

NGAGA-DJI

(HEAR ME)

young voices creating
change for justice





Logo Narrative

The pathway flows through different communities, each having their own challenges, their own strengths and their own journey. However, all striving for the same things; connection to culture, community and freedom.

The young and vulnerable members of our community are depicted as the inside circles. The outer circles depict the rest of the community protecting, advocating and fighting for freedom, justice and wellbeing.

- Dixon Patten (Yorta Yorta and Gunnai)

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For further details, other accessible formats and to contact us, visit www.ngaga-djiproject.org.au



FOREWORD - KOORIE YOUTH COUNCIL



Ngaga-dji (hear me) captures the voices and experiences of Aboriginal children in Victoria's youth justice system. This is the first time that these children will have their voices heard, giving Victoria the chance to understand how policy choices affect their lives and the future of our communities.

These children's experiences are the missing piece of the youth justice conversation, they hold the key to justice solutions that work. By listening, valuing and acting on Ngaga-dji, the Victorian

Government and opposition can create a system that supports Aboriginal children to thrive in their communities.

I remember speaking with every single child and young person who contributed to this report. I remember the stories, the reflections and the visions for systems that truly support our children. These yarns are the driving force for this project and will forever hold a place in my heart.

An Uncle of mine says "to truly listen we must remember to also hear." Our current systems are not truly listening to Aboriginal children and Ngaga-dji can change that. It is time we hear these voices and create an equitable future for Aboriginal children.

The name 'Ngaga-dji' translates to 'hear me'. Drawn from Woiwurrung language of the Wurundjeri people, this project is based in cultural values of listening, collaboration and care. Wurundjeri are a part of the broader Kulin nation, whose lore is drawn from Bunjil, the creator spirit. Bunjil's lore states that those who walk on this land must care for the Country and waterways as well as care for the children and young people. Bunjil's lore keeps this land and its people strong, as it has for over 60,000 years.

The Victorian Government and opposition are not adhering to Bunjil's lore for children in youth justice. Each yarn with these children demonstrated how choices by those in power have created systems and services that turn our children away, inflict harm and push them into the quicksand of the justice system.

These yarns also showed us the power and care of culturally-based community services that have changed children's pathways and in many cases, saved their lives. Ngaga-dji presents an opportunity for decision-makers to support community-designed and led supports that work for Aboriginal children. Victoria is leading the country by supporting community-designed and led out-of-home care programs, it is time we do the same in youth justice.

I want to acknowledge the Aboriginal Justice Forum and its members both past and present for giving our communities a voice in justice. In particular, I thank the leadership of the Aboriginal Justice Caucus for ensuring Aboriginal families and communities are the driving force addressing the over-representation of our people, particularly children.

It is my honour to introduce this important and unique report. I thank everyone who supported this project, communities, staff, government departments and the children and young people who put their trust in us to amplify their stories for change.

I call on everyone reading this report to take action, share our stories, share our solutions and share our vision. Let's walk together with the leadership of Aboriginal communities to break down discrimination and injustice to ensure that our children grow up happy, healthy and strong in their culture and communities.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Indi Clarke'. The signature is fluid and cursive.

Indi Clarke
**Executive Officer,
Koorie Youth Council**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The Koorie Youth Council (KYC) is based on the lands of the Kulin Nation in Naarm (Melbourne). KYC gives our deepest respect to people of the Kulin Nation, in particular, to all Elders past, present and emerging for their knowledge, wisdom and legacies that continue to drive us as we walk a path toward positive social change.

We also acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and pay respect to the knowledge, cultures and continued history of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations.

We respectfully acknowledge and thank the custodians and communities across Victoria who supported Ngaga-dji. They are continuing the fight for justice by supporting KYC to yarn with children and young people on their land.

ABOUT THE KOORIE YOUTH COUNCIL

The Koorie Youth Council (KYC) is the representative body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in Victoria. Led by an Executive of 15 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and our state-wide members, KYC values the diversity and strength of young people as decision-makers. KYC advocates to government and community to advance the rights and representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. By hosting events like the annual Koorie Youth Summit, KYC brings Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people together to amplify their voices for social change.

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NGAGA-DJI (HEAR ME) IS A CALL TO ACTION

The stories you are about to read are the voices of Aboriginal children around Victoria.

The stories they share with you are from the heart, they are about love, trauma, strength, discrimination and healing. They are about justice and equality. Children are telling their stories because we need a state where Aboriginal children can thrive in their culture and communities. These children are telling their stories because they trust us to listen and take action.

Following the stories, Ngaga-dji outlines our vision for a Victoria that enables Aboriginal children to thrive. Based on the voices of children from around the state, as well as expert knowledge, Ngaga-dji is our hope to create better lives for Aboriginal children and their communities. We can ensure the pain expressed in these stories is not felt by another generation of our community.

This change won't happen without you. We need everyone in communities, our allies, the social services sector, government and opposition to stand together for real justice for our children, to stand for treating children as children.

