

VIYAC VOICES TELLING IT LIKE IT IS:



Young Aboriginal Victorians on Culture,
Identity and Racism.

With a Summary report by the Youth Affairs
Council of Victoria:
Painting a picture with Stats and Facts

A report done in partnership by the
Victorian Indigenous Youth Advisory Council and the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria



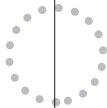
VIYAC VOICES

TELLING IT LIKE IT IS

YOUNG ABORIGINAL VICTORIANS ON
CULTURE, IDENTITY AND RACISM

WITH A SUMMARY REPORT BY THE
YOUTH AFFAIRS COUNCIL OF VICTORIA:
PAINTING A PICTURE WITH STATS AND FACTS





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A report done in partnership by the Victorian Indigenous Youth Advisory Council and the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria.

Artwork by Jade Colgan

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A SUMMARY STATEMENT

This report has been written for several audiences, including government representatives, Aboriginal services and community controlled organisations, youth services in general and young people themselves. So often, the voices of young people are not heard on issues that impact on them. In this report however, these voices are prioritised. The perspectives of members of the Victorian Indigenous Youth Advisory Council appear first, as Section one of this report. Section two of the report provides summary stats and facts, to provide some context information.

So that the VIYAC members perspectives remain at the forefront of this report, an executive summary has not been presented, however key themes and recommendations are draw out in the conclusion.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Victorian Indigenous Youth Advisory Council (VIYAC) and the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) would like to acknowledge all traditional owner groups in Victoria and pay their respects to their Elders.

VIYAC and YACVic would like to extend our thanks to the following organisations and individuals for their assistance in providing advice, information and feedback on content in the development of this report:

- ◉ Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency
- ◉ The The Victorian Aboriginal Health Service
- ◉ The Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service
- ◉ Onemda VicHealth Koorie Health Unit, and
- ◉ The Council to Homeless Persons

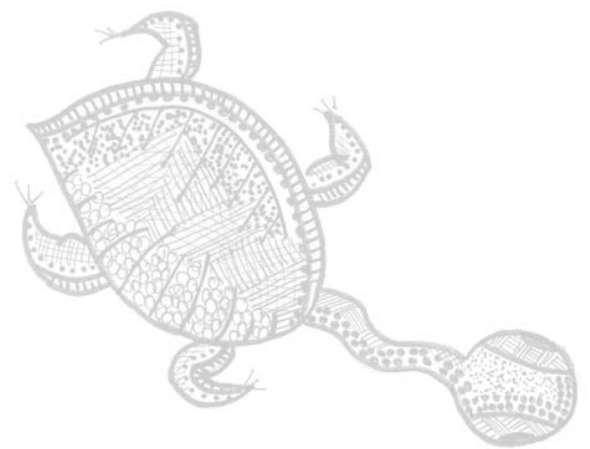
We would like also to acknowledge the work and expertise of Aboriginal community controlled organisations in Victoria. A list of some Aboriginal Community Organisations in Victoria is provided as Appendix 1 of this report.

Thanks also go to Dr Amanda Kearney from the Centre for Australian Indigenous Studies, Monash University, for reviewing Section 2 of this report, and to Genevieve Grieves and Sharon Heubner for sharing their skills and sensitivity in working with the VIYAC members to workshop the research topic and conduct the interviews.

Thank you to the VIYAC Reference Group for their guidance on the development of this report. Members include:

- ◉ Jason Eades
- ◉ Belinda Jakiel
- ◉ Troy Austin
- ◉ Amanda Young (representing Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, Department for Victorian Communities)
- ◉ Kim Wilson (representing the Office for Youth, Department for Victorian Communities)
- ◉ Jen Rose and Georgie Ferrari (representing the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria)
- ◉ Jade Colgan (representing the Victorian Indigenous Youth Advisory Council)

Thanks also go to Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, Department for Victorian Communities and the Office for Youth, Department for Victorian Communities for their continued support of VIYAC.



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A MESSAGE FROM THE VICTORIAN INDIGENOUS YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL COORDINATOR

I think it's a very rare thing when you can honestly say, I love what I do. VIYAC enables me to be able to say this, and this paper is a big part of that being possible. I am really proud of this publication.

The fact that this publication contains raw, honest and very real youth perspectives on three confronting issues affecting Indigenous youth - Culture, Identity and Racism - says a lot.

The VIYAC members specifically chose these issues to talk about as they felt that they were extremely important in their lives, and have seen the effects that sometimes occur in themselves and their peers when these issues aren't dealt with and recognised.

My hope is that this report will initiate more interest and action in these issues, that people will see that our culture is alive and well - that it's an amazing culture, not only for myself and other Indigenous people to enjoy, but also for all of Australia to embrace and connect with.

I think a very big thank you to the youth who were interviewed is needed. It's not the easiest thing to open your life and self up to a stranger and talk about issues that are extremely close to your heart. They should be proud of their contribution and know that it will not go unnoticed or unheard.

The reasoning behind the three topics chosen - Culture, Identity and Racism - was the fact that as a young Indigenous person, in this day and age, if you don't know who you truly are, where you belong, come from, connect, where you fit ... then it can become really daunting. What is it to be Indigenous? Does that shape me? If so, how?

I know for myself I feel very spiritual and connected, more complete, when I talk about and connect to my heritage, it helps me understand who I am and what my purpose here is. As a young person trying to create a life and position in the world, if you don't have these core things set in stone and known, then you can feel behind the eight ball, so to speak. That's why this publication is so important, it doesn't just touch on this, it delves right on into it. This report has given these nine young people a real voice, an opportunity to put their perspectives out there, and this is one thing VIYAC is happy to have been able to provide.

Part of me really wishes you could all hear the actual recordings of the interviews themselves. Listening to them was amazing. It really moved me. The rawness of each voice, their heart pouring into their stories and responses was really something. I only hope that as you read the responses you try to hear their heart and soul, like I was able to.

Thank you



Jade Colgan
State Coordinator, VIYAC

A MESSAGE FROM THE YOUTH AFFAIRS COUNCIL OF VICTORIA

YACVic is privileged to have been able to partner with VIYAC to produce this report. A key element underpinning YACVic's advocacy work is young people's participation, so that we advocate with young people on the issues they identify as important. This partnership has offered us a fantastic opportunity to do just that. The VIYAC members have shared their knowledge with us to inform the work we do, improving our understanding of their own experiences and of the issues of relevance to their communities. As the peak body of the youth sector in Victoria, it is crucial that we seek partnerships with Koorie young people, families, community organisations and Elders to advocate together on issues impacting on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. Undertaking this project has assisted us in working towards achieving this.

The anecdotal evidence of the VIYAC members who participated in interviews sits alongside a report that brings together findings from other already produced research. We have included the summary of other research in order to draw together some of the other existing information and to highlight the fact that there are large gaps in the information that is broadly available about Koorie young people's experiences, aspirations and needs. This information is essential to the development of culturally sensitive and informed policy and can assist agencies and services in improving their capacity to provide appropriate and accessible services to Koorie young people.

We hope that by bringing together the voices of the VIYAC members and the findings of other research, this report provides a fuller and more balanced perspective than is achieved if just stats and facts are relied upon. We hope too that it will encourage the engagement of young people themselves in research that concerns them, and will show how young people's own knowledge can make invaluable contributions to promote understanding and to assist in determining future directions.

A Special Note

In the interests of not excluding people from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage living in Victoria who are not Koorie, the terms Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander are often used in this report. YACVic and VIYAC understand that many people prefer to be identified as Koorie and apologises for any offence that may be caused when the broader terms Indigenous or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander are used. Out of respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the word Indigenous appears capitalised.

INTRODUCTION

VIYAC'S ROLE

The Victorian Indigenous Youth Advisory Council (VIYAC) is a voluntary network of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who are working together to provide a voice for Indigenous young people to the government and to the community more broadly. In 2004, it made a decision to be located with the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic), the peak body and leading policy advocate on young people's issues. In 2005 VIYAC began recruiting representatives, established a reference group, set their objectives and since then have been undertaking their role to provide a 'strong voice for Indigenous youth'. At the time of publication of this report, VIYAC consisted of 20 members from around the state. Not all participated in the interview process, and the perspectives of those who did participate are their own and are not intended to represent all Koorie or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in Victoria.

YACVic'S ROLE

YACVic provides a means through which the youth sector and young people voice their opinions and concerns in regard to policy issues affecting them. It works with and makes representations to government and serves as an advocate for the interests of young people, workers with young people, and organisations that provide direct services to young people. YACVic also promotes and supports the participation of young people in debate and policy development areas that most affect them. Its resources are primarily directed towards policy analysis and development, research and consultation, and meeting the information, networking, education and training needs of its constituency.

A PARTNERSHIP PROJECT

One of VIYAC's objectives has been to produce a report to share their knowledge of issues impacting on Koorie young people and to turn the spotlight on their experiences. VIYAC and YACVic decided to work in partnership to produce this report, with both making a contribution as joint authors. Working with oral historians Genevieve Grieves and Sharon Heubner, VIYAC set the focus for their section of the research, exploring the themes of Culture, Identity and Racism. The group then set questions for interviews with Genevieve and Sharon in which they would share their knowledge and experiences on these themes. Excerpts from these interviews make up Section 1 of the report.

The YACVic contribution has been to draw together information from existing reports, research and statistical data to provide a snapshot of what that information also tells us about Koorie young people's experiences and some of the issues that can impact on their health and wellbeing and their access to opportunities. This makes up Section 2 of the report.

OUR OBJECTIVES FOR THIS REPORT

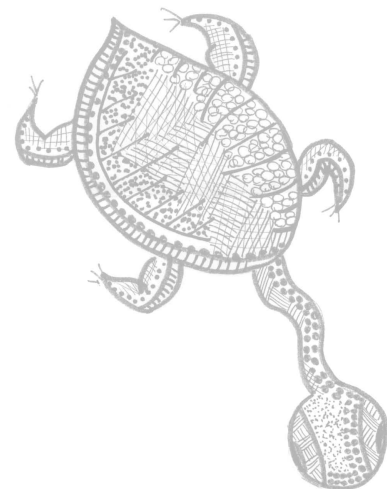
This partnership brings together two forms of knowledge: the anecdotal evidence of the VIYAC members, and the information gathered in research produced by research bodies, community organisations and government departments and agencies. While the young people who participated in the interviews for Section 1 of this report, only speak from their own perspectives and not for all Koorie or Aboriginal young people, this report is an attempt to provide a more complete picture of the experiences, needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people living by hearing those voices.

The report does not explore or make comment about programs in place through Community organisations or other services for Koorie young people, although it does call for increased investment from Government in youth specific services and programs. A list of some Koorie Community organisations, many of which host youth programs or services young people access is provided as Appendix 1.

Instead this report explores some key themes, drawing from VIYAC member's experiences and the findings of existing research and then making some recommendations outlined in the conclusion.

The objective has been to produce a report which recognises the need for cultural autonomy and empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and which also draws on the resources of existing research bodies. We hope that it brings the voices of those young people who participated to a broad audience and contributes to a process of culturally informed policy-making and service development.

It is hoped too that it will assist to correct some of the existing misrepresentations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. This is an objective of VIYAC more broadly in its advocacy work in providing 'a strong voice for Indigenous youth'. As the peak body for the youth sector in Victoria, it is crucial that YACVic help to ensure that the sector improves its understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people's culture and experiences. We hope the report will assist in doing this.



SECTION 1: VIYAC - OUR VOICES

THE VOICES BEHIND THIS REPORT ...

22 year old Murri woman

I was born in Queensland, I have been living in Victoria for six years, it is my second home. I moved away for high school and university where I'm currently studying my Bachelor of Law, in the hope of becoming a barrister.

20 year old Gubbi-Gubbi/Monero woman

Gubbi-Gubbi/Monero woman, I am 20 years old. I currently live in Melbourne, but grew up in East Gippsland. I am a project officer at Westgate Community Initiatives Group. I am very passionate about motivating our youth to be all that they can be.

24 year old Yorta Yorta man

I am a 24 year old Yorta Yorta man, tied to my country through my mother. I was born in Brisbane and have made my home in Gippsland where I have resided for the majority of my life. I have spent the majority of my working life in the community based sector.

21 year old Arrernte woman

I am 21 years of age, am an Arrernte woman from East Alice Springs but grew up in Darwin, Northern Territory and moved to Melbourne, Victoria when I was 17 to pursue a tertiary qualification.

21 year old Yorta Yorta woman

I am a Yorta Yorta woman who has strong ties to my family and my culture. I embrace it every day through work, family and learning from my Elders. I have lived all over Victoria and in other places like New South Wales, Canberra and Queensland, but have lived in Victoria most of my life.

21 year old Kurnai woman

I am a Kurnai woman from the Gippsland region. I have lived in different parts of New South Wales and Victoria but am currently back in my home town with my family. I am passionate about youth affairs and helping to contribute to our community in any way that I can.

23 year old Gunditjmara woman

I am a 23 year old Gunditjmara woman. This is my great-grandmother's country. I also have Nukunu and Wotjaboluk ancestry. I was born in Adelaide and came to Geelong when I was four years old, where I have lived for almost 20 years. I am a published author and have been on various committees including the Victorian Indigenous Family Violence Task Force and the National Indigenous Youth Leadership Group. I am studying social work at Deakin University and I am currently working in community services, liaising between the Aboriginal community and the organisation I work for.

23 year old Gunditjmara man

I am a proud Gunditjmara man born in Heywood, western Victoria. I have been actively involved with the Aboriginal community across the state as I have been involved in numerous state-wide committees and boards, also my work has taken me across Victoria. I want to help youth make the right decisions in life, believe in themselves, connect with their culture and identity, and voice their opinions and become the leaders of tomorrow.

17 year old Koorie young woman

I'm a 17 year old Indigenous girl and both my parents have Indigenous heritage. My parents are from tribes in Stradbroke Island, Queensland and Wangaratta, Victoria. I have lived most of my life in the suburbs of Melbourne and am looking to be more involved in the community.

