited the opportunity for Aboriginal families to accumulate wealth and social capital over generations.
* The Aboriginal population experiences higher than average rates of disability. This not only affects children and young people who have a disability themselves, but also those with caring responsibilities for a relative or other person with a disability. Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 to 24 are more than twice as likely to have such caring responsibilities than their non-Aboriginal peers (11.6 per cent compared to 5 per cent) (ABS, 2017).
* In Victoria, the number of Aboriginal young people under Youth Justice supervision on an average day has declined from 140 in 2015-16 to 81 in 2019-20 (AIHW, 2020a; DJCS, 2020).
* Family violence is not a traditional aspect of Aboriginal culture but has become a serious problem for the Aboriginal community. Family violence is both the primary driver of Victorian Aboriginal children entering out-of-home care (Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention & Legal Service Victoria, 2015), and is increasingly being identified as the primary reason why Aboriginal young people are accessing
* homelessness services (from 15.3 per cent of cases in 2011-12 to 34.9 per cent in 2018-19) (AIHW, 2019a).
* In Victoria, the number of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in out-of-home care has increased significantly from 2010 to 2019, especially for the birth to 12 years age group (DHHS, 2020a). Aboriginal children continue to be disproportionately represented in out-of-home care, but are increasingly likely to be placed in kinship care arrangements, where care is provided by the child’s relatives or members of a child’s social network or community who have been approved to provide accommodation and care. The recent implementation of Section 18 of the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 (Vic) now also enables the transfer of powers and functions for Aboriginal children on protection orders to Aboriginal organisations.

### The Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018-2023

The VAAF is a whole of Victorian government framework for working with Aboriginal Victorians, organisations and the wider community to drive action and improve outcomes, including for Aboriginal Victorian children and young people.

The VAAF aligns with and supports existing government strategies such as Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016–2026. It establishes measures, objectives and goals

across six domains:

* Children, Family and Home
* Learning and Skills
* Opportunity and Prosperity
* Health and Wellbeing
* Justice and Safety
* Culture and Country.

While each of these domains have an influence on Aboriginal learners, the Learning and Skills Domain has measures such as participation in Early Start Kindergarten; number of Aboriginal education workers; students’ levels of connection to school; number of schools teaching an Aboriginal language; and proportion of school leavers participating in education and training and/or employment.

The VAAF recognises that to improve outcomes for Aboriginal Victorians, government must enable self-determination through systemic and structural transformation in four areas:

* Prioritise culture
* Address trauma and support healing
* Address racism and promote cultural safety
* Transfer power and resources to communities.

The VAAF also requires that government reports on its efforts to enable self-determination in the annual Victorian Government Aboriginal Affairs Report (VGAAR).

## Children and young people

Data collected by the 2016 Census of Population and Housing (ABS, 2017) shows several distinct features of Victoria’s Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations. Firstly, the Aboriginal population as a whole is substantially younger, with those aged from birth to 24 years making up 52 per cent of the total, as compared to only 31 per cent for the non-Aboriginal population.[[3]](#footnote-3) Figure 1 divides Victorians into 10 year age brackets, showing the distinct distributions of the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations. There are several factors that could potentially be contributing to this age distribution, including Aboriginal children with one Aboriginal and one non-Aboriginal parent (ABS, 2013).

Figure 1 Victorian population, age distribution by Aboriginal status, 2016

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Aboriginal** | **Non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal status unknown** |
| **0-9 years** | 22.8% | 12.4% |
| **10-19 years** | 20.5% | 11.7% |
| **20-29 years** | 16.5% | 14.4% |
| **30-39 years** | 11.4% | 14.4% |
| **40-49 years** | 11.4% | 13.6% |
| **50-59 years** | 8.9% | 12.4% |
| **60-69 years** | 5.6% | 10.4% |
| **70-79 years** | 2.1% | 6.5% |
| **80-89 years** | 0.7% | 3.4% |
| **90-99 years** | 0.1% | 0.8% |
| **100 years and over** | 0.0% | 0.0% |

*Source: (ABS, 2017)*

Secondly, census data reveals that from 2006 to 2016, the under-25 Aboriginal cohort is growing at a much faster rate than the non-Aboriginal cohort, by 23.8 per cent between 2006 and 2011 and 20.1 per cent between 2011 and 2016, as compared to 5.7 per cent and 7.5 per cent. It is important to note that these increases are not entirely accounted for by births or migration but are likely contributed to by increasing Aboriginal participation in the census, as well as some young people identifying as Aboriginal in the census who were not identified as Aboriginal in previous collections. Figure 2 shows these population increases as captured by the census, as well as the population from 2016 to 2019 as estimated by the ABS. As shown, the estimated population is higher than the census figure, accounting for the fact that there are likely to be a significant number of Aboriginal young people who do not participate or identify as Aboriginal in the census.

Figure 2 Victorian population, birth to 24 years old

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Aboriginal** |  |  |  |  |  | **Non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal status unknown** |
| **2006** | 16,788 |  |  |  | **2006** | 1,607,485 |
| **2011** | 20,788 |  |  |  | **2011** | 1,698,453 |
| **2016** | 24,956 | 31,360 |  |  | **2016** | 1,826,080 |
| **2017** |  | 31,764 |  |  |  |  |
| **2018** |  | 32,233 |  |  |  |  |
| **2019** |  | 32,749 |  |  |  |  |

*Source: (ABS, 2017; 2019a)*

*Note: Population estimates from 2016 to 2019 are not official statistics, rather they are produced by the ABS based on information collected from the 2016 Census of Population and Housing, and include assumptions made about future levels of fertility, mortality, and migration.*

The geographic distribution of Victoria’s children and young people also shows differences between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cohorts. While 76 per cent of non-Aboriginal Victorians under the age of 25 were living in Greater Melbourne at the time of the last census, only 46.6 per cent of the Aboriginal cohort in this age bracket were in this geographic location. As shown in Figure 3 a far greater proportion of the young Aboriginal cohort were located in regional areas, particularly in regional centres including Ballarat, Bendigo, Geelong, Shepparton and Mildura.

Figure 3 Percentage of Victorian population (birth to 24 years) by LGA of residence, 2016

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **Aboriginal** | **Non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal status unknown** |
| **Greater Melbourne** | **Banyule (C)** | 0.01 | 0.02 |
|  | **Bayside (C)** | 0.00 | 0.02 |
|  | **Boroondara (C)** | 0.01 | 0.03 |
|  | **Brimbank (C)** | 0.02 | 0.03 |
|  | **Cardinia (S)** | 0.02 | 0.02 |
|  | **Casey (C)** | 0.04 | 0.06 |
|  | **Darebin (C)** | 0.02 | 0.02 |
|  | **Frankston (C)** | 0.03 | 0.02 |
|  | **Glen Eira (C)** | 0.00 | 0.02 |
|  | **Greater Dandenong (C)** | 0.01 | 0.03 |
|  | **Hobsons Bay (C)** | 0.01 | 0.01 |
|  | **Hume (C)** | 0.03 | 0.04 |
|  | **Kingston (C)** | 0.01 | 0.02 |
|  | **Knox (C)** | 0.02 | 0.03 |
|  | **Manningham (C)** | 0.00 | 0.02 |
|  | **Maribyrnong (C)** | 0.01 | 0.01 |
|  | **Maroondah (C)** | 0.01 | 0.02 |
|  | **Melbourne (C)** | 0.01 | 0.03 |
|  | **Melton (C)** | 0.03 | 0.03 |
|  | **Monash (C)** | 0.01 | 0.03 |
|  | **Moonee Valley (C)** | 0.01 | 0.02 |
|  | **Moreland (C)** | 0.01 | 0.03 |
|  | **Mornington Peninsula (S)** | 0.03 | 0.02 |
|  | **Nillumbik (S)** | 0.00 | 0.01 |
|  | **Port Phillip (C)** | 0.00 | 0.01 |
|  | **Stonnington (C)** | 0.00 | 0.01 |
|  | **Whitehorse (C)** | 0.01 | 0.03 |
|  | **Whittlesea (C)** | 0.04 | 0.04 |
|  | **Wyndham (C)** | 0.04 | 0.04 |
|  | **Yarra (C)** | 0.01 | 0.01 |
|  | **Yarra Ranges (S)** | 0.03 | 0.03 |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **Aboriginal** | **Non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal status unknown** |
| **Rest of Victoria** | **Alpine (S)** | 0.00 | 0.00 |
|  | **Ararat (RC)** | 0.00 | 0.00 |
|  | **Ballarat (C)** | 0.03 | 0.02 |
|  | **Bass Coast (S)** | 0.01 | 0.00 |
|  | **Baw Baw (S)** | 0.01 | 0.01 |
|  | **Benalla (RC)** | 0.00 | 0.00 |
|  | **Buloke (S)** | 0.00 | 0.00 |
|  | **Campaspe (S)** | 0.02 | 0.01 |
|  | **Central Goldfields (S)** | 0.00 | 0.00 |
|  | **Colac-Otway (S)** | 0.01 | 0.00 |
|  | **Corangamite (S)** | 0.00 | 0.00 |
|  | **East Gippsland (S)** | 0.03 | 0.01 |
|  | **Gannawarra (S)** | 0.00 | 0.00 |
|  | **Glenelg (S)** | 0.01 | 0.00 |
|  | **Golden Plains (S)** | 0.00 | 0.00 |
|  | **Greater Bendigo (C)** | 0.04 | 0.02 |
|  | **Greater Geelong (C)** | 0.05 | 0.04 |
|  | **Greater Shepparton (C)** | 0.05 | 0.01 |
|  | **Hepburn (S)** | 0.00 | 0.00 |
|  | **Hindmarsh (S)** | 0.00 | 0.00 |
|  | **Horsham (RC)** | 0.01 | 0.00 |
|  | **Indigo (S)** | 0.00 | 0.00 |
|  | **Latrobe (C)** | 0.03 | 0.01 |
|  | **Loddon (S)** | 0.00 | 0.00 |
|  | **Macedon Ranges (S)** | 0.01 | 0.01 |
|  | **Mansfield (S)** | 0.00 | 0.00 |
|  | **Mildura (RC)** | 0.05 | 0.01 |
|  | **Mitchell (S)** | 0.02 | 0.01 |
|  | **Moira (S)** | 0.01 | 0.00 |
|  | **Moorabool (S)** | 0.01 | 0.01 |
|  | **Mount Alexander (S)** | 0.00 | 0.00 |
|  | **Moyne (S)** | 0.00 | 0.00 |
|  | **Murrindindi (S)** | 0.00 | 0.00 |
|  | **Northern Grampians (S)** | 0.00 | 0.00 |
|  | **Pyrenees (S)** | 0.00 | 0.00 |
|  | **Queenscliffe (B)** | 0.00 | 0.00 |
|  | **South Gippsland (S)** | 0.01 | 0.00 |
|  | **Southern Grampians (S)** | 0.01 | 0.00 |
|  | **Strathbogie (S)** | 0.00 | 0.00 |
|  | **Surf Coast (S)** | 0.00 | 0.00 |
|  | **Swan Hill (RC)** | 0.02 | 0.00 |
|  | **Towong (S)** | 0.00 | 0.00 |
|  | **Wangaratta (RC)** | 0.01 | 0.00 |
|  | **Warrnambool (C)** | 0.01 | 0.01 |
|  | **Wellington (S)** | 0.01 | 0.01 |
|  | **West Wimmera (S)** | 0.00 | 0.00 |
|  | **Wodonga (C)** | 0.02 | 0.01 |
|  | **Yarriambiack (S)** | 0.00 | 0.00 |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
|  | **Unincorporated Vic** | 0.00 | 0.00 |
|  | **No usual address (Vic.)** | 0.00 | 0.00 |

*Source: (ABS, 2017)*

## Kinship, family structure, and sources of support

The concept of family in Aboriginal culture can include more extensive and complex kinship relations and responsibilities than those of the nuclear family structure seen in European cultures. These kinship structures are the basis of many Aboriginal cultural norms and rules, including principles of sharing and obligations to the community (Dudgeon, Bray, D’Costa, & Walker, 2017).

These different understandings of family can have implications for Aboriginal people’s contact with government services and the Australian legal system. Historically, the government provision of housing to Aboriginal families has been problematic, with programs designed to accommodate nuclear families, locating parents and children away from their wider kinship groups, and prohibiting the sharing of houses (Marsden, 2018). The Family Law Act 1975 (Cth) is also premised on European family structure norms (Davies & Dikstein, 1997), although, as of 2006, an amendment was included to specify that ‘the court must have regard to any kinship obligations, and child rearing practices, of the child’s Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander culture’ (Family Law Act 1975 (Cth) s. 61F).

Concepts of family also have implications for government data collection, which may not adequately capture information about the contexts in which Aboriginal children and young people are growing up. In particular, many Aboriginal cultures have a collective approach to child raising, where care is the shared responsibility of the extended kinship group or whole community rather than just the parent dyad. Research with Aboriginal communities has found advantages to this approach, including strong support networks for parents and children, provision of learning opportunities and models of positive behaviour, and enabling of supervision and safety for children while facilitating their independence (Lohaur, Butera, & Kennedy, 2014). This approach, however, is often misunderstood by non-Aboriginal people or perceived to conflict with mainstream beliefs about parenting.

Bearing these limitations in mind, available data does provide some relevant informationabout family structure as pertaining to Aboriginal families in Victoria. 2016 Census data capturing the number of families per Victorian household indicates only small differences between those with and without an Aboriginal person or people, with few households having two or more families in either case (see Figure 4). Data also shows that Aboriginal mothers are more likely than other Victorian mothers to be teenagers (9 per cent of births as compared to 1.1 percent, see Figure 27), and that they are more likely to be single parents (AIHW, 2017a). These two factors may affect the readiness and skills of some first-time parents and could potentially contribute to more challenging home environments for children for reasons such as financial stress.

Figure 4 Families per household (Victorian households with children), 2016

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Households with an Aboriginal person(s)** | **Other households** |
| **One family household** | 95.6% | 97.2% |
| **Two or more family household** | 4.4% | 2.8% |

*Source: (ABS, 2017)*

For Aboriginal Victorians, family and community are a crucial source of support. Results from the 2014-15 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) conducted by the ABS showed that 91.8 per cent of Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 years and older were able to get support in times of crisis from outside their immediate household. The most frequently available sources of support were family members (reported by 78.9 per cent) or friends (70 per cent), followed by neighbours (27.1 per cent), work colleagues (25.4 per cent) and community organisations (20.3 per cent). Less commonly, health, legal or financial professionals (15.2 per cent) and local council or other government services (10.5 per cent) were identified as a source of support.

#### Strong Brother, Strong Sister

Strong Brother, Strong Sister is a 100 per cent Aboriginal owned and run youth mentoring organisation. Strong Brother, Strong Sister is extremely passionate. It’s the fire of our old people that burns brightly in our hearts, a partnership encompassing 80,000 years of Aboriginal leadership, knowledge and culture that has been passed down providing platforms of culturally safe spaces to nurture excellence amongst Aboriginal communities.

Strong Brother, Strong Sister is a culturally appropriate safe place for Aboriginal young people to access and thrive. The structure and programs within the space guide, mentor and empower Aboriginal young people to achieve excellence. The outcomes from these programs not only guide, mentor and empower Aboriginal young people, they also improve Aboriginal young people’s health and wellbeing.

Strong Brother, Strong Sister’s culturally safe program offers one-on-one mentoring with a holistic approach to achieve only the best outcomes for Aboriginal young people aged four to 26 years old.

Across Victoria, Strong Brother, Strong Sister has been able to support Aboriginal young people, including:

* 42 returning to school
* 23 returning safely back to home and family from out-of-home care
* 19 facing homelessness, who have now achieved excellent outcomes, engaging with work or school and are no longer homeless
* 106 with mental health related issues
* 55 facing family violence
* 26 with employment and training
* 89 young women with health/relationship guidance
* seven young people from remote communities
* 63 students with mentoring in school.

Strong Brother, Strong Sister has also worked with over 573 Aboriginal young people, providing them with group workshops and mentoring. Four young people who have come through the one-on-one mentoring program are now employed full time as trainee Aboriginal mentors for the organisation.

#### Department of Health and Human Services — Parenting Services for Aboriginal Families

**Strengthening Parent Support Program (SPSP)**

The Strengthening Parent Support Program (SPSP) is for parents of children from birth to 18 years with a disability or developmental delay. The program aims to support parents in their parenting role through peer support groups, individual support from a qualified coordinator and education/information sessions.

SPSP is delivered by 12 community service organisations in regional and metropolitan areas of Victoria. In 2019, 124 Aboriginal parents participated in SPSP either in a group or through individual support. Aboriginal parents represented five per cent of all parents accessing SPSP in 2019.

**Regional Parenting Services**

Regional Parenting Services provides family counselling and parenting education and support groups in nine sites across the state. Each site is funded to provide services to approximately 960 families per annum. The targets include Aboriginal families and families from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

**Koorie Supported Playgroups**

Koorie Supported Playgroups are provided by three Aboriginal organisations and delivered in metropolitan Melbourne and rural Victoria. Koorie Supported Playgroups connect families with young children to support and culture. Koorie Supported Playgroups work with Aboriginal Maternal and Child Health Services to provide Aboriginal families with access to support in the critical early years of their child’s development. Facilitators work with parents to improve the quality of the early home learning environment to promote children’s wellbeing and development.

In 2019, 229 children aged birth to five years participated in Koorie Supported Playgroups and 668 Aboriginal children participated in mainstream Supported Playgroups, representation around eight per cent of all Victorian children participating in Supported Playgroups.

### Case Study

At our playgroup in rural Victoria a mother began attending regularly with her daughter. The mother expressed concerns that her daughter had social difficulties and did not easily engage with other children.

During the first few sessions the child sat by her mother’s side and observed other children playing together but didn’t participate.

The Koorie Supported Playgroup facilitator worked with the mother and child taking small steps each session to help the child engage with the play-based learning activities and slowly supporting the child to firstly engage with one other child before starting to play with a small group of children in most sessions.

The mother was also supported to form relationships with the other parents and began to talk more openly with them. With continued slow steps combined with the help and support provided by the facilitator and other families, the mother is now more confident and excited to see her daughter playing happily with the other children. The child is confidently engaging in the play-based learning activities and interacting positively with her peers.

## Culture and community

A strong connection to culture and sense of Aboriginal identity can be a source of

strength and resilience for children and young people, especially those facing adversities,and as for other First Nations who have experienced colonisation, research has found that maintaining connections to culture is associated with more positive physical and mental health, educational attainment, and employment outcomes (Colquhoun & Dockery, 2012; Dockery, 2010; Dudgeon, Bray, D’Costa, & Walker, 2017).

Historically, Aboriginal children and young people have been subjected to aggressive government policies and actions that have devalued their cultural heritage and aimed to assimilate them into a white Australian culture. These attacks have included the forcedremoval of children from their families and communities, prevention of speaking Aboriginal languages on missions and in schools, and refusal to acknowledge the Aboriginal identityand status of children and young people of mixed Aboriginal–European decent (Broome, 2015; McCalman & Smith, 2016). As a result, generations of Aboriginal children have been denied the opportunity to learn their culture, and many of Australia’s languages have been lost (McConvell, Marmion, & McNicol, 2005; Nettle & Romaine, 2000). The consequences of these actions still affect Aboriginal communities, and many feel that an assimilationist nation-building agenda continues to dismiss their culture, community, and relationship with the land (Short, 2010).

For these reasons, the strengthening and reclamation of culture is integral to Aboriginal self-determination and the overcoming of the legacy of colonisation (Dudgeon, Bray, D’Costa, & Walker, 2017). The Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 (Vic) acknowledges the distinct rights of Victorian Aboriginal people to maintain their culture, language, and kinship ties, and relationship with the land and waters with which they have a traditional connection.

#### COVID-19 Aboriginal Community Taskforce

The COVID-19 Aboriginal Community Taskforce was established by the Victorian Government to support a comprehensive, coordinated and culturally safe whole-of-government response to COVID-19 impacts on Aboriginal Victorians. The Taskforce membership includes representatives from statewide ACCOs, in addition to key community stakeholders and senior staff from the Victorian Public Service.

Actions coming out of the Taskforce to support Aboriginal Victorian children include significant investments in additional frontline family and care services and outreach support for remote learners.

Through the Taskforce, the Victorian Government is working in partnership with ACCOs to lead the development of an Aboriginal data dashboard to track and monitor the impacts of COVID-19 on Aboriginal communities. The dashboard is envisaged to include both government and ACCO data to generate a comprehensive understanding of the impacts of the pandemic on Aboriginal communities and is expected to be used as a basis for shared decision making in COVID-19 response efforts.

### Cultural identification and participation

In 2014-15, data collected through the NATSISS found that 44 per cent of Aboriginal Victorians aged three to 24 years identified with a clan, tribal or language group.

This proportion was higher for older age groups (52 per cent for those aged 13 to 24,

as compared to 35.3 per cent for those aged three to 12). Similarly, 49.2 per cent recognised an area as traditional homelands or Country, living or visiting there, with those aged 13 to 24 (58 per cent) more likely to recognise homelands than those aged three to 12 (39.5 per cent).

Of young Aboriginal Victorian’s (aged three to 24), 53.2 per cent had participated in cultural events, ceremonies, or organisations, and 59 per cent had participated in cultural activities in the 12 months prior to the 2014-15 NATSISS. Aboriginal children (aged three to 12) were most likely to learn cultural activities from their parents

(76.3 per cent), and many also learned at school (19 per cent). Other family, community members and Elders, and volunteer organisations or community groups were also reported to be sources of cultural education. Responses to the 2014-15 NATSISS also indicated that around two percent of Aboriginal Victorians aged three to 24 spoke an Aboriginal language, but that an additional 15.7 per cent had knowledge of Aboriginal words, and that 7.7 per cent in this age group were learning an Aboriginal language. Of those learning a language, school was the most common place to learn (46.1 per cent). Many were also learning from their parents (34.1 per cent) or other relatives (20.7 per cent).

Figure 5 Victorian Aboriginal children and young people (aged three to 24) who participated in cultural events, ceremonies, or organisations in the past 12 months, 2014-15

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| All cultural events, ceremonies or organisations | 53.2% |
| NAIDOC week activities | 32.9% |
| Arts, crafts, music or dance festivals | 25.0% |
| Sports carnivals | 19.1% |
| Involved with an Aboriginal organisation | 17.5% |
| Sorry Business/ funerals | 14.6% |
| Other ceremonies | 12.3% |

*Source: (ABS, 2016a)*

*Note: Sorry Business refers to the period of cultural practices following the death of a community member*

Figure 6 Victorian Aboriginal children and young people (aged three to 24) who participated in cultural activities in the past 12 months, 2014-15

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **All cultural activities** | 59.0% |
| **Fishing** | 45.0% |
| **Aboriginal arts and crafts** | 23.1% |
| **Performing Aboriginal music** | 12.0% |
| **Gathering wild plants or berries** | 10.2% |
| **Writing or telling Aboriginal stories** | 10.1% |
| **Hunting** | 7.4% |

*Source: (ABS, 2016a)*

#### VACCA Art Mentoring Program

VACCA’s Art Mentoring Program has been running since 2014. Developed to support Aboriginal young people aged 15 to 21 with a passion and interest in art, the participants are mentored by established Aboriginal artists Maree Clarke and Peter Waples-Crowe. The program runs for seven months and in this time the young artists are mentored and develop a body of work to showcase at the end-of-program exhibition, receiving all money from the sale of their art.

*“I feel connected to my tribe and my culture when I paint because a lot of people in my family do it.”*

*Art Mentoring Program participant, 2018*

Throughout the program the young artists learn cultural knowledge and connections

and are introduced to Victorian Aboriginal art traditions and contemporary practice.

The program has evolved to include a partnership with Victoria University’s Moondani Balluk Unit, supporting the young artists to complete modules towards Certificate I in General education. Young people who complete the program are encouraged to join

Narrun Yana Art Collective which supports young artists to generate an income from

their art and cultural practice.

Since its inception, 30 young people have taken part in the Art Mentoring Program. Past participants have gone on to create an income from their artwork through art commissions and group exhibitions. It has become an important program at VACCA supporting young people to connect culturally and learn about themselves and the potential of what they can achieve.

*“I see art as part of my culture and identity.”*

*Art Mentoring Program participant, 2019*

#### Aboriginal Youth Mentoring Program

The Victorian Government allocated $2.85 million over five years (2016-17 to 2020-21) for the Aboriginal Youth Mentoring Program with a focus on supporting young people’s: social and emotional wellbeing; individual talents and leadership; identity, culture and faith; Youth Justice and crime prevention; education, training and employment; and out-of-home care.

Through this program five Aboriginal organisations have designed and delivered tailored mentoring activities to meet the needs of young people in their local communities:

* Aboriginal Wellness Foundation’s Warran Warran Maar (Boy to Man) mentoring program supporting young people in western metropolitan Melbourne
* Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative’s Yanda Together mentoring program supporting young women in Shepparton
* Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation’s Karreeta Koornong Maar mentoring program supporting young people aged 14 to 17 years in Heywood/Portland
* Mallee District Aboriginal Service mentoring program focusing on the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal young people in Swan Hill
* Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Cooperative mentoring program supporting young people aged 12 to 18 years in Bairnsdale with a safe space to gather and participate in cultural learning.

Over 270 Aboriginal young people have been actively engaged with their community through activities including: guidance and support around study; mental health and wellbeing; cultural activities such as camps, workshops and cultural site visits; and facilitating connections with peers, community members, Elders and leaders.

#### Warran Warran Maar (Aboriginal Wellness Foundation)

**Story 1**

A young man from the Yorta Yorta Wolithiga Barkindji people is one of the most committed participants, rarely missing any of the fortnightly cultural mentoring sessions or cultural camps. Over the three-year journey in Warran Warran Maar, he has become deeply connected to his cultural journey and actively shares knowledge learnt with the broader Foundation community.

Over his final year in Warran Warran Maar, the young man has gone beyond all expectations and is facilitating the Aboriginal Wellness Foundation’s (AWF) little kids’ cultural group by teaching traditional dance, song and games. In addition to this, over the past six months he has stepped into a role where he is now the lead mentor for traditional song and dance, representing AWF at numerous events, functions and corroborees, a role that he does not take lightly.

With his leadership in the AWF now being witnessed within the broader community, the young man has been able to take knowledge learnt over his three year journey back to community in Mildura to support with cultural events and to inspire the local younger generation to connect to their culture. This was particularly evident during NAIDOC week 2019, when he led the development of three new dances with a group of local youth which they then performed at a NAIDOC event.

As a result of the above, the young man will be offered a casual cultural mentor role at the AWF.

**Story 2**

The person in this story is a 15-year-old Yorta Yorta young man currently in year two of the Warran Warran Maar Program. He joined the Aboriginal Wellness Foundation (AWF) at the beginning of 2018 and had extremely limited cultural mentors, community connection or exposure to culture.

This was evident at the first two Warran Warran Maar camps, where he refused to participate in the process of painting up and dancing in the corroboree, completely separating himself, closing off and retreating to his tent.

After close mentoring from Warran Warran Maar cultural mentors throughout his initial six months in the program, despite being ‘shame’ and embarrassed, deep down the young man truly did want to participate in cultural dance and other cultural activities, he just needed to do it in his own time.

Almost two years down the track, he is now the first to put a lap lap on and paint up at any opportunity he gets. Not only for AWF corroborees, but also for public cultural performances, with the major highlight being his acceptance of the opportunity to dance representing the AWF at the Dream Time at the G game, in front of a crowd of over 70,000 people.

This young man’s confidence in public speaking, maturity and ability to express himself proudly as an Aboriginal young man has grown rapidly over the past two years. Coming from his own early life challenges, we are grateful to have him involved and look forward to sharing his growth in the years to come.

#### Gunditjmara Aboriginal Cooperative — Koornong Camp

The Gunditjmara Aboriginal Cooperative facilitated the Koornong Camp, which took

place in April 2019 at Southcombe Park, Port Fairy. The camp was organised by Gunditjmara Aboriginal Cooperative’s previous Prevention and Early Intervention Coordinator, Belinda Payne.

There were 13 Aboriginal young people who participated in the camp who were aged from 12 to 21 years of age. There was a supervision ratio of one leader to every four participants. The leaders who attended the camp were Danny Pearson, Cody Chatfield, Maryanne Purcell and Ken Brown. Transport to the Koornong Camp for participants was provided by Gunditjmara, utilising the community bus and participants could also make their own way to the camp if they wished.

Several activities took place at Koornong Camp, such as making message sticks, weaving, cultural activities and recreational activities. Yaraan Bundle spoke with the young people about the cultural significance of possum skin cloaks and Uncle Rob Lowe spoke with the young people about growing up on Framlingham Mission. There were also several health education programs that took place over the course of the camp that focused on healthy eating, smoking cessation, alcohol and other drugs, as well as the Deadly Sexy health promotion which focuses specifically on sexual health and healthy relationships.

Gunditjmara has received a lot of positive feedback from the Aboriginal young people who participated in the camp, such as connecting with culture, learning about different health programs and connecting with and developing pro-social relationships with other Aboriginal young people in community.

#### Aboriginal languages in education

*“Language is culture”*

*Student.*

Language is central to the expression and celebration of culture. The initial and ongoing impacts of colonisation, and past government policies and practices, affected the use of all 38 Victorian Aboriginal languages which are currently undergoing reclamation and revival.

The Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018-23 includes a commitment to support

the preservation, promotion and practice of culture and languages through investment in Aboriginal language and culture revitalisation programs. Increasing the provision of languages programs for children and young people is essential to realising this commitment.

To support community efforts and language learning, Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026 includes an action to increase the number of Aboriginal language programs in schools and kindergartens. The Victorian Curriculum provides content descriptions and achievement standards from Foundation to Year 10 for teaching Victorian Aboriginal Languages, which means schools can provide an Aboriginal language program to meet their requirement to teach a language other than English. In 2019, 2,278 Victorian students studied an Aboriginal language across 20 government schools, covering a range of languages including Dhudhuroa (in conjunction with Murrinhpatha), Barkindji-Marwara, Yorta Yorta, Dhauwurd Wurrung, Woiwurrung, Wemba Wemba, and Gunai/Kurnai. Last year, six students completed Year 12 Aboriginal language study under the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) Indigenous Languages of Victoria: Revival and Reclamation study design.

The year 2019 was declared by the United Nations to be the International Year of Indigenous Languages and was a significant year for Aboriginal languages education in Victoria. It saw the commencement of the Early Childhood Language Program, which provides funding to Victorian kindergartens to deliver language programs, including 18 kindergartens teaching Aboriginal languages. And in December 2019, a cohort of 11 Aboriginal language workers graduated from the Certificate III in Learning an Endangered Aboriginal Language delivered by the Victorian School of Languages. This was the first time the course had been offered in Victoria and was part of the Aboriginal Languages Training Initiative. These graduates have progressed to the Certificate IV in Teaching an Endangered Aboriginal Language through Swinburne University of Technology in 2020 with a view to increasing the number of trained Aboriginal language instructors available to teach language in schools and kindergartens. As the custodians of language, it is essential that Aboriginal communities drive language reclamation and education. In all of its Aboriginal language initiatives, the Department of Education and Training partners with the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI) and the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL) to ensure that appropriate community protocols around the teaching and learning of languages are observed.

Due to the success of the Year of Indigenous Languages and the sustained commitment required to support communities to restore and revitalise language for future generations, the United Nations has declared 2022-2032 to be the International Decade of Indigenous Languages. The coming 10 years will see Victoria take its place as part of a global movement toward the reclamation, revival, and celebration of First Nations Languages across the world. These activities will be a critical part in improving outcomes for Aboriginal people, and our journey towards reconciliation.

**VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS FRAMEWORK Goal 19: Aboriginal culture and language are supported and celebrated**

Objective 19.1:

Support the preservation, promotion and practice of culture and languages

Past government policies of dispossession and assimilation led to loss of Aboriginal cultural practice and languages. Despite this, the strength and resilience of Aboriginal Victorians has helped to preserve cultural practices and languages, which continue to be practised and passed onto future generations.

Connectedness to culture and community strengthens individual and collective identities, and promotes self-esteem, resilience and improved outcomes for Aboriginal people. While cultural identity is central to the lives of Aboriginal Victorians, all Victorians should celebrate and take pride in Aboriginal culture and language.

### Self-determination and youth voice

Self-determination concerns the right of the Aboriginal community to make decisions on matters that affect Aboriginal people, and exercise choice over how their social, cultural and economic needs are met. The rights to self-determination for all peoples are firmly established under international agreements, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966a), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966b), and the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), all of which state that ‘All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development’.

These principals are also embedded in Victorian government legislation, policy and initiatives, such as the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 (Vic), that recognises the importance of self-management and self-determination in decisions that concern the Aboriginal community, families and children. The preparations for treaty negotiations currently being made in partnership by the Victorian Government and First Peoples’ Assembly of Victoria, are a landmark step in advancing self-determination and redefining the relationships between the State, Aboriginal Victorians and non-Aboriginal Victorians.

The self-determination of communities is not only an issue of fundamental rights, but is known to be linked to their social and health outcomes, and to whether government policies and services succeed or fail in their implementation (Phillips, 2015; Cornell, 2006). It is also important for young people in particular to have a sense of agency and feel that they have choices and control over the direction their life takes. The development of government policies and programs benefits from incorporating principles of youth voice and co-design as mechanisms for delivering programs and services aligned to the needs and aspirations of young people. In this respect, supporting the involvement of Aboriginal young people in the design and delivery of programs and services helps better serve and engage with this cohort. Research has found that the feelings of disempowerment often experienced by Aboriginal young people, and those of other colonised First Nations, affect both their wellbeing and ability to pursue their goals, and have been linked to the increased risk of suicide experienced by some communities (Lawson-Te Aho & Liu, 2010; Chandler & Lalonde, 1998).

In the 2014-15 NATSISS, only around half (54.9 per cent) of Aboriginal Victorian people aged 15 to 24 reported feeling able to have a say within their community on important issues at least some of the time, while even fewer (34.5 per cent) felt able to have a say most or all of the time.

#### The First Peoples’ Assembly of Victoria and Treaty

Following years of advocacy from Victoria’s Aboriginal leaders and community, the

First Peoples’ Assembly of Victoria was established in December 2019 for the purpose of working with the government of Victoria to create a Treaty Negotiation Framework, establishing the rules and processes by which a Treaty or Treaties will be negotiated.

The First Peoples’ Assembly of Victoria is the first body of its kind in Australia, with 21 representatives elected through a statewide Aboriginal community vote, and 10 representatives appointed by Traditional Owner Corporations. The Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation, having expressed reservations about the process, have not

as yet appointed a representative.

The work of the Assembly will involve identifying the laws, policies, and rights that will

need to be addressed by Treaty negotiations. It also includes the establishment of

an independent Treaty Authority to mediate Treaty negotiations, an Elders Voice to

provide cultural guidance to the Assembly, and a self-determination fund to support

the participation of Aboriginal communities in the Treaty negotiation process.

The First Peoples’ Assembly has called upon the Victorian Government to establish

a Truth Commission, to investigate and document historic injustices against the

Aboriginal community and their impact, with terms of reference and processes

currently in development.

The Assembly has also been instrumental in the development of the Victorian

Government’s $10 million redress scheme for Stolen Generation survivors, announced

in March 2020, which will include a range of measures to try and address the trauma

caused by the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families.

#### Koorie Youth Council

Koorie Youth Council (KYC) is an organisation that advocates to advance the rights of Aboriginal young people. Currently auspiced by the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic), KYC was first established in 2003 as a voluntary state-wide network of Victorian Aboriginal young people and provides policy advice in relation to their needs and issues. The KYC is guided by an executive of 15 Aboriginal people, aged 16 to 27 years, and their network from across Victoria.

The KYC is a member of the Aboriginal Executive Council (AEC), which comprises the

heads of 11 peak and statewide Aboriginal organisations, and which was established in 2017 to provide sector-specific advice on whole-of-government self-determination reform. Other work of the KYC includes:

#### Annual Koorie Youth Summit

The KYC has hosted the Koorie Youth Summit since 2014. This is the largest gathering in Victoria created for and by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people aged 18 to 28 years. This event is a culturally safe space for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people from around the state to connect with each other, discuss important issues and to learn, share and celebrate culture as proud First Nations peoples. More information about the 2019 summit is included below.

#### Marram Nganyin (We are strong) — Youth mentoring program

Marram Nganyin is a youth mentoring program for Aboriginal young people aged 12-25 years old. The program is run by Aboriginal organisations which deliver the program with support from the KYC and Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic). Marram Nganyin translates to ‘we are strong’ in language provided by the Wurundjeri People.

#### Ngaga-dji (Hear Me) — Young voices creating change for justice

Ngaga-dji captures the voices and experiences of Aboriginal children in Victoria’s Youth Justice system. These stories have been used to develop recommendations regarding the services and support systems available to Aboriginal young people, to promote Aboriginal ownership of community infrastructure and gathering places, and successfully advocate for raising the age of leaving care from 18 to 21. More information about the Ngaga-dji project and report is included in the Criminal justice section below.

#### The Aboriginal Treaty Working Group

The Aboriginal Treaty Working Group was established in July 2016 to bring community voices into the heart of Victoria’s treaty process. The KYC was a member of this Working Group. In March 2018, following two years of broad and inclusive engagement with the Aboriginal community, the Aboriginal Treaty Working Group presented the Final Report on the Design of the Aboriginal Representative Body (Aboriginal Treaty Working Group, 2018) to the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and the Victorian Treaty Advancement Commissioner, setting the direction for the future work of the Victorian Treaty Advancement Commission.

*The KYC’s participation in the AEC and operational costs are supported with four years of funding provided through the Victorian 2017/18 State Budget.*

#### Koorie Youth Summit 2019

The 2019 Koorie Youth Summit brought 115 Aboriginal young people from across Victoria together to connect, to be inspired and to be empowered. The Summit provided a platform where ideas designed to create change could be heard by government and community. The culture, experiences and achievements of our young people were celebrated, and their capabilities and enthusiasm to make a positive impact were enhanced.

The plains and wetlands of the Wada Wurrung and Wurundjeri provided perfect surroundings for this sixth Koorie Youth Summit, the first to move outside Melbourne. Time and space were made to reflect on the cultural loads, responsibilities and trauma that play a crucial role in how the Australian landscape is navigated by an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young person. The Koorie Youth Summit provided a platform for our young people to ‘press pause’, relax and heal if needed. The 2019 program reflected this by stretching out the times for workshops and panels, and having each activity available as an open session throughout the Summit. Many of the exercises, such as the Wayapa Wuurrk practice and basket weaving, helped to facilitate healing, calm the mind and engage with others, to truly build that connection with culture and be empowered.