We invite you to join us in sharing our stories and vision far and wide with Victoria leading the change we need to see across the country.¹ This report is just the beginning.

By continuing the work of Ngaga-dji we are acting on the voices of children who are calling for change.

YARNING JUSTICE. GATHERING STORIES

Ngaga-dji is based on listening, valuing and acting on the voices of children in our communities. Born out of the Aboriginal Justice Agreement,ⁱⁱ Ngaga-dji tells the stories of children that society silences with incarceration and stigma.

Over six months, KYC engaged with four community sites (including rural, regional and metro) and two youth justice custodial centres to meet 42 children and young people who were currently or previously under youth justice supervision.

Participants represented a range of ages, from among the youngest to the oldest children in the system. We also spoke to some over-18 participants who reflected on their time as children in youth justice.

Participants had experienced a range of contact with the justice system, including:

- police cautioning,
- police custody,
- courts (mainstream and Children's Koori Court),
- diversion,
- good behaviour bond,
- incarceration (youth justice custody) on remand and sentenced,
- community-based order.

Engagement took the form of group yarning circles and individual interviews. These yarns enabled participants to lead conversations to ensure their safety and confidentiality.

Discussions spanned Aboriginal children's lives in community before coming into contact with the youth justice system, their experiences in the system and (where applicable) return to community. This methodology enabled a deep understanding of the children and young people's lives, personal experiences and communities that is reflected in the stories and advocacy.

The engagement plan for this project was approved by the Department of Health and Human Services Human Research Ethics Committee, reference number: 19/16.

A note on our stories

The following stories have been de-identified to ensure children's privacy and safety. The process of de-identification involved creating composite accounts that reflect the real lives of many Aboriginal children. All experiences and events included in the stories are real with details and names changed for confidentiality. Stories have been reviewed by a focus group of young people with lived experience of the youth justice system.

Content warning: These stories contain distressing content, including family violence, sexual abuse, physical violence, mental illness, self-harm, suicide and coarse language.



ENDORSEMENT - ABORIGINAL JUSTICE CAUCUS

The Aboriginal Justice Caucus would like to begin by thanking the Koorie Youth Council for their work on Ngaga-dji. Young people are our future and it makes us proud to see the work that the Koorie Youth Council are doing for culture and community. We would also especially like to thank the young people who were brave enough to share their stories.

To young people: it is clear that the system is not working for you, but that connection to culture and family can help you heal.

We need to change the system so that young people are listened to and supported to connect to their culture, and those interventions need to happen a lot earlier in young people's lives. Culture brings healing that can prevent the hurt and loneliness that causes young people to harm themselves and others. Adequate support services, like Balit Ngalu and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth justice services, can prevent the occurrence of petty crime that exposes people to the justice system too early. For this reason, the Aboriginal Justice Caucus endorses Ngaga-dji and agrees to incorporate the principles and solutions into their planning.

We endorse the principles of:

- Self-determination
- Youth Participation
- Culture, Family, Elders and Communities

We also endorse the solutions:

- Give children services that work
- Keep children safe and strong in their culture, families and communities
- Community designed and led youth support solutions
- Create just and equitable systems

The Aboriginal Justice Caucus implore that our partners on the Aboriginal Justice Agreement take on board the asks from this report.

Once again thank you to the Koorie Youth Council, all the young people and workers that have contributed to this important piece of work.



Marion Hansen
Chairperson
Aboriginal Justice Caucus



ENDORSEMENT - COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

In recent years, the state of Victoria has engaged in vigorous debate about the youth justice system and the children and young people who get caught in that system. Narratives about youth crime and how we should respond have dominated political, media and community conversations. There are also frequent headlines about the over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people involved in youth justice. Yet until now, the voices of Aboriginal children and young people have been missing from these discussions. Ngaga-dji brings these voices to the fore and shares their stories with us.

Sadly, the stories of trauma told in this report are not unfamiliar to us at the Commission for Children and Young People. All too often we hear of children like Mirrim Nga-ango who become involved in the youth justice system after years of experiencing abuse and neglect. We hear of children, like Binak, who are crying out for connection. And we hear of how involvement in a punitive or poorly functioning justice system can entrench trauma and disadvantage, rather than providing healing and rehabilitation.

However, as Ngaga-dji shows, there is hope. Aboriginal children and young people told the Koorie Youth Council that all they want is to feel safe and loved. They want to be helped when things go wrong for them, and they know what will help others like them because they have been in the same situations. This is why we must not just hear the voices of Aboriginal young people, we must also act on their suggestions for change.

Every child can heal, and the importance of culture and connection to community for Aboriginal children and young people cannot be underestimated. Imagine if, as Ngaga-dji calls for, Aboriginal community organisations were sustainably resourced to meet children's needs before they became involved in the justice system.

Imagine if the minimum age of criminal responsibility were raised and the system responded to younger children with difficult behaviours without criminalising them and, in too many cases, further entrenching them in a life of offending. We believe that this would mean that Victoria would not only save money, it would save lives and bring about a safer community for everyone.