ISSUE 1 - CULTURE

1. VIYAC MEMBERS DESCRIBE WHAT THEIR CULTURE IS TO THEM

24 year old Yorta Yorta man

Koorie culture is an evolving lifestyle, I believe. It's everything that we do, everything that we breathe, everything that we feel, and everything that is important to us. It's how I believe we view our family, predominately. It's everything that we are. With my family, my adopted family, my cousin Terry - who is my third cousin, I believe - is no less my cousin than Mary who is my first cousin, we don't seem to distinguish that, and I think the family unit is the main basis of what our culture is based upon.

*CULTURE TO ME IS ABOUT
MUSIC, ART, LANGUAGE,
KINSHIP, HERITAGE, LAND
AND YOUR CONNECTION.*

20 year old Gubbi-Gubbi/Monero woman

Koorie culture today is to survive, to live and work in the mainstream community.

22 year old Murri woman

Well, some people say that the culture is disappearing, and that's perfectly fine and perfectly validated. Obviously we have been disenfranchised in some facets of our culture, but as of being an

Aboriginal person in today's society, I mean, the culture is everywhere. You can come to the Koorie Heritage Trust when you want to see culture, and there's events like Sorry Day and you can watch the Latje Latje dancers or something like that, that's raw culture right in your face.

21 year old Kurnai woman

It's hard to explain, because everyone has a different view on what Koorie culture is today. I think that it's lost. I don't think it's what we would like to hope it is. I'd hate to see if it continues at this rate. I would hate to see my children not be able to identify with their Koorie culture because I don't think it's evident enough in our society, it's not embraced. You see in schools and in the education system people get taught how to speak Italian, how to speak French, how to speak Japanese etc., but there is no identification with the Koorie culture and we don't get taught what Koorie culture is. I think that it's a shame that people are looking to teach about other overseas cultures but they're not looking inside Australia to teach us that.

21 year old Arrernte woman

I am not Koorie, so I cannot speak on what I believe Koorie culture is today. Instead I will discuss what I believe Indigenous culture is today. I believe Indigenous culture is art, strong family ties and the continuous struggle for Indigenous rights. I believe Indigenous youth do not embrace their heritage as strongly as they could. Whilst growing up, my nana never really discussed her heritage much with us. She rarely shared stories from her childhood and seldom passed on cultural traditions. I reached a point when people would ask me questions about my Indigenous heritage, and I was embarrassed because I couldn't really tell them much, as I had minimal knowledge myself. So I started questioning Nana about her parents, where her father was born, which land her people are connected with. All it took was a little prompting from me, and Nana opened up. Sadly, however, I can see the Indigenous heritage slowly fading away, as young people start adopting westernised values as their main heritage.

21 year old Yorta Yorta woman

Culture to me is about music, art, language, kinship, heritage, land and your connection. Being able to be a part of that and embrace it. Learning as much as possible from our Elders to ensure their knowledge is passed on and never lost. I believe it is an important part of me and who I am as a person.

.....

23 year old Gunditjmara woman

Our culture today is as strong as ever. We have not assimilated, but evolved with the times. Our culture is surviving and although some language has been lost, we have Koorie English, and people working to revive the remaining languages. Our land is our culture - our stories throughout the Dreamtime come from the land - Mother Earth. She looks after us and we need to look after her. This is the core principle of fighting for our land rights. Our culture is education - to ensure that it is passed down to the younger generations, keeping our culture alive. Our culture is health - men's business and women's business are still vital to our culture and survival. We may not walk around with a spear, coolamon, possum cloak and ochre painted on our bodies - our culture is who we are as a people. It is our connection to the land, our language, other Aboriginal people, our health and education. It is pride.

23 year old Gunditjmara man

Koorie culture today is the artwork, artefacts, scarred trees, fish traps, sacred sites, basket weaving, language, dance and craft, for example. With all of these items there will be a story behind it.

17 year old Koorie young woman

Culture is a sense of belonging to community and identifying with a common past. A sense of pride in who you are and identifying.

2. VIYAC MEMBERS CONSIDER THE VALUE OF THEIR CULTURE

24 year old Yorta Yorta man

Without our culture we have nothing. Our value is our identity. It's who we are and what we are. I can't stress that enough. Without something to put your faith in or to put your value on, you pretty much stand out there on your own. I mean, Albert Einstein said that man's brain is far too complex to live in the world without a god, so his theory was that if there was no god, man would create one, just to make it a reason for him to live there. I suppose, in my view, our culture is that reason for me to exist. Without that culture, I wouldn't be able to justify my presence. I think that our culture, our Aboriginal culture, our Koorie culture, is an evolving life force of its own. I don't think it should stay stagnant how it was 200 years ago or 400 years ago or 80,000 years ago.

.....

*THAT'S THE ABSOLUTE.
I FEEL LIKE IF I LOST THAT,
IT WOULD BE JUST
DEVASTATING TO ME.*

We have a lot of benefits in not having a written history where our culture is open to evolving, and it has evolved to suit the needs of the current day. So everything that I do, every waking moment and every sleeping moment, is for my culture, for my people.

20 year old Gubbi-Gubbi/Monero woman

Our culture is irreplaceable. There is nothing in this world as unique as our culture. And no monetary value can be put on it.

22 year old Murri woman

That's the absolute. I feel like if I lost that, it would be just devastating to me. It's so important to me. Aboriginal culture is so important, and I often thought that if I wasn't born Aboriginal, would I be not so passionate about it, but then I've realised that no, I really honestly think I would. Every time I lose a family member I just keep thinking like, I'm striking the tally and I keep thinking ... that's one less older person that I have in my family, like they're all going to die out soon, and it's just going to be the younger generation left, and what's that going to leave?

.....

21 year old Kurnai woman

I value it a lot. As to the outside community, I don't think there's as much value as there should be, but there's always two sides to the story. I guess it's a bit that people are naive. If they don't know about something, how can they value it? It should be valuable to all of us because I think that if you don't have a value for who you are and what your culture is, you will never really accept yourself and you'll never be able to grow as a person or succeed in life.

21 year old Arrernte woman

I strongly value my Indigenous heritage. My heritage defines who I am, what my beliefs are, and what future decisions, and it even determines my relationships with others. I have never been close to my non-Indigenous heritage, because my Aboriginality has played a more dominant role in my upbringing.

21 year old Yorta Yorta woman

I believe culture is an important part of any Aboriginal person's life as it gives you a sense of where you come from. I find value in my culture every day through work, family and by being involved in community events. I feel very passionate about my culture and my Aboriginality as it strengthens my spirit.

23 year old Gunditjmara woman

It is an integral part of our identity. It is the oldest culture in the world.

23 year old Gunditjmara man

The value is very important, as we need to express our stories and dreaming through our culture and pass this down to future generations.

17 year old Koorie young woman

Culture capital is something that should be acknowledged by the wider community, it is a sense of who we are as people.

3. VIYAC MEMBERS TALK ABOUT THEIR CONNECTION TO CULTURE, HOW THAT OCCURS AND HOW IT CAN BE STRENGTHENED

24 year old Yorta Yorta man

Making a decision to work within my culture. Just the priorities I put on family. I work at a primary school because they need me there as much as I need them there. I learn as much from my kids as they would learn from me. I mean ... I have qualifications that would get me a job earning two, two and a half times the money. It's not the financial gain of working there that's the benefit, it's the way that I'm contributing to the next generation. Having been in a difficult place, coming out the other end of it, not smelling like roses, but definitely not in the mud, either. I like to just portray as much of a positive image as I can. My connection to culture could be strengthened, definitely. For me to be able to portray an image to my youth and to instil that cultural identity in them, I need to learn it myself, and unfortunately it's fairly difficult to learn in a culture that's systematically been raped and taken away from us. There's a lot of great work going on out there as well - don't get me wrong - about, you know, trying to reclaim our culture and integrate it back into what is now our mainstream or more broader culture. If there was, you know, a little bit more commitment from various outsourced agents as far as making sure that those programs continue to run, it might not be able to, in my lifetime, strengthen my culture or my connection to my culture, but definitely my child and my grandchildren would benefit greatly from that.

I think there are a lot of cross-cultural programs running that are fantastic ideas and there's a lot of Australian history being written that are - what's Australian history? We'll leave it there. If more of our mob can get out there and tell their story of what history is and have that accepted into the mainstream curriculum, it would be far more beneficial. If people were actually learning the truths about what happened over the last 200 years - not that I'm accusing anyone of being dishonest, but definitely omitting a few truths along the way, as certain people would have them. If people could be just given the truth and the whole truth, the entire story, and deal with it as you will. Now finding those truths and recording those stories is a generational program that's going to have to be run for a few more generations yet, before you get the full grasp of what's going on and before it will have the full effect on not only our community but the broader community as well.

20 year old Gubbi-Gubbi/Monero woman

I am connected to my culture through all of the things that I do, like traditional dance and writing. I feel that Australia as a whole needs to educate its citizens to have a proper understanding of Indigenous culture. Just like the Maori people in New Zealand. I am a strong young woman who will be saying what she thinks.

22 year old Murri woman

The way I connect myself to culture is I have my Aboriginal flag so I can wake up to that, because I can't really wake up to the trees and I can't really wake up to the smells of

.....
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.....

my home. I don't even have a backyard. It's all concrete in my little flat, so the way I connect myself is by having those things and wearing my Aboriginal bracelet and having my Aboriginal necklaces around, and so I can just see a little bit of it every day.

Sometimes I have to bring myself back, because sometimes when I'm doing my work I just think 'Oh, this is just so boring. What's the point? I don't want to be a lawyer, I don't want to be this'. And then you realise like why you want to do it, because

you are so entrenched, and you live it every day and that's how. I might just go for a walk in the street and just shake a couple of hands if I see some Indigenous people on Smith Street or, you know, on Swanston Street or something like that, because it's hard down here like when you feel so detached.

It could also be strengthened by my Nan, because I try and ask her stories, but she says you can't know it, 'cause like it's too painful. And, sometimes I'm just trying to get a little bit out of her. So, if she could talk to me a little bit more, and she's starting to come up now, 'cause I'm getting older. So now I'm like 22 and she's starting to realise, you know, like she can talk of some of these things, because her past is quite painful. So, a lot of that Elder connection, but a lot of their past is quite painful. So that's a way I feel that I could be a bit more strengthened.

21 year old Kurnai woman

I have become in the last few years. My parents separated when I was younger. I have a white mum, black dad. When they split, I obviously, as most split families do, went with my mum and we moved interstate, and I unfortunately lost touch with my father and my culture. So, I guess when I was growing up I was never connected at all to my culture. Probably within the last couple of years being in and around my family, I have definitely become more connected and started to see what it is to be Koorie, so to speak, and embraced it more. So, I feel that I am today. I do everything that I can to connect myself with it, whether it is through my work or personal life. I try and connect myself in different ways with the community and do this because it's not only helping my community, but it's helping me too, because it's opening my eyes to our community and to things that I never thought existed.

My culture could be strengthened ... It's like how they say that you can never learn too much. You should always be undertaking some sort of study or personal growth. I think that's on a professional level as well as on a personal level. You can never say that I've got nothing left to learn. You can always strengthen who you are, whether it is about your culture or you as a person.

For me it's probably through my family ties, engaging in things like sitting down and doing a family tree through my nan or my dad, so strengthening the things that are close to me to better identify with my culture.

21 year old Arrernte woman

My connection to the culture comes natural, it's a natural feeling. When I am around other Aboriginal people, I don't feel shame, I feel completely at ease with their company and myself. Last year, for example, I flew to Canberra for a job interview. I

..... I had to attend an assessment session with ten other Indigenous people, all of who were complete strangers. Immediately, however, we were able to interact comfortably, joke with one another and encourage one another to do their best. I wish every interview could be like that!

*BY LISTENING TO THE
RESPONSES OF ELDERS,
ONE YOUNG PERSON CAN
TAKE THAT ELDER'S STORY
AND SHARE IT WITH
ANOTHER YOUNG PERSON.*

..... In a broader sense, however, I connect with my culture predominantly through family. Family is such a dominant feature in the Indigenous culture, subsequently my family plays a dominant role in my life. My mother instilled in me from an early age that family always comes first, no matter what. I've seen such remarkable examples of this notion through my own family life. If ever a few cousins decided to visit an aunty unannounced around dinner time, she would never make us feel guilty for coming over at dinner time. She would make a pot of stew and rice stretch between ten of my cousins and her.

I believe the Indigenous culture can be strengthened using the culture's two greatest assets - the Elders and the youth. All it takes is for one young person to ask an Elder a question regarding the Indigenous culture. By listening to the responses of Elders, one young person can take that Elder's story and share it with another young person. Young people, however, must have the desire to listen and learn and, more importantly, have patience.

21 year old Yorta Yorta woman

I feel connected to my culture through my family, work, participating in events and committees like VIYAC, NAIDOC week celebrations, Sorry Day marches and Survival Day. I feel my connection to culture through learning more from my Elders, acknowledging and paying respects to their struggles for our rights, which are what they have fought so hard for. Being able to listen to their stories which can sometimes be sad and hurtful, but yet there are those great ones too. My connection to culture can be strengthened by doing more research about my culture, as you can never stop learning, by studying the languages that were within the south-east of Australia, as they have mostly been stolen, and our Elders, when they were not allowed to talk in their native tongue. I know they learn some of it down at Worowa College so maybe it might be worth seeing if they could possibly run classes down there for mature students who want to learn more. I feel that would give me more strength and also maybe taking up cultural heritage.

.....

23 year old Gunditjmara woman

I am always conscious of my behaviour and attitudes towards people - especially our Elders. I am conscious of the need to be environmentally friendly as the land looks after us and we need to look after the land. I connect to my culture through being around other Koories. I always acknowledge the land I am on. I acknowledge the Elders past and present. I am involved in the Aboriginal community in which I live and make sure that the Aboriginal children, who aren't connected to the community, become connected and stay connected.