A major action to come out of the 2019 Koorie Youth Summit was the delivery of a Treaty forum for young people to discuss, explore and understand the finer mechanics involved in Treaty negotiations. Future years will also see a mini Summit delivered for Koorie young people under the age of 18. A truth telling report focusing on kinship will also be developed, looking at the current state of DHHS and its processes with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

The 2019 Koorie Youth Summit finished on a high note with the Sunday Festival. Music and dance are opportunities for us to show our talents, celebrate together and laugh with each other. It gives the opportunity for us as young people to heal together. Presented by the amazing Neil Morris through his company STILL HERE, we were treated to a music line-up of some of the deadliest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander musicians in Victoria. It provided the perfect backdrop for the Koorie Youth Summit lunchtime expo, that showcased a range of organisations and the work they do. This was a great platform to spark the interest of our young people in finding out about the work these organisations do.

#### Aboriginal Community Infrastructure Program

The Aboriginal Community Infrastructure Program is a grants program which enables Aboriginal organisations to build new infrastructure or to repair, refurbish or expand existing infrastructure to meet the emerging needs of Aboriginal Victorians (Aboriginal Victoria, 2019). The program will provide $14.7 million of investment over four years, with a focus on improving:

* the delivery of services to communities
* cultural connectedness and community safety
* health and wellbeing of communities
* education and economic participation opportunities for communities.

Grants are available to Aboriginal organisations under three categories:

repairs and minor works:

* business cases for redevelopment, expansion or to build new facilities
* capital works and upgrades.

There have been three funding rounds since the program opened in 2018, with a total

of $11.7 million in grant funding awarded to Aboriginal organisations to undertake community infrastructure projects of their own design. The Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPC) and Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP)

jointly administer the ACIP.

Listed below are some of the projects that directly relate to Aboriginal children and

young people.

**Round 1 - 2017/18**

Bubup Wilam for Early Learning: Aboriginal Child and Family Centre received

funds for facility upgrades which created better access to community space,

training rooms, the library and dining room space with the expansion of breakaway space for specialist learning.

Worawa Aboriginal College received funds for the installation of an electrical

backup generator, with switchboard and related works to resolve ongoing power

issues at the College.

VACCA received funds to undertake a business case to understand the viability

of implementing a ‘foyer model’ service to provide disadvantaged young people

with secure accommodation, case management, education and training.

Njernda Aboriginal Corporation received funds to refurbish and upgrade the

Berrimba Child Care Centre to ensure staff, children and their parents are safe.

Works included fencing, yard works, sandpit, installation of a shade sail, flagpole

and turf, CCTV, development of a sensory playground/mud kitchen, roofing repairs,

and replacement of water-damaged plasterboard throughout the facility.

**Round 2 - 2018/19**

Bubup Wilam for Early Learning: Aboriginal Child and Family Centre received funds for stage two of its facility upgrades, which created enhanced accessible, culturally appropriate community spaces and training facilities for Aboriginal students, families and the community with the creation of a library and dining room inclusive of extra break away space for specialist learning.

VACCA received funds to undertake structural work across its offices in order to improve and optimise the existing facility layout and workplace use to accommodate increased staff and usability for increased client work resulting from the Victorian Government’s Roadmap for Reform program.

Nairm Marr Djambana (Frankston Gathering Place) received funds to develop a culturally safe, welcoming and accessible outdoor area for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to gather, connect and heal including a child-safe natural playground, sports and activity area, veggie beds and cultural art.

VACSAL received funds to undertake a feasibility study for the expansion of its Torquay Family Support Facility to: offer programs/activities to strengthen parenting skills and cultural pride and identity; host holiday/recreation camps, especially for the most vulnerable children; offer flexible family style accommodation; provide outdoor activities and leadership programs; and to provide opportunities to generate sustainable income and self-determination.

## Disadvantage and vulnerability

### Socioeconomic status

Socioeconomic status not only refers to an individual’s or family’s income and wealth, but also to their social position, as related to occupational status, access to resources such as education, and other facets of life associated with privilege or disadvantage. While Australia has better intergenerational socioeconomic mobility than some other developed countries, such as the United States, it remains a fact that the advantaged or disadvantaged status of parents is to a large extent predictive of outcomes for their children (Murray, Clarke, Mendolia, & Siminski, 2018). For example, children of parents receiving government welfare payments (an indicator of disadvantage), are themselves more likely to be welfare recipients as young adults (Cobb-Clark, Dahmann, Salamanca, & Zhu, 2017).

These intergenerational aspects of socioeconomic status operate through several mechanisms. Higher socioeconomic status families are able to make greater financial investments in all stages of their children’s education, providing a foundation for other positive outcomes (OECD, 2017). Later in life, higher socioeconomic status parents are also more likely to continue financially supporting their adult children with gifts, and

other transfers of wealth and property (Huang, Perales, & Western, 2018). Importantly, however, higher socioeconomic status also affords greater access to non-material resources, such as social networks and cultural capital, that facilitate their children’s educational and employment success (Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009). Higher socioeconomic status parents also typically have high aspirations for their children, which influences the goals young people set for themselves, such as pursuing post-school education and higher status occupations (OECD, 2013; von Otter, 2014).

For many Aboriginal families the opportunity to accumulate wealth and social capital over generations has been prevented by the dispossession of lands, forced separation of families, and the history of exploitation and economic exclusion. As a result, Aboriginal people experience socioeconomic disadvantage at much higher rates than the non-Aboriginal population, with a relatively high proportion relying on government pensions or allowances as their main source of personal income (AIHW, 2017b).

Socioeconomic status is also closely interrelated with the determinants of health, and social and emotional wellbeing (AIHW, 2016b; State of Victoria, 2019), as well as housing insecurity, disability, and educational outcomes, as is discussed in subsequent sections of this report. Data from the 2016 Census of Population and Housing shows that not all Victorian Aboriginal households have low income, but that they are on average more likely to be in lower income brackets than non-Aboriginal households (ABS, 2017). As a consequence, Aboriginal families are at higher risk of experiencing food insecurity (Markwick, Ansari, Sullivan, & McNeil, 2014), being disconnected or restricted from utilities (Bedggood, et al., 2017), and having financial barriers to accessing housing and services.

The Index of Relative Socioeconomic Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD) is a measure developed by the ABS that ranks areas in Australia into five categories, from most disadvantaged to advantaged, based on information captured by the Census of Population and Housing. This data shows that at the time of the 2016 Census a much higher proportion of Aboriginal Victorians were living in areas categorised as being more disadvantaged.

Figure 7 Proportion of persons by Index of Relative Socioeconomic Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD), Victoria, 2016

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Aboriginal** | **Non-Aboriginal** |
| **1 (Most disadvantaged)** | 35% | 16% |
| **2** | 25% | 18% |
| **3** | 20% | 21% |
| **4** | 13% | 24% |
| **5 (Most advantaged)** | 8% | 21% |
|  | 100% | 100% |

*Source: (ABS, 2017)*

**VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS FRAMEWORK Goal 8: Aboriginal workers achieve wealth equality**

Objective 8.1: Increase Aboriginal household income in line with the Victorian median

Objective 8.2: Increase Aboriginal home ownership in line with the Victorian average

Objective 8.3: Increase Aboriginal business ownership and support Aboriginal entrepreneurs

Raising Aboriginal household income supports personal and collective agency and enables Aboriginal Victorians to have equal access to opportunities. Home ownership is an aspiration held by many Aboriginal Victorians. Among other benefits, home ownership enables Aboriginal Victorians to obtain financial gain from the intergenerational transfer of wealth.

### Housing and homelessness

Housing insecurity and homelessness are major issues facing the Victorian Aboriginal community. As identified by Aboriginal Housing Victoria (2020), lower rates of home ownership within the Aboriginal community have restricted opportunities for intergenerational accumulation of wealth, perpetuating cycles of socioeconomic disadvantage. Frequently moving home can also be socially and educationally disruptive for children and young people. Data from the 2016 Census shows that households with an Aboriginal person are more likely to be renting than other households (50.9 per cent versus 27.6 per cent), and are more likely to have had one or more residents who have moved house in the past year (24.2 per cent versus 17.4 per cent).

Figure 8 Victorian households by tenure type, 2016

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Households with an Aboriginal person(s)** | **Other Households** |
| **Owned outright** | 14.2% | 32.5% |
| **Owned with a mortgage** | 29.0% | 35.3% |
| **Rented** | 50.9% | 27.6% |
| **Other tenure type/not stated** | 6.0% | 4.6% |

*Source: (ABS, 2017)*

Figure 9 Proportion of households where some or all residents moved house in the past year, 2016

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Yes** | 24.2% | 17.4% |
| **No** | 67.4% | 76.5% |
| **Not stated** | 8.5% | 6.1% |

*Source: (ABS, 2017)*

In 2019, an estimated 17 per cent of all Aboriginal people in Victoria sought assistance from a homeless service, the highest rate of any Australian state or territory (Aboriginal Housing Victoria, 2020). This crisis is a consequence of the dispossession of lands and subsequent economic exclusion of Aboriginal people.

In 2019, an estimated 17 per cent of all Aboriginal people in Victoria sought assistance from a homeless service, the highest rate of any Australian state or territory (Aboriginal Housing Victoria, 2020; AIHW, 2019b). This crisis is a consequence of the dispossession of lands and subsequent economic exclusion of Aboriginal people.

For those living in social housing the facilities are often inadequate, with one study finding that 50 per cent of participating Aboriginal families living in social housing required more space as their families were growing, while about one third of households were already overcrowded with five or more occupants in three or four bedroom homes (Ritte, et al., 2018).

The number of all Victorians under the age of 25 accessing homelessness services has increased significantly from 32,723 in 2011-12 to 41,310 in 2018-19. While the Aboriginal status of many of these clients is not identified, the number of clients whose status is known shows an over-representation of the Aboriginal population, with Aboriginal clients accounting for at least 10.6 per cent of Victorian homelessness services clients under the age of 25 in 2018-19. This proportion has also been increasing over the years, from 8 per cent in 2011-12 to 10.6 per cent in 2018-19.

Figure 10 Aboriginal Victorian homelessness services clients under the age of 25, 2011-12 to 2018-19

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2011−12** | **2012−13** | **2013−14** | **2014−15** | **2015−16** | **2016−17** | **2017−18** | **2018−19** |
| **Number of Aboriginal identifed clients** | 2634 | 3100 | 3379 | 3610 | 3677 | 3952 | 4199 | 4362 |
| **Proportion of all clients under the age of 25** | 8.0% | 9.4% | 9.1% | 9.4% | 9.4% | 9.8% | 10.0% | 10.6% |

*Source: (AIHW, 2019a)*

*Note: Client numbers and proportion of all clients may understate actual Aboriginal representation due to the significant number of people accessing homelessness services whose Aboriginal status is not known.*

Over the same time period, an increasing proportion of Aboriginal children and young people have identified family violence as the primary reason for accessing homelessness services. Concerningly, this proportion has more than doubled since

2011-12 (from 15.3 per cent to 34.9 per cent). This trend is very similar for both the identified Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cohorts, but is higher among those whose status is unknown.

Figure 11 Percentage of Aboriginal Victorian homelessness services clients under the age of 25 whose primary reason for access was related to family violence, 2011-12 to 2018-19

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **2011−12** | **2012−13** | **2013−14** | **2014−15** | **2015−16** | **2016−17** | **2017−18** | **2018−19** |
| 15.3% | 13.6% | 18.0% | 25.9% | 30.7% | 33.2% | 33.0% | 34.9% |

*Source: (AIHW, 2019a)*

#### Aboriginal Housing Victoria — More Than A Landlord

Victoria has the highest per capita rates of contact by Aboriginal people with homeless services in Australia and almost half (48 per cent) of those seeking assistance are under 25. To achieve their aspirations, children and young people need secure, stable housing as a fundamental precondition for learning, thriving and staying healthy.

Aboriginal Housing Victoria (AHV)[[4]](#footnote-4) is delivering an innovative wellbeing program that is offered to vulnerable tenants within northern metropolitan Melbourne. AHV’s support for Aboriginal tenants through the More Than A Landlord (MTAL) program uses the platform of stable accommodation to build pathways out of disadvantage for children and families whose lives have previously been characterised by crisis and trauma.

By delivering a targeted, coordinated and family based approach that facilitates access

to support services, MTAL aims to maximise opportunities for Aboriginal households to enjoy the broader health and socioeconomic benefits that long-term, secure and affordable housing can provide. This insulates residents against threats to their family wellbeing and opens pathways to education, training, work and social participation.

MTAL features include:

* a focus on strengths and aspirations rather than needs/deficit
* Aboriginal community-led health promotion initiatives
* increased opportunities for social engagement and participation
* recruitment of an Aboriginal workforce, including opportunities for AHV tenants
* integration of activities and services from a household or family perspective,
* which is more consistent with Aboriginal cultural values and practices
* life coaching.

A key feature of MTAL is the delivery of life coaching. The Life Coach assists tenants

and households to understand what success looks like for them and to identify goals

to achieve that success; inspires them to imagine more and to achieve more; empowers them with the practical tools to do so; motivates them to sustain focus; and steers them towards success. Understanding the needs of children in families is a first plank in support provided to parents. Once children are settled and thriving parents can begin to focus on their own goals and aspirations.

Since MTAL’s commencement, the program has delivered some significant achievements. In particular, the concept of life coaching has proven to be transformative for participating tenants. AHV has been working with approximately 50 tenants and household members. These include preparing 20 tenants to be ‘job ready’; supporting 12 tenants into employment (full-time and casual) and another 10 in undertaking further education.

In recognition of the significant and positive outcomes achieved through MTAL, the

program was awarded the 2019 Australian Housing Institute Professional excellence

in housing award.

One example of what young people can achieve through the program is exemplified by Jenny, who entered the program as a 23-year old single mum of a five-year old daughter. Jenny was a young single mother who did not complete her school education and had not worked for about seven years when she entered the program. Once her daughter Amira was born, she was wholly responsible for raising her on her own with little support. Jenny had herself been a ward of the state, raised in the foster system, and she wanted a different future for her own daughter.

An amazingly resilient young woman with a passion to learn and improve her own life, Jenny refused to be defined by her early experiences of disadvantage and was determined to be a positive role model for her daughter.

Jenny was one of the very first tenants that worked with a life coach. Never having had secure paid employment before, Jenny initially worked on a casual basis as one of AHV’s Peer Researchers on the MTAL program in 2017 and found that she could more than hold her own.

The Life Coaching program was able support Jenny to work towards her goals

and aspirations. Working with her life coach, Jenny was able to:

* secure her tenancy with AHV by working with a financial counsellor to set a realistic household budget
* put a mental health plan in place
* work with a counsellor and other medical practitioners to improve her health
* and wellbeing
* obtain her driver’s licence.

The benefits have been felt by Jenny’s daughter Amira who is now thriving in her learning and well settled in school. Amira is ‘proud’ of her mum and looking forward to a bright future.

One of her biggest achievements to date is that, working with her life coach, Jenny secured full time employment with a government department as a Client Services Officer.

Having worked successfully in this role for close to two years, Jenny moved on to work for an airline, coaching others to move into client service roles in the airline industry. Like so many other participants in this program, Jenny found latent talents nobody had previously recognised. Now settled with a new partner, Jenny is aiming to buy her own home.

AHV’s aspiration is to provide support through MTAL and Life Skills (crisis support) to every Aboriginal social housing tenant in Victoria who requires it — across AHV properties, public housing and other social housing providers. We know these programs work but we have nowhere near the levels of resources we need to build a universal platform of support for Aboriginal social housing tenants. Further investment in these programs would deliver strong returns for the Victorian community, take pressure off mental health and tertiary services and make sure all young people, whatever their background, have the opportunity to fulfil their potential.

#### Mana-na worn-tyeen maar-takoort: Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework

The Victorian Government funded Aboriginal Housing Victoria to develop an Aboriginal housing and homelessness framework, with the aim of building a new approach to

ensuring all Aboriginal Victorians have safe, secure and stable housing. Victoria’s

Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework is the first statewide Aboriginal

housing policy in an Australian jurisdiction led and developed by and for the Aboriginal community. The framework was launched by the Minister for Housing and the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in February 2020 and sets out a blueprint for improving Aboriginal housing outcomes within a generation.

The Victorian Government has announced an initial investment of $5.3 million to kick-start some of the initiatives in the framework, including an Aboriginal-specific private rental assistance program; community engagement activities; and exploring future investment in Aboriginal housing. It will also secure the continuation of the award-winning MTAL program, which provides life coaching and support towards education, employment and maintaining stable housing.

The Victorian Government is now working with the Aboriginal community on an implementation plan for the framework, which responds to its long-term objectives and ambition. In doing so, it will also aim to address the many challenges that Aboriginal children experience arising from a lack of stable housing or homelessness.

## Disability

Disability can be complex to determine. It can also change throughout a person’s life and as their needs and circumstances change. Disability can be defined by long-term

physical, mental or sensory impairments that restrict everyday activities. For children, this may include the late acquisition of developmental milestones, with some developmental delays being temporary and others being permanent and indicative

of intellectual disability or other ongoing conditions. Disability can also be defined by the interaction between a person’s impairments and the context in which they live.

The physical and built environment, as well as society’s attitudes and expectations towards people with disability can act as barriers to these people undertaking everyday activities and accessing opportunities and services.

In Australia, people, including children and students, with disability are protected under anti-discrimination laws. The Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth) provides protection for everyone in Australia against discrimination based on disability. Disability discrimination happens when people with a disability are treated less fairly than people without a disability. The Disability Standards for Education 2005 (Cth) seek to ensure that students with disability are not discriminated against in educational settings.

Aboriginal Australians are known to have higher rates of disability than non-Aboriginal Australians in both childhood and adulthood (AIHW, 2015). Although the data and research available does not present a complete picture of why this is the case, it is consistent with the higher rates of disability found among other colonised First Nations and is related to a broader context of socioeconomic and health inequality.

Issues have also been noted in how disabilities are identified and the potential cultural bias of standard assessment instruments and procedures, which do not necessarily take account of relevant cultural differences in behaviour, language and conceptualisation, which may lead to Aboriginal children with disabilities being unrecognised or misdiagnosed, and their behaviour misinterpreted (DiGiacomo, et al., 2013; Aboriginal Disability Network New South Wales, 2007).

Data from the 2016 Census of Population and Housing (ABS, 2017) shows that Victorian Aboriginal children and young people under the age of 25 were more than twice as likely to have a need for assistance with core activities than non-Aboriginal Victorians in the same age group (5.8 per cent compared to 2.3 per cent). The 2014-15 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey indicates (ABS, 2016a) a potentially even higher rate of 6.9 per cent of Aboriginal Victorians in the 15 to 24 years age group experiencing a profound or severe core activity limitation.

Figure 12 Victorians under the age of 25 requiring assistance with core activities

5.8% Aboriginal and 2.3% Non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal status unknown

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Aboriginal** | **Non-Aboriginal and not stated** | **Aboriginal** | **Non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal status unknown** |
| **Has need for assistance with core activities** | 1455 | 42112 | 5.8% | 2.3% |
| **Does not have need for assistance with core activities** | 22622 | 1674884 | 90.7% | 91.7% |
| **Not stated** | 857 | 109085 | 3.4% | 6.0% |
| **Total** | 24934 | 1826081 | 100.0% | 100.0% |

*Source: (ABS, 2017)*

Concerningly, research has found that Aboriginal people with a disability are less likely than non-Aboriginal people to access relevant services. There are a number of reasons for this, including the cultural and historical contexts that can alienate Aboriginal people from mainstream services generally. This not only reflects a distrust of government organisations, but also a fear held by Aboriginal parents that accessing services will bring intrusive attention to family circumstances that could result in children being taken away (Productivity Commission, 2011). Analysis of National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) data by the Melbourne School of Global and Population Health found that Aboriginal people with disability were more likely to experience unfair treatment, violence and removal from their natural families than other Aboriginal people, and that they were more likely to avoid places where they have previously been treated unfairly (Ferdinand, et al., 2019).

These issues highlight the significance of Aboriginal organisations and health

workers in the provision of culturally relevant and safe services.

Research has found disability to be both a cause and effect of socioeconomic disadvantage, with disadvantaged demographics having greater exposure to factors that increase the risk of disability, and caring for disability placing a significant financial and social burden on families (Emerson, 2007). Census data shows that Aboriginal Victorians are more likely to be providing unpaid assistance to a person with a disability than non-Aboriginal Victorians. For Aboriginal young people aged 15 to 24,

the proportion (11.6 per cent) is more than twice that of their non-Aboriginal peers

(five per cent). For these young people, caring responsibilities may be limiting their ability to engage with post-school education and employment at the critical point of entering adulthood. It is also important to note, however, that Aboriginal young people may not necessarily view providing care as a burden, but rather as a willing obligation in the context of cultural or family responsibilities.

Figure 13 Victorians providing unpaid assistance to a person with a disability, all ages and young people aged 15 to 24, 2016

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **All ages** | **Young people aged 15 to 24** |
| **Aboriginal** | 14.3% | 11.6% |
| **Non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal status unknown** | 8.2% | 5.0% |

*Source: (ABS, 2017)*

*Note: These percentages include people who spent time providing unpaid care, help or assistance to family members or others because of a disability, a long-term health condition or problems related to old age, in the two weeks prior to the 2016 Census. This includes people in receipt of a Carer Allowance or Carer Payment, but does not include work done through a voluntary organisation or group.*

### Disability and out-of-home care

It has been widely reported that there is an over-representation of disability amongst children and families involved with Child Protection. Within this group, Aboriginal children are particularly vulnerable, with Taskforce 1000 revealing 14 per cent of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care in Victoria are described as having a known disability (Commission for Children and Young People, 2016). This is expected to be an under-representation due to misdiagnosis and under-reporting, yet there is limited coordination between the disability and child welfare system to help support children and families.

For children in out-of-home care, disabilities are often intertwined with trauma, creating complex needs and requiring multilayered support. Carers struggle to coordinate the disability system, leading to missed opportunities to receive support and respite. When young people leave care, they are expected to become their own advocate and barriers to accessing the disability system are exacerbated due to limited Aboriginal-specific supports. Alternatively, children, young people and their families are forced to access mainstream services that may not provide culturally safe environments and fail to recognise the intersection of Aboriginal peoples’ experiences and the role of culture in identification, treatment and support.

*Information provided by VACCA*

### Students receiving educational adjustments

Under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth) and Disability Standards for Education 2005 (Cth), all schools within the Australian education system are obliged to ensure that students with disability are able to access and participate in education on the same basis as other students. This includes providing reasonable adjustments where needed, in consultation with the student and their parents or carers. Adjustments can be made at the whole-school level, in the classroom, and at an individual student level.

Information about educational adjustments is captured annually in the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) with the

goal of enabling schools, education authorities and governments to better understand the needs of students with disability and how they can be best supported at school. Teachers and schools collate evidence to make professional judgements about the adjustments provided for students.

NCCD data for 2019 shows that 21.6 per cent of students in Victorian schools were receiving adjustments (ACARA, 2019b). Analysis found that within this cohort,

Aboriginal students are proportionally more likely to require an educational

adjustment for disability than non-Aboriginal students (DET, 2020a). Additionally, Aboriginal students receiving an adjustment are more likely to require a higher

level of adjustment than non-Aboriginal students.

Within the non-Aboriginal population, students in metropolitan areas are less likely

to be receiving an educational adjustment for disability than non-metropolitan students. For Aboriginal students, however, levels of adjustments in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas are very similar. This may reflect that the geographic distribution, and how geography relates to aspects of disadvantage, are different for the Aboriginal cohort compared to Victorian children and young people in general.

### Disability Inclusion — Education for All

As part of the 2020/21 State Budget, the Victorian Government is investing nearly $1.6 billion over four years through a world leading Disability Inclusion — Education for All program that ensures every Victorian student, no matter their background or circumstance is given every chance to reach their potential.

Disability Inclusion — Education for All program will transform how students with disability are supported in Victorian Government schools. This new initiative will build on the significant work already undertaken to support inclusive education and introduces:

* A new tiered funding model for students with disability — the new model, along with significant additional investment, has three tiers of funding, which align resources and support with the educational adjustments made by schools to assist students with disability to participate in education on the same basis as their peers.
* A new Disability Inclusion Profile — a strengths-based process to help schools and families identify the strengths, needs and the educational adjustments schools can make to assist students with disability. A new facilitator role is being established to help schools and families work together through the new approach.
* A suite of initiatives to build skills and knowledge in inclusive education —complementary, multidisciplinary package of activities and supports for school workforces to build their knowledge and skills in inclusive education. The initiatives will increase access to specialist expertise, coaching, professional learning and support for school staff, Department region and area-based staff, and allied health staff.

## Youth justice

The majority of Aboriginal people in Victoria do not commit offences or become involved in the criminal justice system, and the rates of Aboriginal young people involved in the criminal justice system are lower in Victoria than in most other Australian jurisdictions (State of Victoria, 2018b). Over-representation as compared to the non-Aboriginal population, however, remains a significant issue. For Aboriginal young people who offend, there are increased risks of future involvement with the justice system, with re-offending contributing significantly to the rates of Aboriginal over-representation.

The reasons for this over-representation in detention and the criminal justice system are complex and interconnected with higher levels of socioeconomic disadvantage, lower educational attainment, as well as experiences of discrimination, and the trauma and loss of culture resulting from colonisation. For some young people there is an intersection between entering and exiting out-of-home care, housing insecurity, and contact with the criminal justice system, all of which are issues disproportionately affecting Aboriginal young people in Victoria.

Experiences of trauma early in life, such as circumstances leading to placement in out-of-home care or resulting from separation from family, can cause neurodevelopmental delays (Bollinger, Scott-Smith, & Mendes, 2017). In adolescence, these delays can emergeas poor emotional regulation and impulse control, resulting in increased risks of offending behaviour, and drug and alcohol abuse. Young people with disabilities such as cognitive and language impairments, which occur at higher rates in the Aboriginal population, also have increased likelihood of criminal justice system contact and incarceration due to impaired decision making and behavioural regulation (Shepherd, Ogloff, Shea, Pfeifer, & Paradies, 2017; Snow, Woodward, Mathis, & Powell, 2016). Such young offenders are greatly disadvantaged as a consequence of the difficulties they have in comprehending processes and communicating, how this affects interactions with police, legal counsel, and the courts, and in particular their ability to engage with therapeutic interventions and diversional approaches (Snow, Woodward, Mathis, & Powell, 2016),.

In 2018-19 in Victoria, the rate per 10,000 of Aboriginal young people (aged 10 to 17) in youth detention was 79.4 as compared to only 8.2 for non-Aboriginal people, a ratio of 10 to one (AIHW, 2020d; Sentencing Advisory Council, 2020). While reflecting a significant disparity in outcomes for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal young people, this ratio of over-representation is lower than results for Australia as a whole (17 to one), and for other states and territories except for Tasmania. The rate of Aboriginal young people aged 10 to 17 under Youth Justice supervision, including both detention and community-based supervision, was also lower in Victoria than the Australia-wide rate. In Victoria in 2019-20, there were 81 Aboriginal young people aged 10 to 17 under Youth Justice supervision on an average day. This was a 25 per cent reduction on the 2018-19 average (108), and a 42.1 per cent reduction on the 2015-16 average (140).

Figure 14 Youth in detention, rates per 10,000 young people (aged 10 to 17 years), by state and territory, 2018-19

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Aboriginal** | **Non-Aboriginal** |
| **Western Australia** | 284.1 | 13.4 |
| **South Australia** | 183.1 | 9.1 |
| **Queensland** | 176.6 | 7.8 |
| **Australian Capital Territory** | 150.5 | 17.9 |
| **Northern Territory** | 146.9 | 3.5 |
| **New South Wales** | 133.5 | 10.8 |
| **Victoria** | 79.4 | 8.2 |
| **Tasmania** | 34.6 | 9.4 |
| **Australia** | 160.9 | 9.7 |

*Source: (AIHW, 2020b)*

Figure 15 Aboriginal young people (aged 10 to 17) under Youth Justice supervision on an average day in Victoria

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **2014–15** | **2015–16** | **2016–17** | **2017–18** | **2018–19** | **2019–20** |
| 124 | 140 | 134 | 122 | 108 | 81 |
| 0.346774 | 0.421429 | 0.395522 | 0.336066 | 0.25 | 0 |

*Source: (AIHW, 2020a; DJCS, 2020)*

The Aboriginal community’s disproportionate contact with criminal justice not only affects young people who have themselves committed offences, but also those whose parents or other family members are incarcerated or otherwise involved with criminal justice. The incarceration of Aboriginal women, in particular, has a disruptive and negative effect not only on their immediate family and children, but also for their extended kinship group, as Aboriginal women frequently have care relationships

and responsibilities for other children within the community (Jones, et al., 2018).

Many Aboriginal people become involved in criminal justice through minor offences like defaulting on the payment of fines, and it has been observed in other Australian states that statutory fine enforcement regimes lead to disproportionate penalties for Aboriginal people, including imprisonment (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2017).

### Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreement

The Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreement is a long-term partnership between the Aboriginal community and the Victorian Government, aimed at improving justice outcomes, family and community safety, and reducing the over-representation of Aboriginal people in the Victorian criminal justice system.

The Agreement was initially implemented in 2000 and has involved the development of multiple positions, plans, partnerships and programs that specifically meet the needs of the Victorian Aboriginal community. Burra Lotjpa Dunguludja, the Aboriginal Justice Agreement Phase 4, commenced in 2018, with increased emphasis on progressing self-determination towards a justice system that values, promotes and requires greater involvement of Aboriginal communities in decision-making, program design, and delivery.

The Agreement outlines a range of goals and outcomes, aimed at addressing the drivers of offending, providing culturally safe services, remedying justice policies with disproportionate impacts on the Aboriginal community, and providing Aboriginal people with greater roles in leadership, governance and decision making.

Targets for the Agreement include achieving 43 fewer Aboriginal young people in the justice system by 2023. As at the end of 2020, the Department of Justice and Community Safety was ahead of this target, with a focus on sustaining and improving on this result in partnership with Aboriginal organisations and people.

### Koori Youth Council — Ngaga-dji (Hear me)

The Ngaga-dji (Hear me) project explores the experiences of Aboriginal children and young people in Victoria’s Youth Justice system, giving a voice to those who have been silenced with incarceration and stigma.

The vision of the Ngaga-dji project is for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in Victoria to be supported and to thrive with community-designed and led supports. It is an opportunity to improve justice and equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and their communities. It is an opportunity to change the narrative of loneliness and hurt to one of healing and love. It is an opportunity for Victoria to uphold the lore of this land, to stand for justice and equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and an opportunity to lead change across the country.

Over a six-month journey, the KYC engaged with four community sites across rural, regional and metropolitan Victoria, including both Victorian Youth Justice custodial centres, to meet 42 children and young people who were currently or previously under the supervision of Youth Justice. Participants of Ngaga-dji represent a range of ages, from among the youngest to the oldest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in the system.

Engagement with participants was conducted in yarning circles and individual interviews, which enabled participants to lead conversations in both a culturally safe and confidential manner. The discussions with participants focused on their lives in community before coming into contact with the Youth Justice system, their experiences in the Youth Justice system and their transition back to community. These conversations enabled a deep understanding of the participants lives, personal experiences and community’s experiences.

The guiding principles from Ngaga-dji were developed to reflect and support a culturally based framework for supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. These guiding principles are self-determination, youth participation and culture, family, Elders and communities. Through the support of Ngaga-dji, the following recommendations were developed:

* Give Aboriginal young people services that work.
* Keep Aboriginal young people safe and strong in their culture, families and communities.
* Community-designed and led youth support systems for Aboriginal young people.
* Create just and equitable systems for Aboriginal young people.

The Ngaga-dji project is a call for action to implement the recommendations that young people have voiced. The Ngaga-dji project has achieved change in relation to raising the age of leaving care from 18 to 21, and promoted Aboriginal ownership of community infrastructure and gathering places. These changes have been achieved through the advocacy of both Aboriginal community members and organisations.

The Ngaga-dji report “(Cerreto, & Clarke, Koorie Youth Council, 2018) contains detailed information in relation to the Ngaga-dji project, as well as powerful stories detailing the journey of participants from the Ngaga-dji project.

### Youth Justice Strategic Plan, 2020–2030

Youth Justice is responsible for the statutory supervision of children and young people (aged 10 to 18), and some young adults up to age 24, in the criminal justice system in Victoria, and funds organisations that deliver interventions and assists with rehabilitation. The Youth Justice Strategic Plan, 2020-2030, provides a 10-year vision for the delivery and reform of the Youth Justice system, with a focus on implementing the insights of the Armytage Ogloff Youth Justice Review and Strategy (2017), including age appropriate responses and the evidence informed approaches to addressing youth offending.

The plan identifies four key opportunities.

* Improving the approach to diversion and early intervention.
* Using tailored rehabilitation efforts that address a child or young person’s assessed risks and needs and support them to reduce offending.
* Enhancing and formalising partnerships between Youth Justice and other services
* to improve rehabilitation and life outcomes.
* Improving end-to-end career support for the Youth Justice workforce.

The plan is guided by, and complements, Burra Lotjpa Dunguludja, the Aboriginal Justice Agreement Phase 4, and sets out specific actions for working collaboratively with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and delivering services responsive to individual circumstances and cultural background.

These actions include:

* using the findings from the Ngaga-dji (Hear me) project, to engage with Aboriginal children and young people in policy, practice and program design and implementation
* reducing the number of Aboriginal children and young people coming into Youth Justice through the Koori Youth Cautioning Program, developed with community as part of Burra Lotjpa Dunguludja
* continuing to support the Aboriginal liaison officers and a team leader who are available 24 hours a day to advise non-Aboriginal custodial staff about their work with Aboriginal young people, and inform critical decision making about their care.

Victoria will also participate in the national review of the age of criminal responsibility through the Council of Attorneys-General. This process will include investigating alternatives to custody for children aged 10 to 14, and in particular for Aboriginal children who make up almost one quarter of this age group under supervision.

### Aboriginal Youth Justice Strategy

The Aboriginal Youth Justice Strategy (Strategy) is being developed in partnership with

the Aboriginal Justice Caucus (Caucus) in line with the principles of self-determination

as enshrined in Burra Lotjpa Dunguludja—the Aboriginal Justice Agreement Phase 4.

Caucus has identified five key domains in the Aboriginal Youth Justice Strategy critical

to addressing over-representation and furthering self-determination, namely:

* work towards an Aboriginal led justice response
* empower young people and community to uphold change
* protect cultural rights and increase cultural safety in the current justice system
* address intergenerational trauma and support healing
* reduce over-representation and provide alternatives to custody.

The Caucus has had input into the Strategy’s development from the outset, identifying the key domains and areas of focus. The Caucus vision is for an end-to-end Aboriginal community-controlled Youth Justice system. Central to this approach is the progressive transfer of authority, decision making, resources and responsibilities to an Aboriginal controlled approach.

The Strategy will be informed by, and will respond to, the Koori Youth Justice Taskforce led by the Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People in partnership with Youth Justice.

### Koori Youth Justice Taskforce

The Koori Youth Justice Taskforce (the Taskforce) is a key initiative of Burra Lotjpa Dunguludja. The Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) and the Department of Justice and Community and Safety are leading this initiative focused on a strengths-based approach to understanding how to address the systemic issues contributing to the over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in the Youth Justice system. The Taskforce examined the cases of all Aboriginal children and young people on Youth Justice Orders (between 1 October 2018 and 31 March 2019) with a view to:

* address issues that impact on the cultural connectedness and social and emotional wellbeing of the young person/s
* review and update the interventions and supports offered to children and young people currently in Youth Justice
* identify and address the systemic issues contributing to the over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in Youth Justice.

CCYP are conducting a parallel Inquiry Our Youth Our Way into the over-representation of Aboriginal young people in the Youth Justice system. A combined Taskforce and Inquiry report is expected to be tabled in Parliament by CCYP in early 2021.

**VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS FRAMEWORK Goal 16: Aboriginal Victorians**

**have access to safe and effective justice services**

Objective 16.1: Increase Aboriginal participation in culturally safe and effective justice prevention, early intervention, diversion and support programs

Prevention and early intervention can keep Aboriginal young people, women and men out of the criminal justice system. Community-based diversion programs and community-led services that connect people to culture can also help break cycles of offending and promote positive outcomes. This also requires intersectional services in health, Child Protection, homelessness and family violence, to deliver effective prevention and early intervention support.

Victorian crime statistics show that the largest proportion of alleged young Aboriginal offenders are male and aged 18 to 24, however, females make up a larger proportion of alleged offenders aged 10 to 24 compared to the non-Aboriginal cohort and those whose Aboriginal status is unknown (33.8 per cent as compared to 25.3 per cent in 2020). In 2020 as compared to 2011, the proportion of alleged offender incidents for which ‘Drug offences and Other offences’ were recorded as the principal offence increased from 8.3 per cent to 28.3 per cent for alleged young offenders who were non-Aboriginal or whose Aboriginal status was unknown. Correspondingly the proportion of incidents for which ‘Property and deception offences’ and ‘Public order and security offences’ were recorded as the principal offence dropped for this cohort. Over the same time period, however, these changes in principal offences as a proportion of alleged offender incidents were less pronounced for the Aboriginal cohort.

Figure 16 Number of alleged Aboriginal young offenders by age group and sex, 2011 to 2020

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **2011** | **2012** | **2013** | **2014** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** | **2020** |
| **Male** | **10 to 17** | 455 | 459 | 468 | 418 | 396 | 420 | 430 | 397 | 382 | 375 |
|  | **18 to 24** | 655 | 704 | 711 | 693 | 698 | 677 | 723 | 717 | 705 | 716 |
| **Female** | **10 to 17** | 231 | 215 | 211 | 185 | 182 | 237 | 225 | 202 | 213 | 233 |
|  | **18 to 24** | 265 | 235 | 247 | 278 | 249 | 234 | 255 | 268 | 283 | 323 |

*Source: (CSA, 2020a)*

*Note: Data is for years ending September quarter.*

Figure 17 Principal offences as a proportion of alleged offender incidents, alleged offenders aged 10 to 24, 2011 and 2020

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **A Crimes against the person** | **B Property and deception offences** | **D Public order and security offences** | **E Justice procedures offences** | **C Drug Offences and F Other offences** |
| **Non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal status unknown** | **2011** | 22.1% | 46.0% | 19.4% | 4.2% | 8.3% |
|  | **2020** | 24.2% | 34.1% | 6.6% | 6.7% | 28.3% |
| **Aboriginal** | **2011** | 23.0% | 54.8% | 13.3% | 5.2% | 3.7% |
|  | **2020** | 26.5% | 46.9% | 6.0% | 9.4% | 11.2% |

*Source: (CSA, 2020a)*

*Note: Data is for years ending September quarter.*

### Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Ltd — Community Based Aboriginal Youth Justice Program

Over a 12-month period James was charged with burglary, theft, stealing/cheating, committing an indictable offence while on bail, armed robbery and car theft. At the time of his first offence James was 15 years old living in a kinship care arrangement with his aunty and siblings. James presented with various issues including lack of connection to community and culture, alcohol and substance use and pending court matters. The Koorie Youth Justice (KYJ) case worker began engaging with James through the provision of court support. He established and built a rapport with James through transporting him to appointments, catching up for coffee and/or lunch, going to the gym and such. In all

the case worker’s interactions with James, their discussions would focus on specific issues, challenges or future goals that James envisaged for himself. During James’s time in the custodial centre, the case worker would visit regularly and continue these discussions.