The Commission will soon be undertaking a major taskforce to review the experiences and life path of each Aboriginal child in the youth justice system, and as part of that taskforce we are committed to hearing directly from children and young people in the system.

In this way we hope to build on this landmark work by Koorie Youth Council, further strengthening the impetus for reform. We take this opportunity to thank the Koorie Youth Council for this important project and, as always, for making sure the voices of Aboriginal children and young people are heard.



Liana Buchanan
**Principal Commissioner
for Children and Young People**



Justin Mohamed
**Commissioner for Aboriginal
Children and Young People**



BINAK

Binak (pronounced Binuk) means basket in Woiwurrung. This name represents Binak's hard journey in life that is now woven together by culture.

In the old house Nan and me were a team. I did all the cooking and looked after the little ones and Nan did the cleaning and everything else. Our house was full of kids, cousins and noise. Nan welcomed everyone in that little house 'cos everyone needs a home and a family. Nan never had that so she tried to make it there, for anyone who needed it.

Lots of our family needed a place to stay, and there are not many safe places to go 'round here. When my uncle moved away for work we ended up with four more little cousins here. They nagged and screamed and got up in the night but I loved looking after them, I was good at it. Sometimes they looked at me like I was their unbreakable superhero. Other times I felt heavy with all the jobs, like I was dragging my body around to do cooking, shopping, bath-time, then more cooking, shopping, bath-time. Weed and booze made me feel light, like someone lifting a lead backpack off my shoulders.

“IT DIDN'T MATTER WHAT I SCREAMED AT THEM. THEY WANTED TO TELL MY STORY FOR ME. DECIDE FOR ME. KNOW WHAT WAS BEST FOR ME.”

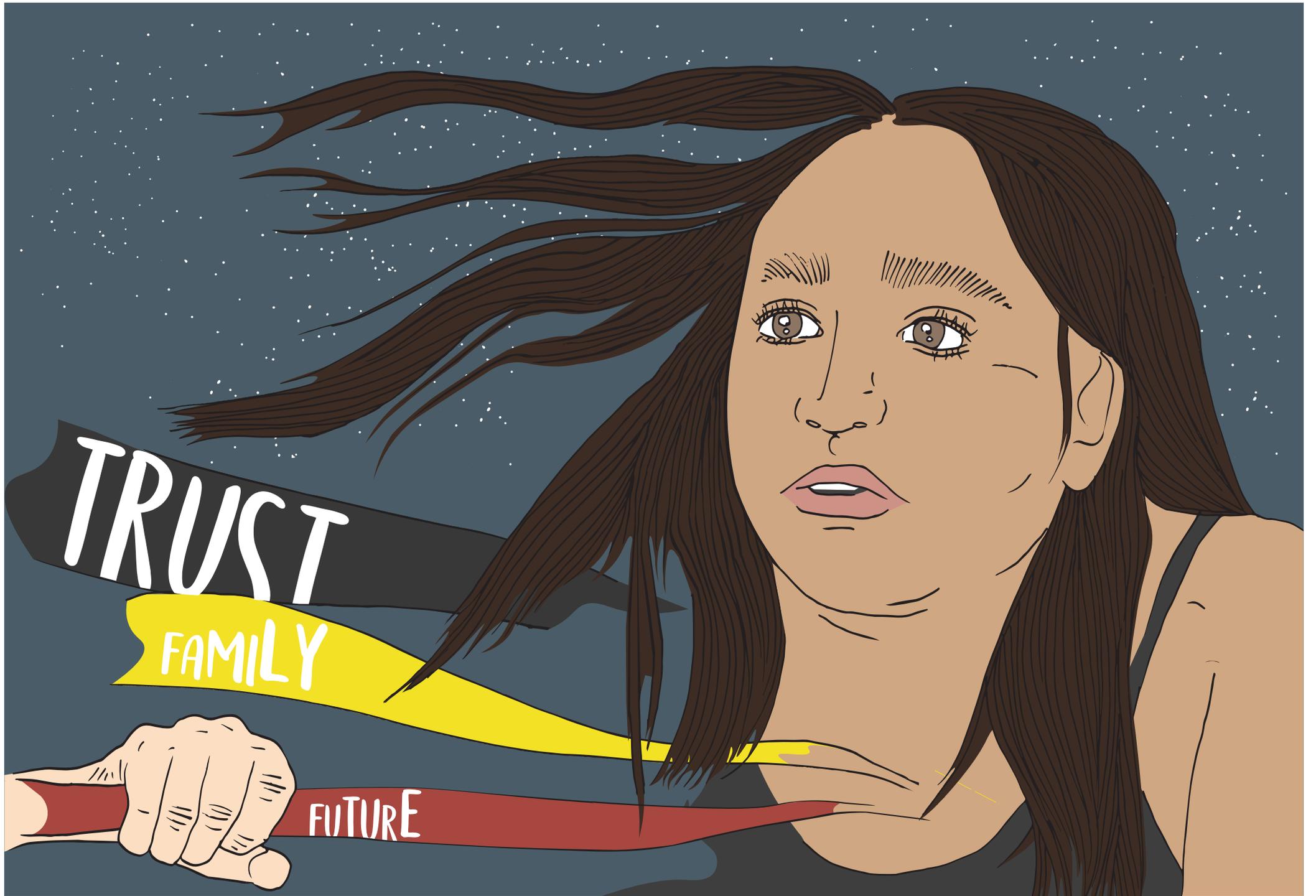
I started getting to school late, never had time for homework, I'd nap during maths and get sent home for fighting at lunch. I got behind at school and no one cared, they just thought I wasn't trying, a lazy, bludger blackfulla. No one expected me to finish school anyway, so I stopped caring and stayed home helping Nan where I was wanted.