There are ways in which connecting to my culture can be strengthened. The gap between Elders and young people has been widening and there is a need to rebuild the relationship so the Elders can keep passing the culture on to the young people. Cultural groups need to be established where the young people are learning the old ways - learning how to weave, spear fish, throw a boomerang, play the didgeridoo, paint Aboriginal art, dance, tell stories, etc.

.....

*CULTURE IS THE REASON
I WORK SO HARD, I WORK
TO MAKE MYSELF, MY FAMILY,
MY ELDERS AND MY
COMMUNITY PROUD.*

.....

23 year old Gunditjmara man

I am connected to my culture by listening and learning from my father, family and extended family. It is very important to respect your family and respect the information that is passed down. When I connect to my culture I generally talk with family members, take a drive out in the bush or create artwork. The only way that my connection can be strengthened is by moving back to my tribal area, which is the land of the Gunditjmara.

17 year old Koorie young woman

Yes, I'm connected through family. I identify with my Aboriginal culture through community and also through being told traditional stories and watching dancing. My culture can be strengthened by being more involved in peer group activities and going to more events with Indigenous communities.

4. VIYAC MEMBERS TALK ABOUT HOW CONNECTION TO CULTURE INFLUENCES THEIR LIFE

24 year old Yorta Yorta man

Culture is the reason I work so hard, I work to make myself, my family, my Elders and my community proud. I'm very, very proud of my community, I'm very proud of my culture. I am also very proud of the mistakes that my community has made. You have to struggle through in the dark sometimes before you can find the light switch and, as a broader culture, the Aboriginal people are looking for that light switch, and we're getting closer. Accepting my culture and living my culture and breathing my culture, and being my culture, as it's strengthened me to make choices that I've had to have and make sacrifices that I've had to make along the way.

20 year old Gubbi-Gubbi/Monero woman

It influences me to be all that I can, so that I am a role model for the generations to come.

.....
22 year old Murri woman

Oh, it just influences everything about me. Like, I remember at uni once we were doing some rubbish in psychology about the identity of the self, and the teacher said a lot of people don't know themselves and, um, write down a few things about yourself and see if you know yourself. And I said 'Well, what if I do know who I am exactly?', and she goes 'Try and sum it up in two words'. I said 'I can', and she goes 'Oh, well, good on ya', but we never read it out. But what I identified myself is an Aboriginal woman because I'm Aboriginal, and that affects why I'm studying law, because of everything I've seen, people I know being sent to prison, the culture, you know, abuse of procedural rights by police, and I'm a woman, because I am a female, and I can bear children, and that's something that affects me, because I'm also passionate about women's issues as well. So culture affects every single facet from, I mean, from my health, how healthy I am right now, you know, like the illnesses that I get because it's hereditary.

21 year old Kurnai woman

I think that it probably influences a lot of what I do, because every day I'm dealing with it. I have to approach it sensitively. When we're dealing with the industry that I work in within my region, it's something that's a huge issue. I don't feel that the government is aware or truly understands the barriers our people face and the influences that our culture plays on us, so I can see what type of an influence it has on people's life as well as my life. It plays a big impact on the way I deal with people every day because you have to be aware of how it does impact people and how it influences their life and creates barriers, and it's learning to turn those around to make that a good influence so it is motivating you to do it and not holding you back.

.....
*I CELEBRATE MY CULTURE
AND AM NOT AFRAID TO
WEAR MY COLOURS.*
.....

21 year old Yorta Yorta woman

It influences me as I am passionate and proud of my culture. I feel I can give something back by working in my community, through my family and learning from them, and also them learning from me too. My culture influences me as I want to be able to influence my brothers, sisters and cousins to get involved and learn more. I hope to influence them and other people in a positive and motivating way. I feel it influences me in a positive way as I want to learn more and share it with others, and people may not be exposed to Aboriginal culture in Victoria. I have been influenced through work and have had the opportunity to be exposed to my culture and also through family and community events. These are things that were not taught to me in school. And it's important for us young ones to have the opportunity to be exposed more to our culture as we learn more and can pass that knowledge on to future generations.

23 year old Gunditjmara woman

My culture influences my life in the way I live. I have Aboriginal art on the walls, I have Aboriginal books, and I have the Aboriginal flag on display in my home. I acknowledge the days of significance. I celebrate my culture and am not afraid to wear my colours.

23 year old Gunditjmara man

It influences my life in a big way by teaching the youth around Ballarat my stories and teaching them the respect that comes with it.

17 year old Koorie woman

Culture is such an important part of my life, it makes me feel like I belong to a group and can be established in that group.

5. VIYAC MEMBERS DESCRIBE WHAT IT IS TO LIVE WITH PRIDE

24 year old Yorta Yorta man

To live with pride enables me to make the right decisions without any regret, to make the right sacrifices without any disturbances about it. To be proud of everything that I've done, which I am, whether it has been a positive thing or a negative thing. I have given my all and continue to give my all. I have made decisions based upon my immediate circumstances that have fallen short, unfortunately, but was the best decision that I could make, and I take that strength and 'no regrets' attitude from the pride that I have in my community and the pride that I have in my culture. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger, and every mistake that you make really is a lesson to you.

It's not the journey that's the source of the pride, and it shouldn't take away from the pride, it's where you are at the end of it. If you can lay your head down on the pillow at the end of the night and say, well, I've given it my all, I've done everything to the best of my abilities with what I had at the time, then regardless of whether other people view you as wrong, or regardless of whether you've stumbled a few times along that road, then you've made the right decisions, you made the right choices, and you have every right to feel proud about where you are.

20 year old Gubbi-Gubbi/Monero woman

It is so important to be proud. Koorie kids that I know that are not proud have no sense of being or self. It is really destructive.

22 year old Murri woman

I think it means just being proud of what you've done, even if it's not that great. And just keeping your head up and standing up for yourself, even if you stand alone. That's

.....
*THAT'S WHY IT'S IMPORTANT THAT
WE INSTIL PRIDE WITHIN OUR KIDS
FROM A YOUNG AGE
SO THEY CAN BE STRONG
ENOUGH TO STAND UP TO PEOPLE
WHO CAN SOMETIMES
BE NEGATIVE AND RACIST.*
.....

always been my motto, and I feel proud of myself 'cause, yeah, I've stood up for myself, even times I've stood alone, and that to me makes me proud. Being proud of what you've done, all your achievements, it doesn't matter how small they are and, yeah, just recognising where you come from as well, even if it's not the best, take what you have been given and make the best of it.

21 year old Kurnai woman

I guess, to me, to live with pride is to say proudly I'm black and I'm proud. I never used to be able to say that, but now if someone asks me where I work, I'll say it with pride. If someone asks me who my family is, I'll say it with pride. And I think that to live with pride is to unashamedly admit who you are and what your culture is, and that's pride. Everyone expresses it in a different way, I guess, and it's what you're comfortable with. No person should have to feel they should hide who they are. Pride to me is just being able to answer and not care what people think.

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21 year old Yorta Yorta woman

As I get older and more exposed to life, my culture, to my family, I found that it's what makes you strong as a person, being able to be proud of where you have come from and to have a positive direction in your life. I find living with pride is something that grows stronger inside of us each day, if we let it. I feel very proud when people ask me what nationality I am, 'cause I always say 'I'm Koorie', but some of the times people don't believe me as they say 'You're not dark enough', and that can be upsetting, but you have to let them know.

But other times in my life it has been very hard to live with pride as people in the wider community can sometimes make that difficult. That's why it's important that we instil pride within our kids from a young age so they can be strong enough to stand up to people who can sometimes be negative and racist.

23 year old Gunditjmara woman

To live with pride means not being afraid. It means that I am a young Aboriginal woman and I am embracing my culture because this is who I am and I will never deny my Aboriginality. I live with pride every day because of this.

23 year old Gunditjmara man

If you have no pride in yourself, then you will lose your identity, culture and your self-confidence.

17 year old Koorie young woman

Not being afraid to tell people where you're from and your culture. To feel really good about who you are and understand your culture.



ISSUE 2 - IDENTITY

6. COMMENTS FROM VIYAC MEMBERS ON THEIR ABORIGINAL IDENTITY AND WHAT IT MEANS TO THEM

24 year old Yorta Yorta man

Koorie is a state of being, to me. That's the simplest answer for it. It's not a skin colour. It's not a percentage, it's not a caste system, it's a state of being. You are Koorie if you're Koorie and you believe you are Koorie, and you work within your group. I am relatively fair. I get mistaken for Greek or Italian. I'm always being told I am Italian, but my community, my family don't see me as any less black than my uncle who's, you know, relatively dark. Koorie to me is an intensity, it is a state of being rather than a race. I mean, there's no genetic marker for race, as we've recently discovered. Race is a starter's pistol and a couple of runners, as far as I'm concerned.

I'm very proud, I'm very vocal about it. I was told at a very young age before my teen years, probably 11 or 12, you either are or you aren't - make the choice. If you aren't, well and good, it's your choice and no penalties for it. But if you are, be prepared to be Koorie at every turn of the way. You're not Koorie and you get a Koorie job, and you're Koorie from nine o'clock in the morning until five o'clock at night, you go home and lock

..... your door and shut out the community. If you're Koorie, you're Koorie 24/7, all day, all year, for the rest of your life, and it's a decision that you make and it's a lifestyle.

KOORIE IS A STATE OF BEING, TO ME.

..... A very rewarding lifestyle, and everything that I do identifies with my community. I show my Elders respect, as is due to them. I, you know, visit my co-op that I used to work in. I still want to be. I give to my community. I treat my community as my community

treats me. I embrace it with open arms and make it feel very welcome.

20 year old Gubbi-Gubbi/Monero woman

Being Koorie means being proud of who I am and where I come from.

21 year old Kurnai woman

Working and living in the Koorie community, you soon get known amongst the Koorie community who you are and who your family are. To me, identifying as Koorie is simply that you're interacting comfortably within your community.

21 year old Arrernte woman

I often have conflicts whereby I've got my family back up in the Northern Territory who really do mean so much to me, and I'm sacrificing them because the Northern Territory doesn't have the same opportunities that Melbourne possesses. Like, at the same time, I have also made such a life for myself here in that I've got a boyfriend and I've got friends and I've got a really good job. So, there is no balance, because I go home and I do miss them and I do feel like it's slowly all drifting away because I'm not there. And they're all getting older and it's harder for them to kind of commute down here.

21 year old Yorta Yorta woman

I identify myself as a Yorta Yorta woman from Cumberagunga. I also identify myself through my family. Being Koorie means coming from south-east Australia, as you can't say Victoria because it includes parts of New South Wales too. I also identify myself as a Koorie.

23 year old Gunditjmara woman

Koorie to me is the core identity of Victorian Aboriginal people. It is what unites us as people. We have many different cultures but come together as Koorie when it counts. I identify as an Aboriginal woman. I also acknowledge my non-Indigenous ancestry as being a part of who I am. I am an Aboriginal Australian.

23 year old Gunditjmara man

Koorie to me means that I belong to one of the longest living cultures in history. I identify by knowing who I am, where I'm from and my family tree.

17 year old Koorie young woman

To be Koorie means I'm special and different to those around me. I think it's about what you believe and having a strong sense of your background. I believe it's spiritual and about knowing who you are, rather than what you look like or how you act.

7. VIYAC MEMBERS TALK ABOUT THE EXPECTATIONS THEIR COMMUNITIES HAVE FOR THEM AND THEIR ROLE AS A YOUNG PERSON IN THEIR COMMUNITY

24 year old Yorta Yorta man

Certainly as a young Koorie man who's, you know, gone to uni and made the mistakes that I made in my younger life and moved on from that, my community use me as a bit of a role model for the youth. My community come to me for advice, and just as I go to them for advice. It's a two-way street. I take great strength from that. For every bit of help that I can do for my mob, you know, to repay in untold quantities, either through advice that I've been given - I always know where to go to if I have a question, both professionally and personally.

My role primarily in the community as a youth is to make sure that I'm there to look after my Elders, that I'm there to look after the youth below me, and that I contribute to the best of my ability. It's a given thing that I will show my Elders the same respect that they show me, which they do in Morwell. I'm very happy to be living in Morwell with the community there that are open to suggestions and open to constructive criticism. But, at the same time, I'm fairly open to the Elders pulling me up, and they do when I go wrong. I'm very happy for that to happen. I suppose that would be my main role, to be a contributing member of the Koorie community.

20 year old Gubbi-Gubbi/Monero woman

The impact on me is only in frustration. I understand that the past needs to be recognised, and it damn well should. But we are the future, and we need to be recognised as equals and have the proper acknowledgement. (This statement has been edited.) My role as a young Indigenous person is to make sure that the future and past is looked after.

22 year old Murri woman

Sometimes I think what annoys me with communities is that you always have to be felt that you're going to be doing something for them, where they may not necessarily have even played a part in your success, or something like that. But sometimes you do feel like you really owe it to them to do something, even though you may not. They may not have made any contribution to it whatsoever, but it's just something that's in you. Like an unwritten expectation that you are going to serve that community, and it just so happens that I do. I was having a chat with this lady who was saying, when she was entering into university, the university had asked her 'What do you want to give back to your community from getting this degree?' And she said 'Well, I don't understand why I have to give anything back, because they haven't actually ever supported me and haven't done anything to me'.

But my community's expectation, they have been completely supportive. My family have been supportive of me, and their expectations and beliefs have impacted on my identity and that I do want to go through with the law degree. The flip side of that is certain times when I've wanted to do work experience at community and Aboriginal legal centres, I wasn't allowed to, and I don't know what the reasons for that were, but

I wasn't allowed to do it. So, yeah, that impacted on me a little bit because it just made me wonder what was the bureaucratic red tape that stopped me that time from having that experience as a young girl who had passion, but it was just like 'No, we don't want to have nothing to do with that'. That makes me a little bit annoyed, but my community, the people who have suffered because they're victims of circumstance, speaking of them, they've impacted on my identity. It's sad for what they have

MY ROLE PRIMARILY IN THE COMMUNITY AS A YOUTH IS TO MAKE SURE THAT I'M THERE TO LOOK AFTER MY ELDERS, THAT I'M THERE TO LOOK AFTER THE YOUTH BELOW ME, AND THAT I CONTRIBUTE TO THE BEST OF MY ABILITY.

gone through, but they fuel me and they fuel my brain every day when I'm putting theory into practice. So, yeah, there's good and bad.