When the custodial centre held their NAIDOC celebration event, the case worker supported by attending and was proud of how engaged James was in the traditional dancing for the day as he was strengthening his own understanding of culture and his connection to it.

When James was released, he was able to return to his previous place of employment but after missing two days of work he was let go. The KYJ case worker continued to support James and when he didn’t receive any contact with James, he would attend James’s Youth Justice Appointment to catch up with him. In his engagement and interactions with James, James disclosed to the worker that things were not going okay in the home and he wasn’t attending school. James, at this stage denied, any substance use. James’s case was presented to the Koorie Youth Justice Taskforce and further supports were explored and put into place by the care team.

James’s last offence saw him bailed to Bunjilwarra Koorie Youth Alcohol and Drug Healing Centre for a three-month stay. James successfully completed his time at Bunjilwarrra with his KYJ case worker visiting and calling him regularly. Through his challenging and now reflective conversations with the case worker James was able to see the connection between his substance use and offending. He took responsibility for his actions and persevered with small goals. While in Bunjilwarra, James received a sports scholarship and restored his relationship with his aunty. Once he completed his Bunjilwarra stay James began the process of applying for a job with Rails Project Victoria. He completed the application and interview process and eventually proudly passed the standard drug testing. James started his job in the Rails Project, is working full time and has maintained stable employment. James has successfully been exited out of the community-based Aboriginal Youth Justice program.

#### VACCA — Barreng Moorop

VACCA’s Youth Justice Program, Barreng Moorop (BM), is an early intervention program that provides wrap-around support to strengthen protective factors and reduce risk factors for Aboriginal young people aged 10-14 years.

Dianne was referred to the BM program in 2019 by the DHHS. Concerns for Dianne included exposure to family violence, engagement in high risk behaviours, recently returning to an aunt’s care, disengagement from school and not engaging with support services. BM began working with the family soon after, first with June (aunt), who engaged well with the case manager. It took one month before meeting Dianne because she was living with her maternal grandmother at the time and getting ready to transition back to living with aunt. Dianne had been removed from mum’s care due to family violence between her mum and dad, and hadn’t lived with June for five years. The relationship between June and Dianne was strained. Dianne was not attending school and she was beginning to engage in high risk behaviours and criminal activity.

One of BM’s first activities working with Dianne was to develop a care plan. BM asked

Dianne where she wanted support and she said she wanted to re-engage with school.

The case worker committed to taking Dianne to school one day a week. Dianne went

from zero attendance to 59 per cent in her first term back.

*The school reflected in her report that “Dianne should be commended on the strong start she has made at school. She consistently attends school and engages in the full breadth of the curriculum in her class. We are excited by the progress Dianne is making in class and look forward to extending this in 2020”.*

BM worked collaboratively with Stronger Families (VACCA) and Koorie Kids at the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS) to provide parenting support for June to a safe environment for herself and Dianne. At the beginning of 2020, June engaged with counselling services and has subsequently attended a VAHS parenting program.

Despite some positive changes in Dianne’s life, in late 2019 she was charged with theft of a motor vehicle and driving without a license. Dianne was given strict bail conditions and her BM case manager supported Dianne and June in court and meetings with the lawyer. Dianne was referred to Youth Justice and her worker linked her in with the VAHS Koori Kids youth engagement officer. Dianne met with Koori Kids every Friday, however, she disengaged during the period of COVID-19 isolation.

The BM case manager continued to support Dianne with other goals including joining a gym and she began attending with her mother. Dianne’s school attendance continued to improve. In Term 1, 2020 Dianne’s attendance was 72 per cent. Dianne had set herself a goal at the start of the year to have an attendance of 80 per cent and she was working hard to achieve this goal.

*The school commented that Dianne’s “communication with staff has really improved and seems to feel a lot more comfortable to express feelings” and “Dianne is attending class and staying for the two hours without leaving at break time without telling staff”.*

Dianne also acknowledged that some of her friends were not doing the right thing and it was frustrating her. She continued attending school, even without them, showing a positive change and that she was less influenced by them.

Dianne expressed an interest in playing basketball and the BM case manager helped her register in the team of her choice. She engaged for one month and then dropped out, but we are hopeful to support re-engagement once COVID restrictions have lessened.

Dianne also expressed an interest in finding a job and the BM case manager supported her to write a resume. The school is supporting Dianne in the application for work and this will become more of a focus in Term 3 now school has returned.

Dianne has now attended the Children’s Koori Court and received a nine-month good behaviour bond and ended her involvement with Youth Justice. Dianne was very relieved and is now focusing her energy on school and applying for a part-time job.

Throughout our time working with June and Dianne, cultural practice and opportunities have been offered. Dianne and June are strongly connected to their culture and mob and embrace any opportunities to engage in programs that VACCA run. They both attended the excursion on Sea Country in February 2020 which connected them with other young people and families from BM. They are also keen to participate in making possum skin cloaks together as a family, which we hope to begin in Term 3.

We have seen positive changes and a willingness from Dianne to get on board with the engagement with the school and come up with strategies as a family to resolve issues. Whilst the impact of COVID-19 has created some obstacles in our capacity to work face-to-face, the BM case manager has stayed in weekly contact with June and Dianne through lockdown and Dianne returned to school happily when learning from home ended. More recently, Dianne has been taking place in the BM online work-ready program and has been engaging consistently despite challenges of the Stage 4 lockdown.

### Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program

To reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal young people in the Youth Justice system, Victoria Police has worked with Aboriginal communities to develop an Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program. The program is currently being trialled in Echuca, Bendigo and Greater Dandenong. It entails local police and Aboriginal community services working together to respond to the needs of Aboriginal young people coming into contact with police to ensure that their first contact with police is their last. The aim of the program is to address the drivers of offending to reduce the number of Aboriginal young people progressing into the Youth Justice system. In accordance with Phase 4 of the Aboriginal Justice Agreement, the program was developed through a self-determination framework, ensuring that the voice of Aboriginal communities is at the forefront of the program.

### Aboriginal crime data

The Crime Statistics Agency (CSA) produces the official aggregate Victorian crime statistics, derived from the administrative information recorded by Victoria Police and extracted from the Law Enforcement Assistance Program (LEAP) database. Aboriginal recorded crime data contains a significant proportion of unknown or missing values. In March 2019, the Aboriginal data quality had declined and was withdrawn from release in the public datasets.

In 2019 and early 2020, while Victoria Police attended to system issues potentially affecting data quality, the CSA undertook community consultation about Aboriginal crime data needs. This consultation was guided by the principle of advancing Aboriginal data sovereignty by increasing community ownership of and access to data, as committed to in the Aboriginal justice agreement. The consultation findings were published in July 2020 (CSA, 2020b).

Victoria Police are committed to improving collection and availability of Aboriginal justice data in line with Phase 4 of the Aboriginal Justice Agreement. Victoria Police have invested significant IT enhancements and consulted with CSA and partner agencies to address the system issues that were contributing to inflated values for Standard Indigenous Question (SIQ) responses. The IT enhancements were finalised in April 2020, and revised data released publicly in late 2020.

### Goolum Goolum — Deadly Connections Youth Justice

In 2018, in response to a rise in youth offending and the gap in holistic supports for

offenders with issues such as homelessness, alcohol and other drugs and poverty,

Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Co-Operative (GGAC) established an intensive case management program. The program targeted youth between the ages of 14 to 20

at risk of chronic offending and/or incarceration.

These youth presented with a multiple high-risk factors including:

* homelessness
* drug and alcohol abuse or addiction
* victim of family violence and/or sexual violence
* involvement with Child Protection from a young age
* traumatic childhoods
* intellectual disabilities
* mental health concerns or diagnosis
* inability to navigate services
* minimal life skills
* no prosocial relationships.

During the period of the program, participants work with a case manager to address their risks, needs and responsivity factors that contribute to their reoffending or risk of offending. An intensive case plan is developed which is goal-orientated and addresses the causative issues that lead to the young person being involved in the justice system or are placing them at risk. The young person is involved in all decisions and is supported to achieve these goals.

Over the course of 12 months, GGAC worked with 36 local Aboriginal youth across three levels of engagement: youth engagement, program participation, and intensive case management. Prior to the introduction of the intensive case management program 16 youth had 36 statutory orders. By the end of the program this had dropped to two youth on two orders.

The introduction of the program saw the number of Koori youth caseloads in Wimmera

drop from 50 per cent to 12.5 per cent. Recidivism rates drastically lowered, completion of orders increased and there was a significant increase in attendance at detox facilities and alternative education programs.

### Aboriginal-specific programs and supports in Youth Justice

#### Aboriginal Youth Justice Programs based in the community

The objective of the Aboriginal Youth Justice Program is to address the over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people coming in contact with the criminal justice system by providing early intervention and engagement, prevention and intervention opportunities. The Aboriginal Youth Justice Program provides a culturally safe and responsive service for Aboriginal children and young people involved with, or at risk of involvement with the criminal justice system. This is done by ensuring that a young person has strong connections to their family and their community of origin.

The Aboriginal Youth Justice Program is delivered through 14 funded agencies, supported by a total of 23 staff. Thirteen of these agencies are ACCOs and one is a community based agency (Anglicare). The program suite provides preventative, early intervention and case management services for Aboriginal children and young people at risk of Youth Justice involvement, or subject to a Youth Justice Order. The program suite includes the Community Based Aboriginal Youth Justice Program, Aboriginal Early School Leavers Program, Aboriginal Intensive Support Program, Aboriginal Youth Support Service and Aboriginal Court Advice Worker.

#### Aboriginal Youth Justice Programs based in custody

##### Aboriginal Liaison Officers

Aboriginal Liaison Officers provide Aboriginal children and young people with culturally informed support, planning and advocacy during custodial stays. Two are located at each precinct, Malmsbury and Parkville Youth Justice Centres, overseen by the Aboriginal Youth Justice Manager.

##### Youth Through-Care Project

The Youth Through-Care (YTC) Project is a co-designed initiative being supported by the Commonwealth and Victorian governments as a new model to help address underlying factors contributing to re-offending behaviours and better support Aboriginal young people, their families and community to reduce recidivism rates. The Victorian Aboriginal Childcare Agency (VACCA) is the selected service provider for Victoria. This program provides support to Aboriginal children and young people exiting custody and transitioning to community. The focus is on cultural strengthening and cultural mentoring and to connect young people to community and extended family as part of their cultural strengthening. Young people and their families continue to have ongoing follow up and support post release with outreach as required. Where outreach visits are not essential, follow up with clients and families is mostly completed through regular phone calls.

### Family violence

Family violence occurs between people in a family or family-like relationship, including current or former relatives or partners, and which for Aboriginal people may include those considered relatives under traditional concepts of kinship of contemporary social practice (Djirra, 2017). Family violence not only includes behaviours that are physically or sexually abusive, but also emotional or psychological abuse, threatening, coercive or controlling behaviour, and economic abuse. The consequences of family violence are far reaching, as home environments where children and young people are exposed to stressors, such as violence or other abuse, can cause significant long-term harm to their cognitive development, behavioural regulation, and health (Center on the Developing Child, 2020).

Family violence is not a traditional aspect of Aboriginal culture but has emerged as a serious problem for the community following colonisation. As heard by the Royal Commission into Family Violence (State of Victoria, 2016), Aboriginal women and children are at significantly higher risk of family violence than other members of the community, and it has been estimated that Victorian Aboriginal women are 45 times more likely to experience family violence than non-Aboriginal women. While some of the factors that increase risk of family violence are the same for the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community, such as socioeconomic disadvantage, the additional disempowerment, high levels of stress, and disruption of traditional culture experienced by the Aboriginal community as a result of colonisation and ongoing discrimination have also influenced the risks of violent offending behaviour (Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, 2008). In Victoria, family violence is the primary driver of Aboriginal involvement with Child Protection, with research indicating that men’s violence against women accounts for 95 per cent of cases of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care (Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention & Legal Service Victoria, 2015).

It is important to note that not all perpetrators of family violence against Aboriginal people are Aboriginal themselves. In their submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence, Djirra (an ACCO providing family violence prevention and support services) stated that their clients, predominantly Aboriginal women, experienced violence at the hands of men from a range of different backgrounds (Victorian Government, 2020; Braybrook, 2015). While many incidents of family violence go unreported, statistics are available on incidents attended by Victoria Police where a Victoria Police Risk Assessment and Risk Management Report (also known as an L17 form) are completed. These statistics show that from 2016 to 2020 around 39.5 per cent of family incidents recorded where the affected family member was Aboriginal, the other party was non-Aboriginal (CSA, 2020c).[[5]](#footnote-5) This data also shows that from 2016 to 2020, 31.2 per cent of Aboriginal affected family members were children and young people aged from birth to 24 years. Within this cohort, females, particularly those aged 20 to 24, had the highest representation.

Figure 18 Aboriginal children and young people (aged birth to 24) affected by one or more family violence incidents, Victoria, years ending June 2016 to 2020

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **2016** | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** | **2020** |
| 890 | 810 | 779 | 844 | 811 |

*Source: (CSA, 2020d)*

*Note: Aboriginal status data are derived using the revised CSA most frequent recorded status of an individual as recorded by Victoria Police, and may not represent the Aboriginal status recorded by police at the time of the incident.*

#### VACCA — Therapeutic Family Violence Program

*“I have never felt more connected to my culture and this community in the 10 years since I relocated to the Wodonga area, thank you my worker and VACCA.”*

*“Before this program started, I had no sense of identity, now I am feeling more connected to my culture and am on the journey of finding out who I am.”*

Since COVID-19, our face-to-face group cultural healing programs have had to be re-created to fit into our new virtual world of communicating and connecting throughout communities. Our Ovens-Murray Goulburn Therapeutic Family Violence team worked hard to develop an online cultural connection experience for our community members to keep them feeling socially and emotionally connected to VACCA, culture, community and one another.

Our new virtually delivered program has been a great success during this time of uncertainty and disconnect. We prerecord videos that are rich in cultural knowledge and experiences specific for our targeted audiences including mums, bubs and our children’s group. The videos are short and go for around 10 minutes and we include an activity with someone from community who has cultural knowledge. These videos are engaging and encouraging for our community members, inviting them to be a part of the experiences from the safety and comfort of their homes.

This has been an easy transition for our community members and been particularly effective for some of our program participants who have social anxieties, allowing them to participate in our virtual cultural experiences, and for the first time in their lives felt connected to their children, their culture, their community and own identity.

*“My children and I have been so disconnected for a long time and now thanks to my worker and this program we look forward to the weekly videos and cultural packs that are delivered so we can spend time together as a family connecting to each other through the cultural activities…. Thank you.”*

*“Since being a part of this program I feel strong about my culture.”*

#### Integrated Family Services

Integrated Family Services (IFS) supports families where children and/or young people, aged from pre-birth to 17 years old, are experiencing vulnerabilities. These children are likely to experience greater challenges due to developmental impacts, their experience of risk and/or cumulative harm, and may require Child Protection intervention if risks are not reduced. IFS receives referrals via the Orange Door or Child FIRST. These referrals originate from a range of professionals including Child Protection workers, police, school staff and health professionals, as well as from any person in the community, including self-referrals.Every year, 3,347 cases of IFS support are provided to Aboriginal families in Victoria. This makes up eight per cent of the total cases of IFS support each year in Victoria.

**Case Study\***

Jessica is a 24-year-old Aboriginal woman and mother to four-year-old twins, Tahnee and Sammy. Jessica separated from her partner and the father of her children six months ago due to family violence, she has no contact with him and receives no financial support from him. Following her separation, Jessica relocated to access more affordable housing, leaving her and her children isolated. Jessica does not have her license and has limited public transport options where she lives. Tahnee was involved in the family violence incident which led to Jessica leaving the relationship. Tahnee has become very anxious and clingy. If Jessica tries to leave the room or give attention to Sammy, Tahnee becomes distressed and is difficult to console. Sammy appears content but Jessica worries that this will impact Sammy. Jessica has struggled with depression and anxiety since she was a teenager, and this has worsened since her separation and relocating. Jessica becomes very anxious when she is unable to settle Tahnee and feels she has no way to escape this.

Jessica is currently working with her IFS case worker to support her goals around parenting, mental health and connection to community. Jessica’s IFS case worker spent time getting to know Jessica and her children to understand what was important to them before helping Jessica to develop goals for her and her children. Jessica’s IFS case worker supported her to find a local GP who provided her with a mental health plan. Jessica is now attending counselling to help manage her depression and anxiety. Jessica’s IFS caseworker attends Jessica’s home weekly and has supported her with strategies for parenting, particularly in managing Tahnee’s anxiety and involving both children in activities. Jessica’s IFS case worker supported Jessica to find a kindergarten she was comfortable with in the local area and supported her with enrolling the children with an Early Start Kindergarten grant. Jessica was able to attend with the children until they were comfortable enough to be left. Jessica’s IFS case worker accessed a Flexible Funding Package for Tahnee and Sammy to attend a local kids AFL program with taxi vouchers to get there as it is too far to walk. The package was also able to purchase two car seats so that Jessica was able to use taxis or ask a friend to drive them safely. Jessica is now attending the local Aboriginal gathering place; she attends a women’s art group one morning while the children attend kinder and a play group with the children on another day.

Jessica is considering studying when the children are in school next year. Jessica would also like to obtain her driver’s license. Jessica is happy that Tahnee appears happy and is settled at Kindergarten and that both children appear happy and healthy.

*\*This case example is indicative of a Family Service response.*

### Out-of-Home Care

Children and young people are placed in statutory out-of-home care arrangements when they cannot live with their parents due to significant family difficulties, or

because of abuse or neglect. In Australia, the number of out-of-home care placements has increased over the past decade, with Aboriginal children and young people significantly over-represented in all states and territories. As of 30 June 2019 in Victoria, 26.3 per cent of children and young people (aged from birth to 17) in out-of-home care were Aboriginal, compared to 19.5 per cent in 2010.[[6]](#footnote-6) These figures highlight the need to provide culturally safe and accessible services to Aboriginal families experiencing difficulties. As was found by the Always was, always will be Koori children inquiry (Commission for Children and Young People, 2016), early provision of support is required to prevent the need for more intrusive interventions, such as out-of-home care, later on.

Figure 19 Number of children and young people in out-of-home care in Victoria at 30 June, by age range and Aboriginal status

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Aboriginal, ages birth to 12** | **Aboriginal, ages 13 to 17** | **Non-Aboriginal, ages birth to 12** | **Non-Aboriginal, ages 13 to 17** |
| **2010** | 609 | 145 | 2007 | 1103 |
| **2011** | 642 | 165 | 2032 | 1186 |
| **2012** | 752 | 188 | 2311 | 1286 |
| **2013** | 797 | 211 | 2498 | 1283 |
| **2014** | 965 | 226 | 2835 | 1322 |
| **2015** | 1115 | 264 | 3301 | 1375 |
| **2016** | 1278 | 323 | 3527 | 1395 |
| **2017** | 1366 | 358 | 3709 | 1440 |
| **2018** | 1488 | 463 | 3966 | 1536 |
| **2019** | 1659 | 520 | 4387 | 1724 |

*Source: (DHHS, 2020a)*

Due to the disadvantage and stressful life circumstances that lead to out-of-home care placements, and the disruption and trauma related to separation from parents, affected children have poorer outcomes than their peers across a range of health, wellbeing, social, and economic outcomes. Victorian research with Aboriginal children in out-of-home care has identified the significant physical, developmental, and psychological health needs for this cohort, with one recent study identifying 66 per cent of participants having mental health diagnoses, 37 per cent having hearing problems, 34 per cent vision problems, 46 per cent having developmental delays (including 36 per cent with speech delay), 49 per cent having respiratory problems, and 40 per cent experiencing dental decay (Shmerling, Creati, Belfrage, & Hedges, 2020). Those in out-of-home care placements are also at greater risk of contact with the criminal justice system and homelessness later in life (Jackson, 2017; Bollinger, Scott-Smith, & Mendes, 2017).

**VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS FRAMEWORK Goal 2: Aboriginal children are raised by Aboriginal families**

Objective 2.1: Eliminate the over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in care.

Objective 2.2: Increase Aboriginal care, guardianship and management of Aboriginal children and young people in care.

Objective 2.3: Increase family reunifications for Aboriginal children and young people in care.

Community-led responses that focus on prevention and early intervention are critical for reducing the number of Aboriginal children and young people in Child Protection and care. For those in care, it is important they remain connected to kin, culture and community, and have the opportunity to be reunited safely with their families. Where this is not possible, the transfer of responsibility for Aboriginal children to Aboriginal organisations is a key action in progressing Aboriginal self-determination.

#### Child Protection reform

The Commission for Children and Young People’s (CCYP) (2016) systemic inquiry into services provided to Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care in Victoria, Always was, always will be Koori children, found that family violence in conjunction with parental alcohol and/or drug abuse was the leading cause for Aboriginal children’s entry to care. This is symptomatic of both the socioeconomic disadvantage experienced by the Aboriginal population, as well as the intergenerational trauma and disruption to families caused by past government actions and social marginalisation.

The Always was, always will be Koori children inquiry also found that there were promising outcomes for Aboriginal children in care where there was strong collaboration between the Child Protection system, community services and ACCOs, and in particular where the ACCOs were well resourced to provide case management and continuing connections to culture for children in placements. Mainstream services were found to require improved cultural awareness and safety, and better engagement with Aboriginal families and communities.

A total of 133 recommendations—79 from Always was, always will be Koori children and 54 from In the child’s best interests (Commission for Children and Young People, 2014)—were made to improve policy and practice within the Child Protection system for Aboriginal children and young people, improve compliance by DHHS and other agencies with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle, and increase opportunities for greater Aboriginal self-determination within the Child Protection system. All the recommendations directed to the Victorian Government were accepted either in full, in part, or in principle. As of 2020, 88 recommendations from both reports have since been completed, 27 recommendations are on track, and one recommendation has been delayed.

Over the past four years, DHHS has committed, through the Roadmap for Reform:

strong families, safe children (DHHS, 2016) and the more recent Wungurilwil Gapgapduir: Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement (DHHS, 2018a), to prioritise efforts to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal children involved in Child Protection. The principles of self-determination and self-management underpin these efforts, with suggested actions to include more funding and a stronger role for ACCOs in the design and delivery of local services, supports and the offer of services that are culturally responsive and safe.

New nation-leading initiatives have been developed to reduce the number of Aboriginal children in care and keep children who cannot live safely at home connected to their extended family, culture and community. Under the Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care initiative (ACAC), authorised ACCOs assume full responsibility of specified children on Children’s Court protection orders. ACAC provides important decision-making ability to ACCOs for Aboriginal children involved in Child Protection, which was the intent of many recommendations of the two inquiries tabled by the Commission for Aboriginal Children and Young People in 2016. In addition, the Transitioning Aboriginal Children to ACCOs initiative sees the transfer of case management of Aboriginal children in care on protection orders from the Department of Health and Human Services and community services organisations to ACCOs.

#### Intensive Placement Prevention Services for Aboriginal Children

#### and Families

The Victorian Government funds a range of intensive placement prevention services aimed at supporting Aboriginal children to remain safely at home with their family or to reunify children as soon as possible with their families. This includes Intensive Family Services, Aboriginal Cradle to Kinder, Aboriginal Stronger Families, and Aboriginal Family Preservation and Restoration Services.

Through these programs, Aboriginal children and families are provided with intensive in-home and therapeutic support and they are supported to link into the services and community supports they require.

A case study of the Aboriginal Stronger Families program is provided below.

Approximately 570 Intensive Placement Prevention services cases are provided to Aboriginal families in Victoria each year. Aboriginal families make up approximately a quarter (25 per cent) of all families receiving Intensive Placement Prevention services.

#### New Victorian Aboriginal Family Preservation and Reunification Response

In 2020-21, as part of the Victorian Government’s $46.2 million investment in supporting the most vulnerable children and families during the Coronavirus pandemic, a new Victorian Aboriginal Family Preservation and Reunification Response will be delivered in each of the four DHHS operational divisions.

This Response seeks to promote a new way of working between ACCOs, Child Protection, and Aboriginal Children in Care providers to provide intensive and therapeutic in-home support to Aboriginal children and families to reduce the likelihood of children entering care or to reunify families as soon as possible. As part of this response, the Victorian Child Care Agency is co-designing with ACCOs, to develop Aboriginal cultural practice elements that are to be implemented across the state to promote cultural safety and cultural healing when working with Aboriginal children and families.

#### Aboriginal Stronger Families\*

Aboriginal Stronger Families is an intensive in-home family preservation and early reunification service which supports Aboriginal families who are involved with Child Protection, where protective concerns have been substantiated and children are

considered to be at imminent risk of being placed in out-of-home care or have recently entered out-of-home care for the first time.

The Aboriginal Stronger Families program received a referral for Joel, aged 32 and Grace, aged 30, and their three children, Isaac, aged five, Tuck, aged three, and Esme, aged six months. Joel had a history of substance misuse. Grace had a difficult relationship with her own mother who also misused substances. Grace was regularly subjected to Child Protection interventions as a child and was eventually removed from her mother’s care permanently when she was five years old. Grace’s mother passed away when she was 12. Joel and Grace had good support from Joel’s family. Grace was experiencing post-natal depression and has difficulty getting out of bed some days. Joel was pulled over while under the influence of drugs while Isaac and Tuck were unrestrained in the car, and Child Protection were notified of the incident by Police.

The Aboriginal Stronger Families worker attended a home visit with the allocated Child Protection worker and the Aboriginal Child Specialist Advice and Support Service worker within 24 hours of the referral. The Aboriginal Stronger Families worker began meeting with the family several times a week to better understand their family’s strengths and needs through a therapeutic assessment. Grace and Joel, with the help of their Aboriginal Stronger Families worker, developed a plan using their strengths and other supports to address their needs. Joel’s mother attended some of the meetings and agreed to have the children for respite sometimes so that Joel and Grace could have a break. Joel was linked in with drug and alcohol supports. Esme missed several maternal child health check-ups and so a referral was made to the Enhanced Maternal Child Health program. Grace was linked with a mental health service for support with her post-natal depression. Grace also began attending a Koori cooking group and she is enjoying connecting with other women from her community.

Isaac is in Prep at the local primary school, and the school is very supportive of the family. The Aboriginal Stronger Families worker supported Joel and Grace to enrol Tuck in kindergarten with an Early Start Kindergarten grant. The Aboriginal Stronger Families worker applied for a flexible support package to purchase a new washing machine and some baby items for the family. Joel began taking Tuck and Esme to a Koori playgroup and connected with another father. The Aboriginal Stronger Families worker arranged regular care team meetings with the family, Child Protection and all other professionals, to make sure everyone was on the same page and working towards the goals Joel and Grace had set for their family. One weekend while Joel was at work Grace was unable to settle Esme. Grace became distressed and was able to call the Aboriginal Stronger Families After Hours Support who talked with her about how she was feeling and offered her suggestions to help soothe Esme.

The Aboriginal Stronger Families worker supported Joel and Grace for 12 months, intensively at first and less frequently as they became confident in their parenting. Isaac, Tuck and Esme have been able to remain at home with their parents with regular respite from Joel’s mother. Grace reports feeling ‘happy again’. Joel has completely stopped his substance use.

*\*This case example is indicative of an Aboriginal Stronger Families Service response.*

Out-of-home care placements in Victoria are of the following types:

* Kinship care provided by the child’s relatives or members of a child’s social network or community who have been approved to provide accommodation and care.
* Foster care where temporary home-based care is provided by trained and approved carers (not usually known to the child before placement).
* Residential care in community-based houses where a group of children or young people are placed in a residential building and cared for by paid staff. This type of care may be provided to children and young people who are part of a large sibling group, or who display complex needs or challenging behaviours that put them at risk of harm.
* Lead tenant arrangements for young people aged 16 to 18 years of age who are in transition to independent living, but who still require accommodation and support.

These placement types are distinct from permanent care arrangements where custody and guardianship of a child are granted to a permanent care family by an order of the Children’s Court. This occurs when it is determined that children in care are unable to return home to their birth parents or other relatives.

Long-term trends show that a greater proportion of Aboriginal children and young people are being placed in kinship care in 2019 as compared to 2010, with fewer placed in foster care and residential care arrangements. The proportion of pre-school and primary school aged Aboriginal children (birth to 12 years old) placed in residential care settings remained relatively low over this period, at between 1 and 3.3 per cent. Aboriginal young people of secondary school age (13 to 17 years old) were more likely to be placed in residential care than younger Aboriginal children. However, this cohort constituted a declining proportion of those 13-17 year-old Aboriginals in care, from a high point of 28.2 per cent in 2012 to 15 per cent in 2019.

Figure 20 Victorian Aboriginal children (ages birth to 12) in care at 30 June, by placement type

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Residential care** | **Foster care** | **Kinship care** |
| 1.6% | 38.4% | 59.9% |
| 2.5% | 40.7% | 56.9% |
| 3.3% | 37.5% | 59.2% |
| 2.6% | 34.1% | 63.2% |
| 3.1% | 33.4% | 63.5% |
| 1.8% | 29.1% | 69.1% |
| 1.7% | 26.7% | 71.6% |
| 1.2% | 23.5% | 75.3% |
| 1.0% | 21.8% | 77.2% |
| 1.7% | 18.7% | 79.6% |

*Source: (DHHS, 2020a)*

*Note: Data excludes children on permanent care orders.*

Figure 21 Victorian Aboriginal young people (ages 13 to 17) in care at 30 June, percentage in placement type

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Residential care** | **Foster care** | **Kinship care** |
| 19.3% | 24.8% | 55.9% |
| 26.7% | 21.8% | 51.5% |
| 28.2% | 23.9% | 47.9% |
| 26.1% | 23.7% | 50.2% |
| 24.3% | 21.7% | 54.0% |
| 24.6% | 22.0% | 53.4% |
| 22.3% | 20.4% | 57.3% |
| 21.2% | 16.5% | 62.3% |
| 18.4% | 17.7% | 63.9% |
| 15.0% | 16.0% | 69.0% |

*Source: (DHHS, 2020a)*

*Note: Data excludes young people on permanent care orders.*

Historically, the separation of Aboriginal children from their families was used intentionally by Australian governments as a method of destroying Aboriginal communities and cultures and assimilating the Aboriginal population into the white Australian culture. These practices were particularly prominent in Victoria (Murrup-Stewart, Searle, Jobson, & Adams, 2018), and their devastating legacy has been enduring, as reflected by the poor social, economic, and health and wellbeing outcomes experienced by members of the Stolen Generations and their families.

It is now recognised that removal of Aboriginal children from their families should only be used as a method of last resort for their protection, and that Aboriginal children still have the right to be raised within their culture. The Aboriginal Child Placement Principle states that Aboriginal children have the right to be raised in their own family, culture and community, and that these are vital to ‘growing up’ Aboriginal children well (VACCA, 2018). This principle has been adopted in Victorian legislation, including the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 (Vic), which states that wherever possible Aboriginal children in out-of-home care must be placed within the Aboriginal extended family or relatives, and that any non-Aboriginal placement must ensure the maintenance of the child’s culture and identity through contact with the child’s community.

The advocacy and advice of Victorian ACCOs, such as the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) and Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People’s Alliance, has been instrumental in informing further improvements to related policy and legislation. ACCOs have also played a central role in the Taskforce 1000 project, through which community service organisations, government departments and the Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) collaborated to identify and address key issues for Aboriginal children in care and their families. This process has led to implementation of Section 18 of the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 (Vic), which enables the Secretary of the DHHS to transfer powers and functions for Aboriginal children on protection orders to the Aboriginal Principal Officer (CEO) of an Aboriginal organisation. By allowing Aboriginal organisations to assume responsibility of Aboriginal children on protection orders this process supports culturally informed decision making.

In the process of consultation with ACCOs on the development of this report, it was observed that authorisations to ACCOs under Section 18 can only occur when an Aboriginal child is already on a Child Protection Order, and it was noted that it would be beneficial for additional processes to be implemented to facilitate ACCOs working proactively with families before orders are made.

#### Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care (ACAC) and Transitioning Aboriginal Children to ACCOs (TAC) mid-term evaluation report

ACAC and TAC support the transfer of responsibility for Aboriginal children involved with Child Protection to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) either through a legislative process of authorisation (ACAC), or contracted case management (TAC) to ACCOs. The ACAC and TAC initiatives are fundamental pillars in promoting and achieving Aboriginal self-determination and aim to address the over-representation of Aboriginal children in care. It is widely recognised that connection to culture, community and Country is fundamental to supporting the safety and identity of Aboriginal children.

The ACAC and kinship component of the TAC programs were funded in the 2018-19 State Budget and funding lapses at the end of the 2019-20 financial year.

ACAC and TAC collectively aim to:

* maintain Aboriginal children’s cultural identity and promote connection to family, community and Country
* support Aboriginal children to return home to parents or extended families where
* it is safe to do so, or support the identification of culturally safe alternative care
* achieve self-determination by handing decision making and case management
* for vulnerable Aboriginal children from the DHHS to the relevant ACCO
* improve the support and decision making for Aboriginal children who have been
* placed on Children’s Court protection orders.

#### Key findings

The key findings arising from Phase 1 of the evaluation are that:

* ACAC and kinship component of TAC are contributing to positive outcomes and cultural empowerment for children, families and communities
* as of June 2019, 45 per cent of Aboriginal children on contractible orders were case managed by ACCOs either through ACAC or TAC
* as of June 2019, 72 of 108 funded ACAC targets were filled (66 per cent)
* since 2016 the number of children contracted to an ACCO has grown by 250 per cent
* ACAC and TAC are contributing to higher reunification rates of children with their families
* there has been significant growth in the capacity of ACCOs to support effective implementation of ACAC and TAC
* the transition initiatives align with the DHHS’s priority action to operationalise the agreed principles of self-determination
* the practices undertaken by ACCOs, as part of these initiatives are perceived by children, families and professionals to be more culturally appropriate, trauma-informed, timely and responsive to children and their family’s needs.

#### VACCA — Nugel program

VACCA’s Nugel program is an authorised statutory Child Protection program that operates under Section 18 of the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 (Vic). As the first of its kind in Australia, Nugel enables Aboriginal organisations to take responsibility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people on Children’s Court orders.

Nugel is a Wurundjeri word meaning ‘belong’. Nugel aims to create self-determining families, children and young people, and empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to oversee and support our kids in care.

Through Nugel, VACCA advocates for the importance of keeping our children and young people connected to community, culture and family. With this focus, VACCA aims to keep siblings connected; commits to finding family and community networks; pursues family reunifications where possible; and involves families in decision making.

John is a two-year-old boy who was removed from the care of his parents immediately after birth due to concerns relating to their substance use and the impact this had on baby John. He was placed into the care of his maternal aunt when he was just 10 days old and has remained there. Jennifer, John’s mother has had a long history of drug use which has resulted in her four older children also being removed from her care and placed on Permanent Care Orders to other family members. All four children remain living away from their mother. The contact between Jennifer and her older children at times is limited however Jennifer is working to strengthen their relationships.

John was referred to VACCA’s Nugel program with a case plan to remain permanently

with his aunt. Nugel’s practice approach is embedded in Cultural Therapeutic Ways—

a whole-of-agency approach which places culture at the centre and integrates this with theories of self-determination and trauma. It recognises that children have a sacred place at the centre of Aboriginal communities, and that Aboriginal children are born into circles of care that include immediate family, broader kinship networks and the community as a whole. Nugel is part of this community, and therefore seeks to strengthen and empower Aboriginal families to be able to take on this responsibility.

With this in mind, the Nugel case manager engaged with Jennifer about the role that she could play in the life of her son. Jennifer reports that she felt listened to and began to develop a sense of hope. Jennifer engaged in supports for her substance abuse and is currently 18 months clean of substances, which in the past included heroin and methamphetamines. Nugel assisted Jennifer to obtain stable accommodation in an area away from negative friendships, and she is now in a healthy long-term relationship. Jennifer has also recently engaged in counselling with VACCA to work on her own trauma and issues of grief and loss at having had all her children removed.

Due to these enormous changes, Nugel were able to increase the amount of time that Jennifer spends with John, and assessed that supervision was no longer necessary.

A review of the case plan changed the direction to reunification. From what started as supervised contact once a week for three hours is now unsupervised for four days a week (including overnight), soon to be five. Nugel have referred Jennifer to Aboriginal Stronger Families, who are working with her to develop her confidence as a mother and strengthen her relationship with her child. Planning is on track for John to be in the full-time care of his mother for Christmas!

#### Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation

Charlie is 14 years old and lives with his father and three siblings. Charlie’s family has a history of trauma, drug abuse and family violence. They were well known to the ACCO and the children have had multiple placements in care over the years. Charlie’s mother passed away when he was in Year 6 and he had not attended school since. Both Charlie and his younger brother were beginning to exhibit anti-social behaviours.

As a result, Charlie was at risk of entering residential care and was placed on a Family Preservation Order. To prevent Charlie from entering out-of-home care, the ACCO worked alongside the family to design a Targeted Care Package that offered a range of in-home and therapeutic supports within a cultural healing framework. Charlie and his family decidedthat through the Targeted Care Package they wanted to increase Charlie’s father’s parenting skills, re-engage Charlie with school, address his anxiety and depression, address grief and loss within the family, build prosocial behaviours and strengthen intra-family relationships.

The practical ways that they decided to do this included:

* home schooling and a tutor to prepare Charlie to return to school
* art therapy, equine therapy and counselling for the children
* in-home support to help dad with routine, structure, and to role-model parenting,
* as well as a cleaner four hours a week
* a smoking ceremony to cleanse the house and create a fresh start
* arranging a plaque and an unveiling ceremony for their mother’s grave
* supporting life story work and family history research.

Following the Targeted Care Package the family attended a Cultural Healing camp to culminate the healing journey alongside the family therapist. This involved a range of activities such as cultural tours, dance and possum skin cloak making. It was followed by returning to their mother’s Country with the possum skin cloak, for closure as a family.

As a result of the Targeted Care Package and the ongoing support provided by the ACCO, Charlie and his family have come a long way. Charlie is regularly attending school, which he enjoys and walks himself there most days. He has grown from being very quiet and depressed to full of life, even taking on more of a big brother role with his siblings. The family remains engaged with the family therapist and child psychologist and the father continues to address his own trauma and healing. The therapies, supports, and cultural healing that were included in the Targeted Care Package have been pivotal in preserving the family unit and preventing Charlie and his siblings from entering Residential Care.

In 2019, the majority of Aboriginal children in care in Victoria were placed with either an Aboriginal (40.6 per cent) or non-Aboriginal (36.9 per cent) relative. Of those for whom kinship care arrangements were not possible, relatively few were placed with other Aboriginal carers or in Aboriginal residential care, reflecting the relative scarcity of such placements available to meet demand, compared to non-Aboriginal foster and residential care. From 1 March 2017, DHHS policy, co-designed and agreed to by ACCOs, has aimed for approved cultural support plans to be provided to all Aboriginal children who had been in out-of-home care for more than 19 weeks. Cultural support plans include information about the child’s community and family, as well as goals to maintain and develop the child’s Aboriginal identity, and encourage the child’s connection to their community and culture (Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 (Vic), s.176). Of Aboriginal children who had been in out-of-home care for more than 19 weeks at 30 June 2019, only 60.2 per cent were recorded as having been provided with a cultural support plan.