When DHHS came I didn't really understand their words. They said stuff about Nan drinking, me stopping school, too many people in our house. It didn't matter what I screamed at them, they wanted to tell my story for me, decide for me, know what was best for me. That's easier than listening, isn't it? They said I'd be better off away from family.



SOMETIMES THEY LOOKED AT ME LIKE I WAS THEIR UNBREAKABLE SUPERHERO.





TRUST

FAMILY

FUTURE

They got it backwards, family was the one thing holding me together. Being taken from Nan and seeing the little ones separated was like watching bits of me being broken off and scattered across town.

Resi is not a home. It's a house where they take all the kids doing bad shit and the kids who've had bad shit done to them and stick 'em together like fire with fire. I was put with kids I was trying to get away from, we'd smoked and stolen some stuff from Woolies together and I knew nothing good would come from hanging with them. They were always trying to get at me or get with me. Now I was stuck with them in this house and at school, bringing me down.

Cops were always at that resi unit, called around 'cos someone smashed a cup, stole another kid's phone or punched a wall. They became a joke, the 'big guns' called around when workers couldn't deal with something. Workers were scared of us bad kids.

Cops caught us taking some chips from Woolies and I got a good behaviour bond that said I couldn't see the kids I offended with - the kids I lived with! My child protection order said that I couldn't see Nan, so wherever I was, sneaking away to Nan's or sitting in resi, I was doing something wrong. I was a bad kid. I tried just sticking to myself, hanging out alone, shutting out the other kids. Some days I hardly spoke to anyone. I was so lonely I thought "they may as well lock me up." That's the only future for kids like me.

In resi I was no one's superhero, I became another lost kid in care. I had to squash and twist and stretch myself to be what everyone wanted: the good girl, the tough one, the bad girl, the dumb girl, the lost cause. There was no one to trust and no one who hung around long enough to get me. I watched as more bits of me were broken off and tossed away.

“BEING TAKEN FROM NAN AND SEEING THE LITTLE ONES SEPARATED WAS LIKE WATCHING BITS OF ME BEING BROKEN OFF AND SCATTERED ACROSS TOWN.”

I felt a constant pull to be with Nan and the others. I'd sit in front of the TV at the resi unit thinking about them so much that I wouldn't even know what show was on. I closed my eyes and remembered Nan's hugs, singing with the young ones, rocking the bubs as they slowly drifted to sleep. The more I thought about them the harder it was to just sit there, kids fighting and TV blaring around me. I'd take off as soon as the worker was distracted, running past the creeps who hang out the front of the resi unit. When I got to Nan's I'd make toasted sandwiches and she'd braid my hair and we'd fall asleep watching TV.

“THEY PUSHED ME LIKE
THEY KNEW I WOULDN'T
PUSH BACK AND STAND
UP FOR MYSELF, STUPID
ABORIGINAL GIRL.”

I got warrants out on me for seeing Nan. Cops would storm through the house and take me back to the resi unit. I watched Nan through the back window every time we drove off, panicking that this might be the last time I saw her. I pretended cops couldn't scare me as they got rougher each time, trying to get me to react, saying it was all Nan's fault. Police checked Nan's most days, waiting for me to come by. I got paranoid that they were watching me all the time.

I started drinking and smoking more with the kids at the resi unit, took off to Nan's more and stopped caring what the cops did. I watched Nan get worn out with worry, I found new greys every time I did her hair. I tried to remind her to eat. One night the cops woke us up by pulling me off the couch to take me back to the unit. They pushed me like they knew I wouldn't push back and stand up for myself, stupid Aboriginal girl. They were so rough with Nan I thought she was gonna break.



Black
3
Proud!!

TRUST

FAMILY

FUTURE

WEAVING

ME

BACK

INTO

SOMETHING

UNBREAKABLE

When they dropped me back at resi I was shivering, the image of Nan and the cops stuck in my head.