I've been lucky to be part of VIYAC. I feel that my role in that is, although I'm not Koorie, I feel that my experiences are completely validated down here. My cousins and my brothers and my family, it's a national cause. The problems are national and I feel that I would like to be a voice for those young people who don't necessarily have the means of being given the opportunities that I had to move away to Melbourne to, you know, chat about these things and to voice them. So I may not have experienced certain things that they have, but because they have told me, their voice is also instilled in me, and I feel that I would like to speak for them at times because they haven't had the means to do it, and sometimes at times haven't felt that they have had the capacity to do it.

21 year old Kurnai woman

It impacts on me a lot. It's hard because my family have lived here their whole life so they are known within the community. I don't know what kind of future tomorrow holds for me, and the community expectations can sometimes be that you follow in your family's footsteps rather than embrace your own life. So their beliefs can sometimes impact the way my life is heading.

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21 year old Arrernte woman

As a young Indigenous person, I believe I need be a role model not just for other Indigenous youth, but for Indigenous people as a whole. I have been fortunate in that I have been given so many amazing opportunities that have assisted me in attaining a tertiary qualification and gaining a secure job. All of my achievements have not been made possible without the encouragement of my mother. She encouraged me to study hard, go to university and to do extra-curricular activities that would prosper my employment chances. Sadly, not all Indigenous youth have role models to be inspired by. I want to encourage other Indigenous youth, as well as their parents, aunties and uncles, that they can achieve what I have, plus much more. I believe in the ripple effect. I was the first person in my mum's family to go to university. One year later, one aunty decided to go to university. One other sister saw what she was doing, so she decided to enrol at university. One year after her enrolling, my own mother enrolled in uni. See, all it takes is one person to start something and others will follow. They can now

..... encourage their children to go to university and get an education.

I BELIEVE IN THE RIPPLE EFFECT. I WAS THE FIRST PERSON IN MY MUM'S FAMILY TO GO TO UNIVERSITY. ONE YEAR LATER, ONE AUNTY DECIDED TO GO TO UNIVERSITY. ONE OTHER SISTER SAW WHAT SHE WAS DOING, SO SHE DECIDED TO ENROL AT UNIVERSITY. ONE YEAR AFTER HER ENROLLING, MY OWN MOTHER ENROLLED IN UNI.

But Indigenous people don't even have to go to university. A year ago my little brother was a worry. He just wanted to party every weekend, had no real employment prospects and no real vision for the future. So Mum sent him to Melbourne to live with my sister and I who encouraged him to go to TAFE and study a course in an area he was interested in. Just six months later, he works five nights a week, studies every Tuesday at TAFE, works unpaid Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to

..... 5 p.m. at a store to gain work experience, and his vision for the next few years is to open his own café. So that's my role as an Indigenous person, and I take great pride in inspiring other young Indigenous people to achieve great things, because I know that they can do anything they want to.

21 year old Yorta Yorta woman

I felt that they can be positive and genuine as we are constantly looking after one another. I feel that the older generations have been fighting for years to ensure us young ones get better opportunities and have rights. They would have put in a lot of long hard hours which they wouldn't have gotten paid for to ensure we have better futures. That's why we have a lot of respect for our Elders and our culture, as we hear the stories and we want to ensure our kids will have the opportunity to learn as well. My role as a youth in our community is to gain as much knowledge as possible to ensure it's passed on and to be a positive influence to the younger ones in my life. I also believe we need to be active in our community because it is important for us to get involved as it's a part of who we are and a part of our future, and our kids' futures.

23 year old Gunditjmara woman

It makes me proud to be part of the Koorie community. It keeps me strong in my identity. Working in the community services sector, I see children in out-of-home care - away from their culture, away from their community. My role as a young Koorie in the community is to ensure that these children do not lose their culture and identity. I hope that by being a role model in the community will bring out a sense of pride in being Koorie for these children and that they will become strong in their identity.

23 year old Gunditjmara man

It doesn't impact on me, as I know who I am, and if they cannot accept that, then that's their problem. My role in the community is to teach the youth to respect their Elders, lead by example and to make sure that the next generation have the experience, support and voice to be the leaders of tomorrow.

17 year old Koorie young woman

I'm proud to be part of the Koorie community and I want to do well in my chosen career to make my people proud while still following my culture. I still have a lot to learn from my people and a lot to give. I try to create awareness everywhere I go and show that there isn't just that one stereotype, or any for that matter, because each person is an individual.

8. VIYAC MEMBERS' TAKE ON SOCIETY'S EXPECTATIONS OF THEM AND HOW THAT IMPACTS ON THEIR IDENTITY

24 year old Yorta Yorta man

I'm still waiting for my free car and house. The myths, the stigmas attached to being Koorie, that everything is a free ride. It's not, and the broader community need to understand that it's not a free ride, and need to get over that issue that they have with that, before they're ever going to accept us as a people or as an equal. I suppose if we could look at it as a pendulum, the pendulum has swung in mainstream Australia's favour for so long, you know, any movement towards an equilibrium is seen as favouritism. And I mean, to be fair, the pendulum probably does need to swing a little bit over towards our side, before it settles in the middle. There's bound to be a bit of that. It doesn't mean that anybody's wrong, it doesn't mean that anybody's having any favourite treatment. I think if the broader community can have a bit of education into what really went on and what it's really like to be an Aboriginal Australian, just to give them those options before they make a choice on, you know, what they think of us, at least by the time they make their choice it will be an informed, educated and intelligent choice, rather than the ignorant one that they're displaying at the moment. On the same hand, though, I'm not saying anybody is overtly racist. But, definitely, there's a difference between ignorance and racism, and ignorance is prevalent in Australian society.

I REMEMBER WHEN I APPLIED FOR AN SRC POSITION AT UNI, THEY WERE SORT OF LIKE 'PFFT'.

I'm Koorie, so I'm expected to play the didge, which I do do, but I don't often tell mainstream people that because it's a stereotype. So occasionally I like to play the devil's advocate and say 'Oh no, sorry, I can't do that, I don't know how'.

Society, in their patting me on the head because of the things that I've done - and I'm sure it's done with the best of intentions - are making me question myself. You know, they always tell me that you're doing really well for one of them, 'Oh, I can't believe you're Aboriginal, you know, you're doing so well for yourself, you're great'. That's great for me, but you know, I am more than me, I am my community and I am one of them. The 'us' and 'them' discussions drive me mental, they drive me insane. And unfortunately, society is not ready for it to be anything else apart from 'us' and 'them'. So it's a work in progress, I expect, which has been going on for over 100 years. I suppose the expectations of me growing up as a Koorie person was to fail. The bar was set fairly low.

20 year old Gubbi-Gubbi/Monero woman

People have stereotypes, and it takes a while for them to change. If people were educated in this, they would not be so ignorant.

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22 year old Murri woman

Society's expectations ... sometimes when I'm at uni, some people don't expect just because I have the stigma, like, 'Oh, that girl, she's Aboriginal, she probably doesn't have anything to say'. And other things, like, I'm overweight as well, so sometimes they think 'Oh, you know, this chick probably doesn't have anything to say or she could be this and that'. People label you on what you look like sometimes as well. But knowing that I'm Aboriginal, sometimes they don't expect me to have anything valid to say, they don't expect me to want to do certain things. I remember when I applied for an SRC position at uni, they were sort of like 'pfff'. I remember this one chick saying 'You're not going to get it' to me. That annoyed me, but then also society's expectations ...

I think it's great that they do have Indigenous positions in government roles. My lecturers expect a whole lot of me and have great faith in me, and there are some

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SOME PEOPLE DON'T BELIEVE ME WHEN I TELL THEM THAT I AM KOORIE, THEY SAY THAT I DON'T LOOK IT.

solicitors who want to take on Indigenous people, I respect that. And I know some solicitors who have had great faith in me and sometimes the expectations can be high, and sometimes they can be low, but I mean, it's just a double edged sword, you just take the good with the bad, but either way whether it's good or bad, they just drive me.

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The impact on my identity ... well, yeah, no, I just have to say the good and the bad, low expectations drive me, and high expectations drive me as well, and I'm grateful for those high expectations. It's great and it just validates my position as an Aboriginal person.

21 year old Kurnai woman

I guess at times it can be pretty negative, the broader society's expectations - and I've heard this said by many people. This can be a huge weight for Koorie youth to carry. If we don't have the support around us it can play a huge impact on our identity. If you have people thinking and telling you that you're something negative, it's hard to break free from that cycle.

21 year old Arrernte woman

I feel that society has two types of expectations of Indigenous peoples: negative expectations and positive expectations. Their negative expectations are based on the falsely held stereotype belief that Indigenous people are alcoholics and welfare dependants. I realised this expectation whilst growing up and inviting friends over to my house only to encounter stereotype beliefs. One friend commented 'Wow, your house is so clean. I thought that because you are Aboriginal, your house would be dirty'. But thankfully there are many more people in this world who have such encouraging expectations of Indigenous people.

21 year old Yorta Yorta woman

They can most of the time be negative which can be hurtful and damaging, but you need to learn as a person to stand up to people like that, be strong in your identity and culture. Fortunately not everybody is like that, there are people out there who want to help and make a difference, but that is a minority compared to the majority of negative people out there. That's why it's important for us to instil positive beliefs in our young ones so they can be strong enough to stand up to racism and negative people.

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23 year old Gunditjmara woman

Some people don't believe me when I tell them that I am Koorie, they say that I don't look it. I just bite my tongue. This impacts deeply emotionally and socially on my identity, but I have come to terms with it, and put it down to their ignorance and racism. The government's idea of congregating us into one people is absurd. We have many cultures - each with different beliefs. We stand united as Aboriginal people, as Koories, but need to keep our culture alive within our communities. I am an Aboriginal woman with English, Irish, Scottish, Nukunu, Wotjaboluk and Gunditjmara ancestry. I am an Aboriginal Australian. I am Koorie.

23 year old Gunditjmara man

It has an impact because there is a lot of stereotypes and racism around, but you have to rise above that if you want to earn the respect of the people that judge you before they know you.

17 year old Koorie young woman

I constantly have to justify my Aboriginality because I don't look the way that society expects me to look.

ISSUE 3 - RACISM

9. WHAT IS RACISM IN THE EYES OF THESE VIYAC MEMBERS?

24 year old Yorta Yorta man

Racism is everywhere you look. It's everywhere. It's in the 'You're doing really well for one of those'. It's the stigma associated with walking into a supermarket with my cousins. Like, I can walk into a supermarket and do my shopping by myself or with my mainstream mates, very comfortably - I walk in with a couple of cousins, and we're followed. It's the stereotyping of our people. It's the key, holding us into the illiterate alcoholic criminals that society seems to feel that we all are. It's also in the statement that 'I didn't know'. I went to the milk bar the other day to hear a woman talk about those 'f'ing Abos' and, you know, 'They should all be put on an island somewhere and blown

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*So I GUESS, FOR ME, RACISM IS
NOT SOMEONE CALLING ME BLACK,
RACISM IS TO ME ANYONE, NO
MATTER WHO THEY ARE IN SOCIETY,
USING SOMETHING THAT MAKES US
UNIQUE AND SPECIAL AGAINST US.*
.....

up, drop a bomb on them', to which I obviously responded, not hostilely. I just said 'Are you aware that I am one of those "f'ing Abos"?', and the justification was 'Oh, I'm so sorry, I didn't know'. Now, to me that doesn't justify it, that just means, okay, you're smart enough to be sneaky about it. Racism is everywhere you look, unfortunately. I think we need to have a lot more focus on our youth, on our mainstream youth in primary

schools, because a child in primary school, and working in a primary school, I've heard some horrific things falling out of the mouths of my children.

20 year old Gubbi-Gubbi/Monero woman

Racism is the non-acceptance of another culture other than your own.

22 year old Murri woman

Just judging you obviously on your race. Stigmatising you, based on your race, and not giving you a chance just because of that.

21 year old Kurnai woman

I am pretty open minded when it comes to racism. I'm not someone who I guess feel likes I have to fight for the wellbeing of the world. I think that everyone has some sort of bias or racism in him or her somewhere, even if they think that they don't. It's always very deep within and it could be against age, gender, race, religion etc., whatever it is. Racism to me is someone feeling for whatever reason they're better than other people. I don't believe that anyone has a right to think that. I personally feel that everyone is on an equal playing field, no matter how old you are, what religion you are, what race, especially what race you are. So I guess, for me, racism is not someone calling me black, racism is to me anyone, no matter who they are in society, using something that makes us unique and special against us. For me, that's what racism is.

21 year old Arrernte woman

Racism is a negative view held by misinformed individuals. Racism is an insult against an important feature of a person's life. In my own belief, racism occurs when an individual has distorted beliefs of a cultural group in society. Sadly, in most circumstances that I have encountered, these individuals have derived their beliefs from their parents, or worse, people fear the unknown.

I believe racism can be overcome by educating people about the Aboriginal culture from the view of an Indigenous person or a cultural expert. I believe that the emergence of popular Indigenous sporting figures such as former Essendon football player Michael Long and rising star St Kilda player Xavier Clarke have assisted in breaking down cultural barriers. Advancing the profiles of other Indigenous identities in fields other than sport may assist in diminishing racial vilification against Aboriginal people.

21 year old Yorta Yorta woman

I believe racism is when another person can be hurtful in a physical, mental, emotional or verbal way to a particular race. By making judgements and jokes, which can be very sad and damaging to a person or group of people. But there is a lot of it going on and we can't ignore ... we just have to try harder to educate people on different cultures and learn to work together as one.