Figure 22 Placement of Aboriginal children and young people in care in Victoria, as at 30 June 2019

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **With Aboriginal relative** | 40.6% |
| **With non-Aboriginal relative** | 36.9% |
| **With other Aboriginal carer** | 1.7% |
| **With other non-Aboriginal caregiver** | 15.9% |
| **In Aboriginal residential care** | 0.3% |
| **In non-Aboriginal residential care** | 4.6% |
| **Total** | 100.0% |

*Source: (DHHS, 2020a)*

Figure 23 Aboriginal children in care with a cultural support plan, 2019

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Yes** | 60.2% |
| **No** | 39.8% |

*Source: (DHHS, 2020a)*

*Note: Data includes Aboriginal children in care for more than 19 weeks at 30 June 2019 who had/had not been provided with a cultural support plan since 1 March 2017. Data excludes children on permanent care orders.*

#### Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-operative ­— Mutjang Bupuwingarrak Mukman

The Bendigo and District Aboriginal Cooperative’s (BDAC) Mutjang Bupuwingarrak Mukman Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care (ACAC) service is a successful initiative using a relationship-centred approach and working alongside families to build stronger connections to culture, community and Country. In 2020, BDAC assumed the care and case management of 72 Aboriginal children on protection orders. Through the culturally attuned delivery model, high-risk families remained engaged, and high rates of family reunification were achieved.

When we talk about self-determination and Aboriginal people making decisions on behalf of children, BDAC Mutjang Bupuwingarrak Mukman ensures there is an Aboriginal person at all levels of decision-making. Feedback from families is that they feel difficult conversations are made in a loving way like a family would. Mutjang Bupuwingarrak Mukman workers endeavour to listen to families, including them in the decision making, building two-way respectful relationships.

#### Wungurilwil Gapgapduir and the Aboriginal Children’s Forum

The Wungurilwil Gapgapduir: Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement (DHHS, 2018a) is Australia’s first tripartite agreement between ACCOs, mainstream Child and Family Welfare Organisations and the government. It prioritises the Victorian government’s commitment to self-determination alongside better outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people. Wungurilwil Gapgapduir promotes the safety, health and resilience of vulnerable Aboriginal children and young people, so they thrive and live in culturally rich and strong Aboriginal families and communities.

The Aboriginal Children’s Forum (ACF) is a group of people dedicated to improving the safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal children in, or at risk of entering, out-of-home care.

It brings together ACCOs, the community sector and government on a quarterly basis,

with a shared purpose, giving practical effect to Wungurilwil Gapgapduir.

*“The Aboriginal Children’s Forum has provided a necessary monitoring and accountability mechanisms. VACCA looks forward to it being reviewed, continued and supported with stronger investment in order to achieve its aims which we all share.”*

*-VACCA*

Participants say the ACF has brought an improved understanding of ACCOs’ perspectives, and the significance and meaning of culture. This has had a flow-on effect, with the goal of self-determination being realised more fully as ACCOs lead decision-making for children.

*“It has created a new-found belief that with strong shared purpose, barriers can be swept away and unimagined change is possible,” said one member. Another participant said that for them, the best moments were the ‘tricky’ ones. “Where disagreements are made, tricky conversations are had, all parties are being informed by the other, and outcomes eventually arise,” they said. “This is what the Aboriginal Children’s Forum is all about, working together for a better future for Aboriginal children.”*

The ACF is co-chaired by a nominated chief executive officer from an ACCO together

with the Minister for Child Protection and the Secretary of DHHS. It was established in 2015, following the Aboriginal Children’s Summit, which was convened by the then Minister for Families and Children.

#### Out-of-Home Care Education Commitment

The Out-of-Home Care Education Commitment (The Partnering Agreement) is a shared commitment between partners to improve education, health and wellbeing outcomes for children and young people in out-of-home care. The Partnering Agreement was refreshed in 2018, with changes to align with current legislation, policy and programs available to children and young people in out-of-home care to support their education, health and wellbeing.

The Partnering Agreement is a commitment between:

* the Department of Education and Training (DET)
* the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)
* the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria
* Independent Schools Victoria
* Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA)
* the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare.

The agreement aims to ensure that:

* processes are in place to actively support the educational achievement of every child and young person in out-of-home care
* a strongly coordinated approach exists to support the needs of children and young people in out-of-home care
* all parties understand each other’s roles and responsibilities and work cooperatively
* strategies are implemented to improve outcomes related to student enrolment, attendance, achievement, case planning, retention and school completion.

#### LOOKOUT Educational Support Centres (LOOKOUT Centres)

LOOKOUT Centres are an additional resource to support schools and Child Protection practitioners to meet their obligations under the Partnering Agreement. LOOKOUT Centres also provide support in the early childhood sector. Each regional LOOKOUT Centre is led by an experienced school principal and is staffed by a team of education specialists, allied health professionals and Koori Cultural Advisors.

LOOKOUT centres provide professional development, advocacy, and expert advice and support to build the capability of professionals who work with children and young people in care, making sure that education is at the centre of decisions made about their care, placement and future.

LOOKOUT centres assist children and young people through:

* professional development for staff and carers
* advice to schools to support individual students
* challenging enrolment decisions that aren’t in a student’s best interests
* facilitating opportunities for students to participate fully in school life (including camps, excursions and extracurricular activities).

#### Early childhood agreement for children in out-of-home care

The early childhood agreement for children in out-of-home care aims to increase

the participation of young children placed in out-of-home care in high quality early childhood education and care.

The agreement focuses on:

* meeting the health, learning and development, and cultural needs of children
* engaging children with universal services, particularly Victoria’s funded kindergarten programs including Early Start Kindergarten for three-year olds and Koorie Kids Shine.

The agreement also works towards all children in kinship care and their carers engaging in supported playgroups or Koorie supported playgroups. These services are free for children placed in out-of-home care, and provide core foundations in health, development and learning. All children, regardless of their circumstances, have the right to access these services.

***LOOKOUT case study***

*In 2019, Corey was placed into out-of-home care with his older and younger siblings and began attending kindergarten for the first time at the age of six. This was Corey’s first experience learning with other children and in the beginning he experienced significant behavioural challenges. In order to better support Corey’s early learning and prepare him for the transition to school, staff at the early learning centre contacted their LOOKOUT Early Childhood Learning Advisor with the aim of developing a learning plan tailored to his needs.*

*The LOOKOUT Centre was able to provide the early learning centre with trauma informed training, information and resources, with input from the LOOKOUT Centre’s Early Childhood Learning Advisor, Koorie Education Advisor and Psychologist. Additional guidance was received from the local Preschool Field Officer and Koorie Education Support Officer (KESO). The early learning centre implemented several changes to make Corey feel welcome and encourage his connection to culture, including an Acknowledgment of Country placed at the entrance of the building, introduction of an Aboriginal welcome song to start group sessions, and the offer of art activities. Over time, Corey began to settle in, enjoy his education and learn how to self-regulate his behaviour.*

*Towards the end of Corey’s kindergarten year, LOOKOUT Centre staff made contact with the school in preparation for his transition, and to inform the school about his strengths and needs. With the assistance of the LOOKOUT Centre, Corey’s school initiated a School Support Group which included representatives from Student Support Services and Child Protection, as well as his preschool teacher and the local KESO. The School Support Group ensured all required information was sensitively shared and that an appropriate transition plan was formulated. Around this time, Corey was placed with a new carer, who took an active role in making sure Corey attended all transition sessions and that he felt familiar with school by going for daily walks past the campus.*

*Corey started school with an active multidisciplinary care team supporting his transition into Prep. Student Support Services completed an Educational Needs Analysis early in his first term of schooling and worked quickly with the school to submit an application for additional funding supports. The school also worked closely with Occupational and Play Therapists to make environmental adjustments that supported Corey’s feelings of safety at school. Work with Corey focussed on building his language skills, social skills and ability to self-regulate. His Individual Learning Plans have played to his strengths, and the school has provided opportunities for him to pursue his interests, which include bike riding, sports, dancing, singing, music and gymnastics.*

*Corey’s connection to culture has become very strong, and he enjoys showing others his cultural arts and crafts. His cultural plan, developed as part of his placement in out-of-home care, has encouraged the school to further extend their cultural programs with support of the local KESO. The successful ongoing collaboration between the LOOKOUT Centre, Child Protection, Student Support Services, and Corey’s school and carer, works to coordinate the supports Corey needs for long-term success in education, and it is expected that as he develops his needs for intensive supports will be fewer.*

The transition from out-of-home care to independent living can be extremely difficult, with many young people encountering problems with access to healthcare, education, employment, and housing (Mendes, Saunders, & Baidawi, 2016). This can relate to having had limited opportunities to develop independent living skills while in care, as well as to the factors that disproportionately affect disadvantaged cohorts, including

the high costs of housing and need for financial support while pursuing post-school qualifications. Research with child and family welfare agencies has also found that many Aboriginal youth exiting care face additional burdens due to care responsibilities for siblings or other family members, and that because some leave or abscond from care placements early, they can miss out on the support services available to help with transitioning to independence (Mendes, Saunders, & Baidawi, 2016).

To put this transition in perspective, it is worth noting that analysis of the 2017 wave of data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey found that more than 60 per cent of Victorians aged 18 to 29 were still living with their parents (Wilkins & Vera-Toscano, 2019). As such, for those exiting care at age 18, the transition to independence occurs far more abruptly and at a younger age than is typical in our society. For this reason, both public policy think tanks and the community services sector, including Victorian ACCOs, have strongly advocated to raise the age for which government assumes formal responsibility for young people in care (The Home Stretch, 2020), with a focus on enabling the transition to be better planned, less abrupt, and with flexible supports available into early adulthood (Campo & Commerford, 2016). The Victorian Government is currently in the process of extending the support services available to young people transitioning from out-of-home care through the Better Futures and Home Stretch programs, including the extension of support up to the age of 21 for every young Victorian in out-of-home care from 1 January 2021.

#### Support for young people to transition from care: Better Futures and Home Stretch

Better Futures aims to engage earlier with young people in care, supporting them from

15 years and 9 months to have an active voice in their transition planning, and with access to case work support and flexible funding to support their goals for independence. The program provides individualised supports both in-care and post-care across a range of life areas including housing, health and wellbeing, education, employment, and community and cultural connections.

Home Stretch commenced in 2019 and is delivered via the Better Futures program. Better Futures workers proactively engage with young people up to 21 years of age to support them as they transition from care to adulthood. As part of the Victorian Budget 2020/21, $64.7 million over four years and ongoing funding was announced to make the landmark Home Stretch program universal, extending state supports to all young people in out-of-home care from 18 to 21 years, from 1 January 2021 and from 16 years of age from 2021-22. An additional $10.3 million over four years was also announced to bolster the supports provided by the Better Futures program.

Through the Home Stretch program young people and their kinship and foster carers have the option of the young person remaining with their carer up to the age of 21 years, supported by an allowance. Young people leaving residential care are eligible for an allowance to support housing costs up to 21 years of age. In addition to an accommodation allowance, the program includes case work support and brokerage provided by a key worker, to facilitate the young person’s access to education, employment and health and wellbeing supports. The Home Stretch program is based on international and Australian evidence that extending the age of support for young people in care contributes to improved outcomes.

#### VACCA — Better Futures program, Southern Metropolitan Region

The VACCA Better Futures (BF) program connects young Aboriginal and/or Torres

Strait Islander people from the age of 16 years and nine months with a BF Youth Worker. The worker assists them as they transition from out-of-home care into adulthood (up to 21 years of age) to work towards independence based on needs and aspirations within a cultural framework. Flexible funding and housing support through Homestretch can also be accessed for eligible young people.

James is 17 years old and a proud young Aboriginal man. James is currently involved in our VACCA Better Futures and VACCA Kinship Program as well as connected to our broader youth cultural programs. His Kinship Case Manager supported and advocated for James and his extended family with day to day care needs. VACCA’s Kinship Program ensured James and his carer were linked with relevant Aboriginal and mainstream services and his placement was well supported.

James is the youngest of eight children and has a mild disability, experienced poor schooling and has struggled to re-engage in education and training. James has had various placements in out-of-home care including residential care, and spent time in custodial Youth Justice settings. He currently lives with extended family. Due to intergenerational trauma and family loss, James was previously involved in drug substance misuse and negative peer relationships. With a multi-disciplinary care team approach and James being at the centre of this care, both he and his carer have felt well supported.

Since working closely with an Aboriginal youth worker in the VACCA Better Futures program, James is considering employment and education pathways, navigating NDIS service options as well as becoming an Aboriginal leader in our VACCA cultural camps later this year. Feedback from James is that he sees his Aboriginal youth worker as a strong mentor and positive role model.

Despite the many challenges facing James in everyday life, he strives to reach his aspirations and goals, supported by VACCA to remain connected to his culture towards self-determination, healing and change.

# PART 2: HEALTH, AND SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

Health has strong interactions with other areas of children and young people’s lives, with the potential to influence their social life, family relationships, emotional wellbeing, and educational outcomes. Mainstream explanatory and treatment models for physical and mental illnesses often differ from Aboriginal people’s experiences and cultural understandings of health, in which the physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing of a person, their community and the environment, are closely connected (State of Victoria, 2019). This holistic concept of health, often termed social and emotional wellbeing, is gathering traction in Aboriginal health research and practice, which now recognises the significant influence of social relationships, cultural connections, and history on Aboriginal health outcomes (Marmor & Harley, 2018; Day, Nakata, & Miller, 2016; Dudgeon, Bray, D’Costa, & Walker, 2017). There is also growing recognition that Aboriginal health outcomes cannot be meaningfully improved independently of acknowledging and addressing the underlying social, economic and historical basis of inequality (Calma, Dudgeon, & Bray, 2017), as well as issues related to the cultural safety and appropriateness of services, assessments, and treatments.

For the purpose of this report, it is not possible to provide a direct measurement of children and young people’s social and emotional wellbeing or how this has changed over time. This is because social and emotional wellbeing is a highly contextual concept and the data collections available do not capture all of the relevant dimensions it encompasses (Day, Nakata, & Miller, 2016). Indeed, previous attempts to construct a single index of social and emotional wellbeing out of existing data collections have been unsuccessful (Marmor & Harley, 2018). Instead, Part 2 of this report examines the data and research available on the physical and mental health of Aboriginal children and young people in Victoria, to be considered in the context of other factors contributing to their social and emotional wellbeing. These factors include the challenges experienced by the Aboriginal community identified in Part 1 of this report, as well as strengths, including connections to culture, and the topics of educational engagement and post-school pathways covered in Part 3.

The evidence collated here shows a number of positive health trends, including better immunisation coverage for Aboriginal children and declines in smoking for young people. There are also examples of programs run by ACCOs and other organisations successfully engaging Aboriginal young people in healthy lifestyles with participation in physical activity and information about good nutrition. Overall, however, the Aboriginal community continues to experience a significantly higher burden of disease than the rest of the Australian population (AIHW, 2016a; Young, Hanson, Craig, Clapham, & Williamson, 2017), including elevated risks of a range of physical and mental health conditions for children and young people (Butten, et al., 2019; Blair, Zubrick, & Cox, 2005; AIHW, 2015; Sherriff, et al., 2019). Where children have poor health, this can be source of both emotional and financial stress for families, especially those already experiencing other aspects of disadvantage.

The reasons for this health inequality are complex, but are known to be interrelated with socioeconomic disadvantage (AIHW, 2016b), as well as other factors that can be understood as downstream effects of colonisation, including experiences of discrimination and trauma, lifestyle risks, and barriers to health services including issues of cultural safety and distrust of government services (Butten, et al., 2019). In particular, research shows that exposure to stressful life events and experiences of racism are associated with poorer physical and mental health for both Aboriginal adults and children (Bodkin-Andrews, et al., 2017; Larson, Gillies, Howard, & Coffin,

2007; Zubrick, et al., 2005; Cave, Shepherd, Cooper, & Zubrick, 2019; Salmon, et al., 2019). Similar health inequalities are known to affect other colonised First Nations in Canada, New Zealand, and the United States.

While Aboriginal health has been identified as a priority in numerous strategies

across Commonwealth, state, territory and local governments, action in this space has often been criticised for a lack of progress and for failing to include input from Aboriginal people and communities in the design and implementation of programs (Murrup-Stewart, Searle, Jobson, & Adams, 2018; The Lowitja Institute, 2020). Reflecting this, more recent endeavours including the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap, released in July 2020 (Australian Government, 2020), and Victoria’s Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018-2023 (State of Victoria, 2018a) and Korin Korin Balit-Djak: Aboriginal health, wellbeing and safety strategic plan 2017-2027 (DHHS, 2017a), recognise the key role of Aboriginal organisations, communities and leadership in responding to Aboriginal healthcare needs.

## Key findings

* Data indicates that the proportion of Victorian Aboriginal children enrolled in Maternal and Child Health services has increased over the 15 years from 2003-04 to 2017-18 (ABS, 2019a; ABS, 2014; ABS, 2020b; DET, 2020b), closing much of the gap with rates of enrolment for the general population.
* From 2010 to 2019, rates of full immunisation coverage at ages one and five improved for Victorian Aboriginal children, with rates at five years (97.3 per cent) now exceeding those of the general population (95.7 per cent) (Department of Health, 2020). Vaccination rates, however, vary geographically and these inequalities are more pronounced for the Aboriginal cohort, with coverage under 90 per cent for one year olds in some Primary Health Network (PHN) areas.
* From 2008-09 to 2019-20, the proportion of children and young people (aged

birth to 17) presenting to Victorian public dental services with a history of tooth decay, or with untreated tooth decay, declined for both the Aboriginal and

non-Aboriginal cohorts, including a modest narrowing of the gap between

cohorts on both measures (DHHS & DHSV, 2020). In 2019-20, 36.6 per cent of

the Aboriginal cohort presented with untreated tooth decay as compared

to 59 per cent in 2008-09.

* As with the general population, lifestyle factors such as poor diet and lack of physical activity are increasing the risks of long-term health problems for many Aboriginal children and young people. In 2018-19, extremely few Aboriginal children and young people (3.9 per cent) met the dietary guidelines for vegetable consumption, and only 8.7 per cent of those aged 15 to 24 met the physical activity guidelines for daily exercise (ABS, 2020a), factors likely contributing to the high prevalence of overweight and obesity amongst the cohort.
* Rates of smoking are higher among Aboriginal young people, but are declining in a similar trend to rates of smoking among young people generally (Heris, et al., 2020a). In 2018-19, 64.8 per cent of Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 to 24 had never smoked (ABS, 2020a).
* While there may be risks related to excessive alcohol consumption for some Aboriginal young people in Victoria, this is not an issue particular to the Aboriginal community. The 2017-18 National Health Survey found that among the general Australian population 46.8 per cent of young people aged 15 to 24 had exceeded the single occasion risk guideline (consuming more than four standard alcoholic drinks on a single occasion) at least once in the past 12 months (ABS, 2018b). The 2018-19 NATSIHS found very similar results (48.4 per cent) for Aboriginal Victorians in the same age group (ABS, 2020a).
* Young Aboriginal Victorians experience stress frequently and at high levels. Data from the 2014-15 NATSISS showed that 40.4 percent of Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 to 24 had experienced high to very high levels of psychological distress in the four weeks prior to completing the survey, and that mental health diagnoses were also prevalent for this cohort, including anxiety (24.4 per cent) and depression (22.5 per cent) (ABS, 2016b).
* Experiences of discrimination, violence, and bullying put the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people at risk (Thomas, et al., 2017; Priest, King, Bécares, & Kavanagh, 2016; McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015). From 2017 to 2019, the proportion of Aboriginal students in Victorian government schools reporting experiences of bullying trended down from 25.9 per cent to 22.1 per cent (as compared to 18.7 per cent to 14.7 per cent for non-Aboriginal students) (DET, 2019a).
* In 2014-15, 37.1 per cent of Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 to 24 reported they had experienced unfair treatment over the past 12 months because they were Aboriginal, while 12.1 per cent reported having experienced physical violence

(ABS, 2016b).

#### National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2020

The National Indigenous Reform Agreement 2008 set out the initial Closing the Gap strategy of the Coalition of Australian Governments (now superseded by the National Federation Reform Council), aimed at addressing the profound health inequalities experienced by Aboriginal Australians.

In many areas, the progress against the goals set by this agreement was limited or mixed, and in 2017 a process commenced to refresh the Closing the Gap agenda, with key changes advocated for by the Aboriginal community and organisations. From this, the new National Agreement was developed with a recognition of the role of the Aboriginal community in decision-making regarding policies and services, and the need for structural changes in the way that governments work with the Aboriginal community.

On 30 July 2020 a new National Agreement was brought into effect by endorsement of all Australian Governments, the Australian Local Government Association, and the Coalition of Peaks, a body representing more than 50 Aboriginal community-controlled peak and member organisations from across Australia, including 13 Victorian ACCOs.

The new National Agreement has been developed around four priority areas with related commitments for governments (Coalition of Peaks, 2020).

1. Shared decision-making: Structures will be developed, including formal partnership arrangements setting out agreed roles and responsibilities, that enable Aboriginal people to share decision-making authority with governments on policy and place-based approaches related to Closing the Gap.
2. Building the community-controlled sector: Governments and the Coalition of

Peaks will build and strengthen the community-controlled services sector to

deliver Closing the Gap programs and services across Australia. This includes

funding prioritisation polices to increase the proportion of services delivered

by community-controlled organisations.

1. Improving mainstream institutions: Government organisations will be transformed to improve accountability and better respond to the needs of Aboriginal people.This includes identifying and eliminating racism and embedding cultural safety.
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led data: Aboriginal people have access

and the ability to use locally relevant data and information to set and monitor

the implementation of efforts to close the gap, their priorities and drive their

own development.

Recognising social and economic determinants of health and their contribution to the outcome gaps experienced by the Aboriginal community, the National Agreement also encompasses a suite of 16 socioeconomic targets in areas such as education, employment, health and wellbeing, justice, safety, housing, land and waters, and languages. These include eight targets specifically related to children and young people aged from birth to 24 years.

Target 2: By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies with a healthy birthweight to 91 per cent.

Target 3: By 2025, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in year before full-time schooling early childhood education to 95 per cent.

Target 4: By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children assessed as developmentally on track in all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) to 55 per cent.

Target 5: By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (aged 20 to 24 years) attaining year 12 or equivalent qualification to 96 per cent.

Target 7: By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth (aged 15 to 24 years) who are in employment, education or training to 67 per cent.

Target 11: By 2031, reduce the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (aged 10 to 17 years) in detention by 30 per cent.

Target 12: By 2031, reduce the rate of over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care by 45 per cent.

Target 13: A significant and sustained reduction in violence and abuse against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children towards zero.

Jurisdictions will report annually on their progress and contribution towards Closing the Gap, with data made publicly available by the Productivity Commission. Victoria was the first state to announce a new additional investment of funding towards progressing the new National Agreement with $3.3 million allocated over four years to support Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and put them at the heart of reform work.

#### Koornong Ngootong Nganoong Day

Warrnambool Clontarf Academy partnered with Gunditjmara Aboriginal Cooperative

Health Service to expand a recommended yearly Aboriginal and Torres strait Islander Health assessment check into a full day of cultural and health related activities. This first Koornong Ngootong Nganoong Day was held in June 2019 at the Gunditjmara Harris Street Reserve Community facility in Warrnambool.

Aboriginal students participated in Welcome to Country cultural ceremonies and traditional activities, received a Health Check, engaged in a sexual health workshop and heard some inspiring stories from Indigenous Elder Charmaine Clarke and ex-Collingwood AFL star Leon ‘Neon’ Davis.

The full day event offered a special activity for all the students who attended. Many of the boys were in awe of Leon Davis as he told the story of his struggles, and the hurdles he faced to become an AFL footballer. Charmaine Clarke inspired the students to be the best versions of themselves and strive for greatness. The basket weaving session fascinated many who were unaware of this local cultural tradition. And while there were many laughs during the Sexual Health workshop, the students understood the clear messages being delivered. The traditional games facilitated by Leon, while a great way to conclude the day, also gave the students further knowledge and understanding of their culture.

*“I learnt lots about looking after myself, not just physically but spiritually and emotionally. I also didn’t know about some of the jobs that are out there in health.”*

*-Year 11 student*

The above student gained an interest in health careers after attending Koornong Ngootong Nganoong Day and had organised a Work Placement at Gunditjmara Health Clinic just prior to COVID-19 restrictions.

The event was made possible by the dedicated health professionals and staff from Gunditjmara Health Clinic. The event allowed the students to feel comfortable, connected and supported throughout the day as well as guiding and empowering them to take control of their physical, emotional and spiritual health.

#### Korin Korin Balit-Djak

Korin Korin Balit-Djak Aboriginal health, wellbeing and safety strategic plan 2017–2027 (Korin Korin Balit-Djak) is the Department of Health and Human Services’ overarching Aboriginal policy framework.

Aboriginal self-determination is at the core of its design, development and implementation. Developed in 2017, Korin Korin Balit-Djak cascaded down to the following policy agreements, frameworks and strategies:

* Wungurilwil Gapgapduir: Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement 2018 (DHHS 2018a)
* Balit Murrup: Aboriginal Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework (DHHS 2017b)
* Aboriginal Governance and Accountability Framework (DHHS 2017c)
* The Aboriginal Medical Research Accord — Cancer, Speciality Programs, Medical Research and International Health Branch
* Dhelk Dja: Safe Our Way — Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families 2018–2028 (DHHS 2018b)
* Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort: Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework (Aboriginal Housing Victoria, 2020).

It is these agreements, frameworks and plans that drive the Department of Health and Human Services Aboriginal services and programs, and system wide reform.

## Maternal and Child Health

The development that occurs from conception to birth, and in the first few years of a child’s life, has lifelong effects on an individual’s health and wellbeing, with the potential to establish either strong foundations, or increase vulnerability to disease and poor health later in life (Moore, Arefadib, Deery, Keyes, & West, 2017). Across Australia most Aboriginal mothers have healthy pregnancies, with babies born at term and with normal birthweight, but perinatal outcomes are poorer, on average, than those for non-Aboriginal women and babies (AIHW, 2020c). These outcomes occur in the context of the historic, socioeconomic and health factors that affect the Aboriginal community, and can relate to issues of cultural safety that affect how Aboriginal women access Maternal and Child Health (MCH) services (Department of Health, 2019b).

Victorian Perinatal data show that infants with an Aboriginal mother were at around 82 per cent higher risk of mortality during the three year period from 2016 to 2018. Victorian Aboriginal babies also have a higher likelihood of low birthweight than non-Aboriginal babies, a factor known to increase the risks for infant mortality, and susceptibly to a range of health problems. Globally, research has shown that the risk

of low birthweight is associated with socioeconomic disadvantage, psychosocial stress, and experiences of family violence (East , Biro, Fredericks, & Lau, 2019), all of which are factors disproportionately affecting Aboriginal mothers. Victorian Perinatal data also show that Aboriginal mothers are more likely to smoke during pregnancy, another known risk factor for low birthweight (AIHW, 2020e).

Figure 24 Infant mortality rate per 1,000 live births, Victoria (rolling triennia)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Non-Aboriginal mother** | **Aboriginal mother** |
| **2009-2011** | 3.9 | 8.4 |
| **2010-2012** | 3.8 | 7.7 |
| **2011-2013** | 3.7 | 9.4 |
| **2012-2014** | 3.7 | 10.0 |
| **2013-2015** | 3.7 | 10.0 |
| **2014-2016** | 3.5 | 6.3 |
| **2015-2017** | 3.4 | 5.6 |
| **2016-2018** | 3.4 | 6.2 |

*Source: (Consultative Council on Obstetric and Paediatric Mortality and Morbidity, 2020)*

*Note: As there is a small number of Aboriginal perinatal deaths in any single year, these results are pooled for three years and reported for rolling triennia. Births in which Aboriginality was unknown are excluded. Rates exclude terminations of pregnancy = 20 weeks for maternal psychosocial indications, but do not exclude terminations of pregnancy for congenital anomaly resulting in neonatal death.*

Figure 25 Babies with low birthweight as a proportion of all livebirths in Victoria

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2010** | **2011** | **2012** | **2013** | **2014** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** |
| **Aboriginal** | 10.1% | 12.5% | 9.7% | 11.2% | 11.9% | 11.3% | 9.7% | 13.1% | 11.7% |
| **Non-Aboriginal** | 6.2% | 6.1% | 6.0% | 6.3% | 6.4% | 6.3% | 6.5% | 6.6% | 6.6% |

*Source: (Consultative Council on Obstetric and Paediatric Mortality and Morbidity, 2020)*

*Note: Denominator is all babies who were liveborn at 20 or more weeks gestation. Data excludes those for whom Aboriginal status is not known, and terminations of pregnancy.*

Figure 26 Any reported smoking during pregnancy, Victorian mothers

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2010** | **2011** | **2012** | **2013** | **2014** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** |
| **Aboriginal** | 41.9% | 40.5% | 40.2% | 43.7% | 40.4% | 39.5% | 38.1% | 40.6% | 40.2% |
| **Non-Aboriginal** | 11.3% | 11.3% | 10.8% | 10.2% | 9.7% | 9.0% | 8.5% | 8.2% | 7.5% |

*Source: (Consultative Council on Obstetric and Paediatric Mortality and Morbidity, 2020)*

*Note: Denominator is all women who gave birth at 20 or more weeks gestation. Data excludes those for whom Aboriginal status is not known, and terminations of pregnancy.*

In Victoria, the proportion of Aboriginal babies born to teenage mothers was lower in 2018 (nine per cent) than in 2010 (16.1 per cent), but was still significantly higher than for the non-Aboriginal population. While young parenthood is not always a negative experience, it does have the potential to affect educational and employment opportunities, and for mothers under the age of 20 and their babies, is associated with increased risk for a number of poorer health, and social and emotional wellbeing outcomes (AIHW, 2020f).

Figure 27 Livebirths to women aged 15-19 years as a proportion of all livebirths in Victoria

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2010** | **2011** | **2012** | **2013** | **2014** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** |
| **Aboriginal** | 16.1% | 12.3% | 13.7% | 13.0% | 11.2% | 7.4% | 11.0% | 9.6% | 9.0% |
| **Non-Aboriginal** | 2.2% | 2.2% | 2.1% | 2.0% | 1.8% | 1.5% | 1.3% | 1.2% | 1.1% |

*Source: (Consultative Council on Obstetric and Paediatric Mortality and Morbidity, 2020)*

*Note: Denominator is all babies who were liveborn at 20 or more weeks gestation. Data excludes those for whom Aboriginal status is not known, and terminations of pregnancy.*

The Victorian Government’s Universal MCH service provides all new families with access to a maternal and child health nurse, who acts as a point of information, advice and support for families, providing information on childhood development and parenting, and identifying where children may have additional health or support needs. In addition to the Universal MCH service, an Enhanced MCH service provides flexible interventions and targeted support to families identified as having a higher level of need due to multiple vulnerabilities, such as infants with complex health and developmental issues, lack of engagement with the universal program, or social factors impacting parenting or home safety.

A review of Aboriginal families’ engagement with MCH services in Victoria found that lower levels of participation reflected experiences of intergenerational trauma and the failure of services to provide a culturally safe model of care (VACCHO, 2014). Recent MCH initiatives have been implemented to address these issues and provide culturally responsive services meeting the needs of Aboriginal families. These include the Aboriginal MCH Initiative, which provides choices to engage with Aboriginal staff and ACCO run services, and Koorie Maternity Services (KMS), which deliver flexible, inclusive and culturally safe care for Aboriginal women, women having Aboriginal babies, and their families.

Based on proportions derived from MCH services enrolments and population estimates, the rate of participation in MCH services is lower for Aboriginal families than for the general population. However, over the 15-year period from 2003–04 to 2017–18 much of this gap has closed. This is a positive trend, with Aboriginal MCH enrolments moving toward parity with non-Aboriginal enrolments in the long term.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Figure 28 Proportion of Victorian children aged birth to four years enrolled at a Maternal and Child Health service, 2003-04 to 2017-18

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **All children** | **Aboriginal** |
| **2003-04** | 81.8% | 49.3% |
| **2004-05** | 82.5% | 52.3% |
| **2005-06** | 83.0% | 54.5% |
| **2006-07** | 82.9% | 57.3% |
| **2007-08** | 81.5% | 57.5% |
| **2008-09** | 82.6% | 61.9% |
| **2009-10** | 82.6% | 62.7% |
| **2010-11** | 82.9% | 62.4% |
| **2011-12** | 81.6% | 66.0% |
| **2012-13** | 80.8% | 69.2% |
| **2013-14** | 80.1% | 71.4% |
| **2014-15** | 80.0% | 74.1% |
| **2015-16** | 80.8% | 73.1% |
| **2016-17** | 79.3% | 68.1% |
| **2017-18** | 77.5% | 70.1% |

*Source: (ABS, 2019a; ABS, 2014; ABS, 2020b; DET, 2020b)*

*Note: These proportions are based on Maternal and Child Health enrolments data and several sets of ABS population estimates over 15 years. In 2015-16 a new reporting system was introduced for Maternal and Child Health services which may affect enrolment numbers. Similarly, population estimates from 2016 on have been revised based on data collected through the 2016 Census of Population and Housing, which saw an increase in the estimated Victorian Aboriginal population including for the birth to four years age group.*

For children participating in MCH services, the Key Ages and Stages Framework sets out evidence based activities for 10 MCH consultations from birth until the age of 3.5 years, with emphasis on health promotion across a range of domains that address both maternal and child health and wellbeing. The Key Ages and Stages consultations provide an opportunity for assessment of children’s development and early interventions, and for reassuring parents who have concerns about their child. Participation rates for earlier consultations are high for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children, and then drop off as children age, with participation dropping off more markedly for Aboriginal children earlier on but ending up similar for both cohorts at the 3.5-year stage.

Figure 29 Participation Rates for Key Ages and Stages Consultations, 2017-18

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal status unknown** | **Aboriginal** |
| **Home Consultation** | 100.2% | 97.9% |
| **2 Weeks** | 96.8% | 89.9% |
| **4 Weeks** | 97.2% | 88.9% |
| **8 Weeks** | 96.2% | 83.9% |
| **4 Months** | 94.4% | 80.4% |
| **8 Months** | 86.1% | 70.6% |
| **12 Months** | 83.6% | 67.5% |
| **18 Months** | 74.5% | 60.7% |
| **2 Years** | 70.7% | 62.1% |
| **3.5 Years** | 64.3% | 61.1% |

*Sources: (DET, 2020b)*

#### Maternal and Child Health services for Aboriginal families

To support stronger Aboriginal participation in MCH services, a service model was

co-designed to deliver more culturally responsive and high-quality services that focussed on meeting the needs of families. The model consists of the following principles:

* access to information in the antenatal period
* a choice to receive services from an ACCO and/or their local government
* the choice to engage with Aboriginal staff
* access to a culturally safe, flexible and integrated service delivery.

The Aboriginal MCH Initiative (AMCHI) service model was trialled in nine organisations across local government and Aboriginal organisational delivery settings in 2017 and continued in 2018-19 and 2019-20. Funding of $4 million was then allocated through the 2018-19 State Budget over four years to 2021-22 to support the continuation and expansion of Aboriginal MCH services into Aboriginal organisations as well as funding Aboriginal MCH scholarships. This investment allowed for the continuation of Aboriginal MCH service delivery in four Aboriginal organisations that were part of the AMCHI trial and its expansion into a further six Aboriginal organisations, ensuring the delivery of culturally safe, responsive universal MCH services to Aboriginal families and strengthening self-determination in Aboriginal organisations.

Early in 2020 the Department of Health and Human Services called for submissions from Aboriginal organisations to apply to deliver Aboriginal MCH services under the expansion of the program and in October 2020 the six new providers for Aboriginal MCH services were announced:

* Albury Wodonga Aboriginal Health Service
* Bendigo and District Aboriginal Cooperative
* Bubup Wilam Aboriginal Child and Family Centre
* Mallee District Aboriginal Services Mildura
* Murray Valley Aboriginal Cooperative
* Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation.

These services will join the four existing Aboriginal MCH service providers:

* Gunditjmara
* Mallee District Aboriginal Services Swan Hill
* Njernda, and
* Wathaurong.

Providing the choice for Aboriginal families to access MCH services at their local ACCO acknowledges the better health outcomes that can be achieved for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and delivers services that are welcoming, respectful and safe.

#### Koori Maternity Services

The Koori Maternity Services (KMS) initiative aligns with Korin Korin Balit-Djak strategic direction 4.2.1, to increase access to culturally responsive early years services. KMS deliver flexible, inclusive and culturally safe care for Aboriginal women, women having Aboriginal babies, and their families, across 14 sites in Victoria, including 11 in ACCOs and three in public health services.

KMS are an integral component of Victoria’s maternity service system, working in partnership with women, families and the local community to ensure that service delivery is culturally safe, responsive and meets the unique needs of individuals and community. KMS and public hospitals operate with formal partnerships and agreed referral pathways for the provision of high quality and safe antenatal, intrapartum and postnatal care for Aboriginal women and boorai (baby). The role of KMS is critical to improving outcomes and increasing participation in maternity care for Aboriginal women, babies and families.

#### Gunditjmara — Ngarakeeton Ceremony

The Gunditjmara Child, Youth and Family Services team worked closely alongside their community to reintroduce the traditional Ngarakeeton (family/children) ceremony. These ceremonies welcome Gunditjmara children and infants onto Country, bringing community together and supporting families to celebrate and strengthen their cultural identity and sense of self. What began as a passion project for a small committee of staff turned into something much more significant, taking families and staff on a rich cultural journey.

The event was planned alongside community, with a committee made up of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff, Traditional Owners of Gunditjmara Country and other parts of Australia, community members and organisers from the previous Naming Day Ceremony held on Gunditjmara Country. Community played a vital role in the organizing and running of the event:

* local artists designed the invitations
* the Elders Activity shed created frames to commemorate the event
* the chairman of the Gunditjmara Board performed the Welcome to Country, and spoke of its importance and how special it was to have the event on such a significant cultural site for Gunditjmara people
* a local youth group performed traditional dance
* families from the Integrated Family Services and Cradle to Kinder programs helped to set up and cook the barbecue
* a local artist sang traditional songs, including a lullaby that his mother, an Elder who was in attendance on the day, had sung to him as a baby
* local women painted ochre on communities faces and Gunditjamara staff painted ochre on baby’s feet to put on paperbark and keep in frames to commemorate the day.

The Ngarakeeton Ceremony was held on Country, at a site of cultural significance

for Gunditjmara people. Over 200 people from across Victoria came together for the

Ceremony, with Traditional Owners travelling from Mildura, Geelong and Melbourne, bringing their children and grandchildren back to their Country. A profound moment

during the smoke ceremony was when a grandmother held her newly born

granddaughter amongst the smoke and said, ‘Welcome to our Country’.