The other kids told me to come out with them, not going anywhere, just somewhere else. I wanted to be somewhere else too. I went with them and took off on some bikes they'd lifted. As we rode we watched the cops' headlights get closer and closer till we could almost touch them. I started crying for the first time in ages, so many tears the road looked blurry. They chased us from the main street to the highway where we crashed. I remember one cop pulling me up from the grass before I passed out from the fear.

I woke up with a cop standing over me, the same one I pissed off at Nan's. I was in a cell, my hands in cuffs and everything aching. There was a toilet in the corner but I was too embarrassed to go in the open like that, especially after cops took the toilet paper out. I was in so much pain I couldn't sleep that night. Cops said I couldn't have a blanket or see a doctor about my pain. They told me I'd never see my family again, that I was going to juvi. I couldn't hear much after that.

When they interviewed me the next day my head was all over the place I just said what they told me to, agreed with their words I didn't understand.

I walked into Koori Court ready to be locked up. I looked at the lawyer I'd met five minutes before, waiting to hear the same old stuff, but the Elders asked me to talk up. They listened to everything about home, school, Nan, resi, the cops, the crash. It was the first time I told my story where people heard me. They asked me what I needed and what my family needed. I felt a spark of trust light up again.

An Uncle at Koori Court told me that my family and culture are healing, that Nan and me have lots going on and need support so I can get to school, out of trouble and Nan can have a break. Family supports help me, Nan and the little ones. They lift the burdens and give me time to find out who I am, stand up for myself, get into TAFE and learn culture.

There are no cultural programs for girls in this town, so an Aunty from Koori Court is teaching me to weave, sharing stories with me. They might seem like little things but they're bringing all my pieces together.

Weaving me back into something unbreakable.

“IT WAS THE FIRST TIME I TOLD MY STORY WHERE PEOPLE HEARD ME. THEY ASKED ME WHAT I NEEDED AND WHAT MY FAMILY NEEDED. I FELT A SPARK OF TRUST LIGHT UP AGAIN.”

MIRRIM NGA-ANGO

Mirrim Nga-ango (pronounced (mir-r-rim nga-un-go), means deep breath in Woiwurrung. Mirrim Nga-ango's name reflects him feeling safe to breathe deep in his new home.

It's weird to want to open my eyes in the morning, not try to sink back to sleep. I want to see my room, my paintings, my posters, remind myself that I am home. This is where I learnt what home means. I've always lived between houses, never had a place where I felt safe all the time. I was uncomfortable, on edge everywhere, even with mates and family. This Healing Centre¹ taught me that home is community and culture, it's Aunties and Uncles and workers, it's unconditional welcome.

I always lived between houses so I could hide from whatever I needed to, never standing still. First person I ran from was Dad, his strap and his rage. He'd always say sorry, cry just a little bit, make my favourite dinner and say he'd never do it again. He hated himself for hurting me and promised to be better. Dad was also the first person I ran towards when I was sad because Mum was always locked up, when kids called me them names, when I couldn't get to sleep.

“ I’VE BEEN IN TROUBLE
SINCE BEFORE I WAS
BORN. ”

I've been in trouble since before I was born. It's in my blood, my family. My dad stole a fucking car to get Mum to hospital to give birth to me. Mum was born in prison. Growing up, no one I knew had a job. Dad went for so many he lost count. Most of my family's been inside, starting with juvi. We were stuck living on a disability pension, so I learnt how to fend for myself really young. I'd find my own feed, run from place to place to find a spot to sleep that wasn't too bloody cold. That was my normal. Same for most of my mates - we all slept between houses and streets.

1. Culturally-based healing centres are residential Aboriginal community-run services that provide a range of healing services for young people including detox and rehabilitation, social and emotional wellbeing support, behaviour change programs, cultural programs and justice programs.





JUST COME IN ON TUESDAYS
CAN'T EVEN
READ
NUMB

NOT BLACK
ENOUGH TO BE
A ORIGINAL

JUST COME IN ON TUESDAYS

CAN'T EVEN READ

NOT BLACK
ENOUGH TO BE
A ORIGINAL

STOP

LOST CAUSE

SHIT HOLE
TOWN

HOW ELSE AM I
SUPPOSED TO GET
FOOD.~

STOP

LOST CAUSE



Dad's rage grew as I grew. Mum had been locked up for longer than ever and Dad had been to so many funerals he stopped talking about 'em. I was always on edge at home. I started to feel Dad's anger in me too but I kept it locked away. I guess my dad passed on his anger to me like he passed on his eyes and hair. I absorbed so much of his loneliness and hurt over the years that it had to come out somehow, I couldn't stop it. I tried to be quiet at Dad's house to keep on his good side, so when I got to school I felt my anger boiling me up like a kettle till it overflowed and I got dangerous. I started snapping at people, couldn't concentrate. I'd sit on those little plastic seats so scared, so angry. I used to walk into the classroom and see the teachers thinking that I was just gonna give 'em trouble. Last grade I finished was Grade Three, I had a nice teacher that year. Every school I've been to kicked me out. Expelled in Grade One, Grade Two, Grade Four and Year Seven. At one school they told me to come in from 9am-11am. At the next one they said, "Just come in on Tuesdays." I got so behind it was impossible. They didn't want me, so it was better for everyone that I stopped trying. I never got reading and writing so there was no point in staying. Most of my mates dropped out too.