23 year old Gunditjmara woman

Racism is someone's unwillingness to understand another's culture. It is a weapon used by a hegemonic society to incapacitate the marginalised. It is a person's ignorance and fear of difference.

23 year old Gunditjmara man

I think that people are afraid of what is different, so they make racist comments to bring someone down to their level.

17 year old Koorie young woman

Racism is judging or making assumptions about others according to culture, background or what you look like.

10. SOME OF THE VIYAC MEMBERS' EXPERIENCES OF RACISM AS YOUNG ABORIGINAL PEOPLE AND THE IMPACTS THESE HAD ON THEM

24 year old Yorta Yorta man

My upbringing, my pride, was very much a direct result of the way my mother raised me to walk with my head held high, to be proud of every aspect of my life, even the things that are deemed inappropriate. If I've learnt from them, I have no reason to be ashamed of them, and for that I walk very proudly with my head held high. I was very political through high school, as I said, with no concept of ignorance, it was just either you're racist or you're not, simple as that. So I was fairly political and organised various walkouts during the school. One of my English teachers ... well, all teenage boys are going to comment and snigger and carry on about the sexual health discussion that every school has, and we did, and we were mucking up and making comments about this lady in her lovely miniskirt while she was talking about sexual health. Me and my cousin Terry were removed from that discussion to be spoken to by this English teacher who asked us why - whether we knew why we had been removed - and I was being cheeky and said 'Yeah, 'cause we're black'. And the response, to my surprise, was 'Yes, that's right. Don't you think you have enough problems being Aborigine? You don't need to be a smart-arse with it'. And I thought 'Hey, what problems? I don't have a problem with being an Aboriginal. Do you have a problem with me being Koorie?'

20 year old Gubbi-Gubbi/Monero woman

One of my best friends now who I met at hairdressing school asked me what nationality I was, and I told her. She then turned to me and said that she thought that all Aboriginal people were like the guys that hang out at Flinders Street station. I have been taunted and teased all my life, as well as had every theft in my school blamed on me. I could go on forever, really. All these experiences have made me more passionate to educate the ignorant people in this world.

22 year old Murri woman

Some of my experience of racism ... I mean, there's a lot. Some are very small and some quite huge. Even from lecturers saying, you know, you don't have to have something in on time, because for some reason - because I'm Aboriginal, I guess - there's some sort of unwritten leniency towards me. Police moving me on, you know, after just sitting there and, you know, I've seen a lot of Aboriginal people get beaten on the street and just certain girls at school calling me names.

Once I met this eight-year-old and it just shocked me to the core. He wasn't allowed in this shop. I said 'Why aren't you going in this shop, mate?' And he said 'Oh, because I'm not allowed, this person called me a little black what's-his-name'. And I said 'You know, that's not on'. And he said 'No, that's right, but that's how it is, that's how it is, you know'. It killed me to think that this eight-year-old kid had so readily accepted his place in society at the age of eight, and his little voice always, his voice always makes me, um ... it really fuels me at times.

Even a cleaner refusing to clean my dorm at university because she didn't want to, because she said all this stuff to me, she said 'I don't want to clean your room, because god knows what you people have'. It just ... it beat me down so much, but then, now it's like - I don't want to sound corny here, so forgive me - it's just like you're a flower and you just bloom. Now, it does shock me, but now I feel like I can handle anything. Even just hearing some of my cousins and brothers, some of the stuff they talk about has just fuelled me. And the impacts of racism. I've just gone past and through it and come out the other side, and now I feel like I'm a brick wall and I can take it, and now I don't fight, I just fight people with my head. Yeah, it impacts on you, but you come through it.

21 year old Arrernte woman

I was invited to a friend's house for dinner, when he was explaining how when filling his car that day with petrol, it back sprayed, some flickering into his face. A girl at the table commented 'What are you, Aboriginal or something?', making the inference that Indigenous people are petrol sniffers. What shocked me was that every other person at that table sat there in silence. I believe that to sit in silence is to agree.

Perhaps the most significant encounter with racism occurred when I was in Grade 4. My teacher believed that because the Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander box was ticked on my enrolment form, I should automatically be placed in the lowest grade for English and maths. By the end of the year, I was in the top levels for all of my subjects, and even better, got the best grades in the class.

21 year old Yorta Yorta woman

I've experienced racism at school by other kids and people who I thought were my friends, it is very hurtful and upsetting, but you need to stand tall against racism and try not to let it bring you down. You can't let a person's judgements knock you down as you know who you are at the end of the day. It can hurt and make you feel resentment. It can also be very damaging when it comes from authority as well. I believe if authority weren't as racist, there wouldn't be so many Aboriginal men locked up and so many kids growing up out there without their fathers around.

17 year old Koorie young woman

When I was younger, my friend's mother hit me and told us they didn't want our kind in the neighbourhood. A Koorie worker from Catholic education supported us. The woman was from outside of Australia and had only moved in a few years before, and we had lived there all our lives. I've come to realise that people are racist without knowing it, many are ignorant because there isn't a lot of cross-cultural awareness at school, workplaces etc. So I've come to learn to be patient and not to blame, and instead try to make others understand.

23 year old Gunditjmara man

I have experienced a lot of racism in my life, but as my father told me at a young age, 'Tell them you're proud'. It got them upset in the way that they could not offend me.



23 year old Gunditjmara woman

I have experienced racism throughout my life. In high school, I faced racial taunts and students mimicking the sound of the didgeridoo. I have had students say that I get too much money from Abstudy from the government. Another example is that I don't look Aboriginal - 'The real Aborigines are up north'. I have had emotional trauma as an after-effect of racism.

SOME FINAL COMMENTS

24 year old Yorta Yorta man

Culture is the reason I work so hard. I work to make myself, my family, my Elders and my community proud. I'm very, very proud of my community, I'm very proud of my culture.

21 year old Arrernte woman

There are a lot of positive things that happen in the Indigenous communities. We have a lot of great Indigenous events and sports stars. Even lots of great community programs that we should be really putting out there as something that we're proud of.

21 year old Kurnai woman

Definitely, VIYAC has had a positive impact on me. Sometimes I feel like with my job I don't always have the availability to be available for all the meetings, but for me it's been good because it gives me a lot of links throughout Victoria with other Koorie kids my age. It's been positive because I have been able to meet Minister Jennings, I've been able to get a better understanding of the government and how that plays a role in a lot of issues in our community, and yes, I think it's been positive, definitely.

I think I'd love to learn more about the culture in general. Even though I think that I have a good awareness of it now, it's only awareness. I am not a book of knowledge like I'd like to be, like you'd like to think that all of us are. If there was some way of doing that, then I would definitely want to do it.

21 year old Yorta Yorta woman

To grow up knowing where you come from, and by being taught at a young age your culture and your family heritage, I feel is very important for a person. I know that I feel that there are a lot of people out there that don't know where they come from, and that can be hard for a person to deal with, growing up, especially as a young person. I feel like my pride for my culture is a strong part of who I am, and I'm proud every day, because I know where I come from. It sort of makes me, well, it makes me feel whole and complete as a person, just to know where I come from, and it's that sense of belonging as well.

My role as a young person in our community is to be a good influence to the younger generation, to acknowledge my Elders, and pass on their valuable knowledge to our younger generation. I also believe we need to be active in our community because it's very important for us to get involved, and to learn about our culture because it's an important part of who we are.

22 year old Murri woman

I have a great respect for the traditional owners of this land, and I feel greatly privileged that I can come to Victoria as an Aboriginal person from somewhere else and be able to study here.

My culture is incredibly important. To me, my culture is so, so valuable.

SECTION 2: PAINTING A PICTURE WITH STATS AND FACTS

INFORMATION GAPS AND THE LIMITATIONS OF SOME RESEARCH

Information sources, data and research paint a sketchy picture of the experiences of Koorie young people. In a nationally focussed analysis of *Research Priorities for Indigenous Children and Youth*, the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) found:

Whilst there is a plethora of information available nationally and internationally in regards to children and young people, in fact there is not a great deal of national research which has been undertaken in regards to Indigenous children and youth in Australia.¹

There is, it seems, even less research relating to Indigenous young people on a state-wide or regional basis.

SNAICC highlights a basic tension in producing research that focuses specifically on Indigenous children and young people:

In fact the task of identifying research priorities for Indigenous children and youth is a challenge in itself, given that Indigenous communities generally do not individualise focus on children and young people, but see them rather as members of family and community.²

Whilst SNAICC are not specifically talking about the Victorian context here, the statement they make has relevance for Victoria. In a report produced by the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service on *The Strengths of Young Kooris*, a community member explained:

'In Koori communities that I know of, kids play a big part in adult life. Kids and adults are not separated'.³

Whilst this sheds some light on why there isn't much research or information available that looks at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people's experiences, there may be other reasons for the lack of this kind of information.

YACVic is aware that, broadly speaking, young people typically don't receive much attention in research and that, more commonly, young people's own perspectives are not heard in the consideration of issues that impact on their lives. Whilst YACVic acknowledges the important work of Koorie research units in tertiary and community sector settings, YACVic notes a failure on behalf of governments to undertake the collection of information around Koorie young people's experiences and calls for greater investment by Government in the collection of that information by other appropriate bodies, organisations or researchers.

The importance of the production of culturally appropriate and sensitive research is also highlighted where SNAICC's analysis reports a suspicion of outside research that is attributed to 'the history of non-Indigenous researchers and authorities making negative and racially prejudiced judgements about Indigenous families, cultures and child rearing practices'.⁴ The SNAICC report outlines the culturally different approaches that are taken to monitoring young people's

¹ Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) (2004) *Research Priorities for Indigenous Children and Youth*, Melbourne, p. 5.

² SNAICC (2004), p. 5.

³ Victorian Aboriginal Health Service Co-operative Ltd (VAHS) (2000) *Study of Young People's Health and Well-being: The Strengths of Young Kooris*, Melbourne, p. 31.

⁴ SNAICC (2004), p. 5

wellbeing and progress between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. Taking a national outlook, and focussing on semi-remote and remote communities, SNAICC comments on the different ways in which children and young people may be understood and nurtured within their communities:

Research undertaken in semi-remote and remote communities indicates a very different approach in regards to raising children and childhood development than that of the non-Indigenous community. Key principles in traditional child rearing include the Dreaming, the Law, family, the land and the child's responsibilities and relationships between all these things. Children are seen as little people and are gradually introduced to their obligations in regard to Dreaming and the Law. Traditional beliefs are consistent and practices do not change over time. (Dept. Family & Community Services - Aboriginal Child Rearing Strategy, 2002)

Non-Indigenous child development beliefs and practices are based on research and have very specific milestone and achievement based expectations. They change over time depending on the latest research findings and are arguably influenced by commercialism, major international corporations and governments. In contrast with traditional beliefs, children are seen as helpless and requiring guidance.⁵

Cultural sensitivity in research is just as relevant in Victoria, with the suspicion of non-Community controlled research being felt by Koorie communities too. The report of the *We don't like research...But in Koorie hands it could make a difference* workshop conducted in 2000 outlines 'Some Koorie Views on Research':

- ◉ It has a bad history
- ◉ It is a suspicious process
- ◉ It is not based on outcomes of benefit to the Koorie Community, but based on what the researchers want from it
- ◉ It has generally taken away and not-given back to the Koorie Community⁶

It is very important, then, to be aware of the limitations of much of the non-community-controlled research and information available to paint a picture of the experiences and needs of Koorie young people, and to recognise that there are often very large gaps in the collection of information, particularly in terms of culturally sensitive information.

It is in this context that the anecdotal evidence of Koorie young people gives essential insights into understanding their experiences, aspirations and needs. While we recognise that section 1 of this report only presents the views of some Koorie young people, the information provided in this section of the report sits as a complementary addition to the young people's voices in Section 1.

Recognising the potential limitations of some of the research we have reported from in this section of the report, here we attempt to draw from a wide range of information, including statistical information such as that collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), government reports, independent reviews such as the findings of the Deaths in Custody Review Committee, and some reports from Indigenous and non-Indigenous community agencies and networks. Our purpose in collating this is simply to provide a snapshot of information that is being reported and to highlight the fact that there are still substantial gaps in the information available.

⁵ SNAICC (2004), p. 4.

⁶ VicHealth Koorie Health Research and Community Development Unit (2000) *We don't like research...But in Koorie hands it could make a difference*. Melbourne, p.24.

The information we draw on in this section of the report paints a picture of acute disadvantage for Indigenous children and young people in regards to health and wellbeing indicators, education, employment, incarceration rates and child protection substantiations. These areas were chosen for focus because of the profound impact that they have on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people's lives and on their families and communities, and because they are areas where research and information are more accessible. However, looking at these issues only provides a limited insight into some of the factors impacting on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people's experiences and lives, and doesn't delve into their strengths and achievements. It doesn't talk about the many other factors that impact on Indigenous young people's sense of identity, their connection to community and culture, and the ways in which they construct their own identities within their own cultural framework, something clearly explained in the interview transcripts in Section 1. These issues are highlighted towards the end of this section where some of the protective factors in Koorie young people's lives are reported on, as revealed by research conducted by the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

A core point worth noting is that, in contrast to the non-Indigenous population, the age structure of the Koorie population is dominated by a very high number of children and young people. There are, then, profound implications for the future of Koorie communities if the needs of children and young people are not met.

In order for this vastly inequitable picture to be improved, it is imperative that more is known and understood about the experiences and issues impacting on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. Such knowledge and information needs to directly inform the development of policy, programs and resources to achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in Victoria.