The outcomes of this day have been continuous, widespread and overwhelmingly

positive, with Traditional Owners and local artists working together, and feeling

empowered, recognised and appreciated. In addition, families and little ones experienced a positive connection to place and community, while non-Aboriginal family members increased their cultural understanding. Service providers and clients had an opportunity to positively connect and discuss ideas and feedback on Gunditjmara’s programs. As a result, Gunditjmara will begin piloting free parenting education and support sessions for mums, dads and carers. The Ngarakeeton Ceremony united community, showing that cultural connectedness is one of the best protective factors to keep children safe and within their families.

#### Cultural safety training for the Maternal and Child Health workforce

The Department of Health and Human Services’ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Safety Framework (DHHS, 2020b) strongly recommends that mainstream services strengthen their cultural safety by participating in continuous learning and practice improvement. To support MCH services to align practice with the Framework, the MCH workforce were provided access to online Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural safety training from mid-2020. This training aims to provide the MCH workforce with a foundational understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and culture, and how to work in partnership in the provision of MCH services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

Improving the cultural safety of MCH services will ensure Victorian Aboriginal families have access to culturally safe care anywhere in Victorian that is welcoming, respectful and safe. The MCH workforce is expected to complete the training within six months. The training will also be available to access until February 2022 for any new starters and students.

In locations across Victoria, facilitated face-to-face reflection sessions are planned to follow the completion of the online training to further embed culturally safe practices at the service level. In addition to this cultural safety training, the MCH Service Guidelines (DHHS, 2019a) were revised in 2019 to include a chapter on providing care to Aboriginal children and families to support cultural safety in MCH services.

#### Training for use of the ASQ-TRAK developmental screening tool

The Department of Health and Human Services has worked with the Department of Paediatrics at Melbourne University to support the use of the ASQ-TRAK developmental screen for Victorian Aboriginal communities. The ASQ-TRAK, designed for children aged birth to six years of age, provides a culturally appropriate option for Aboriginal families, in addition to the other mainstream screening tools used under the Key Ages and Stages Framework by Maternal and Child Health (MCH) nurses. The project sought to establish a self-sustaining training delivery model. The model would enable the continuing provision of professional development in the use of ASQ-TRAK to practitioners in Victoria, as well as practitioners in other jurisdictions.

#### Professional development funding for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations delivering Maternal and Child Health services

Additional MCH workforce support funding was made available in 2019-2020. Some of this funding was allocated to support the professional development of practitioners working in MCH programs in ACCOs. ACCOs currently delivering MCH services were invited to express their interest in receiving the professional development funding.

Two ACCOs responded to the expression of interest and the Department of Health and Human Services has funded them each $15,000 to provide a greater level of overall training support to these recently established MCH services. The ACCOs have been advised that the funding can be used to provide professional development to MCH nurses or non-nursing staff who support the delivery of Aboriginal MCH services.

## Childhood immunisation

The percentage of children who have had all the vaccines recommended for their age group provides an indication of the population’s vulnerability to the spread of vaccine preventable diseases, such as polio, measles and diphtheria. High levels of coverage are required to provide ‘herd immunity’ and reduce risks for individuals who cannot be vaccinated because they are too young, or for medical reasons. Australia’s national aspirational target is for 95 per cent coverage (Department of Health, 2020). In 2016, the Victorian Government introduced new legislation requiring all children to be fully vaccinated (unless they have a medical exemption) before they can be enrolled in childcare or kindergarten in Victoria (DHHS, 2020c).

From 2010 to 2019, full vaccination coverage improved for all Victorian children at one year and five years of age, including for the Aboriginal cohort. For Aboriginal children, the most dramatic improvements have been seen in vaccination rates at five years old, which at 97.3 per cent in 2019 exceeded the state average of 95.7 per cent. Lower vaccination rates at two years of age indicate delays in children receiving vaccinations that could increase the risks of preventable disease for both Aboriginal and all Victorian children. It is also important to note that Victorian vaccination coverage statewide in the first two years does not yet meet the Australian target of 95 per cent.

Figure 30 Victorian children fully immunised, 2010 and 2019

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | 2010 | 2019 |
| Aboriginal | 1 year | 85.0% | 92.1% |
|  | 2 years | 92.5% | 90.3% |
|  | 5 years | 85.5% | 97.3% |
| All children | 1 year | 92.0% | 94.7% |
|  | 2 years | 93.2% | 92.3% |
|  | 5 years | 90.1% | 95.7% |

*Source: (Department of Health, 2020)*

Figure 31 Victorian children fully immunised at five years old

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **All children** | **Aboriginal children** |
| 2010 | 90.07% | 85.48% |
| 2011 | 91.18% | 86.58% |
| 2012 | 91.99% | 90.86% |
| 2013 | 92.64% | 91.64% |
| 2014 | 92.46% | 91.77% |
| 2015 | 93.02% | 92.51% |
| 2016 | 93.63% | 93.66% |
| 2017 | 94.55% | 94.65% |
| 2018 | 95.52% | 96.81% |
| 2019 | 95.68% | 97.27% |

*Source: (Department of Health, 2020)*

Figure 32 shows that for the one-year-old age group, Victorian vaccination rates vary geographically, and that regional differences are more pronounced for the Aboriginal cohort, with the rates below 90 per cent in the North Western Melbourne and Gippsland Primary Healthcare Network regions.

Figure 32 Victorian children fully immunised at one year old, by Primary Health Network, 2019

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **All children** | **Aboriginal children** |
| **North Western Melbourne** | 93.91% | 89.38% |
| **Eastern Melbourne** | 95.13% | 94.62% |
| **South Eastern Melbourne** | 94.79% | 93.07% |
| **Gippsland** | 94.62% | 89.24% |
| **Murray** | 94.70% | 91.90% |
| **Western Victoria** | 96.52% | 96.14% |

*Source: (Department of Health, 2020)*

Healthcare advice is a key driver for maternal and child vaccinations, and it is important that parents have access to high quality anti-natal services. Research conducted in other Australian states and territories has indicated the importance of involving Aboriginal people in the design and implementation of healthcare programs, and that Aboriginal healthcare workers and culturally safe health services can increase in immunisation coverage for Aboriginal children (Cashman, et al., 2016; Hendry, et al., 2018; McHugh, Crooks, Creighton, Binks, & Andrews, 2010).

## Oral health

Oral health is important for overall health and wellbeing. Not only does oral disease cause pain, discomfort, and suffering for the child, but it also affects the family through those distressing symptoms and the burden of costly and, sometimes difficult treatment. Poor oral health early in life is the strongest predictor of further oral disease in adult life. Oral diseases include:

* tooth decay (dental caries), which is largely caused by the interaction between fermentable carbohydrates including sugars (from food and drink) and acid producing bacteria, which dissolves mineral ions from the tooth
* gum disease (gingivitis and periodontitis), an inflammation of the gums caused by bacteria or plaque accumulation on the teeth.

Oral disease is one of the costliest health conditions to treat, but it is also one of the most preventable. A total of $3.2 billion was spent in Victoria on dental treatment in 2018-19 (AIHW, 2020g). While there have been significant improvements over the past few decades, poor oral health remains a public health issue with tooth decay being the most prevalent health condition in Victoria, affecting almost half of all children aged five to 10 years (Ha, Roberts-Thomson, Arrow, Peres, & Do, 2016). Dental conditions are also one of the highest causes of potentially preventable hospitalisations for children aged from birth to nine years, predominantly because of tooth decay (DHHS, 2020d). Oral disease shows considerable inequality across demographics and is a key marker of disadvantage. Findings from the 2015 Victorian Pre-schooler Oral Health Survey (DHHS & DHSV, 2015) showed that 57 per cent of the preschool children had tooth decay. Compared to the general population, children from families who did not speak English at home were at 2.1 times greater risk of advanced tooth decay, while those with a parent on a Health Care Card were 1.8 times greater risk, and Aboriginal children were at 1.9 times greater risk.

Many Aboriginal people in Victoria enjoy good or excellent oral health, however, as

a group, Aboriginal people are more likely to experience poorer oral health outcomes than non-Aboriginal people. Aboriginal children accessing public dental services have higher levels of untreated decay than non-Aboriginal children. Data from Victorian public dental services show that over the 12 year period from 2008–09 to 2019–20,

the proportion of children and young people (ages birth to 17) presenting with a

history of tooth decay or with untreated tooth decay declined for both Aboriginal

and non-Aboriginal cohorts. This included a modest narrowing of the gap on both measures, although 2019-20 rates showed a small increase in 2018-19 rates for the Aboriginal cohort.

Figure 33 Victorian children and young people (ages birth to 17) presenting to public dental clinics with Decay History and Untreated Decay, 2008–09 to 2019–20

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Decay History** | | **Untreated Decay** | |
|  | **Aboriginal** | **Non-Aboriginal** | **Aboriginal** | **Non-Aboriginal** |
| **2008-09** | 77.5% | 63.7% | 59.0% | 43.3% |
| **2009-10** | 78.2% | 63.8% | 58.3% | 40.7% |
| **2010-11** | 72.3% | 63.9% | 50.3% | 38.2% |
| **2011-12** | 70.3% | 61.0% | 48.7% | 35.1% |
| **2012-13** | 66.7% | 59.6% | 44.8% | 34.1% |
| **2013-14** | 65.0% | 56.8% | 43.6% | 31.4% |
| **2014-15** | 64.9% | 54.6% | 42.4% | 27.8% |
| **2015-16** | 61.3% | 52.3% | 37.0% | 25.2% |
| **2016-17** | 58.5% | 50.2% | 35.7% | 24.1% |
| **2017-18** | 58.3% | 49.8% | 35.7% | 24.8% |
| **2018-19** | 55.6% | 49.3% | 33.8% | 24.4% |
| **2019-20** | 60.4% | 49.9% | 36.6% | 24.4% |

*Source: (DHHS & DHSV, 2020)*

### Victorian School Dental Program

In 2020 the Victorian Government has invested more into public dental care than ever before. The School Dental Program provides free dental examinations and follow-up treatment for all children at government primary and secondary schools across Victoria. The $321.9 million initiative makes it easier for children to access dental care with Smile Squad dental vans visiting all public schools and providing students with a free dental pack each year to promote ongoing oral health. The initiative will save families around $400 a year per child in dental costs as well as the inconvenience of taking time off work for appointments. This new investment will reduce wait times for other Victorians seeking public dental treatment, as the children who would otherwise be treated through the public dental scheme will now receive their care at school. The School Dental Program will embed oral health promotion policy into practice, including healthy eating and drinking, in schools.

## Overweight and obesity

For children and young people, being overweight or obese has severe negative psychological and social effects that hamper quality of life (AIHW, 2020h). It is also associated with poorer short and long-term physical health outcomes, exposing children and young people to greater risk of conditions including diabetes, asthma, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, polycystic ovarian syndrome, and some types of cancer. Overweight and obesity reflects an energy imbalance, where more calories are being consumed than expended, and is related to the behaviours around nutrition and physical activity discussed in the sections below. However, the underlying factors that influence these, and which have led to increased prevalence at a population level in Australia, are complex and related to culture, technology, economics, and community infrastructure (Allender, et al., 2015; AIHW, 2018a). Such factors can include the convenience, affordability, and intensive marketing of highly processed, energy dense foods; poor water quality encouraging the consumption of sugary drinks; ubiquity of screen-based entertainment; and lack of infrastructure to facilitate active transport, such as walking and cycling.

Victorian research has added to the growing international evidence that insufficient sleep is another significant risk factor (Morrissey, et al., 2016).

Over the past few decades, childhood obesity has emerged as a significant global health issue affecting low, middle and high-income countries. In high-income countries, such as Australia, those from disadvantaged demographics are at greater risk (World Health Organization, 2016). This pattern is also observed in Victoria, where disadvantaged communities have been found to have higher rates of childhood obesity but lower levels of awareness about the issue and participation in prevention initiatives (Cyril, Nicholson, Agho, Polonsky, & Renzaho, 2017). As with colonised First Nations in Canada, New Zealand and the United States, rates of childhood obesity are high among the Aboriginal community for children, young people and adults, for whom it contributes significantly to the overall burden of disease (Salmon, et al., 2019; Sherriff, et al., 2019). This is related to the dramatic lifestyle changes driven by colonisation, including the forced abandonment of traditional activities and diets (Whalan, et al., 2017; O’Dea, 1984). There is evidence that interventions targeting culturally and linguistically diverse cohorts benefit from respecting cultural practices, and encouraging participants to retain healthy traditional food practices where they can (Renzaho, Halliday, Mellor, & Green, 2015). There are, however, few culturally informed programs specifically targeting Aboriginal childhood obesity (Sherriff, et al., 2019).

Research has indicated that by age three, 10 per cent of Aboriginal children are obese, with further rapid onset of overweight and obesity in the cohort between the ages of three and nine (Thurber, Dobbins, Neeman, Banwell, & Banks, 2017). Based on data collected through the 2018-19 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey (NATSIHS), it is estimated that just under half of Aboriginal Victorians aged three to 24 are overweight or obese (44.1 per cent). Supporting the findings of the research discussed above, this data shows that the prevalence increases for older age groups, from 33.3 per cent for those aged three to 12, up to 54.7 per cent for those aged 13 to 24. While these proportions are high and above the proportion for the non-Aboriginal population, it is worth noting as a point of comparison that 22.6 per cent of all Victorian children and young people aged two to 17, and 50 per cent of those in the 18 to 24 years age group, are estimated to be overweight or obese based on the data collected in the most recent National Health Survey conducted in 2017-18 (ABS, 2018b).

Figure 34 Proportion of Victorian Aboriginal children and young people who are overweight or obese

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Age group** | |
| **3 to 12** | 33.3% |
| **13 to 24** | 54.7% |

*Source: (ABS, 2020a)*

## Health related behaviours

Modifiable behaviours play a significant role in health, and for children and young people can influence both their current wellbeing as well as the risks of developing disease or other health conditions later in life. For children, the behaviours relate to physical exercise and sedentary behaviours, food choices, sleep, and oral hygiene.

As children enter adolescence, they can potentially be exposed to additional risks

such as smoking, alcohol consumption, drug use, and unsafe sex. These behaviours

can result in long-term damage to health, and also carry the risk of becoming established behaviour patterns that persist as unhealthy lifestyles in adulthood.

**VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS FRAMEWORK Goal 11: Aboriginal**

**Victorians enjoy health and longevity**

Objective 14.1: Improve Aboriginal health status, quality of life and life expectancy

Enjoying good health and wellbeing is fundamental. While many Aboriginal Victorians report good health and there have been areas of improvement, government, services and communities need to take significant steps to improve health outcomes and quality of life for all Aboriginal Victorians. Improving health outcomes and having a good quality of life will ensure all Victorian Aboriginal communities can thrive.

Providing culturally safe and responsive health and wellbeing services is essential to ensuring Aboriginal Victorians feel empowered and comfortable

to access preferred services.

### Nutrition

Malnutrition refers both to over-nutrition, high intake of unhealthy energy dense foods, as well as dietary deficiencies stemming from low intake of healthy foods. The underlying causes of poor food choices and food insecurity are often related to aspects of disadvantage disproportionately experienced in the Aboriginal community, including low income, overcrowded or insecure housing, and lower levels of education (Lee & Ride, 2018). Research with Victorian Aboriginal families with children aged from birth to eight years old has identified a range of nutritional concerns, and a demand for culturally responsive support and advice for breastfeeding and child nutrition (Myers, Thorpe, Browne, Gibbons, & Brown, 2014).

The Australian Dietary Guidelines recommend two serves of fruit, and four and a half to five and a half serves of vegetables (depending on age and gender) per day for children and young people aged four and older (NHMRC, 2013). While around half (49.5 per cent) of Victorian Aboriginal children and young people (aged three to 24) meet the fruit intake guidelines, extremely few (3.9 per cent) meet the vegetable intake guidelines. Within this cohort there are distinct age group differences, with children aged three to 12 more likely to meet the fruit intake guidelines (66.5 per cent) than young people aged 13 to 24 (33 per cent). The proportions of children and young people meeting these guidelines are also low for the general Victorian population, with results of the 2018 Victorian Student Health and Wellbeing Survey (VSHAWS), covering a sample of Year 5, 8 and 11 students, showing only 13 per cent meeting the vegetable intake guidelines and 67 per cent meeting the fruit intake guidelines (DET, 2019b).

Figure 35 Proportion of Victorian Aboriginal children and young people (ages three to 24) who meet the dietary guidelines for fruit and vegetables

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Fruit** | 49.5% |
| **Vegetables** | 3.9% |

*Source: (ABS, 2020a)*

#### Mallee District Aboriginal Service — Healthy cooking in out-of-home care

Each month Mallee District Aboriginal Service (MDAS) run a healthy cooking session for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in their out-of-home care program, facilitated by their Nutrition and Public Health Advisor. The sessions are led by the young people, who choose the recipes, before working together and with staff to prepare the ingredients, follow the steps and cook a delicious healthy meal.

An important part of the process is learning how to make each meal as nutritious as possible, reducing salt content, using low-fat options and adding fruits and vegetables. It is an opportunity for hands-on learning, demonstration and role modelling of healthy eating, as well as food handling practices and cooking skills. It is a positive and supported process for the young people, boosting their confidence and providing them with essential life skills.

The sessions are impactful as they are strengths-based, led by the young people, and have a strong focus on positive relationships and building confidence. MDAS run similar sessions with their Elders and in their rehabilitation facility.

The Australian Dietary Guidelines also recommend limiting intake of discretionary foods containing large amounts of saturated and trans fats, salt and sugar, such as cakes, confectionary, chips, soft drinks and processed meat (NHMRC, 2013). Concerningly, population data shows that a high proportion of Australian children’s daily energy intake comes from saturated and trans fats, and added sugar in discretionary foods (AIHW, 2018b). Consumption of sugary drinks in particular, including fruit juices and soft drinks, has been associated with increased risks of overweight and obesity, and related health conditions such as diabetes and oral health issues (Thurber, Dobbins, Neeman, Banwell, & Banks, 2017; Duckett & Swerissen, 2016). Research from the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children also found that a substantial proportion of Aboriginal children in the project’s Australia-wide sample were consuming sugary drinks from an early age, even in the birth to three years age group (Thurber, Long, Salmon, Cuevas, & Lovett, 2019).

In the 2018-19 NATSIHS, around half of Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 to 24 (51.2 per cent) reported either not drinking sugary drinks or drinking sugary drinks on only one or two days per week. However, around a quarter (24.5 per cent) reported drinking sugary drinks every day of the week.

Figure 36 Days per week on which sugary drinks are consumed, Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 to 24

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **None** | 28.4% |
| **1-2 days per week** | 22.8% |
| **3-4 days per week** | 17.8% |
| **5-6 days per week** | 6.5% |
| **7 days per week** | 24.5% |

*Source: (ABS, 2020a)*

### Physical activity and sport

Australia’s National Physical Activity, Sedentary Behaviour, and Sleep Recommendations for Children and Young People (5-17 years) (Department of Health, 2019c) recommend that for health benefits, children and young people should undertake at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity every day. Sedentary time should also be minimised, including time spent sitting at school, during travel, and when using screen-based entertainment. Physical activity not only improves fitness and physical health, but also a broader range of wellbeing outcomes. Research has also found that for Aboriginal children and young people, participation in organised sports can help to promote educational engagement, healthy lifestyle choices, and cultural and community connections, which are all interrelated with social and emotional wellbeing (Macniven, Canuto, Wilson, Bauman, & Evans, 2019).

Research and government data consistently shows that in Victorian and Australia children and young people are less active than they should be, with some evidence suggesting that girls are less active than boys, and that physical activity levels decline as children get older (DET, 2019c; AIHW, 2018c; Strugnell, et al., 2016). The evidence on whether Aboriginal children and young people differ from their non-Aboriginal peers in this regard, however, is mixed. Some studies have found higher rates of physical activity for Aboriginal children (Gwynn, et al., 2010), while other studies indicate that rates are lower, or drop off more steeply as Aboriginal children reach adolescence (Macniven, et al., 2019).

Australia-wide data collected through the NATSISS, 2014-15, found that 75.7 per cent of Aboriginal children and young people aged four to 14 had been active for at least 60 minutes every day in the week prior to completing the survey (ABS, 2016b; AIHW, 2018d). This was similar, but slightly above, data collected in 2008 (74.3 per cent). Data from 2011-12 and 2012-13 collated by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare to allow comparisons between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children, showed that 59.9 per cent of Aboriginal children aged 5 to 12, and 33.4 per cent of those aged 13 to 17 met the physical activity guidelines, higher proportions than for non-Aboriginal children who were at 45.1 per cent and 19 per cent for these respective age brackets (AIHW, 2018d).

The most recent data for young Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 to 24, taken from the 2018-19 NATSIHS, found that very few (8.7 per cent) met the physical activity guidelines for daily exercise.

Figure 37 Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 to 24 meeting the physical activity guidelines

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Met the guidelines** | 8.7% |
| **Did not meet the guidelines** | 91.3% |

*Source: (ABS, 2020a)*

#### Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Ltd —

#### Junior Football and Netball Carnival

The Junior Football and Netball Carnival is an annual statewide event hosted by various communities across the state of Victoria, funded by DHHS and delivered by VACSAL. In 2019 the carnival was held in Echuca/Moama, and games were spread across the Echuca netball courts and the Moama Football Club with 13 teams registered for football and nearly 40 teams for netball.

The events of the carnival included Under 12s, 15s and 17s boys’ football and girls’ netball games that take place in a round-robin tournament format. In 2019 more than 720 Koorie young people registered to play, and an estimate of more than 1,000 spectators attended the events over the weekend.

The carnivals are organised by the VACSAL Statewide Junior Football and Netball Carnival Committee, made up of VACSAL staff, host community representatives, and AFL and Netball Victoria regional constituents. Partnerships with the AFL and Netball Victoria provide the umpires and referees the games.

In 2019, the committee included Luke Murray from the Richmond Next Generation Academy as a guest member. Other stakeholders and ACCOs are invited to attend the carnival at no cost and are given the platform to promote their services and programs. The Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc (VAEAI) attends every year and conducts surveys around the educational needs of our young people and their families. Survey topics include attendance and engagement surveys and school experience surveys. The Victorian Aboriginal Health Service health promotions team attends and promotes healthy eating, dental hygiene, smoking cessation and information stalls. In 2019, Treaty Victoria supported the carnival and contributed a donation to the event to host and promote information stalls over the weekend long event.

The VACSAL Junior Football and Netball Carnival is a highly successful event that brings the community together through sport. It is an alcohol and drug free event for the mob by the mob and provides an opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to gather and participate in friendly competition in a healthy and safe environment. The event promotes cultural connections and community linkages, family participation, healthy lifestyle, positive wellbeing impacts and showcases unique football and netball talents from across the state.

#### Spark Health — Wellah Walks

‘Wellah Walks’, is a health and wellbeing program that builds and inspires positive Aboriginal youth role models in the Western suburbs of Melbourne.

In 2019, Aboriginal males aged between 16-19 were selected to become part of the program and complete the Kokoda trail in Papua New Guinea during November 2019. The Wellah Fellahs came together for six ‘Wellah Together’ sessions, eight Wellah Walks Workshops featuring inspiring guest speakers, and four training hikes across Victoria in preparation to take on the Kokoda trail. In November 2019, the Wellah Fellah Boys embarked on their journey to take on the 97-kilometre Kokoda trail. They spent 10 days immersed in the history of World War II following the footsteps of many Australian soldiers, including Aboriginal soldiers, Harry and Reg Saunders.

Ben is one participant who grew immensely throughout the program. Ben is 16 years old and has spent most of his life in foster/out-of-home care. When Ben first joined the program, it was uncertain if he would be ready to take on a challenge so demanding such as Kokoda. However, it was important to keep Ben included to build friendship, mentorship and resilience alongside other inspiring Indigenous males. During the workshops and training hikes, Ben often struggled, physically and mentally, with the demands of the program. Many of the workouts and training hikes were spent building Ben’s confidence to step up to the challenge.

The moment we embarked on Kokoda, Ben was a different person to the one struggling to engage throughout the previous six months. Ben went from being the last one walking at the training hikes to being the one walking up the front. He began engaging with everyone on the trek including the Papua New Guinea local legends who helped carry the gear along the track. Ben particularly enjoyed using the walking time over the ten days to hear people’s stories. During the trek Ben also began to display leadership qualities. This included making sure no one was left walking alone, helping people across difficult parts of the track and offering encouragement to those who were struggling. Ben completed the Kokoda track smiling and proud of his accomplishments.

Ben was able to come back to the western suburbs of Melbourne and share his story with Community at celebrations. The growth in resilience, leadership and sense of pride was very evident in Ben’s journey.

*The Wellah Walks program is funded by the Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee (RAJAC), Western-Metro region.*

#### Surfing Victoria – Indigenous Surfing Program

Surfing Victoria has developed and implemented a successful Indigenous Surfing

Program that utilises the sport of surfing and stand-up paddleboarding as a vehicle

to engage communities across Victoria and improve health and wellbeing. For 22 years the program has enabled Indigenous people from across Victoria to take part in surfing programs, camps and competitions, contributing to deeper connections within and between communities and places, improved health and wellbeing, water safety

knowledge, and employment pathways.

Whilst the initial aim was to increase the number of young Indigenous Victorians participating in surfing and water safety programs, over time it evolved into a strong

and significant vehicle for social participation of community members as well as

increasing employment opportunities for Indigenous Victorians in the surfing industry.

Over the journey, the program has seen the emergence of a number of Indigenous

leaders within the community who have participated in the program and then

progressed to provide guidance and mentorship to Indigenous youth. Sport is integral

to Victorian Aboriginal culture, to connect to community, culture and Country.

#### Taleena’s Program Journey

At 20 years of age, Taleena has been a part of the Indigenous Surfing Program for 12 years, beginning her journey as a participant in the U8 division of the Woorangalook Victorian Koori Surf Titles. Growing up in Geelong, Taleena would attend programs along with members of the Wathaurong community, soon developing a love for the ocean and surfing.

*“The Koori Surf Titles were a big part of my life. I love hanging there all weekend, it’s what I looked forward to each year, something to be really excited about. I did all the programs, come try days, girls surf days, development programs camps everything I could get to. The ocean is just so relaxing, it just takes your mind off everything while you’re there waiting for a wave. I keep coming back because it so much fun, I get so excited to see everyone each year and meet new people. I’ve created so many great friendships through these programs.”*

Taleena was very quickly identified as a future leader in not only the Indigenous Surfing Program but within the Indigenous community. Taleena plans to combine her full time work with community mentoring, and to help out with programs whenever she can.

*“It makes me so happy to be helping out all the other kids, teaching them something that has given me so much joy. When they finally stand up on the board, it makes you feel like you’ve accomplished something as well, you’ve taught them something new.”*

*Surfing Victoria is a not-for-profit organisation recognised by the State Government of Victoria and the Victorian surf industry as the governing and organising body for surfing in Victoria.*

### Smoking

Rates of smoking have previously been identified as a leading preventable risk factor contributing to the burden of disease and health inequalities for the Aboriginal population, accounting for 23 per cent of the overall gap in health outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians (AIHW, 2016a). Smoking is typically initiated during teenage years, with low levels of initiation at the age of 25 or older (Edwards, Carter, Peace, & Blakely, 2013). Uptake is influenced by factors related to social and emotional wellbeing, as well as peer and family behaviours, which may normalise smoking (West, 2017).

In general, rates of smoking are higher in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. However, research has found that differences in smoking prevalence between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students are greatest for those attending schools in advantaged areas. This may suggest that the increased likelihood of smoking for Aboriginal young people is not only related to lower average socioeconomic status (Heris, et al., 2020b). The same study found that for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal adolescents, smoking is associated with increased likelihood of alcohol and cannabis use, although the association with alcohol is weaker for the Aboriginal cohort (Heris, et al., 2020b).

At the time of the 2014-15 NATSISS, 34.8 per cent of Aboriginal Victorian’s aged 15 to 24 were smokers (including daily, weekly or less than weekly smokers), 11.7 per cent reported being ex-smokers, and 53.5 per cent had never smoked. Encouragingly,

this rate of smoking was lower than for older cohorts (25 years and older), of whom

43.4 per cent were smokers, 30.3 per cent were ex-smokers, and only 26.3 per cent

had never smoked.

The more recent 2018-19 NATSIHS results are not directly comparable to the 2014-15 NATSISS due to differences in sampling and methodology, however, they do indicate a lower number of Aboriginal smokers in the 15 to 24 years age group than was found by the NATSISS four years previously.

Figure 38 2014-15 NATSISS: Smoker status by age group, Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 to 24, and 25 and older

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Aged 25 and older** | **Aged 15 to 24** |
| **Smoker** | 43.4% | 34.8% |
| **Ex-smoker** | 30.3% | 11.7% |
| **Never smoked** | 26.3% | 53.5% |

*Source: (ABS, 2016a)*

*Note: Smoker category includes those who reported smoking daily, weekly, or less than weekly.*

Figure 39 2018-19 NATSIHS: Smoker status, Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 to 24

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | **Aged 15 to 24** |
| **Smoker** | 25.1% |
| **Ex-smoker** | 10.2% |
| **Never smoked** | 64.8% |

*Note: Smoker category includes those who reported smoking daily, weekly, or less than weekly.*

*Source: (ABS, 2020a)*

Trends in smoking rates captured by the National Drug Strategy Household Survey similarly show that the proportion of Aboriginal Australians aged 14 and older who smoke daily has declined from 34 per cent in 2010 to 27 per cent in 2019 (AIHW, 2020i). For Australian secondary school students, information about long-term trends in smoking is also captured by the triennial Australian Secondary School Students

Alcohol and Drug (ASSAD) survey. Recent analysis of this data from 2005 to 2017 has found that when considered as a proportion of baseline prevalence, the smoking rates for Aboriginal students aged 12 to 17 are declining, reflecting a similar trend to the rates for all Australian students in this age bracket (Heris, et al., 2020a). According to these results, in 2017 only 14 per cent of Aboriginal students aged 12 to 17 had smoked in the past month, as compared to 24 per cent in 2005, and 70 per cent had never smoked, as compared to only 49 per cent in 2005. For the entire sample of students, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, the proportion who had never smoked increased from 71 per cent in 2005 to 81 per cent in 2017.

These survey findings suggest that while smoking rates remain higher among Aboriginal young people, the tobacco control measures taken by the Australian and state governments, such as information campaigns, increased taxation, plain packaging, and smoke free areas, are succeeding in changing smoking behaviours for this cohort.

### Alcohol and other drugs

Racist stereotyping of Aboriginal people has perpetuated perceptions that they are significantly more likely to drink and abuse alcohol. Analysis of Australian-wide data shows, however, that while Aboriginal people who do drink are somewhat more likely to drink at risky levels, as defined by the Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol (NHMRC, 2020), more Aboriginal people actually abstain from alcohol entirely as compared to non-Aboriginal Australians (AIHW, 2017c).

Previous research has also found that in Victoria, rates of excessive alcohol consumptionamong adults are very similar for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Victorians (43.9 per cent and 45.5 per cent respectively), and that Aboriginal men in particular were more likely to abstain from alcohol (22.4 per cent as compared to 12.4 per cent of non-Aboriginal men) (Markwick, Ansari, Sullivan, & McNeil, 2014). The long-term Australia-wide drinking trends captured by the National Drug Strategy Household Survey also indicate that the rate of Aboriginal Australians drinking at risky levels is declining, with the proportion drinking at a risky level on a single occasion at least monthly dropping from 39 per cent in 2010 to 35 per cent in 2019, and with those exceeding the lifetime risk guideline dropping from 30 per cent to 20 per cent over the same time period (AIHW, 2020i).[[8]](#footnote-8)

Results from the 2017-18 National Health Survey indicated that among the general Australian population 46.8 per cent of young people aged 15 to 24 had exceeded the single occasion risk guideline, consuming more than four standard alcoholic drinks on a single occasion, at least once in the past 12 months (ABS, 2018b).[[9]](#footnote-9) Results for Aboriginal Victorians in the same age group taken from the 2018-19 NATSIHS were very similar, finding that 48.4 per cent had exceeded the single occasion risk guideline in the past 12 months. Taken together, these data sources suggest that while there may be risks related to excessive alcohol consumption for some Aboriginal young people in Victoria, this is not an issue particular to the Aboriginal community but one also affecting the general population.

Figure 40 Excessive/risky drinking on any occasion in last 12 months, Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 to 24

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Exceeded guidelines | 48.4% |
| Did not exceed guidelines | 10.4% |
| Last consumed alcohol 12 months or more ago | 10.0% |
| Never consumed alcohol | 26.6% |
| Time since last consumed alcohol not known | 4.5% |

*Source: (ABS, 2020a)*

Australia-wide data on the prevalence of drug use amongst Australians aged 14

and older collected via the National Drug Strategy Household Survey shows that Aboriginal people are more likely to have used an illicit drug in the past 12 months than non-Aboriginal people, particularly cannabis, meth/amphetamines, and pharmaceuticals for non-medical purposes (AIHW, 2017c). However, while results

should be interpreted with caution due to the differences in population size, the

results for Aboriginal Australians appear to be stable as compared to the trend

of increasing illicit drug use for the non-Aboriginal population (AIHW, 2020i).

Results from the 2014-15 NATSISS found that 36 per cent of Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 to 24 had used substances in the past 12 months. The most frequently used substances were cannabis, at 27.4 per cent of respondents, and pain killers or analgesics used for non-medical purposes, at 15.2 per cent. The proportions of respondents reporting use of drugs such as amphetamines, ecstasy or other designer drugs[[10]](#footnote-10), and tranquillisers were lower at 8.3, 7.3 and 4.6 per cent respectively. The numbers of survey participants reporting use of heroin, methadone (for non-medical purposes), cocaine, LSD or synthetic hallucinogens, natural hallucinogens, kava, petrol or other inhalants, were too small to report.

Figure 41 Substance use in the past 12 months, Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 to 24, 2014-15

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Cannabis (marijuana, hashish, or cannabis resin)** | 27.4% |
| **Pain killers or analgesics for non-medical purposes** | 15.2% |
| **Amphetamines or speed** | 8.3% |
| **Ecstasy or designer drugs** | 7.3% |
| **Tranquillisers or sleeping pills for non-medical purposes** | 4.6% |

*Source: (ABS, 2016a)*

## Psychological distress and mental health

Experiences of psychological distress and other mental health issues vary across demographics and age groups. The onset of mental health issues often occurs in adolescence and early adulthood, when the potential consequences for education, employment and socialisation can be significant (Patten, 2017; Patton, et al., 2014). Psychological distress, a common mental health issue, increases risk for a range of other physical and mental health conditions, including cardiovascular disease and depression, and is associated with lifestyle risk factors such as smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, and substance abuse.

In Victoria, the adult Aboriginal population has been found to experience psychological distress at more than twice the rate of the non-Aboriginal population (Markwick, Ansari, Sullivan, & McNeil, 2015). Analysis of population data from across Australia has similarly found that young Aboriginal people (aged 18 to 24 years) experience significant psychological distress at twice the rate of non-Aboriginal people in the same age group (Azzopardi, et al., 2018). Research also shows that many Aboriginal children experience stressful life events more frequently than other children, such as family financial stress, parents or carers losing work or going through relationship breakdown, or the serious illness or death of relatives or friends (Salmon, et al., 2019; Blair, Zubrick, & Cox, 2005). As with other gaps in health and wellbeing outcomes, these increased risks stem from both the higher proportion of Aboriginal people experiencing low socioeconomic status, and from the ongoing effects of colonisation, including intergenerational trauma and experiences of racism and marginalisation, that continue to affect the community (State of Victoria, 2019).

Results from the 2014-15 NATSISS showed that most (72.7 per cent) Aboriginal

Victorians aged 15 to 24 had experienced one or more sources of stress in the past 12 months. Furthermore, 40.4 per cent had experienced high to very high levels of psychological distress in the four weeks prior to completing the survey. As the NATSISS is only completed by Aboriginal people, there is no directly comparable data for the non-Aboriginal cohort, however, the 2017 Victorian Public Health Survey found that within the general population the proportion of younger adults (aged 18 to 24) who had high or very high levels of psychological distress was much lower at 23.1 per cent (DHHS, 2019b). Results from the 2017-18 National Health Survey similarly indicated that the proportion of young adults experiencing high or very high levels of psychological distress in the general Australian population was much lower, at an estimated 15.2 per cent (ABS, 2018b).

Figure 42 Levels of psychological distress experienced by Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 to 24

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Low to Moderate** | 59.6% |
| **High to Very high** | 40.4% |

*Source: (ABS, 2016a)*

*Note: Results are grouped based on Kessler-5 (K5) scores, with scores of five to 11 considered Low to Moderate and scores of 12 to 25 considered High to Very High.*

The 2014-15 NATSISS asked participants to identify the types of stressors experienced by themselves, family or friends in the past 12 months. For those aged 15 to 24, the most common sources of stress related to the death of a family member or close friend (39.9 per cent of respondents), not being able to get a job (37.9 per cent of respondents), mental illness (29.7 per cent), or other serious illness (24.4 per cent). Alcohol and drug related problems were also identified as fairly common sources of stress (22 and 21.2 per cent of respondents respectively). The sources of stress reported by older cohorts (25 years and older) had slightly different proportions, with serious illness being the most frequent (39.1 per cent).

Figure 43 Sources of stress experienced in the last 12 months by self, family or friends, Aboriginal Victorians by age group, 2014-15

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Aged 15 to 24** | **Aged 25 and older** |
| **Death of family member or close friend** | 39.9% | 38.1% |
| **Not able to get a job** | 37.9% | 29.4% |
| **Mental illness** | 29.7% | 32.7% |
| **Serious illness** | 24.4% | 39.1% |
| **Alcohol related problems** | 22.0% | 17.5% |
| **Drug related problems** | 21.2% | 21.8% |
| **Pregnancy** | 16.7% | 17.6% |
| **Trouble with the police** | 14.2% | 15.0% |
| **Serious accident** | 13.6% | 8.0% |
| **New family member** | 13.1% | 10.5% |

*Source: (ABS, 2016a)*

NATSISS results also showed that 60.8 per cent of Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 to 24 had been diagnosed with a long-term health condition. Significantly, the two most common conditions for this cohort were both mental health conditions, anxiety and depression, which were found to affect 24.4 per cent and 22.5 per cent of this age group respectively.

Figure 44 Proportion of Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 to 24 diagnosed with select mental health conditions, 2014-15

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Anxiety** | **Depression** | **Behavioural or emotional problems** |
| 24.4% | 22.5% | 12.4% |
| 75.6% | 77.5% | 87.6% |

*Source: (ABS, 2016a)*

Concerns of cultural safety and social stigma are known barriers to Aboriginal people accessing mental health services, with Aboriginal people often feeling uncomfortable

in clinical settings, or when interacting with non-Aboriginal practitioners who may

misunderstand how Aboriginal people communicate, or be ignorant of the cultural contexts in which their wellbeing needs to be interpreted (Murrup-Stewart, Searle, Jobson, & Adams, 2018). In Victoria, culturally informed approaches and the involvement of Aboriginal healthcare workers has been found valuable in achieving positive outcomes for Aboriginal young people receiving mental health treatment (Vance, et al., 2017).