"THEY DIDN'T WANT ME, SO IT WAS BETTER FOR EVERYONE THAT I STOPPED TRYING."

I can't remember a time when my life was in control. I guess because I've always struggled to push my fucking anger down. Started smoking weed real young, 'round ten, to stop my anger from boiling over, keep calm. The crowd I smoked with didn't care if I screamed or got a bit rough. They let me get my anger out. I felt like they wanted to hang with me, lots of 'em were my cousins. We'd steal from Coles for something to do in this hole of a town. I reckon if we had a basketball we wouldn't have offended for fun. Most other times we just stole for a feed. Once the cops picked me up and I asked 'em "how else can I get food, huh? It's two years till I'm old enough to work so how am I meant to feed myself without a paycheck?"

Court said if I did a ropes⁴ course with cops I wouldn't get in trouble. Why? I don't know how they thought climbing some bloody trees would change me. It's like trying to fix a broken leg with a band-aid.

Most of the time cops picked me up I didn't know what my charges were or nothing, or what kind of behaviour bond thing I was on. My family didn't come to help me do the interviews with those dogs, so I always had to wait till the next day. I spent hours going crazy in the cell. I stopped caring, got numb. I didn't get all those bullshit cop and lawyer words so I'd just say what they told me to, take their cordial and crackers and get a lift back to Dad's.

After a while I wanted to feel something. I needed harder drugs to feel safe, strong, in control. My anger got bigger, stronger than me. It was impulsive, erratic, it would make me do things I didn't want to, my head said "STOP!" but I had no control. I couldn't stop. It was like watching something else take over my body. There were other times I'd have such a big hit I didn't even remember what happened, like it turned off my mind. I don't know if I did some of the things I was charged for because I can't remember, I went down for them anyway.

4. "ROPES is a court diversion program...where police officers are teamed up with young offenders (with no prior criminal history & having committed relatively minor offence) in the one day activity of climbing ropes...[and] education about the impact of a police record. If the course is successfully completed the young person is not required to appear at court and the charge is struck out." From YouthLaw n.d., Youth Diversion Makes Sense, accessed 26 June 2018, [http://www.smartjustice.org.au/cb_pages/files/Diversion%20paper\(3\).pdf](http://www.smartjustice.org.au/cb_pages/files/Diversion%20paper(3).pdf)

Round that time I had some fellas try and get me off drugs. A couple of old people in suits who'd maybe smoked one joint in high school, read about drugs in a textbook and decided they could fix me. They didn't get me, my story. I pushed them away because I knew they wouldn't stick around anyway. Someone else tried to get me to stop stealing and hanging out with the brotherboys, tried to get me to appointments while I was sleeping under a fucking bridge, avoiding the strap from Dad and finding money for my drug debt.

When I stayed at Dad's house I'd watch for cops all night with a table jammed up against the door. I stared at the curtains waiting for the headlights to shine through. One night those dogs came for me. Lights, sirens, everything. I slid under the bed as they slammed through the house, my hiding spot from Dad. Cops found me and dragged me out. My fear and anger boiled over.

Cops threw me in the back of the van so hard that my head hit the grate. I started gagging from the stink. The seat was sticky with blood or spew or piss from whoever was in there before me, I freaked. When we got in the cell those dogs knelt me in front of the bed and threw my head into the mattress again and again and again. When it was over they left me overnight without a blanket or anything. I'd pissed these cops off for years so I felt like I deserved it.

At court I got a lawyer who was kinda cool, he actually listened, explained stuff till I got it through my thick head. I'd been running for so long, avoiding court. Now I was here I dreaded the outcome. I walked into court and my stomach dropped, my whole body was shaking. It was all so intense I really thought my body would give up on me and I'd die. Didn't understand the magistrate's dictionary words. My lawyer tried to explain but all I could hear was my pulse thudding in my ears. At the end I heard the judge say I was free! I walked out of the dock to leave and got tackled by cops, I'd got the words confused.

“ I GOT TOUGH. MADE PEOPLE SCARED OF ME TO SURVIVE AND HIDE THAT I WAS SHIT-SCARED MYSELF. ”

My first night in the lock-up they made me take off all my clothes and sleep naked in a suicide blanket. A guard watched me the whole time, watched each bit of clothing fall to the ground. They told me it was because I was Aboriginal, to make me feel safe.

You've gotta be tough in there, otherwise you're meat. Lots of bigger boys had been in on remand for months, years, so they were used to it. My first day inside a kid left with a broken collarbone, I heard it snap. I got tough, made people scared of me to survive and hide that I was shit-scared myself. I heard it's good to get a name as being tough there before you go into adult prison.