A YOUNG POPULATION

Young people make up the largest demographic of the population age structure within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, both at a national level and in Victoria. According to the 2001 ABS Census data, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population represents 2.4% of the Australian population and was estimated in June 2001 to be 458,500 people. The median age of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population was 21 years, which was 15 years younger than the median age of the non-Indigenous population.⁷

The 2002 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) conducted by the ABS collects data on Indigenous people aged 15 years and over. NATSISS data calculates people over 15 as comprising 61% of the total Indigenous population (so 49% of the Indigenous population being under 15 years), compared to 80% of the non-Indigenous population (so 20% of the non-Indigenous population being under 15 years).⁸ In 2001, around one in four Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people lived in remote areas, compared to one in 50 of the non-Indigenous population.⁹

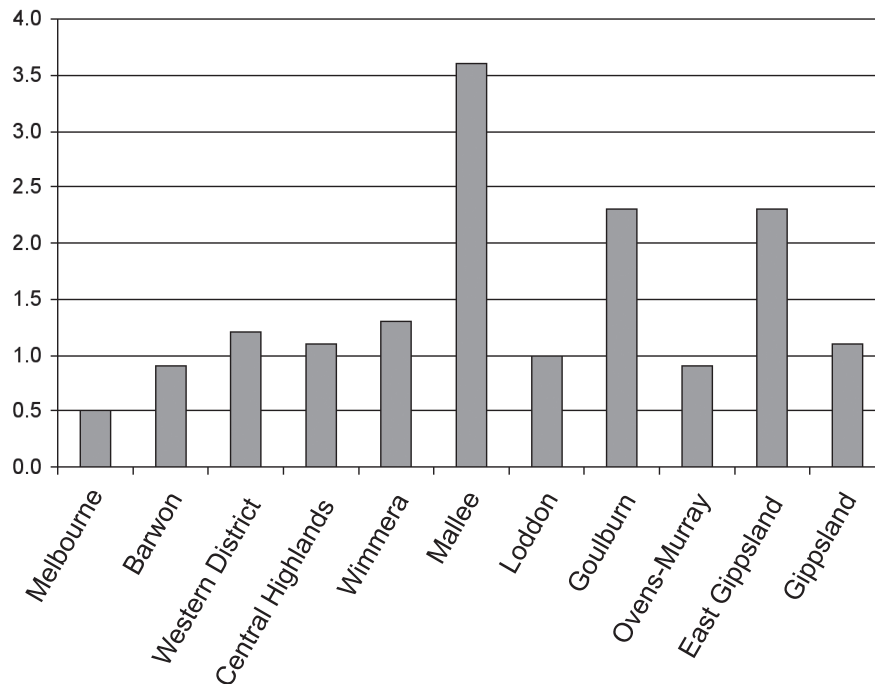
⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2005) *The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, Cat. no. 4704.0, Canberra, p. 3.

⁸ ABS (2002a), *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, 2002*, Cat. no. 4714.0, Canberra, p. 2.

⁹ ABS (2002a), p. 2.

The ABS estimated the Victorian Indigenous population in 2001 to be 25,078,¹⁰ approximately 0.54% of the total Victorian population and 6.1% of the total Australian Indigenous population.¹¹ A large percentage live in regional Victoria (52.1%, compared to 27.1% of the non-Indigenous population).¹²

Location Of Young Indigenous People By Victorian Regions, 2001



Source: ABS (2001), CDATEA 01.

As is the case across Australia, the Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is considerably younger than the non-Indigenous population, in which the number of young people is slowly declining. Over half (54%) are under 25, with 38.8% being under 15.¹³

Aboriginal Affairs Victoria describe the young age structure within the Koorie community as being 'a reflection of a number of factors, including higher fertility rates, higher mortality, a lower life expectancy and reduced well-being'.¹⁴

¹⁰ ABS (2001) *Census of Population and Housing, 2001*, Cat. no. 4705.0, Canberra, <www.abs.gov.au>, retrieved 5 June 2006.

¹¹ Aboriginal Affairs Victoria (AAV) (2005) *The Victorian Government Indigenous Affairs Report: July 2004 – June 2005*, Department for Victorian Communities, Melbourne, p. 38. The ABS is reliant on individuals identifying as Indigenous and, as such, figures may be lower than the actual population. In Victoria, a relatively high incidence of people recorded 'status unknown' in relation to identifying as Indigenous.

¹² AAV (2005).

¹³ AAV (2005).

¹⁴ AAV (2005).

INCREASED INVESTMENT IN YOUNG PEOPLE – ESSENTIAL TO THE FUTURE

In 2003, the national report prepared by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services, *How Young Indigenous People Are Faring*, warned:

It is important to note the different age structure of the Indigenous population (median age of 20 compared with 35 for the non-Indigenous population) and the significant growth in this segment of the population. For example, it is estimated that Indigenous children (aged 0-14) will increase from 4.7% in 2002 up to 7.6% in 2022. While Indigenous people aged between 15-24 now form 3.2 per cent of all young people this will at least double over the next twenty years.¹⁵

Two years later, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner's *Social Justice Report 2005* related the high levels of young people in the Indigenous community to the need for increased service responses to ensure existing disadvantage isn't further entrenched in the future. He pointed out that more investment still is needed to ensure improved outcomes for young people:

The young age structure of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population means that the scope of the issues currently being faced is expected to increase in the coming decades. The increase in absolute terms of the size of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth population will require significant increases in services and programs simply to keep pace with demand and maintain the status quo, yet alone to achieve a reduction in existing health inequality.¹⁶

The very high number of young people within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community means not only a need for investment in young people in the immediate context, but will also have acute implications for the future of communities and for policy and service planning.

A VICTORIAN OUTLOOK

This part of the report explores some general historic and contemporary factors impacting on Koorie communities, and then presents some snapshot information which helps to illustrate the ongoing disadvantage that Koorie young people face in the areas of education, employment, rates of child protection notifications and substantiations, juvenile justice, housing and homelessness, and health and wellbeing. It also draws on community-controlled research that explains the strengthening and protective factors in many Koorie young people's lives.

In exploring these issues, particularly when highlighting statistical information, comparisons are often made between Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people. This is done, not to pitch Indigenous young people's experiences starkly against other

¹⁵ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services (2003) 'How Young Indigenous People Are Faring 2003' in Dusseldorp Skills Forum, *How Young People Are Faring: Key Indicators 2003*, Sydney, p. 38.

¹⁶ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner (2005) *Social Justice Report 2005*, Sydney, p. 18.

young people's, but to challenge the idea that all young people in Victoria or in Australia are the same and require the same provisions to lead healthy lives or to realise their potential. It is also done to highlight the systemic disadvantage that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people commonly face and how this is different to non-Indigenous young people's experiences. While stark statistics can highlight these things, they don't tell us anything about the more complex issues behind the statistics, such as different experiences of the past as experienced by a young person's family or community, or about the impact that a young person's culturally defined aspirations and expectations may have on their experiences. It is important, when reading these kind of statistical comparisons, to bear these factors in mind.

CONNECTION TO CULTURE, LAND AND EXPERIENCES OF DISPOSSESSION AND REMOVAL

Connection to family, culture and land are very important strengthening factors in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The NATSISS 2002 survey explored the issue of 15-24 year old Indigenous young people's connection to family and culture in Victoria. While a very high number reported being involved in community connected social activities in the last three months (91.2%) and the same number reported being able to get support in a time of crisis from someone outside their household (91.2%), fewer identified with a clan, tribal or language group (40.1%) or currently lived in their homelands or traditional country (12.8%).¹⁷ Historic dispossession from land has clearly had a profound impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in Victoria in terms of connection to country, creating a continued dispossession in contemporary Australia.

Another significant causal factor for the disadvantage faced by Koorie young people today lies in the history of intervention and disruption of family networks by the state, a major impact of which has been the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, now termed the Stolen Generation. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody described the continuing impact of this legacy on families, children and young people:

The history of disruption, intervention and institutionalisation to which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island families and children have been subject has left many of those families confronting severe difficulties in securing the adequate care and control of their children; has seen juvenile crime develop into a major social problem; and has seen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island juveniles grossly over represented at all levels of the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.¹⁸

Dispossession from lands and the fragmentation of Indigenous family networks, combined with racism and a lack of cultural sensitivity in policy and service delivery, also contribute to high levels of socio-economic disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

¹⁷ ABS (2002b) *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey*, Victoria, 2002, Cat. no. 4714.2.55.001, Canberra, <www.abs.gov.au>, retrieved 5 June 2006.

¹⁸ Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991) *National Report*, vol. 2, 14.4.38, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.

EDUCATION

The Royal Commission described the central importance of good educational outcomes to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people:

Poor educational participation and achievement in turn limit the capacity of Aboriginal people to make real choices about their participation in the economy more generally. A diminished educational opportunity effectively denies Aboriginal people access to the full range of resources which could help them shape their lives and communities according to their own vision and aspirations.¹⁹

The Victorian Implementation Review of the Royal Commission's recommendations described the essential importance of improving educational outcomes, given the very large number of children and young people in the Koorie community:

Given the age distribution of the Aboriginal population, with its heavy and increased projected weighting towards younger age groups, there is the potential for education to substantially impact on the rate of Aboriginal incarceration.²⁰

The *Victorian Government Indigenous Affairs Report July 2004 – June 2005* paints a picture of 'Victoria's performance on selected headline indicators for Indigenous outcomes'.²¹ The information contained in the report, however, highlights the marked disadvantage that Koorie young people face in terms of educational achievement:

- ◉ The school retention rate of Indigenous Victorians to Year 10 is 81.1%, compared to 97.5% for all Victorians, and drops markedly in the senior years to 36.5% for retention to Year 12, compared to 81.4% for all Victorians
- ◉ The level of attainment of a Year 12 certificate for Indigenous Victorians was almost half that of the non-Indigenous population at 44.6%, compared to 82.7%.²²

Literacy and numeracy levels are starkly different between Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and other students. The *National Report on Schooling in Australia 2002* notes that in Year 5 the literacy level of Indigenous students was 65.9%, compared to 87.5% for the broader population. By Year 7 the literacy level had dropped to 64.8% for Indigenous students and had risen to 88.5% for non-Indigenous students.²³

Numeracy figures were similar, at 78.6% for Indigenous Year 5 students compared to 93.2% for non-Indigenous students. By Year 7 the numeracy levels have dropped starkly for Indigenous students to 58.7% and dropped marginally for non-Indigenous students to 88.5%.²⁴

¹⁹ Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991), vol. 2, 16.1.6.

²⁰ Department of Justice (2005) *Victorian Implementation Review of the Recommendations from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody*, Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreement, Review report, vol. 1, Melbourne, p. 134.

²¹ AAV (2005). The report is careful to indicate that much of the data used is several years old (from the 2001 Census and the 2002 NATSISS survey), and as such will not reflect the impact of more recent program initiatives, and that the statistics provided also may not capture the impact of services and initiatives in Indigenous communities (p. 38).

²² AAV (2005), p. 40.

²³ Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) (2002) *National Report on Schooling in Australia, 2002: Preliminary Paper National Benchmark Results, Writing and Numeracy, Years 3, 5 and 7*, Melbourne, Tables A4, A7.

²⁴ MCEETYA (2002), Tables A6, A9.

Whilst these figures show marked disadvantage, the *Victorian Implementation Review of the Recommendations from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* reports that 'the level of education attained by Indigenous people in Victoria (aged 15 years and over) has improved':

Between 1994 – 2002 the percentage of Indigenous Victorians with a certificate or diploma doubled from 15 per cent to 31 per cent, while post-school qualifications doubled from 16 per cent to 37 per cent). Those with a Bachelor Degree or higher qualification rose from 1 per cent to 6 per cent.²⁵

Key facilitators of Koorie young people's access to higher education are Koorie units. A study conducted in 2005 by the University of Melbourne's Centre for Post-Compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning in partnership with the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI) explored the accessibility of qualifications pathways in VET. The report detailed several findings, including the very important role that Koorie Units played in building literacy and numeracy skills for Koorie students and making TAFE's more accessible:

Given that the majority of Koorie people do not complete secondary education (in this study, only 20% of respondents had completed year 12), an important role of TAFE is to provide general education programs (such as CGEA, Learning Pathways and entry-level Certificates) that build literacy and numeracy skills, and which enable Koorie students to attempt further study. This role is generally undertaken by Koorie Units, which also support students in a variety of ways, depending on individual needs and aspirations.²⁶

The report makes a number of recommendations stemming from their findings around supporting Koorie people's re-engagement in education and training, accessing of mainstream TAFE and accessing to employment.

EMPLOYMENT

The Economic Development Committee's *Inquiry into the Incidence of Youth Unemployment in Victoria* reported high levels of unemployment and disengagement from the labour force among Indigenous young people. Young people who are seeking employment but unable to get it are counted as unemployed. The 'labour market' is made up of both those who are employed and those who are seeking employment. A person is not considered to be a part of the labour force if they are unemployed and not looking for work.

Recognising that ABS Census data was likely to under-report the level of engagement by Koorie young people in the labour force, the committee reported that the 2001 Census found that the unemployment rate for the Indigenous youth labour market force was 26.4% and the participation rate was 52.7%:

This means, that while there is a high proportion of Indigenous youth recognised as unemployed, there is also a significant number of the young Indigenous population that are disengaged from the labour market, and are therefore not included in the unemployment statistics.²⁷

²⁵ Department of Justice (2005), p. 144.

²⁶ Helme, S., Polesel, J. and Nicholas, T. (2005) *Koorie experiences of qualifications pathways in VET: Obstacles or opportunities? Final Report*. University of Melbourne, Melbourne. p.1.

²⁷ Economic Development Committee (EDC) (2002) *Inquiry into the Incidence of Youth Unemployment in Victoria*, Parliament of Victoria, Melbourne, p. 34.