Interrelated with the topics of bullying and discrimination discussed in the section below, some cohorts within the Aboriginal population are at higher risk of psychological distress and mental health issues. This includes Aboriginal people who identify as LGBTIQ+, who have been found to have poorer mental health outcomes than other LGBTIQ+ people and the general population, due to the compounded effects of intergenerational trauma and racism, in addition to homophobia, biphobia and transphobia (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2015).[[11]](#footnote-11) This is evidenced in the results of the 2017 Victorian Population Health Survey, which while not providing data for children and young people, do show that for adult Victorian Aboriginal people identifying as LGBTIQ+ the risk of experiencing high or very high levels of psychological distress is significantly higher than those for the general population, other LGBTIQ+ people, or non-LGBTIQ+ Aboriginal people (DHHS, 2020e).

**VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS FRAMEWORK Goal 14: Aboriginal Victorians enjoy social and emotional wellbeing**

Objective 14.1: Improve Aboriginal mental health and social and emotional wellbeing

Connection to family, kinship and community has a strong influence on social and emotional wellbeing. It is vital that all Aboriginal Victorians, including people living with a disability, have social networks they can draw upon for everyday practical and emotional support, as well as during times of need.

It is important that Aboriginal Victorians have access to Aboriginal-led services that are appropriately resourced and trained to respond to mental health care needs, as well as culturally informed mainstream services that understand Aboriginal concepts of social and emotional wellbeing.

### Improving mental health outcomes for Aboriginal people with moderate to severe mental illness

To improve access to culturally responsive services, the Victorian Government allocated $20.2 million ($7.7 million in 2016-17, $4 million in 2018-19 and $8.5 million in 2019-20) for four consortia demonstration projects to test new service models for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria with moderate to severe mental illness, trauma and other complex health and social needs. The demonstration projects are a key action from the Balit Murrup: social and emotional wellbeing framework 2017-2027 and are led by:

* Ballarat and District Aboriginal Co-operative (in partnership with Ballarat Health)
* Mallee District Aboriginal Services (in partnership with Mildura Base Hospital and Mallee Family Care)
* Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (in partnership with St Vincent Health, Austin Health, Northern Area Mental Health)
* Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative (in partnership with Barwon Health).

The Ballarat demonstration project, called ‘Keela Borron’ (meaning ‘speak children’ in Wathaurong language) has operated since July 2017 and is specifically designed to work with parents of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children where parental mental illness places a child or children at risk of entering the Child Protection system. A trauma informed view of the complexities faced by Aboriginal communities is at the forefront of Keela Borron along with building resilience and self-determination.

Ballarat and District Aboriginal Co-operative has partnered with the Ballarat Health Service’s Mental Health Service to provide specialist psychiatric assessment and consultation to the Keela Borron clinical team. The Keela Borron project, as of 30 June 2019, has had 79 referrals to the program, of which 53 have been registered, and 34 closures. Importantly, the project also supports family reunification. This new and innovative model of care is showing early signs of success with 15 children being returned to their parents where the parent’s mental illness has already resulted in child protective services involvement.

## Bullying, violence, and racism

Bullying occurs within the context of an imbalance of power, and involves repeated behaviours intended to harm others. These behaviours may be physical, such as attacks on a person or their property, or may take the form of verbal abuse, or relational aggression, defined as actions intended to harm someone’s social status or prevent their inclusion. Bullying experiences by children and young people can have severe and long-term consequences, including greater risks of poor academic, social, and health outcomes (McClowry, Miller, & Mills, 2017). The effects of bullying on mental health are pronounced, and can include anxiety, depression, hyperactivity and impulsivity, inattention, conduct problems, self-harm and attempted suicide (Singham, et al., 2017; Thomas, et al., 2017). Children and young people who experience higher rates of bullying also demonstrate lower average achievement across learning domains at school (Thomson, Hillman, Schmid, Rodrigues, & Fullarton, 2017; Thomson, Wernet, O’Grady, & Rodrigues, 2017). Some research has found that mental and physical health problems caused by childhood experiences of bullying endure for up to five years (Bogart, et al., 2014; Singham, et al., 2017), while other studies have identified even longer-term effects, including continued maladjustment and poorer health and labour market outcomes in adulthood (McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015; Drydakis, 2014).

Children are more likely to be targets of bullying if they are vulnerable and distinguished from their peers by factors such as socioeconomic status, different appearance, previous experiences of trauma, disability and social difficulties, or by their sexual orientation or gender (McClowry, Miller, & Mills, 2017). Young people identifying as LGBTIQ+ are at particularly high risk both of being targeted and of experiencing severe negative outcomes from experiences of bullying (Greene, Britton,

& Brian, 2014; Taliaferro & Muehlenkamp, 2017). In the process of consultation with ACCOs on the development of this report, information was provided about incidents in which Victorian Aboriginal children had suffered severe bullying and harassment both in and outside of school, including incidents of cyberbullying, and where the involvement of schools and police had not resulted in appropriate responses or supports. These experiences were described as being highly traumatic and as

having had significant detrimental consequences for the children and their families.

The DET Attitudes to School Survey (AtoSS) asks Victorian government school students whether they have been bullied at their school in the current term. Results show that Aboriginal students are at higher risk of experiencing bullying across all stages of schooling, including in senior secondary school where bullying is less common than in primary school or lower secondary school. From 2017 to 2019[[12]](#footnote-12), however, the proportion of students reporting bullying trended down from 25.9 per cent to 22.1 per cent for Aboriginal students, and from 18.7 per cent to 14.7 per cent for non-Aboriginal students. As shown in Figure 45, this decline was apparent across Year levels, with Aboriginal senior secondary students showing a small increase from 2018 to 2019 but remaining below 2017 results.

Figure 45 Victorian government school students experiencing bullying, by Aboriginal status and Year level group

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** |
| **Aboriginal** | **Years 4-6** | 25.6% | 23.7% | 21.9% |
|  | **Years 7-9** | 28.4% | 25.9% | 24.6% |
|  | **Years 10-12** | 22.3% | 16.8% | 18.8% |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| **Non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal status unknown** | **Years 4-6** | 21.3% | 17.4% | 15.7% |
|  | **Years 7-9** | 20.6% | 17.3% | 16.6% |
|  | **Years 10-12** | 12.2% | 10.6% | 10.8% |

*Source: (DET, 2019a)*

Experiences of physical violence may or may not occur in the context of repeated bullying behaviour but can independently be a significant source of trauma for children and young people and affect the functioning of their lives. Data from the 2014-15 NATSISS showed that 12.1 per cent of Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 to 24 had experienced physical violence in the past 12 months, with the vast majority able to identify the perpetrator. This is interrelated with issues experienced by the Aboriginal community highlighted in Part 1 of this report, including high rates of family violence, and of young people seeking access to homeless services as a consequence of

family violence.

Figure 46 Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 to 24 who have experienced physical violence in the past 12 months, 2014-15

* 12.1 per cent

*Source: (ABS, 2016a)*

While the phenomena of bullying and racism are distinct and do not necessarily

co-occur, experiences racism and other forms of discrimination, like experiences of bullying and violence, can be a significant source of stress for affected children and young people. Experiences of racism have been found to be associated with poorer physical and mental health for both Aboriginal parents and their children, and greater exposure to health risks including drug and alcohol use (Bodkin-Andrews, et al., 2017; Larson, Gillies, Howard, & Coffin, 2007; Zubrick, et al., 2005; Cave, Shepherd, Cooper, & Zubrick, 2019). Australian research found that children from visible minorities were on average less likely to be bullied, but were more likely to experience racial discrimination in other forms (Priest, King, Bécares, & Kavanagh, 2016). This pattern, however, did not apply to Aboriginal children, who were the cohort most likely to experience either physical or social bullying, and were also the most likely to experience racial discrimination.

Analysis of data from the Victorian Population Health Survey, which provides information on Victorians adults, found that Aboriginal people were among the groups most likely to experience racism, and that frequent experiences of racism were associated with significantly increased risks of poor physical and mental health (DHHS, 2017d; Markwick, Ansari, & McNeil, 2019). In the 2014-15 NATSISS, 10.4 per cent of Aboriginal Victorians aged five to 14 reported having been treated unfairly at school because they are Aboriginal. For young people aged 15 to 24, 37.1 per cent reported having experienced unfair treatment in the past 12 months because of being Aboriginal. For this age group, such incidents also often occurred in educational settings, with 32.6 per cent of those who had experienced such an incident reporting that the latest incident occurred at school, university, a training course or other educational setting. Of those aged 15 to 24, nine per cent of Aboriginal Victorians reported being called names, teased or sworn at, while 20.6 per cent reported having heard racial comments or jokes.

Figure 47 Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 to 24 reporting unfair treatment because they are Aboriginal, by frequency of unfair treatment over the past 12 months, 2014-15

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Always/often** | 5.9% |
| **Sometimes** | 5.7% |
| **Rarely/Only happened once** | 25.5% |
| **Total figure reporting unfair treatment** | 37.1% |

*Source: (ABS, 2016a)*

Some cohorts within the Aboriginal population are at additional risk of experiencing discrimination, including those of lower socioeconomic status, those with a disability or experiencing mental health issues, and those who identify as LGBTIQ+. Research has found that Aboriginal people comprise between 1.5 and three per cent of young Australians identifying as LGBTIQ+, and around four per cent of young Australians identifying as trans or gender diverse (Robinson, Bansel, Denson, Ovenden, & Davies, 2014; Hillier, et al., 2010; Smith, et al., 2014). While some cultures, such as in the Tiwi Islands, have traditionally been inclusive of diverse gender identities, many LGBTIQ+ Aboriginal people have compounded experiences of marginalisation (National LGBTI Health Alliance, 2013).

While hostile and discriminatory behaviours, such as name calling, are widely recognised as racist, racism can also exist in less overt forms. Individuals can be unconsciously biased, whereby they enact racist beliefs and attitudes without intention to do harm, and organisations and systems can also produce and reinforce racial inequalities without being explicitly or deliberately designed to do so. Examples of this type of racism can include over-policing of minority groups (Weber, 2020), inequalities in how healthcare streams are funded (Henry, Houston, & Mooney, 2004), and cultural biases embedded in standardised testing (Balzemore-James, Shinaprayoon, & Martin, 2016). Institutional and social norms shape the assumptions of individuals, meaning that systemic factors are involved in the reproduction of unconscious bias and interpersonal racism (Domínguez & Embrick, 2020). The concept of cultural safety refers to addressing these systemic and interpersonal forms of racism to create environments and services that are safe for Aboriginal people (Phillips, 2019).

**VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS FRAMEWORK Goal 20: Racism is eliminated**

Objective 20.1: Address and eliminate racism

Racism can have a harmful impact on the cultural identity and confidence of Aboriginal Victorians. Research shows that experiences of racism can also have detrimental long-term health effects, both mentally and physically.

Racism manifests in many forms: stereotyping and name calling, as well as systemically through structures that exclude the participation of Aboriginal Victorians in everyday life. Eliminating racism—in all forms, at all levels— should not be the responsibility of Aboriginal Victorians. It is everyone’s duty to work towards a fair and equitable Victoria.

# PART 3: EDUCATION AND POST-SCHOOL PATHWAYS

For children and young people, educational achievement influences opportunities for further qualifications and employment and is associated with a range of material and non-material benefits throughout the life course, including earning potential, social and emotional wellbeing, and physical health (Heise & Meyer, 2004, Winkleby, Fortmann & Barrett, 1990, OECD, 2017).

The majority of Aboriginal children begin school developmentally on track and many go on to do well with their education. Just as with the general population there is a range of academic abilities within the cohort, including a proportion of high achievers. Every year, for example, there are Aboriginal students who receive VCE study scores of 40 or more across a range of subjects, placing these students in the top 9 per cent (or above) of achievement for those subjects. As such, is it important to note that while many of the educational outcomes measures collated in this report show outcomes gaps for Aboriginal students, these average results do not describe the experiences or abilities of all, or indicate that educational expectations should be lower for this cohort.

Long-term trends also show that a number of key educational outcomes measures are improving, including increased enrolments in kindergarten in the year before school, gains in primary school literacy, increasing participation in VCE Science subjects, and a higher proportion of Aboriginal young people with Year 12 or equivalent qualifications.

Previous analysis of standardised testing has shown that relative to other Australian states and territories, the Victorian education system does well at supporting students from less advantaged schools and family backgrounds (Goss, Sonnemann, & Owain, 2018). Socioeconomic status and other forms of advantage and disadvantage, however, continue to be strongly associated with educational outcomes. As such, the data and information included here should be considered in the context of the topics covered in previous sections of this report. The ability of children and young people to engage and succeed at school is influenced by family circumstances and resources (Thomson, Hillman, Schmid, Rodrigues, & Fullarton, 2017; Thomson, Wernet, O’Grady, & Rodrigues, 2017), including parents’ own education and expectations (von Otter, 2014; OECD, 2013), as well as by individual factors such as health, and social and emotional wellbeing (Hattie, 2009).

There are, of course, many children and young people who succeed despite significant setbacks and disadvantage. Learning is cumulative, however, and the knowledge and skills children develop in their early years are the foundation for later learning, meaning that those who do well early are at an advantage in later stages while those who fall behind can find it very hard to catch up (Määttä, et al., 2016; Tayler, 2016; Sawyer, et al., 2015; Lamb, Jackson, Walstab, & Huo, 2015; Goss & Sonnemann, 2016; Hattie, 2009). For this reason, school readiness is emphasised here as a key topic of interest, and one relevant to outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people, who are found to have higher risk of developmental vulnerabilities in their early years.

Engagement with education, however, can also be influenced by educational settings themselves, and whether the learning environment and curriculum are inclusive, encouraging, and safe. For Aboriginal students, these factors may be influencing less positive attitudes to school on average, and higher rates of school absences than found for Victorian students generally. Other highlighted topics include subject selection in senior secondary school and planning for school completion and post-school destinations. While the typical industries of employment for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 to 24 are not dramatically different, for the Aboriginal cohort lower levels of participation in Science, Technology Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects in VCE, and greater uncertainty about post-school plans, could be barriers to some career pathways in the longer term.

## Key findings

* While the Victorian rate of eligible children enrolled in a funded four-year-old kindergarten program in the year before school has declined from 98.1 per cent in 2015 down to 92 per cent in 2019, Aboriginal enrolments have shown a strong positive trend over the same five years, increasing from 82.2 per cent to 99.9 per cent (as based on the population estimates used for these calculations) (DET, 2020c). While not all enrolled children attend, parent reports of Aboriginal children’s kindergarten attendance in the year before school are similarly high and above the results for all Victorian children (86.6 per cent as compared to 85.4 per cent in 2019) (DET, 2020d).

* While most Victorian Aboriginal children begin school developmentally on track, they are at a higher risk of developmental vulnerabilities, as identified by both teachers and parents. Although the proportion of students being identified as developmentally vulnerable by teachers through the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) did not change markedly from 2009 to 2018 (AEDC, 2019), parent reports of high developmental risk through the School Entrant Health Questionnaire (SEHQ) increased from 12.8 per cent in 2010 to 32.4 per cent in 2019 (DET, 2020d), possibly influenced by growing public awareness of childhood development and behavioural issues.

* On average, Victorian students’ attitudes to school, including perceptions of teaching practices and themselves as learners, become less positive as they transition to secondary school and are least positive around Years 8 to 10. This pattern applies to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students (DET, 2019a). There are, however, geographic differences in responses. For Aboriginal students, attitudes to school are more positive in regional areas, whereas for non-Aboriginal students, they are more positive in Greater Melbourne.
* On average, Aboriginal students are absent from school for significantly more days per year than non-Aboriginal students (37.2 days compared to 19.9 days for government secondary school students in 2019) (DET, 2020a). Absences are highest in Years 8 to 10, when students’ reported attitudes to school attendance are also at their least positive (DET, 2019a).
* In 2019, the literacy skills of Aboriginal Victorian primary students were higher than in 2010, as were those for Year 9 students (as measured by NAPLAN Reading) (ACARA, 2019a). Numeracy skills were also higher for Years 3 and 9, but similar for Years 5 and 7. Some of these improvements reflect consistent long-term trends, however, in other cases changes in results from year to year have not shown a consistent pattern, particularly for Year 7 students.
* More Aboriginal students are completing school. At the time of the 2016 Census of Population and Housing, 71.3 per cent of Aboriginal Victorians aged 20 to 24 years had Year 12 or equivalent qualifications, as compared to 56.4 per cent in 2006 (Productivity Commission, 2020). Male Aboriginal senior secondary students, however, are more likely to be unsure about their intentions to complete school than female Aboriginal students, and are at higher risk of leaving education early (DET, 2019a).
* A relatively high proportion of Aboriginal students enrol in VCAL, with three VCAL enrolments for every five Aboriginal-student enrolments in VCE in government schools in 2019 (VCAA, 2020). By comparison the ratio of enrolments for the non-Aboriginal cohort was less than one to five. In 2019, VCAL completion rates for Aboriginal students were at 64.5 per cent, higher than at any other point over the previous five-year period, while for the non-Aboriginal cohort they were at 74.9 per cent, similar to most years from 2015 onwards.
* Aboriginal senior secondary students in government schools are more likely to choose VCE subjects in Health and Physical Education, Humanities, Arts, Technology, and English, at the expense of undertaking Mathematics and Science subjects (VCAA, 2020). These choices may mean that fewer Aboriginal people will have access to further Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) qualifications and related career pathways.

* Aboriginal participation in Vocational Education and Training (VET) is high. From 2017 to 2019 there have been increasing numbers of Aboriginal student enrolments in all Victorian government priority areas of training, including courses related to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and family violence workforce (DET, 2020e).
* Typical industries of employment are similar for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 to 24, with accommodation and food services, and retail trade being the two industries providing the most employment for both cohorts (ABS, 2017).

### Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026

Marrung is the Department of Education and Training’s (DET) integrated 10-year plan for improving learning and development outcomes for Aboriginal children and learners of all ages across early childhood, schools, training and skills, and higher education.

Marrung was developed in partnership with the Aboriginal community including the Victorian Government’s principal partner in Aboriginal education and training—the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI)—and is underpinned by the principles of self-determination.

The Marrung Central Governance Committee is co-chaired by the Secretary of DET and the President of VAEAI. There are over 40 members of the CGC including the Chief Executive Officers of several state-wide ACCOs, the chairs of four Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (LAECG), one from each DET region, and executive level representation from relevant government departments and agencies.

The vision of Marrung is that Victoria will be a state where the rich and thriving culture, knowledge and experience of our First Nations peoples are celebrated by all Victorians; where our universal service systems are inclusive, responsive and respectful of Aboriginal people; and where every Aboriginal person achieves their potential, succeeds in life, and feels strong in their cultural identity.

Marrung focuses on key enablers for Aboriginal learners to achieve positive outcomes:

* Creating a positive climate for learning and development where Aboriginal children and learners of all ages feel strong in their identity within all services, and all Victorians understand and respect Aboriginal culture and history.
* Building community engagement in learning and development so that services and Aboriginal communities work together on local, place-based approaches to improving learning outcomes.
* Building a culture of professional leadership where success for Aboriginal Victorians is core business for all educational leaders.
* Excellence in teaching, learning and development at all stages so that:
  + Young Aboriginal children are on track in their health, development and well-being, and their early learning experience sets them up for life
  + Aboriginal students engage fully throughout their schooling years and gain the knowledge and skills to excel at year 12 or its equivalent
  + Aboriginal learners transition successfully into further education and employment, and have opportunities to access education at all stages of life.

### Programs

DET funds and supports a number of initiatives directed to Aboriginal educational success.

* The Koorie Education Workforce, including Koorie Engagement Support Officers (KESO) are available to provide expert advice and support to all schools regarding culturally inclusive strategies to improve engagement and student performance. Four Koorie Cultural Advisors, located within regional LOOKOUT Centre teams, are specialised in intergenerational trauma and trauma-informed practice and work with schools to support the educational and cultural needs of Aboriginal students living in out-of-home care. The role of the KEW, including KESOs, is to build the capacity of schools and other DET funded services to better engage with Aboriginal learners and communities, rather than directly supporting students and families. Some individual schools employ Koorie Educators to provide direct support for their Aboriginal students.
* Cultural Understanding and Safety Training (CUST) embeds sustainable cultural understanding and safety training to build the capacity of all government schools to better support Aboriginal learners, including by building more culturally inclusive practice. CUST is delivered in partnership with VAEAI and Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups.
* The Aboriginal Languages Program Training Initiative provides training to increase the number of Aboriginal languages instructors in order to grow the number of Aboriginal language programs in schools and kindergartens.
* The Koorie Literacy and Numeracy Program provides funding to schools so that they can implement effective and culturally informed interventions for Foundation to Year 6 Aboriginal students not meeting expected benchmarks in literacy and/or numeracy.
* Marrung education scholarships to support Aboriginal students to complete Years 11 and 12.
* Koorie Families as First Educators (KFFE) is a culturally responsive evidence-based parenting support initiative currently delivered by ACCOs in both regional and metropolitan locations. The initiative reached an important milestone in March 2020, when it was brought together with the previously separate Koorie In Home Support/Home Based Learning program, under a common language name. Balert Gerrbik: Koorie Families as First Educators (KFFE) means ‘my strong family/kin’ and is from the Taungurung language. The underlying principles of the integrated initiative continue to be early intervention/prevention, and a strengths-based approach to building the capacity of parents as first educators of their young children from birth to preschool age.

## Kindergarten

Kindergarten participation allows children to advance their social skills, establish a sense of independence and self-confidence, and develop the basic skills that provide the foundation for later literacy, numeracy and other learning. These benefits are long-term, with children who participate in high quality early education programs demonstrating better social and educational outcomes on average in later childhood, adolescence and even into adulthood (Wise, Silva, Webster, & Sanson, 2005; Lally, Mangione, & Honig, 1987; Schweinhart, 2013; Conti, Heckman, & Pinto, 2016). These early childhood services can also enable earlier identification and intervention for language impairments, disabilities, and conditions such as Autism Spectrum Disorder which parents themselves may not recognise (Rudolph & Leonard, 2016; McCormick, Hepburn, Young, & Rogers, 2016; Harris, 2016).

The benefits of kindergarten are particularly important for children who are disadvantaged or who do not have a well-resourced home learning environment (Campbell, et al., 2012; Cleveland & Forer, 2010; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004). There is also evidence that two years of kindergarten before commencing school can provide even further benefit (Fox & Geddes, 2016), with research showing that engaging in 15 hours per week of high-quality early childhood education for two years before school has a positive effect on outcomes comparable to the influence of having a tertiary-educated mother (Sylva, Melhuish, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2010).

While the statewide rate of eligible children enrolled in a funded four-year-old kindergarten program in the year before school has declined from 98.1 per cent in 2015 to 92 per cent in 2019, Aboriginal enrolments have shown a strong positive trend over the same five years, increasing from 82.2 per cent to 99.9 per cent (as based on the population estimates used for these calculations). It is worth noting that not all children enrolled in kindergarten attend or attend regularly. However, information about kindergarten attendance collected from the parents of children in the first year of school through the School Entrant Health Questionnaire (SEHQ) indicates that the proportion of Aboriginal children attending kindergarten in the year before school is high and above the results for all children (86.6 per cent as compared to 85.4 per cent in 2019).

In terms of the average hours per week of kindergarten attendance, in 2019 this was slightly lower for Aboriginal children (13.6 hours) as compared to results for all children (15.5 hours), but showed a reduced gap as compared to 2015 when average attendance was 12.9 hours for Aboriginal children and 15.3 hours for all children.

Figure 48 Proportion of eligible children enrolled in a funded four-year-old kindergarten program in the year before school

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** |
| **Aboriginal** | 82.2% | 90.5% | 94.0% | 92.4% | 99.9% |
| **All children** | 98.1% | 96.2% | 93.4% | 92.1% | 92.0% |

*Source: (DET, 2020c)*

*Note: Proportions are based on enrolment numbers and ABS population estimates. While the 2019 Aboriginal kindergarten participation rate is in line with a strong upward trend in Aboriginal participation over a number of years, this rate should be treated with caution as small inaccuracies in the Aboriginal population estimate can have an exaggerated effect on rates due to the relative size of the Aboriginal population.*

Figure 49 Average hours per week of attendance in a funded four-year-old kindergarten program in the year before school

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** |
| **All children** | 15.3 | 14.8 | 14.9 | 15.4 | 15.5 |
| **Aboriginal** | 12.9 | 12.6 | 13.4 | 13.4 | 13.6 |

*Source: (DET, 2020c)*

**VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS FRAMEWORK Goal 4: Aboriginal children thrive in the early years**

Objective 4.1: Optimise early childhood development and participation in kinder

Increased enrolment and participation in kindergarten and early-start programs can significantly improve social and emotional skills and resilience, and ensure Aboriginal children are in the best position to achieve their potential.

### Aboriginal Best Start

Best Start is an early years initiative to support families and caregivers to provide the best possible environment, experiences and care for children from birth to age eight. The primary outcomes of the program are for children and families to engage in early childhood education (kindergarten and supported playgroups), and with MCH services, including Key Ages and Stages consultations. Best Start partnerships use local data and community knowledge to identify those who are experiencing vulnerability at their sites. Facilitators, communities, and service providers collaborate to address issues as they are experienced at a neighbourhood or regional level.

Aboriginal Best Start projects are led by Aboriginal communities and organisations to create a positive change in children’s early years, MCH and playgroup services, and to support Aboriginal children and families. Many Aboriginal families have difficulties in accessing mainstream services due to issues of cultural safety and the history of oppression and racism, including government policies of segregation and child removal. Aboriginal Best Start programs operate at six sites across Victoria, including: Delkaia (Horsham); Djillay Lidji (Baw Baw and Latrobe); East Gippsland; Mingo Waloom (Geelong); Njernda (Echuca); and Tartu-nganyin Bopop (Dandenong).

VACSAL (Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Limited) is a recognised statewide peak advisory body on Aboriginal community issues, and is a community controlled and community based organisation. The majority of VACSAL’s staff are Aboriginal and have a service delivery role, supporting and interacting directly with community. For this reason, VACSAL receives funding to undertake the lead role in the statewide development and partnership with Best Start sites and partners, including the provision of Aboriginal Best Start Project Officers.

The project officers’ role is to actively assist and support facilitators to develop a more inclusive and responsive universal platform that can address the needs of all Aboriginal children and those that are at greater risk and not currently accessing services. There are currently two project officers supporting partnerships, community service providers, families and community groups, supporting community advocacy, reporting on implementation and actively collaborating closely with Aboriginal communities and key stakeholders across all Best Start and Aboriginal Best Start sites.

*The Best Start program and Aboriginal Best Start program are funded by DHHS.*

### Early Start Kindergarten and Three Year Old Kinder

The Early Start Kindergarten grant provides free or low-cost kindergarten for up to 15 hours per week for Aboriginal children and children who are known to Child Protection. In 2019, 952 Victorian Aboriginal children were enrolled in Early Start Kindergarten, accounting for around one-third of all enrolments. This figure reflects steady year-on-year increases in enrolments, which have nearly doubled from 521 in 2015. In 2019, a large majority of children enrolled in Early Start Kindergarten were enrolled to access 15 or more hours per week.

In 2020, Victoria became the first jurisdiction in Australia to fund three-year-old kindergarten for all children. A staged roll-out will see all families in Victoria having

access to the program by 2022.

### Creating A Koorie-inclusive Learning Environment: Reflections from a Kindergarten Teacher

“A strong commitment to ongoing professional practice is imperative to continue to better oneself as a teacher. Ongoing professional development enables us to be the best teachers we can possibly be for our children. Coming from overseas, I have had to learn many new things about how to be a good and effective teacher in Australia. Initially, I found it most challenging to become knowledgeable, comfortable and confident in teaching Indigenous history and culture. Gaining knowledge was the simple part; the much more difficult aspect was becoming comfortable and confident in what and how to teach the children about Indigenous history and culture.

I attended a professional development session called ‘Making Your Kindergarten Koorie-Inclusive’, which was run by the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI) and facilitated by Dr Aunty Esme Bamblett and Leigh Saunders. This session enabled me to understand on a much deeper level the difficulties Indigenous Australians faced and still face, as well as how to respectfully, appropriately and confidently teach Indigenous culture to Australian children. It was emphasised in the professional development I attended:

*“Don’t be afraid to teach our culture, our culture must be taught and passed on, the future knowledge of Indigenous culture lies in teaching this to young children.”*

I knew I needed to overcome a fear of saying the wrong thing and provide the education about Australian Indigenous culture and history that an early childhood program deserves.The kindergarteners in 2017 were published in Reconciliation Victoria for recognition of their beautiful work in acknowledging and understanding Sorry Day. In 2018, I wrote a personalised Acknowledgement of Country that was more connected to the beliefs and values of our centre. This inspired the idea to write an Acknowledgement of Country with the children. In 2019, the children in the kindergarten program wrote their own Acknowledgement entitled “A Wombat Wominjeka.” The children summarised all that they learnt about Indigenous history and culture and their own feelings and views to collaborate on an amazing piece of work and acknowledgement. Not only have the children been learning a lot about Indigenous culture in the classroom, but our centre has become a more culturally inclusive and safe place.

We want to ensure our Indigenous families and staff that we value their family and cultural contributions. One family in particular became inspired and motivated to reconnect with their past and family as they had not previously been in touch with their Aboriginal heritage. Another family beams with joy as they see their son share his Aboriginal identity and pride with his friends and teachers at kindergarten.

At the end of 2019, VAEAI ran a special professional development session to showcase best practice in Koorie-inclusive early childhood education. I was invited to share my learning and present some of the ways in which I have embedded inclusive practices in the kindergarten program. I brought a box full of inspiring resources and shared various activities that could be implemented to extend on learning. I also shared many pieces of work that my previous students had made and shared the learning and story behind the pieces for further ideas. By sharing my practices, ideas and activities, I believe I inspired others to better incorporate Indigenous culture within their programs.

In summary, I believe that Australian children deserve an education that is honest about our history, instils pride and celebrates the First Australians. This is something that we strive to achieve in kindergarten each day. I know we are on the right path, because the children express to us and their families in various ways that their new knowledge truly resonates with them, but there is so much more work to be done. I am grateful that there are organisations like VAEAI that are there to support and inspire myself through such an important journey we all must partake in as Australian teachers.”

## School years

School plays a critical role in children’s transition to adulthood, providing foundational skills such as literacy and numeracy, as well as an introduction to more specialised areas of learning, vocational skills, and opportunities to explore individual interests, such as arts or sports, all of which contribute to pursuit of further education, and economic and civic participation in adulthood. The sections below provide a broad overview of Victorian Aboriginal students’ engagement with school education, including their perceptions of school, attendance, acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills, completions, and participation and performance during the final years in VCE. The measures used are predominantly drawn from DET administrative data, factors from the Attitudes to School Survey (AtoSS), (an annual DET survey capturing Years 4 to 12 government school students’ attitudes and experiences at school), and results from the nationally administered NAPLAN test, which provides an indication of literacy and numeracy achievement at Years 3, 5, 7, and 9.

As previously referenced, the disproportionate levels of disadvantage experienced by the Aboriginal community affect the ability of some children and young people to engage with education, and this is reflected in many of the results described below.

It is worth reiterating, however, that educational engagement and achievement are varied across the cohort, and that averaged results do not reflect the outcomes of

all individuals.

### School readiness

School readiness refers to the developmental stages and acquisition of skills that children require to successfully transition from pre-school to the school learning environment and achieve early educational milestones. This not only encompasses speech and language skills, but also levels of social and emotional development, and aspects of physical health. Information about the school readiness of Victorian children is captured by several data collections taken during the Foundation year, which together cover a broad range of developmental and early academic skills upon which later learning is founded. These collections include:

* The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC): a triennial survey of the developmental status of children in their first year of school conducted by teachers. The survey covers the domains of physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, and communication skills and general knowledge, assessed as being either ‘on track’, ‘at risk’ (experiencing some challenges), or ‘vulnerable’ (experiencing multiple challenges).
* The School Entrant Health Questionnaire (SEHQ): an annual questionnaire recording Victorian parents’ and carers’ observations and concerns about their child’s health and development, used to assist the Victorian Primary School Nursing Program with assessments, and service planning and delivery. The questionnaire includes two key assessment scales, the Parental Evaluation of Developmental Status (PEDS), and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), which captures concerns about behavioural and emotional problems.
* The English Online Interview: an online tool for teachers to assess the English skills of students in the early years of school, including reading, writing, and speaking and listening. All students commencing their Foundation year are assessed in the first five and a half weeks.

Data captured by the AEDC shows that most Victorian Aboriginal children are developmentally on track in each of the five domains in their first year of school, but that a higher proportion are developmentally vulnerable as compared to non-Aboriginal students. This gap is related to the types of challenges disproportionately affecting the Aboriginal community which, as discussed in earlier sections of this report, include higher rates of disability and health issues. While there have been some small changes in results over the four censuses run from 2009 to 2018, the overall proportions of Aboriginal children deemed to be vulnerable in one or more, and two or more domains, are virtually the same in 2018 as they were 9 years before in 2009.

Figure 50 Victorian Aboriginal children developmentally ‘on track’, AEDC domains, 2009 to 2018

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2009** | **2012** | **2015** | **2018** |
| **Communication** | 56.7% | 63.6% | 65.4% | 62.4% |
| **Emotional Maturity** | 59.7% | 66.3% | 61.1% | 60.3% |
| **Language and Cognition** | 61.8% | 62.2% | 62.6% | 63.4% |
| **Physical Health and Wellbeing** | 61.4% | 66.7% | 63.6% | 61.7% |
| **Social Competence** | 60.1% | 61.1% | 58.2% | 58.4% |

*Source: (AEDC, 2019)*

Figure 51 Victorian Aboriginal children developmentally vulnerable in one or more, and two or more AEDC domains, 2009 to 2018

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2009** | **2012** | **2015** | **2018** |
| **One or more domains** | 42.4% | 39.6% | 40.3% | 42.4% |
| **Two or more domains** | 26.6% | 23.2% | 24.4% | 26.7% |

*Source: AEDC, 2009-2018.*

Figure 52 Victorian children developmentally vulnerable in AEDC domains, by Aboriginal status, 2018

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Aboriginal** | **Non-Aboriginal** |
| **Communication** | 16.8% | 7.2% |
| **Emotional Maturity** | 19.6% | 7.9% |
| **Language and Cognition** | 21.2% | 6.1% |
| **Physical Health and Wellbeing** | 23.3% | 7.9% |
| **Social Competence** | 22.5% | 8.6% |

*Source: AEDC, 2018*

As with the AEDC, data from the SEHQ indicates that the majority of Aboriginal children starting school are not at high risk of social, emotional and behavioural problems or general development problems, but that the overall prevalence of risks is higher than for non-Aboriginal children. However, in contrast to the AEDC, the proportion of parents and carers reporting concerns about their child’s behaviour and development has increased over the past decade. This trend is apparent for all children but is more pronounced for the Aboriginal cohort, meaning that the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal results is increasing. This data needs to be interpreted carefully, in part because the questionnaire is completed by parents and carers, and not by childhood health or education practitioners. Because of this, it is likely that these trends are influenced by growing public awareness of childhood behaviour and development issues, and thus do not necessarily reflect increases in the actual prevalence of behavioural and developmental concerns.

Figure 53 Victorian children with high risk of behavioural and emotional problems or developmental concerns as identified by their parents/carers, 2010 and 2019

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2010** | | **2019** | |
|  | **High risk of behavioural and emotional problems (SDQ)** | **High developmental risk (PEDS)** | **High risk of behavioural and emotional problems (SDQ)** | **High developmental risk (PEDS)** |
| **Aboriginal** | 11.0% | 12.8% | 18.5% | 32.4% |
| **Non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal status unknown** | 4.2% | 8.1% | 6.5% | 22.0% |

*Source: (DET, 2020d)*

Unlike the AEDC and SEHQ, the English Online Interview is not designed to identify developmental vulnerabilities, but rather whether children’s English language skills, including Speaking and Listening, Reading, and Writing, are at the expected level (working toward Foundation) or ahead (working toward Level 1 or above). At the time they commence school, the vast majority of Victorian students are deemed to be either working toward Foundation or toward Level 1 across these skills. Relatively few are working toward Level 2 or 3, and fewer than one percent are working toward Level 4 or above. English Online Interview data from 2019 showed that a proportion of Aboriginal students were ahead of expected skills, working towards Level 1 or above, including 45.1 per cent in Speaking and Listening, 15.2 per cent in Reading, and 22.6 per cent in Writing. Differences in results for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students varied across skills areas, with the largest gap observed in Reading.

Figure 54 English language skills at school commencement, 2019

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Reading** | | **Speaking and Listening** | | **Writing** | |
|  | **Aboriginal** | **Non-Aboriginal** | **Aboriginal** | **Non-Aboriginal** | **Aboriginal** | **Non-Aboriginal** |
| **Towards Foundation** | 84.8% | 66.7% | 54.9% | 43.5% | 77.4% | 68.9% |
| **Towards Level 1** | 14.5% | 29.9% | 38.1% | 45.3% | 19.7% | 23.4% |
| **Towards Level 2 and above** | 0.7% | 3.3% | 7.0% | 11.1% | 2.8% | 7.7% |

*Source: (DET, 2020f)*

#### School Readiness Funding

The Victorian Government has recently introduced School Readiness Funding, which can be used to enhance kindergarten programs and improve outcomes for children, particularly those more likely to experience educational disadvantage. Funding for kindergarten services varies depending on the level of need of the kindergarten service, informed by the type of parental occupation and level of parent education data of the children enrolled at the service.

School Readiness Funding aims to build high-quality practice by developing the capacity of kindergarten teachers and educators to optimise learning for all children. Based on the needs of their communities, kindergartens must spend the majority of their funding on evidence-informed programs and supports that address three priority areas (informed by AEDC data and consultation with the sector):

* Communication (language development) which includes, vocabulary and sentence development, listening and following instructions, engagement in book sharing and early literacy, communication in play and social interaction.
* Wellbeing (social and emotional) which includes, self-regulation, focus and attention, positive relationships, friendships and attachments, emotional resilience and positive mental health, social responsibility and helping skills.
* Access and inclusion which includes support to boost attendance and meaningful participation of all children in the program, outreach to increase participation of children, community engagement, and cultural and social inclusion.

There are nine menu items that focus specifically on improving Aboriginal cultural awareness and inclusion in kindergarten services. They range from specific programs, such as cross-cultural (Aboriginal) awareness programs or storytelling and art workshops with children, to Aboriginal cultural consultancy support. In 2019 approximately 200 kindergarten services used their School Readiness Funding to access menu items focused on Aboriginal cultural awareness and inclusion.

#### VACCA — Koorie Kids Playgroup

**Story 1**

VACCA’s Koorie Kids Playgroups have been unable to run as before due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, the Playgroups team created a plan that each week we were going to call our families for a yarn to ensure that they were doing well during the current circumstances and provide support with referrals to case workers and appropriate services where needed. We also created an activity pack for the families to complete with their children at home, which we safely dropped to their home each week. We found during this time, with the regular communication and activity packs, the families involved have stayed engaged.