Police



The worst days were when I'd dream I was out. Then I'd wake up and be locked in and it was so real. I'd lie in bed staring at the empty wall, the tiny window in the cell door. I'd listen to others banging on their doors, waiting to be unlocked. Sometimes they'd be quiet and that's even scarier. Are they ok? Dosed up on behaviour meds? I'd wake up thinking about who I'd have to get today to stop them getting me. Who'd be wearing long sleeves to cover what they'd done to themselves the night before? Who'd be strip-searched? We all went in there damaged, but that place really fucks you up for good.

At my next court date I had a judge I'd seen five years before, "Why are you still here?" she asked. I had that same good lawyer, he was a blackfulla too. He knew my story and told me to talk up to the judge. "The Court's job is to help you stop offending, we haven't done that very well yet," the judge said. She made a deal with me to try one more thing as long as I didn't give up on it. "You don't belong in prison," she said.

So that's how I ended up at this place, this centre surrounded by bush and the kind of air that makes you want to breathe deep. This is the first time I've left court and had somewhere to be, something to stay clean for. What I needed was to feel loved and be safe - to feel home. Now I have a place to be, open space, people who give me a reason to care about shit. I'm learning to read and write. Dad visits sometimes too. Home is full of culture, I look at the art, listen to stories and feel part of something bigger than I ever imagined. I never did this kind of cultural stuff before, when you have fair skin people don't think you need it or something, 'not a real Aboriginal'. There's a big ghost gum here I sit under and paint. I've never sat still for longer than five minutes but I can focus on one canvas all day under that tree, thinking about all the culture that's been in this place, letting the calm and peace into my body. I try not to think about where I'd be without that tree, this family, this place. Finding home saved my life.

“THIS IS THE FIRST TIME I'VE LEFT COURT AND HAD SOMEWHERE TO BE. SOMETHING TO STAY CLEAN FOR.”

MURRENDA

Murrenda (pronounced muu-rren-da) means alive in Woivurrung. This name represents the way Murrenda feels alive with culture and community.

This is our spot.

Dad used to bring me here and we'd fish all day. I bring my foster brother and sister here to feel life in the dirt under their feet and the breath through the trees above them. I bring them here to feel the calm I missed growing up. To be that person who is always there, an anchor in culture and identity.

When dad died I lost my anchor. I felt like he'd left me alone with pain in his place, grief sitting on my chest. At school I learnt that people hate blackfullas. I learnt that I should be ashamed of who I was, reject culture, not be like 'those' blackfullas. I wrote essays about Captain Cook, a happy white history where my people didn't exist. The hate was so strong I felt like I was drowning in it. My loneliness turned to anger and pulled me under. My head trapped in that hate I heard and played it over and over and over. It swam through my mind until I believed it, accepted the stigma and stereotypes the world told me about my people.

“ I BRING THEM HERE
TO FEEL THE CALM I
MISSED GROWING UP. ”

When I had drugs I could shut my head up. I could talk with people, connect, even charm them. For a while I had a mentor, but the program got shut down. I started hanging with some guys outside of school. I was 14, they were older. They'd get me weed, later we'd get harder stuff, whatever we could get our hands on. We did stupid shit to pay for it 'cos no one ever had money. I felt accepted, confident, part of something.





One guy really took me under his wing. He'd always have an arm around my shoulders, look out for me round the cops and share what he scored. Other people were shit-scared of him because he was built like a truck and he flogged anyone who got in his way. He was cool with me though, I even cut my hair same as his. After a while he got me into harder stuff. Some nights we'd get really high and his hand would slip from my shoulders and down my back and push under my school top. Hands heavy and cold, moving over me leaving invisible scars. I'd hear white noise in my head get louder and louder, like I went somewhere else while his hands were there. After he finished the noise would slowly fade and I'd tune back in again like nothing happened.

I was so ashamed I moved away from mum and the young ones. I'd rather sleep rough than let them see how I was living. I didn't wanna make them worry, to be that fuck-up brother bringing them down. The hate swimming in my head got so loud I did more drugs to shut it up.

For years I had lifelines from police and courts, but they just bailed me to the same situation with a warning or order they knew I would breach. They didn't know my story and they didn't ask. What did they think would change? My life was the same, I was the same, my stupid crimes were the same.

The guys in town knew how to get to me. They'd follow me down the street yelling racist bullshit, pushing me, standing over me, waiting for the angry blackfulla to blow up. Eventually I'd had enough, I punched one, then punched a wall. They got a laugh out of it. I got a broken hand, spear tackled by cops and a prison sentence.

I waited for hours in the cop shop cell, the pain in my hand pulsing through me. Felt like my head was gonna explode. I pressed the distress button for hours waiting for help. Cops told me to hold my arm up so it didn't swell so much, wouldn't give me a sling 'cos they said I'd hang myself.

“THEY DIDN'T
KNOW MY STORY AND
THEY DIDN'T ASK.
WHAT DID THEY THINK
WOULD CHANGE? MY
LIFE WAS THE SAME,
I WAS THE SAME, MY
STUPID CRIMES WERE
THE SAME.”