The unemployment rate of Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people was 26.4%, more than double that of overall Victorian young people at 12.8%.²⁸ Breaking it down by gender, the unemployment rate for Koorie young men was 28.5% (compared to the whole Victorian male youth rate of 13.7%) and for Koorie young women was 23.7% (compared to the whole Victorian female youth rate of 11.9%).²⁹

The committee also found that unemployment rates and labour force participation rates were worse in non-metropolitan Victoria.³⁰ The regions recording the highest unemployment rates were Barwon-Western District (34.2%) and Gippsland (33.9%). In metropolitan Melbourne, the highest unemployment rates for Indigenous young people were recorded in the outer-western and north-western suburbs.³¹

Any estimate of the number of unemployed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people needs to take into consideration the unique status of those participating in Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP). Through CDEP, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people voluntarily give up their social security entitlements which are then used to fund local community CDEP schemes through which participants are paid for their involvement in community managed activities. ABS data excludes CDEP participants when calculating unemployment statistics. The National Tertiary Education Union comments:

A potential problem that a number of commentators have observed in analysing raw unemployment data ... is that the impact of CDEP schemes has the potential to artificially lower Indigenous unemployment rates ... Whether CDEP participants should be included when calculating Indigenous unemployment rates is a contentious issue and goes to the definition of what constitutes or defines work.³²

CHILD PROTECTION

In all states and territories, with the exception of Tasmania, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are more likely to be the subject of a child protection substantiation. The rate is highest in Victoria. In 2004-05, the rate of Victorian Indigenous children aged 0-16 who were the subject of a child protection substantiation was 63.0 per 1,000, compared to 5.8 per 1,000 non-Indigenous children.³³

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) reports a growing trend in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are subject to a substantiation since 1998 to 2005 in all states with the exception of Western Australia. Throughout that period, the number was significantly higher in Victoria than in the other states or territories. Increases in the numbers of Indigenous children reported may be in part due to improvements in the quality of data over time, whereby more children are identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.³⁴

²⁸ EDC, p. 35.

²⁹ EDC, p. 35.

³⁰ EDC, p. 35.

³¹ EDC, p. 34.

³² National Tertiary Education Union (2005) *Submission to the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee Inquiry into Indigenous Training and Employment Outcomes*, Melbourne, p. 8.

³³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2006a) *Child Protection Australia 2004-05*, Child Welfare Series no. 38, Cat. no. CWS 26, p. 22.

³⁴ AIHW (2006a), p. 23.

At June 2005, Victoria recorded the highest rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 0-17 year olds on care and protection orders, with 52.8 per 1,000, compared to 4.3 per 1,000 non-Indigenous 0-17 year olds. This rate is substantially higher than in any other state or territory, all of which recorded higher rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children on care and protection orders than other children.³⁵

Also at June 2005, Victoria recorded the highest rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people aged 0-17 in out-of-home care at 40.7 per 1000, compared to 3.4 per 1,000 of non-Indigenous 0-17 year olds.³⁶ Whilst all states and territories have adopted the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle, which requires that a placement for an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child or young person first be sought with an Indigenous carer, in many instances this does not happen. In Victoria, only 59% of Indigenous children are placed in accordance with the principle. Tasmania is the only other jurisdiction with a lower rate at 27%.³⁷

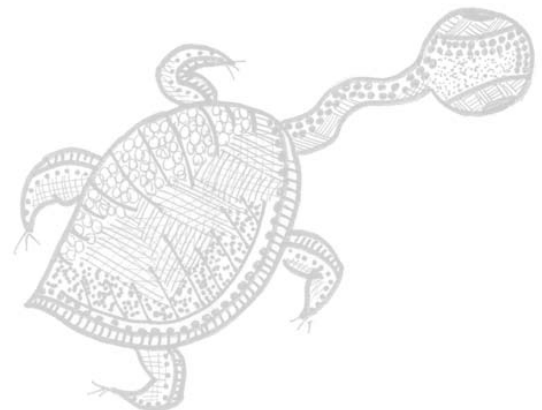
The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Implementation Report paints a picture of the impact of child removal on Indigenous families and communities:

Almost half (46 per cent) of Indigenous people (aged 15 years and older) in Victoria reported in 2002 that they or a relative had been removed from their natural family. Of those aged 35 years and over, 16 per cent said they themselves had been removed.³⁸

The recent introduction of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (Vic.) and the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic.) offer the potential for the high levels of contact of Indigenous children and families with the child protection system to be reduced. The *Children, Youth and Families Act*:

- ◉ Recognises Aboriginal self-determination (s. 12, p. 25)
- ◉ Recognises that it is in the best interests of the Aboriginal child to maintain connection to culture and community (s. 12(a), p. 25)
- ◉ Puts the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle into law, elevating it from being simply a guide or protocol (s. 13, p. 26)
- ◉ States that there must be cultural plans for children in care (s. 14, p. 27)
- ◉ Allows the Secretary of the Department to delegate court order powers to an Aboriginal agency (s. 18, p. 32).

The effectiveness of these legislative changes will be partly dependent on the level of resourcing dedicated to implementing them, and dedicated to Aboriginal organisations to provide support to families and to carry out the responsibilities set out in the Act.



³⁵ AIHW (2006a), p. 39.

³⁶ AIHW (2006a), p. 51.

³⁷ AIHW (2006a), p. 53.

³⁸ Department of Justice (2005), p. 206.

JUVENILE JUSTICE

Indigenous people of all ages are dramatically over-represented in the justice system on both a national and a state/territory basis. In 2002-03 the rate of imprisonment of Indigenous Victorian adults was 1108.2 per 100,000, compared to 95.6 for the broader community.³⁹

Whilst Victoria boasts the lowest rate of young people under juvenile justice supervision of any state or territory,⁴⁰ Koorie young people are still vastly over-represented. The rate of Indigenous young people under supervision in Victoria in 2003-04 was 9.4% for males and 11.8% for females.⁴¹

The Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service reports:

Youth offender statistics do not accurately reflect the actual levels of offending. Factors such as visibility and policing patterns influence who is detected and how they are dealt with. Hence some caution is necessary when interpreting figures.⁴²

On a national basis, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people experienced their first juvenile justice supervision at an earlier age than non-Indigenous young people. The AIHW reports:

Of those aged 10,11 or 12 years at their first ever juvenile justice supervision 56-64% were Indigenous compared with 8% of those whose first supervision occurred at age 18 or older. Indeed, 53% of Indigenous young people were aged 14 years or less during their initial supervision compared with 28% of non-Indigenous young people.⁴³

Other national features of the experiences of Indigenous young people under juvenile justice supervision reported by the AIHW are:

- A greater proportion of females than is the case for non-Indigenous young people
- A higher likelihood to complete a high number of short supervision orders than non-Indigenous young people
- A higher likelihood to experience episodes of detention and a higher rate of episodes of community based supervision than non-Indigenous young people
- A lower likelihood to exit episodes of remand by being released on bail than non-Indigenous young people.⁴⁴

The Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service reports that Indigenous young people are less likely to be cautioned by police than non-Indigenous young people. It notes that 'increase in the total number of people being cautioned eventually has an effect on the number of people proceeding through the criminal justice system'.⁴⁵ The service also reports a number of factors that need to be considered in understanding why Indigenous young people are less likely to be cautioned and offers a range of recommendations to improve this situation.

³⁹ Department of Justice (2005), p. 206.

⁴⁰ AIHW (2006b) Juvenile Justice in Australia 2000-01 to 2003-04, Cat. no. JUV 1, Canberra, Table 3.4, p. 27.

⁴¹ AIHW (2006b), p.105.

⁴² Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service (VALS) (2003) Police Cautioning of Indigenous Juvenile Offenders in Victoria, Melbourne, p. 2.

⁴³ AIHW (2006b), p. 37.

⁴⁴ AIHW (2006b), p. 68.

⁴⁵ VALS (2003), p. 3.

The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody report states:

the underlying issues of racism, education, employment and economic status, housing, families and children, health and well-being, alcohol and other substances, community capacity, land needs and cultural survival, and reconciliation all continue to negatively contribute to Indigenous contact with the juvenile and criminal justice systems.⁴⁶

HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

There are difficulties in recording statistics of levels of homelessness, and particularly levels of homelessness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The numbers identified in the Census data as experiencing homelessness are likely to be an undercount due to difficulties in locating people without stable accommodation. Whilst Census data is improving in its capacity to record the details of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the reliance on participation and identification as Indigenous restricts the accuracy of this information. The Council to Homeless Persons notes:

Whilst there has been some research conducted and data collected on Indigenous people experiencing homelessness generally, to date there has been very little research on Indigenous young people and their experiences of homelessness. Further research needs to be undertaken in this area, particularly in relation to barriers for Indigenous young people to access SAAP services.⁴⁷

The AIHW draws on research by Chamberlain and MacKenzie which finds that in 2001 the 'national rate of Indigenous homelessness was 176 per 10,000, but the rate varied significantly across jurisdictions'. In Victoria, the rate of Indigenous people recorded as homeless on Census night in 2001 was 217 per 10,000, compared to 42 per 10,000 non-Indigenous people. Not only is this markedly higher than the national average, but 'Victoria had the largest difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous rates, with the rate of Indigenous homelessness more than five times the rate for non-Indigenous people'.⁴⁸

Other data that can be used to measure levels of homelessness is that recorded by the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP), a national program that provides a range of homelessness assistance services. Again, these figures show a disproportionately high level of homelessness within the Victorian Indigenous community, making up 5% of SAAP clients in 2003-04, but only 0.5% of the general population.⁴⁹

At the time of the 2001 Census, 35% of those recorded as homeless in Victoria were aged 12-25.⁵⁰ Young people typically face discrimination in accessing private rental arrangements and have very low levels of access to public housing,⁵¹ and issues of access are compounded for Indigenous young people. Whilst on a state and territory comparison, the proportion of home owners amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was highest in Victoria at 36%,⁵² across the board there are lower levels of home ownership in the Koorie community, and Koorie people are more likely to face discrimination in accessing the private rental market.

⁴⁶ Department of Justice (2005), p. 5.

⁴⁷ Council to Homeless Persons (2005) *Contextualising Young People: Implications for Young People Experiencing Homelessness*, Strategic Policy Background Paper, Melbourne, p. 5, <http://www.chp.org.au/public_library/items/2005/03/00052-upload-00001.doc>, retrieved 29 May 2006.

⁴⁸ AIHW & ABS (2005) *The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 2005*, AIHW Cat. no. IHW14, ABS Cat. no. 4704.0, Canberra, p. 47.

⁴⁹ AIHW & ABS (2005), p. 48.

⁵⁰ Chamberlain, C. and MacKenzie, D. (2004) *Counting the Homeless 2001: Victoria*, Swinburne University and RMIT University, Melbourne, p. 25.

⁵¹ Council to Homeless Persons (2005).

⁵² AIHW & ABS (2005), p. 29.

The *Victorian Indigenous Homelessness Study* (2001) prepared by RMIT University for the Aboriginal Housing Board of Victoria reported 'a high level of agreement that racism and discrimination are major factors in the lack of access by Aboriginal people to housing in the private rental market'.⁵³ It also stated that, within this context, an 'overarching concern of Indigenous communities and organisations is the inaccessibility of housing opportunities for young Indigenous people'.⁵⁴

The study recognised the central role that extended family and personal networks play as a vital support for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, providing some security to those who may need accommodation. It did, however, express 'great concern that the State government should take responsibility in dealing with the socio-economic problems faced by disadvantaged communities', and noted that the 'generosity of the extended family cannot cope with the immensity of Aboriginal homelessness'.⁵⁵

The RMIT study highlighted the need for a holistic and culturally sensitive approach in providing an adequate government and service support response to the needs of Koorie young people experiencing homelessness:

Dealing with housing, employment and health in separate policy channels makes it a difficult and cumbersome task for homeless Indigenous young people to access services and to commit to them. Rigid and segmented funding specifications make it impossible to implement holistic programs to sufficiently address the emotional, social, physical and psychological needs of young people.⁵⁶

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The poor health and wellbeing status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria compared to the non-Indigenous population is exemplified by the difference in life expectancy. In 2002, the average life expectancy of Victorian Indigenous males was 60.0 years (compared to 78.2 for non-Indigenous males) and of Victorian Indigenous females was 65.1 years (compared to 83.1 for non-Indigenous females).⁵⁷

Given this extreme difference in life expectancy, it is of great concern that there are gaps in information around the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at both a national and a Victorian level. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody complained of the lack of information available:

In summarising a variety of health data from different sources, this report, and five others (an overview for each State) prepared for the regional Commissioners drew attention not only to the poor level of health experiences by Aboriginal people, but also to the relative paucity of Aboriginal health statistics. I find it unfortunate that data for any key health indicator for Aboriginal people are not available at a national level, and many are not even available at State and Territory level.⁵⁸

⁵³ Berry, M., MacKenzie, D., Briskman, L. and Ngwenya, T. (2001) *Victorian Indigenous Homelessness Study: Final Report*, Aboriginal Housing Board of Victoria, Melbourne, p. 41.

⁵⁴ Berry et al. (2001), p. 53.

⁵⁵ Berry et al. (2001), p. 54.

⁵⁶ Berry et al. (2001), p. 56.

⁵⁷ AAV (2005), p. 40.

⁵⁸ Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991), vol. 3, 23.1.2.

Since the commission reported its findings in 1991, further information has been collected through reports such as those referred to earlier, but large gaps still remain. The AIHW describes the difficulties in capturing health information:

Poor population estimates, the under-identification of Indigenous people in most routine data collections, changes in the extent to which Indigenous people self-identify and changes in coverage hamper efforts to accurately capture the health status of Indigenous Australians over time, or to compare them with other populations.⁵⁹

In this section of the report, we have presented a snapshot of some basic health and wellbeing indicators. A national perspective has been provided on some issues and should be differentiated from the Victoria specific information. It should be noted that the areas already explored, such as education, employment, child protection, juvenile justice and housing and homelessness, are also core factors in influencing the health and wellbeing of young people.