A young mother with twin girls and a school-aged son started attending Playgroups earlier this year. This mother has had many obstacles arise in her family life along with the complex health needs that one of her daughters has had since birth. She has Down syndrome, which subsequently presented other health and learning barriers for the child, including deafness and other complex learning needs.

Before Playgroups were affected by COVID-19, this family had regular verbal engagement with the program, however, sometimes found it quite difficult to attend the physical sessions due to the daughter’s ongoing health needs through hospital appointments, appointments with other workers and while juggling her enrolment and attendance in kindergarten. One positive outcome of COVID-19 for this family is that the mother and her children can be more involved in Playgroups as they have been provided with the resources to learn, play and bond together in their own home through our culturally strengthening activity packs. This has not only contributed to their own personal bonding but has built a stronger relationship between staff and this family. The young mother is working very hard to meet the needs of all her children, all while caring and doing home schooling for her eldest child.

The mother has been incredibly grateful for the activity packs and support the team provided, she sent photos of the activities she had completed with her children. Since this family have started attending Playgroup, her daughter with Down syndrome has exceeded all expectations with the continuous support and encouragement of her mother, siblings and VACCA staff.

Despite the current challenging circumstances, we could not be prouder of this incredible family overcoming the obstacles that they have in the short time they have been attending Playgroup. It is so rewarding being a part of their journey in finding culture, improving their social skills and making trusting, confiding relationships with Playgroup workers. This family has engaged in other programs at VACCA, additional external Aboriginal services and has found support in more ways than one since attending our Koorie Kids Playgroup.

#### VACCA — Koorie Kids Playgroup

**Story 2**

A mother who attends Playgroup is non-Indigenous and uses Playgroup as a safe space for her Aboriginal children to connect with culture through play and learning experiences. The environment that VACCA Koorie Kids Supported Playgroup has provided for this family to find connection to culture has contributed immensely to this family thriving in community involvement. This mother has expressed that the weekly activity packs that have been delivered to her door have helped her build confidence in teaching from home and she has felt more connected to her children through doing these activities together.

The kids are keeping occupied and constantly learning things and enjoying the time spent with their mother at home doing these fun activities. They have all found a growing interest in the cooking activities especially and have thoroughly enjoyed learning about the native ingredients used in these packs. The children have loved exploring the different tastes and explored the chemical reactions and changes that happen through the preparation and cooking of these recipes. This mother has expressed to us that her children love the taste of lemon myrtle that was used in some biscuit packs that were delivered and have since been incorporating it into other dishes at home.

Despite the additional challenges that this mother has faced with the uncertainty that has come with this global pandemic, she has risen above her anxieties and used her voice to seek help and support where she feels necessary. Northern VACCA Koorie Kids Supported Playgroup has been beneficial for her and her children in getting them prepared for school, in addition to the support that she seeks from childcare. For this mother, she has expressed to us that she feels that her relationship is better with Playgroup workers in contrast to her rapport with the teachers at her child’s kindergarten, so feels more comfortable seeking support from us.

This support includes referrals to Best Start workers, information about culturally safe services and health centres such as the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service, and support in her ability to teach her children from home during isolation. She has been proactive with health appointments for her children and researching the best ways to teach from home with the support of education and activity ideas from Koorie Kids Playgroup Curriculums. While we have not had the opportunity to do physical gatherings or events, this family has engaged in several Facebook livestreams facilitated by Playgroup workers and the annual VACCA NAIDOC Children’s Day held virtually.

### Attitudes to school

Research has found that attitudes and behaviours related to learning can have a significant influence on young people’s school and post-school education and employment outcomes (Spengler, Damian, & Roberts, 2018), with positive attitudes and behaviours having the potential to overcome the educational barriers often associated with socioeconomic disadvantage (Mourshed, Krawitz, & Dorn, 2017). For students to learn most effectively they also need to be challenged and supported at the appropriate level. However, the range of student ability within classrooms can make it difficult for teachers to both support students who are struggling academically and challenge those who are achieving at a high level (Goss & Hunter, 2015). The Attitudes to School Survey (AtoSS) asks Victorian government school students about their perceptions of their own characteristics and dispositions as learners, also known as academic self-concept, as well as about the teaching practices in their school.

For all Victorian students, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, academic self-concept and perceptions of teaching practices vary significantly across year levels, particularly following the transition from primary to secondary school. This transition point is an important milestone for students, but in Victoria and comparable educational jurisdictions worldwide, it is associated with a drop in engagement and interruption to learning growth (Carmichael, 2014; Hopwood, Hay, & Dyment, 2017). This is likely a consequence of multiple influences, including the disruption of changing school settings, physical and social changes associated with puberty (Mundy, et al., 2013),

poor curriculum continuity, and changes in pedagogy (Hopwood, Hay, & Dyment, 2016), as well as the less personal teacher-student relations in secondary school (Hung, 2014). Reflecting this, reported positive academic self- concept and perceptions of teaching practices drop for secondary school students and are at their lowest in Years 9 and 10.This pattern is more pronounced for Aboriginal students’ academic self-concept, consistent with some previous Australian research that has found similar cohort differences (Bodkin-Andrews, Dillon, & Craven, 2010; McInerney, 2008).

Figure 55 Academic self-concept and perceptions of teaching, 2019

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Aboriginal** | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | **Year 4** | **Year 5** | **Year 6** | **Year 7** | **Year 8** | **Year 9** | **Year 10** | **Year 11** | **Year 12** |
| **Positive perceptions of teaching practices** | 84.4% | 82.5% | 81.9% | 65.5% | 56.8% | 53.7% | 53.9% | 57.1% | 60.5% |
| **Positive academic self-concept** | 84.8% | 82.0% | 78.9% | 64.4% | 54.8% | 53.6% | 53.9% | 60.3% | 64.2% |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal status unknown** | | | | |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | **Year 4** | **Year 5** | **Year 6** | **Year 7** | **Year 8** | **Year 9** | **Year 10** | **Year 11** | **Year 12** |
| **Positive perceptions of teaching practices** | 84.7% | 83.2% | 82.6% | 65.8% | 58.0% | 54.8% | 55.2% | 59.3% | 64.0% |
| **Positive academic self-concept** | 86.0% | 84.1% | 83.8% | 69.3% | 62.3% | 60.6% | 62.8% | 66.8% | 70.0% |

*Source: (DET, 2019a)*

*Note: The AtoSS is completed by students in Victorian government schools only. The measure above, ‘positive perceptions of teaching practices’ and ‘positive academic self-concept’, are aggregated from student responses to questions within the AtoSS ‘Effective teaching practice for cognitive engagement’ and ‘Learner characteristics and disposition’ domains respectively.*

Other key measures captured by AtoSS include students’ sense of connection to their school, and feeling that they have opportunities to express their views and influence their own education (student voice and agency), both of which relate to factors associated with academic and social outcomes (Allen, Kern, Vella-Brodrick, Hattie, & Waters, 2018; Anderson, et al., 2019). Notably, non-Aboriginal students within Greater Melbourne are more likely to report positive perceptions of these aspects of school than those living in the rest of Victoria, as well as more positive academic self-concept and perceptions of teaching. This pattern may reflect higher average socioeconomic advantage and education levels in metropolitan areas, and other demographic differences, such as cultural background, which are known to be associated with differences in both parents’ and children’s attitudes to education (Phillipson & Phillipson, 2017; OECD, 2013).

This pattern, however, is not apparent for the Aboriginal cohort for whom perceptions related to school tend to be more positive in areas outside of Greater Melbourne. This may be related to the cohort differences in geographic distribution noted in Part 1 of this report, which include a greater proportion of Aboriginal children and young people living in non-metropolitan areas.

Figure 56 Attitudes to school: Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students by location, 2019

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **Greater Melbourne** | **Rest of Victoria** |
| **Aboriginal** | **Positive perceptions of teaching practices** | 64.8% | 67.6% |
|  | **Positive academic self-concept** | 65.4% | 68.4% |
|  | **Positive perceptions of student voice and agency** | 53.7% | 58.9% |
|  | **Sense of school connectedness** | 61.0% | 64.5% |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal status unknown** | **Positive perceptions of teaching practices** | 66.8% | 65.8% |
|  | **Positive academic self-concept** | 72.6% | 69.1% |
|  | **Positive perceptions of student voice and agency** | 56.3% | 55.3% |
|  | **Sense of school connectedness** | 66.7% | 63.8% |

*Source: (DET, 2019a)*

Changes were made to the AtoSS in 2017 that affect the ability to compare to previous years’ results and thus produce long-term trends. From 2017 to 2019, however, Aboriginal secondary students results show encouraging, although in some cases small, positive changes against the four measures discussed above.

Figure 57 Attitudes to school: Aboriginal secondary students (Years 7 to 12), 2017 to 2019

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** |
| **Positive perceptions of teaching practices** | 53.9% | 56.7% | 58.2% |
| **Positive academic self-concept** | 56.3% | 58.6% | 58.3% |
| **Positive perceptions of student voice and agency** | 41.7% | 43.6% | 45.0% |
| **Sense of school connectedness** | 46.7% | 50.6% | 50.2% |

*Source: (DET, 2019a)*

#### Cultural Understanding and Safety Training — Glen Eira and Westall Learning Stones sites

Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026 commits to making ongoing and high-quality cultural awareness training available for service leaders and practitioners in early childhood, school and training sectors. Training for schools has been developed in consultation with the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI), their Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (LAECG) and the DET Koorie Education Workforce. The training seeks to build the capacity of all school staff to better support Koorie learners and build more culturally inclusive practices, including through embedding local Aboriginal perspectives, cultures and histories in the curriculum.

The DET Koorie Education Workforce lead the facilitation of the CUST. Traditional Owners are invited to each training program to perform a Welcome and/or talk about the local area and the LAECG are also engaged to build relationships between the school and their local Aboriginal communities. The Koorie Education Workforce regularly meets with schools and provides guidance to the schools in the development and implementation of an action plan that strengthens inclusion and the relationship between the school and the local Aboriginal community. Delivery of CUST to schools commenced CUST in Term 2 2018 and by November 2019, more than 700 schools had completed the training and were progressing action plans. Cultural awareness professional development for schools is an ongoing commitment.

The Assistant Principal of Glen Eira College reflected on the effects on his school:

*“As a direct result of CUST training we set up regular CUST meetings comprised of parents, teachers and students. This merged with our Building Our Identity committee which school council already had in place. The intent for these meetings is to ensure there is follow up for the range of actions we agreed upon and to make the school a more welcoming place for the Indigenous community. These actions included curriculum initiatives such as Indigenous games in PE, revising our History curriculum and use of textbooks to more accurately reflect the Indigenous experience and providing English classes with greater resources to raise awareness through events such as Reconciliation Day. Aboriginal language words were also introduced into our language classes. We created classroom posters of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island flags and purchased new flags to fly at the front of the school. We also printed maps indicating Indigenous language groups and put these in classrooms. We are now planning to make the College more welcoming with a Learning Stones site. The CUST committee meetings will continue once a month.”*

The Learning Stones initiative was developed by a Koorie Engagement Support Officer in South Gippsland as a result of community consultations which identified several gaps for Indigenous families in the educational sector. Learning stones benefits are numerous, creating a safe place for reflection, a place to acknowledge significant days on the Indigenous calendar and to help support educational transitions for Indigenous families. The true value of creating a Learning Stones site is the process, the communication with stakeholders, engaging community and Elders, developing a shared understanding and a commitment to uphold the integrity of Indigenous practice, lifestyles and people. The Learning Stones site provides a living local resource to assist and provide a better cultural understanding and a place to start for teachers in their delivery of Indigenous content. There are also numerous benefits and opportunities for students associated with Learning Stones sites including assisting school transition and leadership and skill development.

The Principal of Westall Secondary College reflected on the process of creating a Learning Stones site at his school:

*“Our focus at Westall on learning and understanding our Indigenous heritage and history is so significant. Our Learning Stones Gathering Place is a physical symbol of this significance. Ongoing reconciliation and our annual Reconciliation Week events are important elements of our unified move forward as a country. We remember and learn from the past to ensure a better future for all.”*

#### Koorie English

Koorie English is a recognised and valued dialect of English that is spoken by members of Koorie communities across Victoria. It embodies cultural values, concepts and mores of Aboriginal culture, some traditional words and non-verbal communication. It is important that teachers not only value and accept Koorie English as legitimate dialect, but also regard it is a crucial link to cultural identity and wellbeing for Koorie English speakers. One of the features of Koorie English is that is uses Standard Australian English words from an Aboriginal worldview.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Standard Australian English** | **Koorie English** |
| **MOB** | A group of angry people | Family/group of people |
| **FAMILY** | Immediate family | All extended relatives related by kinship |
| **DEADLY** | Dangerous/lethal | Excellent, really good |

A non-verbal feature of Koorie English that is often misunderstood is eye contact. From a Koorie perspective, a lack of eye-contact is not a sign of inattention, but a sign of respect.Teachers may interpret this as a sign inattention or rudeness, which impacts the relationship between teacher and student.

As part of the Education State: Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, professional development opportunities have been designed to support teachers in understanding Koorie English and its relationship with student achievement.

A pilot for the professional development was launched in October of 2018, targeting 18 primary and secondary teachers in the North Eastern Melbourne and Hume Moreland areas. The professional development consisted of three modules: What is Koorie English?, Language and Wellbeing (Engagement), and Koorie English and Literacy in the classroom.

When participants were asked if the professional development could support them in the practice, responses included:

*“It has provided insight into things to look out for when teaching Koorie students*

*and examples of how to support them to feel valued by recognising their language*

*and culture in their learning.”*

*“Absolutely! Much more and better explicit instruction. Much more work into building positive relationships and focussing on positives.”*

*“I will be more understanding of silence as thoughtfulness. Will also be more mindful*

*of how my corrections can impact on how valued a student feels.”*

*“Yes. Has affirmed that cultural awareness is vital and that code-switching in*

*particular needs to be taught as a meta-cognitive strategy and process.”*

The professional development will be rolled out across Victoria from 2020. In addition, more resources, training and case studies will be developed to track the reach of the professional development and identify further opportunities to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

### School attendance

Students who are frequently absent from school are at risk of lower academic achievement and school non-completion. Lower levels of school attendance are predicted by a range of individual and school factors, but are also strongly associated with family disadvantage and parenting skills (Wong, O’Donnell, Bayliss, Fletcher, & Glauert, 2017; Demir & Akman Karabeyoglu). Students who are bullied, harassed, or

who feel unsafe are also more likely to avoid attending school.

On average, Aboriginal students are absent from school for significantly more days in a given year than non-Aboriginal students. As shown in the charts below, this gap has remained largely unchanged for both primary and secondary school students over the past 10 years.

Figure 58 Average absence days per student by Aboriginal status, Victorian government schools, Years Foundation to 6, 2010 to 2019

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2010** | **2011** | **2012** | **2013** | **2014** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** |
| **Aboriginal** | 24.0 | 24.1 | 24.3 | 24.3 | 23.2 | 23.4 | 23.9 | 24.4 | 24.7 | 26.1 |
| **Non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal status unknown** | 13.9 | 14.1 | 14.1 | 14.3 | 13.9 | 14.5 | 14.8 | 15.4 | 15.1 | 16.1 |

*Source: (DET, 2020a)*

Figure 59 Average absence days per student by Aboriginal status, Victorian government schools, Years 7 to 12, 2010 to 2019

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2010** | **2011** | **2012** | **2013** | **2014** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** |
| **Aboriginal** | 37.2 | 36.2 | 31.9 | 34.7 | 34.5 | 34.5 | 35.3 | 35.8 | 36.6 | 37.2 |
| **Non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal status unknown** | 18.5 | 18.2 | 17.4 | 17.7 | 17.9 | 18.1 | 18.6 | 19.0 | 19.1 | 19.9 |

*Source: (DET, 2020a)*

As with other attitudes to school, student attitudes to school attendance begin to decline in secondary school, reaching a low point in Year 9. These changes in attitudes are reflected in actual attendance patterns, with student absences increasing for the same Year levels. For Aboriginal students this pattern is more pronounced, with Aboriginal Year 9 students missing an average of 42.9 days of school in 2019, compared to 23.4 days for non-Aboriginal students (including those whose status is unknown).

Figure 60 Aboriginal students’ attitudes to school attendance and average absence days, Years 4 to 12, 2019

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Positive attitudes to attendence** | 88.0% | 87.1% | 84.8% | 75.3% | 67.0% | 65.1% | 65.9% | 74.5% | 76.2% |
| **Average number of absence days per student** | 25.5 | 26.5 | 29.2 | 35.5 | 41.2 | 42.9 | 37.5 | 31.0 | 27.5 |

*Source: (DET, 2020a; 2019a)*

#### Navigator

The Navigator program supports young people aged 12 to 17 years who are not connected to schools at all or are at risk of disengaging. It provides intensive case management and assertive outreach support to disengaged learners. The program works with these young people and their support networks to return them to education.

Navigator is delivered by community agencies that work closely with local schools and area teams to support a young person to re-engage back into education. Navigator service providers are responsible for improving outcomes for young people, linking them to support services and interventions, and working with schools to support re-engagement planning.

Service providers support Aboriginal young people in the program, through working closely with the Department of Education and Training, Koorie Engagement Support Officers and having regional partnerships with local Aboriginal organisations. Some service providers also employ Aboriginal Case Workers.The Navigator Program is currently operating in most regions across Victoria and by 2021 will be operating as a statewide, ongoing program.

#### St Joseph’s Flexible Learning Centre — Youth Plus (Geelong)

St Joseph’s Flexible Learning Centre provides a class for Koori youth, known as the

Koori Culture Club. This initiative emerged from a meeting of organisations, institutions

and schools, chaired by the Koorie Education Children’s Court Liaison Officer, at which it was identified there was a need for flexible delivery of the Victorian Curriculum F–10 to Koori young people who were disengaged from education and/or involved in the criminal justice system.

The Koori Culture Club started as an offsite mobile class operating two to three days

per week, with a small cohort of young people and variety of supporting staff. Space was provided by the Wathaurong Co-operative, as well as through use of local parks and reserves. In 2019 the initiative expanded, with the addition of a fulltime youth worker, designated classroom, and classes running five days a week.

The classroom utilises a round table model and four core principles of Respect, Honesty, Participation, and Safe and Legal. Every day starts with a yarning circle, which allows the whole class to tune in and gauge where each other are at. At times it becomes a time of healing, culturally, mentally, and emotionally. Participants then use a ‘Deadly Chart’ to indicate on a scale how much engagement they will have for the day. The class delivers the Victorian Curriculum with a strong Indigenous lens, focusing on Wadawurrung Country, learning about the land and history.

An example of the Koori Culture Club’s role in supporting educational engagement comes from a participant who transferred to the classes from the St Joseph’s Flexible Learning Centre Victorian Curriculum class in 2018. This young person had experienced complex trauma, had not engaged with school for a long time, and was not confident in their education or their bloodline. Their early engagement with the Flexible Learning Centre had also been sporadic and inconsistent. Following their transition, this young person’s attendance and engagement has increased, and they have developed a strong sense of belonging in the Koori Culture Club. They now have a role facilitating the daily ‘Deadly Chart’, and are more confident in their words and phrases, and knowledge of cultural places.

### Literacy and numeracy

Literacy and numeracy are foundational skills with broad applications in education, employment and everyday life (DET, 2018). These skills are highly predictive of whether young people complete schooling, and for those who disengage from school early they play a key role in enabling re-engagement with education at later life stages. International studies have found that compared to other countries, the requirements for literacy proficiency are relatively high for both skilled and unskilled occupations in Australia (OECD, 2016), and the literacy skills of workers tend to closely match the level required by their job (OECD, 2012), suggesting that these skills can be a threshold requirement for access to employment.

The National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), is an Australia-wide annual assessment program managed by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). These standardised tests provide data on the skills of both government and non-government school students in Years 3, 5, 7, and 9, across the domains of reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation, and numeracy. Students’ scores in each domain are situated within six bands of performance for their Year level. The data below examines the proportion of students achieving in the top three bands for their Year level in the domains of Reading (as a proxy measurement for general literacy skills) and Numeracy. Top three bands performance has been chosen as an indicator of students’ skills at a level that enables strong engagement with educational content as they progress through school. This is a higher standard of academic performance than the National Minimum Standard reported by ACARA (which encompasses the top five bands).

Over the 10 years from 2010 to 2019, Victoria’s NAPLAN results have been among the top performing jurisdictions, and analysis has shown that relative to those in other Australian states and territories, Victorian students from less advantaged schools and family backgrounds do comparatively well (Goss, Sonnemann, & Owain , 2018). Despite this, there remain significant gaps in averaged results for a number of cohorts, including Aboriginal students, low socioeconomic status students, and those from non-metropolitan areas. Long-term trends have also been mixed, with some domains showing improvement at some Year levels, but others showing only marginal changes, or fluctuating results with no clear trend.

For Year 3 students, NAPLAN results have improved in both Reading and Numeracy, with more Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in the top three bands in 2019 than in 2010. Year 5 Reading results were also better in 2019 than in 2010. Year 5 Numeracy results for Aboriginal students dropped from 2010 to 2012, gradually recovered from 2012 to 2017 and have since remained similar to 2010 results. For non-Aboriginal students, Year 5 Numeracy dropped to a low point in 2013, then recovered and exceeded 2010 results.

Figure 61 Year 3 Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN Top 3 Bands), 2010 and 2019

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Reading** | | **Numeracy** | |
|  | **Aboriginal** | **Non-Aboriginal** | **Aboriginal** | **Non-Aboriginal** |
| **2010** | 46.6% | 75.0% | 38.4% | 68.3% |
| **2019** | 51.9% | 79.0% | 44.2% | 72.3% |

*Source: (ACARA, 2019a)*

Figure 62 Year 5 Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN Top 3 Bands), 2010 and 2019

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Reading** | | **Numeracy** | |
|  | **Aboriginal** | **Non-Aboriginal** | **Aboriginal** | **Non-Aboriginal** |
| **2010** | 33.5% | 61.8% | 33.2% | 62.1% |
| **2019** | 41.9% | 70.3% | 33.2% | 64.7% |

*Source: (ACARA, 2019a)*

In secondary school, the trends in NAPLAN have been less consistent, particularly for Year 7 students where Reading and Numeracy results have fluctuated from year to year for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. The difficulties in maintaining improvements in Year 7 results may be related to the challenges many students experience in the transition to secondary school, as discussed in the sections above. From 2010 to 2019, Year 9 Reading results improved for Aboriginal students, but with most of the improvement in the first few years. Numeracy results for the Aboriginal cohort in this Year level have gone up and down, but have remained above 2010 results from 2014 onward.

Figure 63 Year 7 Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN Top 3 Bands), 2010 and 2019

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Reading** | | **Numeracy** | |
|  | **Aboriginal** | **Non-Aboriginal** | **Aboriginal** | **Non-Aboriginal** |
| **2010** | 31.9% | 62.5% | 26.7% | 60.0% |
| **2019** | 28.4% | 62.8% | 28.9% | 64.9% |

*Source: (ACARA, 2019a)*

Figure 64 Year 9 Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN Top 3 Bands), 2010 and 2019

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Reading** | | **Numeracy** | |
|  | **Aboriginal** | **Non-Aboriginal** | **Aboriginal** | **Non-Aboriginal** |
| **2010** | 15.7% | 50.4% | 19.3% | 54.1% |
| **2019** | 25.2% | 52.8% | 23.3% | 55.9% |

*Source: (ACARA, 2019a)*

While the NAPLAN is used to provide point-in-time data for student performance, it is important to recognise that it does not provide a complete picture of learning or achievement (Mitchell Institute, 2014). For example, a student may demonstrate significant learning gains and yet fail to meet the benchmark for their Year level because the gains have been made from a lower base, while on the other hand,

a high achieving student may meet benchmarks for their Year level without demonstrating significant learning gain over time.

#### Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Ltd — Bert Williams Aboriginal Youth Services Online Homework Program

The Bert Williams Aboriginal Youth Services (BWAYS) Aboriginal Early School Leavers and Youth Employment Program usually operates and facilitates the BWAYS Homework Club each year during the school terms to support Koorie leaners to maintain, catch up and excel in their educational journey. This homework program has been successfully operating for approximately 10 years out of the Bert Williams Centre and recruits volunteer tutors from the Centre of Multicultural Youth volunteer tutor bank. BWAYS screens and interviews all potential volunteers in line with VACSAL policy and child safety standards.

Due to the global pandemic of COVID-19 the program had to cease operation, leaving many existing students without tutorial support. Due to the pandemic, the schools were closed and remote learning was introduced, putting extra pressure on parents to support their children learning from home. In response, VACSAL developed the BWAYS Online Homework Program to support Koorie learners, families and communities. The Online Program provides individual tutorial support for Koorie Learners from Prep to Year 12 through Microsoft Teams and/or Zoom. Tutorial sessions are delivered Monday to Friday between 3:30pm and 6:30pm. Primary students are provided with 30-minute sessions and secondary students are provided with 60-minute sessions. The amount of sessions a child can access during the week will depend on student numbers and tutor availability. Students can bring work from any subject that they need support with.

Initially operating once a week with one tutor for six students, the program has expanded the provision to reach more Koorie students in the north west metropolitan areas by recruiting more volunteer tutors and operating each afternoon during the school terms. Fliers were distributed with COVID-19 care packages to families and emailed to all VACSAL/BWAYS networks.

#### Koorie Literacy and Numeracy Program

The Koorie Literacy and Numeracy Program (KLNP) provides funding to support Koorie students in Victorian government primary schools who are achieving below literacy/numeracy benchmarks. The program is comprised of the Early Years Koorie Literacy and Numeracy Program for students in Foundation (Prep) to Year 3, and the Extended Koorie Literacy and Numeracy Program for students in Years 4 to 6. Schools use KLNP funding to provide targeted support to eligible Koorie students at their point of need in literacy or numeracy.

The two KLNP teachers at Melrose Primary School in Wodonga have reflected on the positive effect the program had on one student’s attendance and overall learning:

*‘Miss L (at eight years old) came into the KLNP program in mid-2019. At the time she had low attendance or was often late arriving to school. Working with the classroom teacher, the Assistant Principal, the school attendance officer and external agencies we were able to assist her arriving at school on time each day. As part of the program we went about building strong relationships between the children and their learning, by providing a safe, one-on-one learning space. Part of this included encouraging Miss L to arrive at school on time, and she would be given opportunities to travel to school with us. Miss L loved this and her attendance levels increased, including arriving on time during the year. An end-of-year reward helped establish this year’s attendance which has greatly increased compared to previous years.’*

*‘Miss L started in the KNLP more than two years below her age in reading. It was evident that the large number of absences during the previous two years had been a factor. The program we offer works on building the foundation required to read, write and do maths. Over the past year Miss L increased her reading age, is able to write using an increased vocabulary, and is beginning to be able to understand and do maths successfully. These foundations are usually established in the early years of schooling, of which she had missed the majority. Miss L (now nine years old) is finding success with her learning, having been able to establish basic reading, writing and numerical strategies. Miss L enjoys working with us in the program where we offer fun, hands-on and one-on-one learning.’*

#### Koorie Academy of Excellence

The Koorie Academy of Excellence (KAE) is an out-of-school-hours leadership program that supports young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be culturally strong and to aspire towards achieving a study or career pathway of their choice. Since the beginning of the KAE in 2012 we have seen many students reach and achieve their goals. The Academy aims to help our young people find their excellence and pursue their career goals and stay connected with their culture and community. KAE students pursue career pathways through many fields including engineering, teaching, dental nursing, culinary arts and many more. We help these students to achieve their goals by supporting them with four main pillars: connection to culture; leadership; academic strength and school engagement; and career passion and knowledge.

Our recent success cases have been some of our most amazing stories so far.

* Emma\* is a KAE graduate from Pascoe Vale Girls College. She is the first in her family to complete high school and go on to further study. She was awarded the 2019 Toorong Marnong Vice Chancellors Academic Achievement Award for the KAE student who displays great academic potential and engagement throughout their education. The award is sponsored by the Victorian Vice Chancellors Committee and VAEAI, where the lucky recipient receives a $2,000 bursary to put towards their pathway choice. Emma was successful in gaining an offer to study a Bachelor of Education (Primary) at the Australian Catholic University and she hopes to specialise in teaching Physical Education to her future students.
* Levi\*, a KAE graduate from Charles La Trobe P-12 College, is also the first in his family to complete VCE and go on to further study. Levi has been offered an internship with the Rail Infrastructure Alliance (RIA) where he will undertake two-days-per-week of paid work experience whilst studying for a Bachelor of Business at RMIT University. A $5,000 scholarship from the RIA will assist with his studies. Levi aspires to be a future business owner and entrepreneur.
* Robjeet\*, a KAE graduate from Mount Ridley Secondary College, completed his Certificates I and II in Electrotechnology with Kangan Institute whilst at school.

Robjeet was also offered a scholarship and internship with the RIA and will undertake two-days-per-week paid work experience whilst he studies Electrical Engineering at Victoria University.

With success stories like these, it is easily seen that the KAE program and academy is extremely important to these students. The KAE guides and supports our young Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples in their career aspirations and also keeps them strong within their culture.

*\*Names in this case-study have been used with permission.*

## Senior secondary school

### School completion

Over the past decades, the skills required for economic participation have shifted with advances in information technology and automation, and globalised production chains, significantly reducing demand for low-skilled workers in economies such as Australia’s. Workers are also now more likely to change jobs and careers multiple times over the course of their working lives, and require skills that enable mobility in the job market.

As a result, the attainment of Year 12 or equivalent qualifications has become increasingly important for young people as a pathway to the types of employment available.

AtoSS captures government school students’ intentions to complete Year 12. This data shows that the majority of Aboriginal senior secondary students intend to complete Year 12, but that there are also many who are unsure about their intentions, especially among male students.

Figure 65 Intention to complete Year 12 Certificate, Aboriginal Years 10 to 12 students in Victorian government schools

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Yes** | **No** | **Unsure** |
| **Female** | 82.6% | 3.2% | 14.2% |
| **Male** | 65.6% | 7.9% | 26.6% |

*Source: (DET, 2019a)*

Apparent school retention rates calculated by the ABS provide an indication of the proportion of students proceeding through the schooling system, but do not account for migration, inter-sector transfers, and other factors that prevent the calculation of actual rates. These figures indicate that over the period from 2011 to 2019, Victorian Aboriginal students were less likely to stay in school from Year 7 or 8 through to Year 12 than non-Aboriginal students, and that male Aboriginal students, in particular, were at higher risk of leaving education.

Figure 66 Apparent Retention Rates, Years 7/8 to Year 12, Victorian schools (all sectors), 2019

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Aboriginal** | 60.6% | 70.7% |
| **Non-Aboriginal** | 82.6% | 93.1% |

*Source: (ABS, 2020c)*

Analysis of Australian Census of Population and Housing data conducted by the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the Australian National University shows that Australia-wide there has been strong growth in the proportion of Aboriginal young people attaining Year 12 or equivalent (Crawford & Venn, 2018). This has likely been influenced by a range of policy, economic and social context factors that have changed since 2006, including increases in the minimum school leaving age, poorer youth labour market outcomes, falling teenage fertility rates, and changes to income support eligibility that incentivise completion of Year 12. However, the analysis found that after controlling for observable differences, Aboriginal students were still around 1.7 to 1.8 times more likely to leave school early for work than non-Aboriginal students.

The National Indigenous Reform Agreement set targets to halve the gap in Year 12 or equivalent attainment rates for Aboriginal people aged 20 to 24 by 2020. At the 2016 Census, Victoria was not on track to meet this target, although Victoria’s Year 12 or equivalent attainment rates for Aboriginal young people are among the highest in Australia and are well above the national rate.

Figure 67 Proportion of Aboriginal people aged 20 to 24 years with Year 12 or equivalent attainment, Victoria and Australia

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2006** | **2011** | **2016** |
| **Victoria** | 56.4% | 61.5% | 71.3% |
| **Australia** | 47.4% | 53.9% | 65.3% |

*Source: (Productivity Commission, 2020)*

Together, these sources of data indicate a positive trend of increasing educational attainment, but also that more action is required to raise the educational aspirations

of those students who are unsure about completing Year 12, especially male

Aboriginal students.

#### Aunty Dot Peters Award

The Aunty Dot Peters Award (Award) supports Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students to complete Years 9 and 10 at a Victorian school. Awards are available for four students, who will receive $5,000 each. The Award honours Aunty Dot Peters AM (born 1930, died 2019), much-loved community member, educator and former Chairperson of the Victorian Aboriginal Remembrance Committee. All applications will be assessed by the Victorian Aboriginal Remembrance Committee. The Committee will provide final recommendations to the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, who will determine the Award recipients.

The Aunty Dot Peters Award is open to students who:

* are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
* have completed Year 8 at a Victorian school in 2019
* plan to complete Year 9 in 2020 and Year 10 in 2021 at a Victorian school.

### Vcal completions

The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) is a senior secondary certificate of education that provides a relatively flexible way for engaging students in vocational learning, and the knowledge and skills to make informed choices about employment and education pathways. The VCAL has four curriculum areas, called strands, which include literacy and numeracy skills, industry specific skills, work related skills, and personal development skills.

A relatively high proportion of Aboriginal students enrol in VCAL, with three VCAL enrolments for every five student enrolments in VCE in government schools in 2019.

By comparison the ratio of enrolments for the non-Aboriginal cohort was less than

one to five, although it should be noted that enrolling in VCAL and VCE are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In 2019, VCAL completion rates for Aboriginal students were at 64.5 per cent, higher than at any other point over the previous five-year period, while for the non-Aboriginal cohort they were at 74.9 per cent, similar to most years from 2015 on.

Figure 68 VCAL completion rates, 2015-2019

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** |
| **Aboriginal students** | 53.6% | 61.0% | 51.7% | 58.1% | 64.5% |
| **Non-Aboriginal students** | 75.0% | 75.0% | 71.8% | 74.2% | 74.9% |

*Source: (VCAA, 2020)*

*Notes: Data is for government schools only.*

#### Victoria Police — Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander School Based Traineeship

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander School Based Traineeship is a joint initiative between Victoria Police, Skillinvest and Jobs Victoria, delivering a highly engaging four-year training program, as part of a state-wide partnership between the Victorian Government and Aboriginal communities.

The traineeship aims to offer valuable experience to support young people in Year 10 and 11 interested in starting a career with Victoria Police. The program is highly practical, hands-on and contributes to the delivery of our Aboriginal Employment Plan allowing students an opportunity to gain VCE/VCAL qualification typically resulting in completion of a Certificate III in Business Administration. Trainees are paid award traineeship wages and typical intake is 60 students per year.

### VCE subject choices and performance

The Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) undertaken in senior secondary school offers students diverse options and pathways into further education and employment. The VCE course is made up of subjects, each comprised of four Units, which are typically undertaken in sequence over two years. A student’s performance in Units 3 and 4 (undertaken in their final year of study for that subject) produce their study score for that subject.

Subjects available to VCE students vary from school to school, with some also offered by distance education. In total there are more than 90 VCE subjects and 20 VCE Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs available, which students select from based on their interests, abilities, and post-school plans, such as university courses with prerequisites. Students usually undertake five or six subjects across Years 11 and 12, but may commence some VCE subjects in Year 10 and complete Units 3 and 4 of those subjects in Year 11.

As seen in Figure 69, Aboriginal senior secondary students are more likely to choose VCE subjects in Health and Physical Education, Humanities, Arts, Technology, and English, at the expense of undertaking Mathematics and Science subjects. Further, when Aboriginal students do choose Mathematics and Science subjects, they are less likely to undertake the more difficult or advanced subjects, such as Mathematical Methods, Specialist Mathematics, Chemistry, or Physics. They are also less likely to undertake Languages subjects. In 2019, the difference in the proportion VCE students undertaking VET in Schools was small at 1.1 per cent higher for Aboriginal students.

Some of these choices are significant, because they may mean that fewer Aboriginal young people will have access to what are broadly referred to as Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) qualifications and career pathways, for which VCE Science and Mathematics subjects can be requisite. Australian and international research has shown that the underrepresentation of both women and disadvantaged cohorts in STEM is a barrier to these groups entering higher paid professions, contributing the perpetuation of occupational segregation, wage gaps, and socioeconomic disadvantage (Justman & Méndez, 2016; Rapoport & Thibout, 2016; MacPhee, Farro, & Canetto, 2013).

Figure 69 Percentage of VCE students who completed a VCE Unit within an area of study, 2019

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Area of study** | **Aboriginal** | **Non-Aboriginal** |
| **Extended Investigation** | 0.4% | 0.5% |
| **VCE Languages** | 2.9% | 12.4% |
| **VET in Schools** | 8.4% | 7.3% |
| **Technology** | 15.4% | 12.1% |
| **Humanities** | 19.8% | 13.9% |
| **The Arts** | 28.6% | 24.5% |
| **Business Studies** | 33.3% | 36.4% |
| **Mathematics** | 46.2% | 63.1% |
| **Health and Physical Education** | 50.9% | 34.0% |
| **Science** | 56.0% | 63.5% |
| **English** | 69.2% | 64.0% |

*Source: (VCAA, 2020)*

*Note: Data is for government schools only. VCE students are defined as students with at least one VCE study scor*e. Legal Studies, Economics, and Accounting are included in the area of Business Studies.

Figure 70 Percentage of VCE Mathematics students who received a subject study score in each Mathematics subject, 2019

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Subject** | **Aboriginal** | **Non-Aboriginal** |
| **Specialist Mathematics** | 3.3% | 11.0% |
| **Mathematical Methods** | 20.8% | 37.5% |
| **Further Mathematics** | 80.8% | 70.0% |

*Source: (VCAA, 2020)*

*Note: Specialist Mathematics is the most advanced Mathematics subject followed by Mathematical Methods, however, most students completing Specialist Mathematics also complete Mathematical Methods.*

Figure 71 Percentage of VCE Science students who received a subject study score in each Science subject, 2019

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Subject** | **Aboriginal** | **Non-Aboriginal** |
| Environmental Science | 4.2% | 2.0% |
| Physics | 10.2% | 18.9% |
| Chemistry | 14.4% | 26.9% |
| Biology | 40.7% | 38.0% |
| Psychology | 60.2% | 42.8% |

*Source: (VCAA, 2020)*

As shown in the chart below, non-Aboriginal participation in both Mathematics and Science VCE subjects increased over the period from 2010 to 2019. Due to the relatively small Aboriginal cohort the results for Aboriginal students are subject to greater year-on-year fluctuations, however, VCE Science participation demonstrates an increasing trend, from 37.7 per cent in 2010 to 43.2 per cent in 2019. The pattern of change in Mathematics participation is less clear, with a significant trough in 2014 (34.8 per cent) followed by a peak in 2017 (48.1 per cent).