The AIHW comments:

although children and young people also suffer from the disadvantages that affect the whole Indigenous community, problems and issues that are particularly pertinent to young people tend to affect Indigenous young people disproportionately.⁶⁰

A key indicator of health and wellbeing is the birth weight of babies, with low weight being linked to a greater risk of poor health and death of the child, and potentially to other factors impacting on the health of the mother such as nutritional status, smoking and illness during pregnancy.⁶¹ In Victoria, from 2000 to 2002, the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies born at a low birth weight was 12%, compared to 5.8% of non-Indigenous babies. This was higher than the rates recorded in the Northern Territory, Queensland and New South Wales.⁶²

A 1999 study conducted by the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service on young people's smoking habits found that, of those surveyed, 30% of young men under 16 and 28.5% of young women under 16 were current smokers. Of young people over 16, 68.5% of young men and 58.5% of young women were current smokers.⁶³

Research from the AIHW tells us that the rate of smoking for young people generally at approximately the same time was much lower. Whilst the results of the surveys are not directly comparable, we are given some insight into the prevalence of smoking among Indigenous young people compared to the national average. In 1998, 9.5% of young men aged 14-17 were recorded as daily smokers. More young women of the same age group smoked daily, at 10.6%. Of young people aged 18 and over, 25.3% of young men smoked daily, as did 20.2% of young women. Roughly comparing the older age brackets of each survey, in the late 1990s both Koorie young men and women smoked at a rate around three times the national average.

On a national level, mortality rates are much higher for Indigenous young people. For the years 1999-2001, the AIHW reports that the difference between mortality rates was most dramatic in the 15-17 age range, 'where Indigenous males died at rates 3 times those of other Australian males and Indigenous females at rates almost 5 times those of other Australian females'.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ AIHW (2003) *Australia's Young People: Their Health and Wellbeing*, Cat. no. PHE 50, Canberra, p. 321.

⁶⁰ AIHW (2003).

⁶¹ AIHW & ABS (2005), p. 79.

⁶² AIHW & ABS (2005), Figure 6.6.

⁶³ VAHS (1999), *Cigarette Smoking: Study of Young People's Health and Well-being*, Melbourne, p. 7.

⁶⁴ AIHW (2003), p. 332.

The level of deaths by suicide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are starkly higher than for non-Indigenous young people. Data from Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory places the rate per 100,000 young Indigenous people whose cause of death was suicide at four times the rate for non-Indigenous young people.⁶⁵ The *Victorian Indigenous Homelessness Study* reminds us that it is essential to understand the nature of the compounded disadvantage experienced by many Indigenous young people and the potentially very serious impact of this on their mental health and wellbeing:

Taking into account the already exacerbated socially and politically disadvantaged position within which Aboriginal young people function, as well as factors that undermine their Indigenous cultural and spiritual roots, it seems tragically inevitable that suicide or attempting suicide is an option.⁶⁶

In 2005, the Victorian Implementation Review of the Recommendations from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody reported a very strong community concern about two particular health issues, alcohol and drugs use and mental illness, with a major concern about the availability of mental health services.⁶⁷

STRENGTHS AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Whilst the data above highlights some elements of the stark disadvantage that Koorie people face in Victoria, research conducted by the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service in 2000 highlighted the positive elements in Koorie young people's lives. *The Strengths of Young Kooris* report stemmed from the Young People's Study of Health and Well-being carried out by the Health Service from January 1996 to January 1999. Information was collected from focus groups, surveys and peer interviews with Koorie young people and other community members, and it reported seven key strengths described by participants:

- ◉ Strong family links, including extended family
- ◉ Friends
- ◉ Connection with the Koorie community and culture
- ◉ Sense of identity
- ◉ Aspirations
- ◉ Responsibility
- ◉ Sport and creative activities.⁶⁸

The report described the central importance of family to Koorie young people:

They talked about the importance of their parents, their brothers, sisters, and cousins, their aunties and uncles, nieces and nephews, and grandparents. They spoke of being close to family members of different ages and how they valued being part of an extended family. Nearly 75% saw, or talked with, their extended family daily or at least weekly.⁶⁹

The report described the protective function of family, highlighting that the 'company of cousins was important in forming a proud Aboriginal identity and as a protection against racial discrimination'.⁷⁰ The report also noted the importance of aunts and uncles who 'are often seen as having much in common with the young person and to have shared

⁶⁵ AIHW (2003), p. 335.

⁶⁶ Berry et al. (2001), p. 56.

⁶⁷ Department of Justice (2005), pp. 235-6.

⁶⁸ VAHS (2000), p. 6.

⁶⁹ VAHS (2000), p. 7.

⁷⁰ VAHS (2000), p. 10.

similar experiences', describing them as 'a bridge across the generations'.⁷¹ It drew an interesting comparison between the experiences of Koorie and non-Koorie young people when it comes to cross-generational relationships within family and community networks: 'spending most time with people of the same age is a characteristic of adolescence in Western society. Aboriginal young people tend to spend time with a wider range of age groups'.⁷² The report acknowledged the special importance of the cross-generational relationship between Elders and young people: 'Respect for Elders, and listening to the stories of Elders, is an important source of strength and learning for young Kooris'.⁷³

Relationships with family were described as one of several key elements that support a person's wellbeing. The young people in the survey reported that 'they are stronger when they know who their family is, who their community is, and where their country is'.⁷⁴ The report also suggested that older people in the community recognised a growing sense of pride in their identity and investment in culture from young people.⁷⁵

Friends were named as a strong support for Koorie young people, offering someone to talk to if they had a problem and helping them feel supported at school.⁷⁶ VIYAC members have reported that school can be an isolating experience for Aboriginal young people if they are the only Aboriginal students at the school. Students sometimes report being expected to 'have all the answers' on Aboriginal history, culture or politics if they are being discussed, placing pressure on them to be 'experts' on their own culture. Others typically report experiencing racism in the school setting and that the presence of other Aboriginal students and friends can help them deal with this experience.

The report commented that 'young people also expressed a feeling of belonging and security through being attached to the community'.⁷⁷ In terms of accessing services and employment opportunities, community organisations were seen as a valuable resource: 'jobs available through community organisations are an important source of employment, work experience, skills development and training for young Kooris'.⁷⁸

However, whilst many young people felt strongly attached to the community, some felt dislocated from their culture because some cultural knowledge had been lost or was not necessarily available to them. Of those who participated in the survey, 80% reported that they had Koorie spiritual beliefs, and over half said these beliefs were very important to them.⁷⁹

Young people generally expressed having a strong sense of Koorie identity and having pride in that identity, with many feeling they were able to hold on to their Aboriginal identity when working in the mainstream community. Almost all participants in the survey were able to identify at least one thing that they were really good at, and a high level reported that they generally liked themselves.⁸⁰

The report highlighted the participants' educational aspirations, with 78% of those who were at school or TAFE rating themselves as better than average students.⁸¹ Having strong role models in the community was reported as being important in inspiring young Koories to achieve, with particular reference to sports stars.⁸² Sport is a popular activity amongst Koorie young people, and 'an important strength because it benefits physical, social and emotional health'.⁸³

⁷¹ VAHS (2000), p. 12.

⁷² VAHS (2000), p. 14.

⁷³ VAHS (2000), p. 19.

⁷⁴ VAHS (2000), p. 16.

⁷⁵ VAHS (2000), p. 23.

⁷⁶ VAHS (2000), p. 15.

⁷⁷ VAHS (2000), p. 17.

⁷⁸ VAHS (2000), p. 20.

⁷⁹ VAHS (2000), p. 18.

⁸⁰ VAHS (2000), pp. 23-6.

⁸¹ VAHS (2000), p. 27.

⁸² VAHS (2000), p. 28.

⁸³ VAHS (2000), p. 32.

Having responsibilities within the community was viewed as a protective factor that helped young Koories to develop skills and knowledge: 'Koori young people do tend to grow up more quickly than non-Aboriginal kids, and are given responsibility at an earlier age'.⁸⁴ Taking part in a creative activity such as dance, painting, screen printing or playing music was also highly popular, with 50% of those surveyed saying they would do a creative activity in their free time.⁸⁵

The Health Service reported that these strengths of Koorie young people could 'provide a direction to help people who are struggling with problems and loss' and 'a direction for further development of responses, opportunities and programs that will protect young people'.⁸⁶



⁸⁴ VAHS (2000), p. 31.

⁸⁵ VAHS (2000), p. 34.

⁸⁶ VAHS (2000), p. 36.

CONCLUSION

This report has sought to bring together the voices of some of the members of the Victorian Indigenous Youth Advisory Council alongside a summary of some of the available research and information about Koorie young people's health and wellbeing.

Section 2 looks at the high level of disadvantage and discrimination that impacts profoundly on Koorie young people's health and wellbeing, opportunities, choices and futures. As Section 1 of this report and the findings from the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service report highlight, this disadvantage and discrimination sits alongside strong sources of resilience and strength in many Koorie young people's lives.

Whilst Section 2 of this report provides a brief snapshot of some of the information available, it also shows very large gaps in information. More investment needs to be placed in collecting the information and knowledge, not only stemming from government or service reports, research and investigations, but most importantly from the knowledge of Koorie communities and Koorie young people themselves.

Without serious investment in improving outcomes for Koorie young people, these issues will only compound in the future. We are reminded that given that the age structure of the Koorie population is dominated by a very high number of children and young people, there are profound implications for the future of Koorie communities if the needs of children and young people are not met.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The VIYAC members who were interviewed offered some directions forward to counter some of the systemic disadvantage and discrimination that Indigenous young people face. Recommendations 1 – 4 made below reflect themes that came through the interviews from Section 1 of this report. Recommendation 5 stems from the research summary presented in Section 2 of the report.

YACVic and VIYAC are aware that there are many more actions that could be taken by governments and community organisations in response to the issues raised in this report and hope that the State Government make increased efforts to work with Indigenous community members, community organisations, Elders and young people to resolve them.

Theme 1: Identity

A key theme stemming from the VIYAC interviews is the need to acknowledge that adolescence and early adulthood is a key time for a person to develop and strengthen their sense of self and identity. At this time, young people also make decisions and are exposed to experiences that can profoundly impact on their future. VIYAC members highlighted the central importance of Indigenous young people being supported to develop a strong and healthy sense of pride in their identity as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

Recommendation 1:

That the State Government work with the Indigenous communities to develop ways to support Indigenous young people's access to cultural identity programs that aim to strengthen Indigenous young people's sense of pride in and connection to their communities and culture.

Theme 2: Cultural expression and learning

VIYAC members also clearly expressed the central importance of culture to Aboriginal young people's sense of self, wellbeing and sense of connection to community. Several VIYAC members suggested that more opportunities for cultural expression and learning could be made through the school curriculum or other avenues.

Recommendation 2:

That the State Government consider the potential to further invest in Indigenous young people's cultural expression and learning by creating more opportunities for Indigenous young people to access cultural expression programs in a variety of settings including school and higher education settings, juvenile justice settings, community service settings and cooperatives and while in State Care. Opportunities to participate should be available to all Indigenous young people in Victoria.

Theme 3: Racism and cultural awareness

VIYAC members described the prevalence and impact of racism that Aboriginal young people have to face and the importance of improving cultural awareness amongst the broader community. This highlighted the need for strategies to foster understanding and directly tackle racism and to ensure that the truth about Aboriginal history is taught in schools. Some VIYAC members explained that they had developed confidence and strategies to deal with racism as they grew older, and highlighted the need to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in their early adolescence be supported to be resilient and self confident.

Recommendation 3:

That the Victorian Government take a leadership role in combating racism and stereotypes in Victoria. Strategies to achieve this can be developed in partnership with Indigenous communities, including young people. That the Victorian Government ensure that schools have all the resources necessary to tackle racism in the school setting and to ensure that Aboriginal cultural heritage and Australian history are taught in ways that are culturally sensitive and informed within their schools.

Theme 4: Support for families

The central importance that family has in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as a source of support, strength, cultural heritage and strong identity. This highlights the importance of supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in order to support young people.

Recommendation 4:

That the Victorian Government work with the Indigenous community to develop strategies to increase resources and support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in Victoria, as the central source of support for young people.

Theme 5: Research with Indigenous young people

Section 2 of this report highlighted gaps in research and widely available information around Koorie young people's experiences, aspirations and needs.

Recommendation 5:

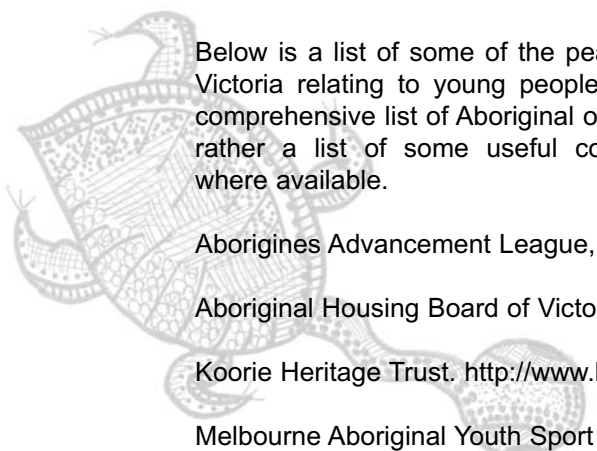
YACVic calls on researchers, academics and governments to seek partnerships with Indigenous young people, Elders and their communities to pursue a greater understanding of Indigenous young people's experiences, aspirations and needs within a culturally sensitive and appropriate framework. Such research needs to be conducted with and not on Indigenous young people and their communities.

A FINAL SPECIAL THANK YOU

The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria would like to extend a special thank you to all members of the Victorian Indigenous Youth Advisory Council for their various contributions to this report. Particular thanks needs to be extended to the following members:

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- ◉ Joleen Ryan
- ◉ Keira Martin
- ◉ Emily Fien
- ◉ Jamie Lee McConnachie.

APPENDIX 1



Below is a list of some of the peaks and community Aboriginal Organisations in Victoria relating to young people or issues raised in this report. This is not a comprehensive list of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander organisations in Victoria, rather a list of some useful contacts. Web addresses have been provided where available.

Aborigines Advancement League, Victoria.

Aboriginal Housing Board of Victoria. <http://ahbv.org.au/welcome.htm>

Koorie Heritage Trust. <http://www.koorieheritagetrust.com>

Melbourne Aboriginal Youth Sport and Recreation Co-op Ltd.

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