Figure 72 Percentage of VCE Science students with a subject study score, 2019

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Aboriginal (Mathematics)** | **Aboriginal (Science)** | **Non-Aboriginal (Mathematics)** | **Non-Aboriginal (Science)** |
| **2010** | 42.4% | 37.7% | 49.8% | 43.9% |
| **2011** | 44.7% | 35.2% | 50.5% | 44.8% |
| **2012** | 43.4% | 40.5% | 50.8% | 45.1% |
| **2013** | 41.3% | 40.2% | 51.4% | 45.7% |
| **2014** | 34.8% | 37.5% | 51.8% | 47.5% |
| **2015** | 43.3% | 42.0% | 52.1% | 47.2% |
| **2016** | 40.7% | 43.7% | 51.4% | 47.2% |
| **2017** | 48.1% | 44.0% | 52.2% | 47.3% |
| **2018** | 43.1% | 41.6% | 53.9% | 47.8% |
| **2019** | 44.0% | 43.2% | 53.3% | 49.3% |

*Source: (VCAA, 2020)*

VCE study scores are a ranking that shows how well students performed relative to all other Victorian students undertaking the final year (Units 3 and 4) of a particular VCE subject, and are used to calculate Australian Tertiary Admission Rankings (ATARs). Scores are given on a scale from zero to 50, with the mean study score for all students undertaking a subject set at 30. The relatively small size of the Aboriginal cohort makes it difficult to meaningfully compare VCE study scores to those of non-Aboriginal students in individual subjects. However, averaging scores across all VCE subjects, Aboriginal students’ results are lower than those for non-Aboriginal students and this has remained consistent from 2010 to 2019. The chart below shows the average study scores across all subjects for government school students in 2019 by Aboriginal status. Government school students perform slightly below the mean (30) for all students across all sectors, with average scores of 28.8 for non-Aboriginal students and 25.5 for Aboriginal students.

Figure 73 Average VCE subject study scores, government school students, 2019

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Mean | 30 | 0 | 5.85E-06 |  | **1SD (23)** | 23 | 0.034567 |  |
| SD | 7 | 5 | 9.68E-05 |  | **Mean (30)** | 30 | 0.056992 |  |
|  |  | 10 | 0.000962 |  | **1SD (37)** | 37 | 0.034567 |  |
|  |  | 15 | 0.005737 |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  | 20 | 0.020543 |  |  | Mean score | |  |
|  |  | 25 | 0.044159 |  | **Aboriginal** | **25.51438** | 0.046414 |  |
|  |  | 30 | 0.056992 |  | **Non-Aboriginal** | **28.84618** | 0.056223 |  |
|  |  | 35 | 0.044159 |  | **Aboriginal Female** | **25.52676** | 0.046466 |  |
|  |  | 40 | 0.020543 |  | **Aboriginal Male** | **25.4902** | 0.046311 |  |
|  |  | 45 | 0.005737 |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  | 50 | 0.000962 |  |  |  |  | No. 1 students |
|  |  |  |  |  | **Aboriginal Science** | **25.13725** | 0.044774 | 118 |
|  |  |  |  |  | **Aboriginal Mathematics** | **24.88889** | 0.043656 | 120 |
|  |  |  |  |  | **Aboriginal Business Studies** | **26.40659** | 0.049956 | 71 |
|  |  |  |  |  | **Aboriginal Humanities** | **26.92593** | 0.051753 | 47 |
|  |  |  |  |  | **Aboriginal English** | **24.97884** | 0.044064 | 181 |
|  |  |  |  |  | **Aboriginal Arts** | **26.24359** | 0.049349 | 64 |
|  |  |  |  |  | **Aboriginal Technology** | **24.19048** | 0.040387 | 40 |
|  |  |  |  |  | **Aboriginal Languages** | 28 | 0.054712 | 8 |
|  |  |  |  |  | **Extended Investigation** | 40 | 0.020543 | 1 |
|  |  |  |  |  | **Health and Physical Education** | 25.59712 | 0.046763 | 111 |

*Source: (VCAA, 2020)*

*Note: The maximum study score for a VCE subject is 50, with the mean study score set at 30. This mean is for all students undertaking that subject, including government, Catholic, and independent school students. Scores of between 23 and 37 fall within one Standard Deviation (SD) of this mean.*

The chart below shows Aboriginal students’ performance in select subject areas, with Arts and Humanities subjects scores being higher on average than those in Mathematics, English or Science. Important to note is that these average scores do not describe the experience or achievements of all individual students. Every year there are high achieving students from the Aboriginal cohort receiving study scores of 40 or more across a range of VCE subjects, placing them in the top 9 per cent, or above, of achievement. In 2019 and some previous years, there have also been very high average subject scores for Aboriginal students studying VCE Languages and other areas such as Extended Investigation (a subject that allows students to carry out an independent research project), but this data has not been included here due to the very small numbers of Aboriginal government school students undertaking these subjects.

Figure 74 Average VCE subject study scores, Aboriginal government school students, select areas of study, 2019

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 23 | 0.034567 |  | Mathematics | 24.88889 | 0.043656 |
| 24 | 0.039471 |  | Science | 25.13725 | 0.044774 |
| 25 | 0.044159 |  | Humanities | 26.92593 | 0.051753 |
| 26 | 0.048407 |  | English | **24.97884** | 0.044064 |
| 27 | 0.051991 |  | Arts | **26.24359** | 0.049349 |
| 28 | 0.054712 |  |  |  |  |
| 29 | 0.056413 |  |  |  |  |
| 30 | 0.056992 |  |  |  |  |

*Source: (VCAA, 2020)*

## Post-school pathways

After completing school, young people may enter the labour market directly, but most undertake further education or training, often in conjunction with part-time or casual employment. As with engagement at school, the disproportionate disadvantage experienced by the young Aboriginal cohort can create barriers to engagement with further education and employment, but many of the challenges experienced by this cohort are shared by non-Aboriginal young people as well. Australia-wide data collected through Mission Australia’s Youth Survey provides some information about the barriers young people can experience pursuing their post-school goals (Carlisle, et al., 2019). Results from the 2019 survey show that the most frequently experienced barriers were shared by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cohorts, and included academic ability, mental health, financial difficulty, family responsibilities, and where young people lived. Aboriginal young people, however, were more likely to also identify additional barriers, such as lack of transport, lack of school or family support, physical health issues, discrimination, and cultural responsibilities, which they perceived to affect their pursuit of further education or work.

A DET-funded research project, exploring post-school decision-making in regional and peri-urban areas of Victoria found that for some Aboriginal young people, family obligations made it difficult to work regular hours, and that because of strong attachments to their home and family, some Aboriginal young people could be reluctant to consider study or employment options that involved moving away from home (Smith & Foley, 2019). The project also identified that Aboriginal young people might be better catered for with Aboriginal-specific services to provide career and further education advice, and with more Aboriginal teachers in the education system.

AtoSS asks Victorian government school students about their intended post-school destination, and shows differences in responses between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in Years 10 to 12. In 2019, around twice as many non-Aboriginal students (50.1 per cent) stated intentions of going to university than Aboriginal students (25.1 per cent), while higher proportions of Aboriginal students were seeking to enter paid work, or undertake an apprenticeship, traineeship, or other Vocational Educational and Training (VET) pathway.

While other data collated in this report suggests that Aboriginal young people are much more likely to have caring responsibilities than their non-Aboriginal peers, just under one per cent of the Year 10 to 12 Aboriginal respondents to the AtoSS reported that their post-school intentions were to care for their child, other relative or similar person, as compared with 0.3 per cent of non-Aboriginal respondents.

Figure 75 Post-school intentions of Years 10 to 12 students, Victorian government schools, 2019

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Aboriginal** | **Non-Aboriginal** |
| **Care for your child other relative or similar person** | 0.9% | 0.3% |
| **Go to TAFE / study a VET qualification** | 8.5% | 6.5% |
| **Take a break before studying (e.g. gap year)** | 9.6% | 10.1% |
| **Do an apprenticeship or traineeship** | 13.2% | 7.7% |
| **Do paid work / look for a job** | 16.0% | 7.2% |
| **Go to university** | 25.1% | 50.1% |
| **Unknown/unsure/other** | 26.7% | 18.1% |

*Source: (DET, 2019a)*

**VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS FRAMEWORK Goal 7: Aboriginal learners achieve their full potential after school**

Objective 7.1: Increase the proportion of Aboriginal young people in work or further education and training

Aboriginal learners must be supported to pursue their pathway of choice, whether that be further education, training or formal employment. This means making these opportunities more accessible for Aboriginal young people, as well as ensuring young people feel supported to follow their ambitions.

#### The Ricci Marks Award

The Ricci Marks Award (Award) encourages and supports young Aboriginal leaders to pursue their aspirations. The Award recognises individual achievements and aspirations of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 16-25 years, in training, education, arts, sport, culture and community leadership. The Award originated in 1997 as the Aboriginal Young Achievers Award. In 2004 the Award was named in memory of Ricci Marks, a recipient of the Aboriginal Young Achievers Award in 2000, who tragically died in a car accident.

This award is available to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people, who:

* are aged between 16 and 25;
* are currently undertaking training, education, arts, sports, culture and community leadership; and
* have lived in Victoria since 1 January 2019.

An internal shortlisting panel at Aboriginal Victoria assesses nominations and chooses the shortlist. Shortlisted nominees are invited to attend a selection interview before an external selection panel made up of community members. All nominees and their guests are invited to attend an Award Presentation Ceremony, where the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs announces the winners. In 2020, two young people received a $5,000 bursary and a third young person was recognised with a $1,500 Rising Star Award.

The annual On Track survey captures the destinations of Victorian students who finish Year 12 and of those who leave school before completion. Between April and July 2019, DET surveyed nearly 27,000 students who completed Year 12 (46 per cent of the Year 12 cohort) and just over 2,000 students who had left school in Years 10, 11 or 12 (13 per cent of the non-completer cohort). In 2019 just over 300 Aboriginal students who had completed Year 12 responded to the On Track survey (around one per cent of the total survey respondents). However, while these numbers have been steadily increasing each year, the relatively low number of responses from Aboriginal young people and proportion of young people completing the survey whose Aboriginal status is unknown, makes it difficult to draw strong conclusions from the results.

The 2019 data indicates that, compared to non-Aboriginal students and those whose status is unknown, a lower proportion of Aboriginal students who complete Year 12 continue straight to undertaking a bachelor’s degree (29.8 per cent as compared to 54.4 per cent), while more continue directly to employment (29.2 per cent as compared to 19.5 per cent). These outcomes may, in part, be related to the fact that the majority of Aboriginal students in Victoria are from non-metropolitan areas. As compared to metropolitan students, these students may find local further education opportunities to be relatively limited, and the costs of moving to pursue further education elsewhere prohibitive. From 2015 to 2019, the proportion of Aboriginal young people entering employment, or undertaking an apprenticeship or traineeship increased, while enrolments in certificates, diplomas, and bachelor’s degrees decreased.

Figure 76 Destinations of Aboriginal Year 12 completers, 2015 to 2019

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** |
| **Apprenticeship/traineeship** | 12.5% | 12.4% | 17.4% | 15.5% | 17.3% |
| **Bachelor's degree** | 33.2% | 33.3% | 27.7% | 32.9% | 29.8% |
| **Certificates/diplomas** | 22.0% | 19.9% | 12.9% | 16.8% | 15.7% |
| **Employed** | 21.7% | 21.6% | 27.7% | 24.7% | 29.2% |
| **Looking for work** | 9.5% | 10.6% | 11.6% | 9.2% | 7.4% |
| **Not in the labour force, education or training** | 1.0% | 2.1% | 2.6% | 0.9% | 0.6% |

*Source: (DET, 2020g)*

#### L2P — Learner Driver Mentor Program

The Transport Accident Commission (TAC) L2P program provides the opportunity for young people who face a significant barriers or disadvantage to successfully obtain a probationary driver’s licence. The program is free for eligible young people aged 16-21 years. The young learners are matched with fully licensed volunteer mentors and have access to a sponsored vehicle, which they can use to get supervised driving experience.

The TAC L2P program is funded by TAC, managed by Department of Transport, and delivered by either local councils or not-for-profit community agencies. Swan Hill Rural City Council now has 40 funded positions shared between Swan Hill and a new program recently established in Robinvale.

Robinvale Clontarf Academy staff Leon and Travis have joined the Robinvale L2P program as driver mentors/instructors and hope this will encourage more of their Koorie young men to get behind the wheel. They describe the L2P program as “a hand up, not a hand out. Just like any other learner driver in Victoria, our boys are still required to drive a minimum of 120 hours prior to sitting their probationary licence test.”

Gaining a probationary licence is an important step towards employment for many young people, especially in regional Victoria. Mentor support to gain a licence also protects young Aboriginal people and the wider Aboriginal community from all-too common contact with the justice system as unlicensed drivers. Robinvale Clontarf Academy staff say “we’re putting a real emphasis on the importance of our young men graduating our program as safe, confident and capable drivers.”

Noah, a Year 11 Clontarf Academy member, was enthusiastic about his recent participation in the Robinvale L2P program:

*“Having access to a vehicle whenever I have the time to drive is unreal. It helps me to clock up way more hours than I could before… and being able to drive with Leon or Travis definitely makes me feel comfortable and confident”.*

### Vocational education and training

In Victoria, Vocational Education and Training (VET) serves the training and skill needs of almost 300 occupations, including training for critical skills-shortage occupations.[[13]](#footnote-13)

VET also plays an important role in providing alternative skill-development opportunities and educational pathways to the academically-focussed university sector, and has been found to facilitate positive labour market outcomes for people who did not complete school or who have had setbacks such as low literacy (OECD, 2010; Polidano & Ryan, 2016).

The rate of participation in VET is much higher for the Aboriginal population than the non-Aboriginal population (17.3 per cent compared to 7.1 per cent for ages 15 to 64).

This aligns with the post-school intentions of Victorian Aboriginal senior secondary students (as discussed in sections above), who are more likely than other students to plan on pursuing apprenticeships, traineeships, TAFE or other VET qualifications. Aboriginal VET students have a relatively young age profile, with 56 percent aged 24 years or younger, as compared to 44 per cent of non-Aboriginal VET students. Reflecting the geographic distribution of the Aboriginal population, they are also more likely to be undertaking their training in regional Victoria than other students. In 2019, 17.4 per cent of Aboriginal VET students in Victoria undertook pre-accredited VET programs, which are short modular courses focussed on creating further education and training or employment opportunities for disadvantaged cohorts or those who have had limited prior access to education.

From 2015 to 2018, the number of VET program commencements increased for the Victorian Aboriginal cohort aged 24 and under, while the number of completions declined. It is worth noting, however, that uncompleted VET programs do not always denote an unsuccessful outcome, as the reasons students undertake VET, such as upgrading skills, finding employment, or for personal interest, do not necessarily require the completion of a qualification (Ong & Circelli, 2018).

From 2017 to 2019, Aboriginal student enrolments increased in all areas of training identified as Victorian government priorities. This growth has been particularly strong in NDIS and family violence training, with 2019 enrolments representing a 26.8 per cent and 37.4 per cent increase respectively. Growth has also been high in infrastructure, with over 100 more enrolments in 2019 compared to 2018.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Figure 77 VET enrolments and completions for programs delivered in Victoria, Aboriginal students aged 24 years and under, 2015 to 2018

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** |
| **Enrolments** | 6,555 | 6,095 | 8,295 | 9,065 |
| **Completions** | 1,910 | 1,910 | 1,830 | 1,660 |

*Source: (NCVER, 2020)*

*Note: Data includes VET programs provided by community education providers, enterprise providers, private training providers, schools, TAFE institutes, and universities. Completions data refers to programs in which the RTO head office*

*was based in Victoria. Course enrolments includes both new students, and students continuing courses that take multiple years to complete. The count of students is the number of individuals who were enrolled in training during the reporting period.*

Figure 78 Aboriginal VET enrolments in Victorian Government priority areas, 2017-2019

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Apprentice** | **High Value Traineeships** | **NDIS workforce** | **Family Violence Prevention** | **Infrastructure** |
| **2017** | 640 | 328 | 652 | 526 | 696 |
| **2018** | 712 | 354 | 754 | 629 | 684 |
| **2019** | 770 | 396 | 956 | 864 | 798 |

*Source: (DET, 2020e)*

*Note: Priority areas are defined as those related to courses included in the 2019 Funded Course List.*

Despite increasing VET course enrolments, data from the annual Victorian Student Satisfaction Survey shows that in 2018 Aboriginal students were less likely to report improved employment status after completing training (41.5 per cent as compared

to 45.3 per cent for non-Aboriginal students), a result that aligns with some previous research showing less favourable employment outcomes for the Aboriginal VET completers nationally (Windley, 2017). Aboriginal students were also less likely to feel they had achieved their main reason for training (68.3 per cent as compared to 73.6 per cent of non-Aboriginal students), while results for overall satisfaction with training, and generic skills and learning experiences were similar for the two groups, as was the proportion of VET students going on to further study.

Figure 79 VET students’ satisfaction with training, 2019

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Non-Aboriginal** | **Aboriginal** |
| **Improved employment status after training** | 50.3% | 46.3% |
| **Satisfied with generic skills and learning experiences** | 46.9% | 46.3% |
| **Went on to further study at a higher level than their completed training** | 19.9% | 20.0% |
| **Achieved their main reason for training** | 73.6% | 68.3% |
| **Satisfied with training provided by the RTO** | 77.5% | 76.1% |

*Source: (DET, 2020h)*

*Note: The year 2019 relates to the year the survey was conducted and gives results for completers and non-completers who left training in 2018. Because of the relatively small number of Aboriginal respondents, caution is needed when comparing the results with the non-Aboriginal cohort.*

Each year the Victorian VET system has a significant number of program commencements from young people who did not complete school. For the Aboriginal cohort, the proportion of early leavers entering the government-operated TAFE system has increased, from 44.6 per cent in 2015 to 63.3 per cent in 2018.

Figure 80 Number of Young Aboriginal early school leavers commencing VET programs, 2015-2018

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** |
| **TAFE** | 242 | 261 | 230 | 303 |
| **Non-TAFE** | 301 | 247 | 227 | 176 |

*Source: (DET, 2020e)*

*Note: Young early school leavers are defined as those who were aged 15 to 17 as at 30 June of the reporting year; and had highest prior education level (i.e. their highest educational attainment before the training being currently undertaken) as either Certificate I, Years 8 to 11 of school completion, or not stated; and had highest school level as Years 8 to 11, or reporting that they did not go to school, or not currently at school.*

#### Student experiences of Vocational Education and Training with VACCHO

**Student 1**

One of the students from Certificate IV in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Health Care Practice started off gaining work at her local Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (ACCHO) as the cleaner. She was very shy, introverted and reportedly lacked self-confidence. She took up a role as a health worker at the clinic and enrolled in the Certificate IV in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Health Care Practice with VACCHO.

Her studies were put on hold when she became pregnant and took maternity leave.

On return to work this student continued on with her studies, consistently producing

high quality work in a timely manner. She was also very well supported within her ACCHO under the supervision of the nurses and other clinic staff.

This student has truly blossomed in so many ways, being the first in the class to complete her course requirements, now quietly confident in the work she does with aspirations to one day to be the manager of the clinic.

**Student 2**

The IDEAS (Indigenous Diabetes Eyes and Screening) initiative brings world-class facilities to rural and remote communities in an effort to substantially reduce blindness and visual impairment amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders with diabetes.

The IDEAS Van is a mobile eye health clinic that screens, treats and helps prevent blindness due to diabetes. Whilst studying a Certificate IV in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Health Care Practice, this student was able to apply her recent knowledge and skills related to eyes and diabetes in her clinical placement. Outreach services from this van commenced at this student’s ACCHO. She has been identified as a champion health worker of this project and manages clients from regional ACCHO’s to access these services.

This student has also created an Aboriginal-specific cardiac rehabilitation program which she coordinates from her organisation. The program aligns with best practice principles, is client centered and is collaborative—working with a mainstream health service to provide support from a range of health professionals at their ACCHO.

**Student 3**

Marissa studied the Diploma of Counselling at VACCHO’s Education and Training Unit and graduated in 2019. She enjoyed her time whilst studying, highlighting that learning with her mob and having a flexible learning environment was important and that she was well supported throughout her time with VACCHO. The Diploma has allowed her to enhance her skills in the workplace but has especially enhanced her ability to understand and support clients. Marissa now not only understands the issues and trauma that Aboriginal people have to carry with them, but why Aboriginal people have the issues they have and how to support them properly.

Marissa’s role was the Intensive Case Manager for women and children at an Aboriginal Healing service, and has now moved into a role as Cultural Development Framework Officer. Marissa graduating greatly benefits the community, and her cultural and community understanding and knowledge positively impacts the Victorian Aboriginal community and facilitates healing and closing the gap.

#### Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Program Ltd. — Registered Training Organisation

VACSAL Registered Training Organisation (RTO) provides a Certificate IV in Community Services Course. In 2019, 33 students successfully completed the Community Services Course, including 23 aged between 18 and 25 years old, of whom 22 identified as Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander. Of 20 young students who gained or maintained ongoing employment in the community services sector after completing their certificate, six were also completing a traineeship with other Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

All the students reported that they felt proud they had received a qualification and further developed their skills in the industry that they are most passionate about—‘Supporting their Community and Mob’. The following are some statements made by students regarding their studies at the VACSAL RTO.

* They had a culturally safe learning environment.
* Integrity was at the heart of their learning journey.
* Their cultural knowledge was valued.
* “Shame” was no longer a barrier.

All students share their life stories to the class so they can gain a better understanding of themselves and each other. The assessment task, called ‘My Mob’ focuses on the concept of ‘you have to know where you have been to know where you are going’. The task also requires the students to orally present their ‘My Mob’ presentation to the rest of the class—this is where the personal growth comes from. The course structure is also important as we do our best to create a collective way of learning. The course begins with 6 weeks of building cultural knowledge, to strengthen identity and increase confidence, self-worth and self-esteem. Many students have had negative experiences in mainstream education so this supports students to believe that they can achieve in an educational setting and deserve to do so. VACSAL believes it is important that the trainers and assessors ‘know’ the student and build on their strengths but the most important element of the successful delivery of the course is that every class has a co-facilitator who has the relevant qualifications and identifies as Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander and this strengthens all aspects of the course and delivery model.

#### Students’ stories

**Sheree**

Sheree is a 19-year-old young Aboriginal and Maori woman. Sheree travelled 2 hours each way to attend the Certificate IV classes which is a significant commitment to make. Sheree lost her mother at the age of thirteen and was moved between family members and services which impacted on her educational journey as she was being moved from school to school.

Sheree has a warm, fun and friendly personality, her love of music is evident as she carries her blue tooth boom box with her everywhere she goes. Sheree has identified music as being therapeutic for her so we support her to be able to access her speaker and music when she needs to. When Sheree first presented, she lacked confidence and would break down and withdraw at times due to feeling overwhelmed with ‘life’ feelings that were not connected to the study load or learning styles. Staff were able to quickly identify that Sheree needed connectedness outside of the study environment as she would often stay after class to ‘yarn’, so they would keep her connected between classes. As her confidence grew stronger and stronger, she was able to recite her story about her educational journey to a room full of ministers and other educational leaders receiving very positive feedback.

After a very successful year, Sheree was voted by her peers and received an award that recognises the resilience and achievements of students who succeed ‘in spite of their adversity’. Sheree completed her studies, her traineeship and secured long term employment working with children who face similar issues as she did growing up.

**Zain**

Zain is an 18-year-old proud Gunditijmara man, raised solely by his non-Aboriginal mother who unfortunately had a severe alcohol addiction. Zain found out about the Certificate IV course through a friend and decided to enrol. Zain wanted to begin a new career pathway supporting children who live in out-of-home care. Zain himself has been in and out of foster care far too many times to remember and experienced poverty his entire life. When Zain enrolled, he did not have any personal income as he had not considered accessing Centrelink or other supports. Living on the outskirts of the western suburbs, Zain would travel one and a half hours each way to attend classes. VACSAL’s RTO provided him with a travel card and assisted him to access Abstudy, the first time he had any type of independent money.

Zain is very charismatic and has a smile that lights up any room but unfortunately his father had spent very little time with him which resulted in Zain being disconnected from community and mob.

Zain is intelligent and excelled in role-play assessments. We learned from Zain’s ‘My Mob’ assessment that he loved acting and would like to pursue a dual career that included acting. A staff member received a community notice about a theatre company looking for actors and passed the information on to Zain. He followed through without any fanfare and by the end of the year he invited the small RTO team to watch him perform at the Arts Centre in Richard Frankland’s play. Zain continues to perform with Ilbijerri and other reputable theatre companies and will also access employment supporting children at risk. Our course offered Zain opportunities he may otherwise not have had. We encouraged him and supported him in and out of class-time hours. Zain responded and engaged really well with us because we took interest in him, not just as a student but as a person. VACSAL RTO provided him with holistic student-centred support and he succeeded.

#### The Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Management Training Program

The Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Management Training Program (ACHMTP) is a Victorian Government initiative (through Aboriginal Victoria), developed to enhance the skills and capacity of Aboriginal Victorians, charged with multiple responsibilities under the Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006. The program stands as a baseline educational package to equip Traditional Owners within Registered Aboriginal Parties (RAPs) and other Aboriginal people to work in the cultural heritage management industry in Victoria. It develops skills specific to the proper functioning of RAPs, and also helps develop a workforce of professionally qualified Aboriginal people that can manage and protect Aboriginal cultural heritage for Traditional Owner groups, government departments and agencies, within private consultancies and in the not-for-profit sector.

The ACHMTP is a suite of tiered training. The program provides a combination of unaccredited (a three day workshop) and accredited training (a year-long Certificate IV course) which leads to employment and further education. The program is available to Aboriginal people over the age of 18 and attendance at both the workshops and Certificate IV course are fully funded by Aboriginal Victoria.

As no other equivalent training courses currently exist (or existed previously), the ACHMTP is the principal means of developing capacity in the Victorian Aboriginal community in Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Management. The Certificate IV may contribute to further university studies in the Bachelor of Archaeology and the Bachelor of Arts (majoring in Archaeology) at La Trobe University and other related fields (conservation and land management, museum studies, business etc) via its connection to other TAFE courses.

The entire program aims to provide:

* training in the cultural heritage management skills and knowledge required by Aboriginal people to meet their obligations under the Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006
* an innovative, cross-sector delivery model which supports Aboriginal students and overcomes obstacles to completion
* a recognised qualification in Aboriginal cultural heritage management
* formal recognition for the existing skills of Aboriginal cultural heritage workers
* a pathway to employment in the cultural heritage industry and related sectors
* pathway to higher education, leading to the degree qualifications required for cultural heritage advisor status under current Ministerial guidelines.

The program is now in its eleventh year with ten Certificate IV years completed. A total of 177 graduates now hold the Certificate IV in ACHM qualification from LTU. Aboriginal Victoria has held 22 workshops in metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria with attendance by 507 Aboriginal people 16 per cent of the Certificate IV graduate/ participants over the past 11 years were under the age of 25 at the time of undertaking the course.

The program has made a significant footprint in the ACHM industry and education sector in terms of employment and education outcomes for the Aboriginal Community.

#### Increasing access to TAFE and Training

Investments announced as part of the Victorian State Budget 2020/21 included $155.4 millionto increase access to TAFEs, Learn Locals, Registered Training Organisations and other training providers for those disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, including women, young people, and Victorians from diverse backgrounds.

In addition to investments in resources for multicultural learners and delivery of online and flexible training, this funding package also encompasses targeted supports for Koorie learners including:

* $1.7 million towards a Koorie loading for pre-accredited learners to support an extra 1800 learners over the next four years
* $520,000 for additional support of the Koorie Vocational and Education Training Advisory Group to improve the participation and success for Koorie learners.

### Employment

Employment is an important step in young people’s independence. Economic participation, advancement, and mobility are also critical for self-determination of the Aboriginal community, as a source of resources and enabler of choices (DEDJTR, 2016).

Data from the 2016 Census of Population and Housing shows that there are similarities in the typical industries of employment for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 to 24, with accommodational and food services, and retail trade being the two industries providing the most employment for both cohorts. As seen below, however, young Aboriginal Victorians are less likely to be employed in these two industries, or in professional, scientific and technical services, and are more likely to be employed in public administration and safety, construction, or health care and social assistance.

Figure 81 Percentage of employed young people (aged 15 to 24) by industry, Victoria, 2016

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Aboriginal** | **Non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal status not stated** |
| **Accommodation and Food Services** | 20.2% | 21.6% |
| **Retail Trade** | 18.5% | 22.9% |
| **Construction** | 11.2% | 9.1% |
| **Health Care and Social Assistance** | 8.9% | 7.3% |
| **Public Administration and Safety** | 6.4% | 2.3% |
| **Manufacturing** | 5.9% | 5.5% |
| **Education and Training** | 4.8% | 5.5% |
| **Arts and Recreation Services** | 4.0% | 3.8% |
| **Professional, Scientific and Technical Services** | 2.0% | 4.5% |
| **Transport, Postal and Warehousing** | 2.9% | 2.3% |
| **Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing** | 2.1% | 1.4% |
| **Other** | 13.0% | 13.8% |

*Source: (ABS, 2017)*

*Note: Data does not include individuals who were unemployed, or who did not provide adequate information to determine industry of employment.*

**VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS FRAMEWORK Goal 9:**

Strong Aboriginal workforce participation, in all sectors and at all levels

Objective 9.3: Increase workforce participation for Aboriginal young people, people with a disability and people living in regional areas.

Fully participating in the economy provides Aboriginal Victorians with the resources they need to determine the future they want. Economic participation is therefore key to Aboriginal self determination.

# CONCLUSION

Aboriginal identity, history, and culture play an important role in many Victorian children and young people’s lives. This report has explored social, health, and educational outcomes for Victoria’s Aboriginal children and young people using available population data, research, and information provided by ACCOs and Victorian government departments. The analysis and commentary presented take a specific focus on those aged from birth to 24 years, but also includes information about the strengths and challenges experienced by Victoria’s Aboriginal community as a whole.

The data shows that a large proportion of Aboriginal children are doing well across the domains examined by this report. Many are healthy, supported and safe, and as with the general population, there are a range of educational outcomes, including high achievers. While the Aboriginal community experiences a higher prevalence of socioeconomic disadvantage and greater risk of interrelated vulnerabilities than the general population, long-term trends show a number of areas where outcomes and access to government services have improved. These include families engaging with early childhood services, including vaccinations, MCH, and kindergarten enrolments, as well as improved literacy in primary school years, and an increasing proportion of Aboriginal young people completing Year 12 or equivalent qualifications, and commencing vocational training in areas identified as Victorian government priorities.

Another positive development is the decline in rates of smoking among Aboriginal young people, as previous analysis has found that smoking is a leading risk factor contributing to the disproportionate burden of disease experienced by the Aboriginal population (AIHW, 2016a; Purcell, 2015). This decline is comparable to that seen for all young people (Heris, et al., The decline of smoking initiation among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander secondary students: implications for future policy, 2020a), indicating that government anti-smoking initiatives are succeeding in changing smoking behaviours for this cohort as well as for young people generally.

Victorian government approaches to service provision have also undergone changes. A significant example has been implementation of Section 18 of the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 (Vic), through which the Secretary of DHHS is able to transfer powers and functions for Aboriginal children on protection orders to Aboriginal organisations. From 2010 to 2019, an increasing proportion of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care were also placed in kinship care arrangements, where care is provided by the child’s relatives or members of a child’s social network or community. While Aboriginal children and young people remain over-represented in out-of-home care, and the number placed in care is trending upward, the implementation of Section 18 and utilisation of kinship care arrangements is supporting children to remain connected with their family, community, and culture.

As highlighted in the stories and case studies provided throughout this report, ACCOs and the Aboriginal community are playing an active role in advocacy for children and young people, and in the provision of services and support for the community’s most vulnerable members. Recent Victorian government initiatives are explicitly recognising this role, not only seeking to improve the cultural safety and relevance of mainstream services, but also embedding principles of self-determination into policies, programs, and frameworks. As outlined in the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018-2023 (State of Victoria, 2018a), a key priority for now and into the future is the transfer of power and resources over to Aboriginal communities, to acknowledge their right to make decisions on the issues that affect their lives, and support Aboriginal organisations to deliver services in line with community preferences.

There is, however, more work to be done. Despite the positive changes described above, Aboriginal children and young people remain at higher-than-average risk of disability and physical health issues, housing insecurity, disengagement from education, and contact with Child Protection and the criminal justice system, as well as exposure to family violence and other sources of stress. These challenges cannot be understood in isolation. Rather, as has been shown throughout this report, they are highly interrelated and connected with broader social, economic, and historical factors. This includes the intergenerational trauma caused by past injustices and ongoing experiences of racism in various forms, which continue to be key drivers of disadvantage and health inequalities for the Aboriginal community. For young people in particular, these may be a barrier to accessing services and engaging with education, which has the potential carryover of limiting access to post-school qualifications and employment in adulthood.

Improvements against individual outcomes measures for Aboriginal children and young people will mean little if health, education, and justice systems perpetuate a status quo in which Aboriginal people are disempowered. Rather, addressing the disparities that exist in outcomes requires broader change. This includes acknowledgement and understanding of the impact of colonisation and intergenerational trauma, addressing ongoing racism and bias in organisations and society, and further supporting self-determination, including Aboriginal leadership in decision making and service provision.

# Acronyms, Figures and References

## Acronyms

ABS Australian Bureau of Statistics

ACAC Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care

ACARA Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority

ACCHO Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation

ACCO Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation

ACF Aboriginal Children’s Forum

ACHMTP Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Management Training Program

ACIP Aboriginal Community Infrastructure Program

AEC Aboriginal Executive Council

AECD Australian Early Development Census

AHV Aboriginal Housing Victoria

AIHW Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

AMCHI Aboriginal Maternal and Child Health Initiative

ASQ-TRAK Ages and Stages Questionnaire — Talking about Raising Aboriginal Kids

ASSAD Australian Secondary School Students Alcohol and Drug survey

ATAR Australian Tertiary Admission Rankings

AtoSS Attitudes to School Survey

BDAC Bendigo and District Aboriginal Cooperative

BF Better Futures (VACCA)

BM Barreng Moorop (VACCA)

BWAYS Bert Williams Aboriginal Youth Services

CAMHS Childhood and Adolescent Mental Health Services

CCYP Commission for Children and Young People

CSA Crime Statistics Agency

CUST Cultural Understanding and Safety Training (DET)

DELWP Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning

DET Department of Education and Training

DHHS Department of Health and Human Services

DJCS Department of Justice and Community Safety

DPC Department of Premier and Cabinet

FVIO Family Violence Intervention Orders

GGAC Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Co-Operative

HILDA Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey

IDEAS Indigenous Diabetes Eyes and Screening initiative

IFS Integrated Family Services

IRSAD Index of Relative Socioeconomic Advantage and Disadvantage

KAE Koorie Academy of Excellence

KESO Koorie Engagement Support Officers

KFFE Balert Gerrbik: Koorie Families as First Educators (DET)

KLNP Koorie Literacy and Numeracy Program

KMS Koori Maternity Services

KYC Koori Youth Council

KYJ Koorie Youth Justice

LAECG Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups

LEAP Law Enforcement Assistance Program database

LGBTI Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and gender diverse, and Intersex

MARAM Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework

MCH Maternal and Child Health

MDAS Mallee District Aboriginal Service

MTAL More than a landlord (AHV)

NAIDOC National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee

NAPLAN National Assessment Program of Literacy and Numeracy

NATSIHS National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey

NATSISS National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey

NCCD Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability

NCVER National Centre for Vocational Education Research

NDIS National Disability Insurance Scheme

NHMRC National Health and Medical Research Council

PHN Primary Health Network

RAJAC Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee

RAPs Registered Aboriginal Parties

RIA Rail Infrastructure Alliance

RTO Registered Training Organisation

SEHQ School Entrant Health Questionnaire

SOVC State of Victoria’s Children

SPSP Strengthening Parent Support Program (DHHS)

STEM Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics

TAC Transitioning Aboriginal Children to ACCOs

TAC Transport Accident Commission

TAFE Technical and Further Education

VAAF Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework

VACCA Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency

VACCHO Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation

VACL Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages

VACSAL Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Limited

VAEAI Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated

VAHS Victorian Aboriginal Health Service

VCAA Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority

VCAL Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning

VCE Victorian Certificate of Education

VET Vocational Education and Training

VGAAR Victorian Government Aboriginal Affairs Report

VSHAWS Victorian Student Health and Wellbeing Survey

YACVic Youth Affairs Council of Victoria

YTC Youth Through-Care Project

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1. Due to differences in sampling and methodology the results from the 2014-15 NATSISS and 2018-19 NATSIHS are not directly comparable. They do, however, indicate a declining rate of smoking for Aboriginal Victorian’s in the 15 to 24 years age group, aligning with findings from other data collections which show declining rates of smoking for Aboriginal young people Australia-wide (Heris, et al., 2020a). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As ranked by the Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD) produced by the ABS. This indicator summarises information about the economic and social conditions of people and households within an area, including both relative advantage and disadvantage measures. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For the purpose of these comparisons, those who did not provide information about their Aboriginal status in the Census are included in the non-Aboriginal population. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. AHV is the only Tier 1 Aboriginal Housing Association in Australia. It owns over 1500 properties accommodating over 4,000 Aboriginal Victorians. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A family incident can involve one or more affected family members and/or one or more other parties. For statistical purposes, these are counted as one incident but may appear multiple times in demographic counts. Aboriginal status data are derived using the revised CSA most frequent recorded status of an individual as recorded by Victoria Police and may not represent the Aboriginal status recorded at the time of the incident. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Data discussed excludes children on permanent care orders or in permanent care arrangements. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. These figures need to be interpreted with some caution, as the time period covers changes in reporting systems and points where population estimates were revised based on new Census of Population and Housing data. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Results as adjusted for age differences in samples across years. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol (NHMRC, 2020) recommend no alcohol consumption for persons aged 15 to 17 years. For the purposes of this analysis, single occasion risk for young people has been defined as consuming more than four standard alcoholic drinks on any one occasion, based on the single occasion risk guideline for healthy persons aged 18 years and over. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Designer drugs are substances designed to mimic the effects of controlled substances/illicit drugs, while avoiding controlled status or detection methods (State Library New South Wales, 2020). Examples of “ecstasy or designer drugs” provided to participants in the 2014-15 NATSISS included alternative names for the drug ecstasy (3,4-methylenedioxy-N-methylamphetamine) such as MDMA, and related drugs such as MDA (3,4-methylenedioxyamphetamine) and MDEA (3,4-methylenedioxy-N-ethylamphetamine). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. LGBTIQ+ is an acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex and Queer and questioning. The ‘+’ is inclusive of other gender and sexual orientations. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. AtoSS was revised in 2017 to bring the survey into alignment with current DET teaching practice frameworks, meaning that results from earlier survey years are not directly comparable to 2017 onward. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Occupations are as defined by the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations Unit Group level (ANZSCO 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Courses supporting the NDIS and family violence workforces are not mutually exclusive, with a number of courses supporting both.

    Similarly, courses supporting the infrastructure workforce also include apprentices and trainees. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)