At court I saw my family for the first time in months. Mum, sis, bub. Three people could still see me down in the deep, under all the hate, all the bullshit. To them I still mattered. I watched Mum as they read out the list of charges. The shame was so heavy I could hardly breathe. The person Mum raised wouldn't do all those things. I searched for the words to explain, but my lawyer said it'd be better if I didn't speak. The magistrate looked at Mum and said, "If he were my son, I would disown him."

In the lock up I didn't feel alive, just like I was surviving. I didn't sleep. At night I made my own scars next to the ones from police dogs. I couldn't relax in a concrete box scared of punches, rape, isolation. I got out a few times on parole, avoiding Mum's so I wasn't a bad influence on the young ones.

"IN THE LOCK UP I
DIDN'T FEEL ALIVE,
JUST LIKE I WAS
SURVIVING."

They put me in a house full of other people who offended and used, so I stayed on the street to avoid all that. Didn't take long till I was back inside again. Each time I went home I'd hear about another brotherboy passing away. I felt like it was my fault. I wasn't there for him, to talk him out of it.

Life started making more sense inside than on the outside. I didn't have to worry about letting people down, getting food, paying bills, getting Centrelink. I got to a fucked up point where I loved it inside. I didn't have to worry about all that stuff like on the outside. Other people were in control of my life.



IF HE WERE MY SON, I WOULD DISOWN HIM.
IF HE WERE MY SON,
I WOULD DISOWN HIM.
IF HE WERE MY SON, I WOULD DISOWN HIM. IF HE WERE MY SON, I WOULD DISOWN HIM
IF HE WERE MY SON, I WOULD DISOWN HIM.
IF HE WERE MY SON,
I WOULD DISOWN HIM.

CULTURE

COMMUNITY

CONNECTION

LEADERS

FAMILY

BELONGING

SPIRITUALITY



Mum caught the train down to meet me at the gate on my last release date. At first she didn't recognise me, skinny from fear and sleep deprivation.

"Time for a different way," she said, "whatever you do, don't leave us." Mum started to pull me up from the deep where I'd been for so long. She saw the grief sitting on my chest, felt the emptiness that stopped me healing, heard the silence where I needed to talk up. She made me feel worthy of the life she gave me.

A cultural healing centre and detox brought culture and Country back into my life. I felt the pride in my identity that the world had taught me to reject. I hung out with an Uncle who told me it is not weak for a man to talk up, care, be vulnerable. I shared pain I had buried inside myself because I was trapped in the idea that strong men were silent. I got a youth justice worker who listened to me, we'd yarn, paint and fish together under the scar trees down the river. Without them, I wouldn't be here today.

The hate in my head is getting quiet as culture and connection get loud and strong. Culture keeps me afloat, keeps me alive. I want other young ones to feel that too, know the strength of who they are by feeling life in the dirt under their feet and the breath through the trees above them.

"THE HATE IN MY HEAD
IS GETTING QUIET AS
CULTURE AND CONNECTION
GET LOUD AND STRONG."

THE SLOT

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WALLS CLOSING IN
MIND CRASHING
I'M NOTHING
I'M ALONE
NO ONE GIVES A SHIT

JUST WANT MY MUM,
MISS MY DAD,
MY MATES,
MY PLACE.

GET FED THROUGH
A HOLE IN THE DOOR.
FOOD'S ON THE FLOOR.
THEY WANT ME TO
EAT LIKE A
DOG.

THEY SAID I'M IN HERE TO
CALM DOWN. THE SLOT
MAKES YOU CRAZY.
LIKE YOUR MIND IS CRASHING.
MAKES YOU FEEL LIKE
YOU'RE NOTHING,
ALONE AND NO ONE
GIVES A SHIT.



THREE STEPS HERE

TWO STEPS HERE

NEED TO FEEL THE
SAND OF
COUNTRY
UNDER MY FEET.

CAN'T GET OUT TO PEE, SHOWER, NOTHING.
LEAVE ME IN HERE FOR HOURS, DAYS.

WALK WITH ME

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IF YOU LISTENED TO MY STORY
YOU WOULD UNDERSTAND.

IF YOU FOUND ME SOMEWHERE SAFE TO LIVE
I WOULDN'T BE ON THE STREET.

IF YOU KEPT THAT PROGRAM RUNNING
I'D HAVE SOMEONE LOOKING OUT FOR ME.

IF YOU HELPED ME WITH GRIEF
TRAUMA AND ABUSE
I WOULDN'T FEEL SO HOPELESS.

IF YOU KEPT MY FAMILY TOGETHER
I WOULDN'T BE LOST.

IF YOU SUPPORTED ME EARLIER
I WOULDN'T DO CRIME IN THE FIRST PLACE.

WHEN YOU SEE ME AS THE CHILD I AM
I FEEL NURTURED AND LOVED.

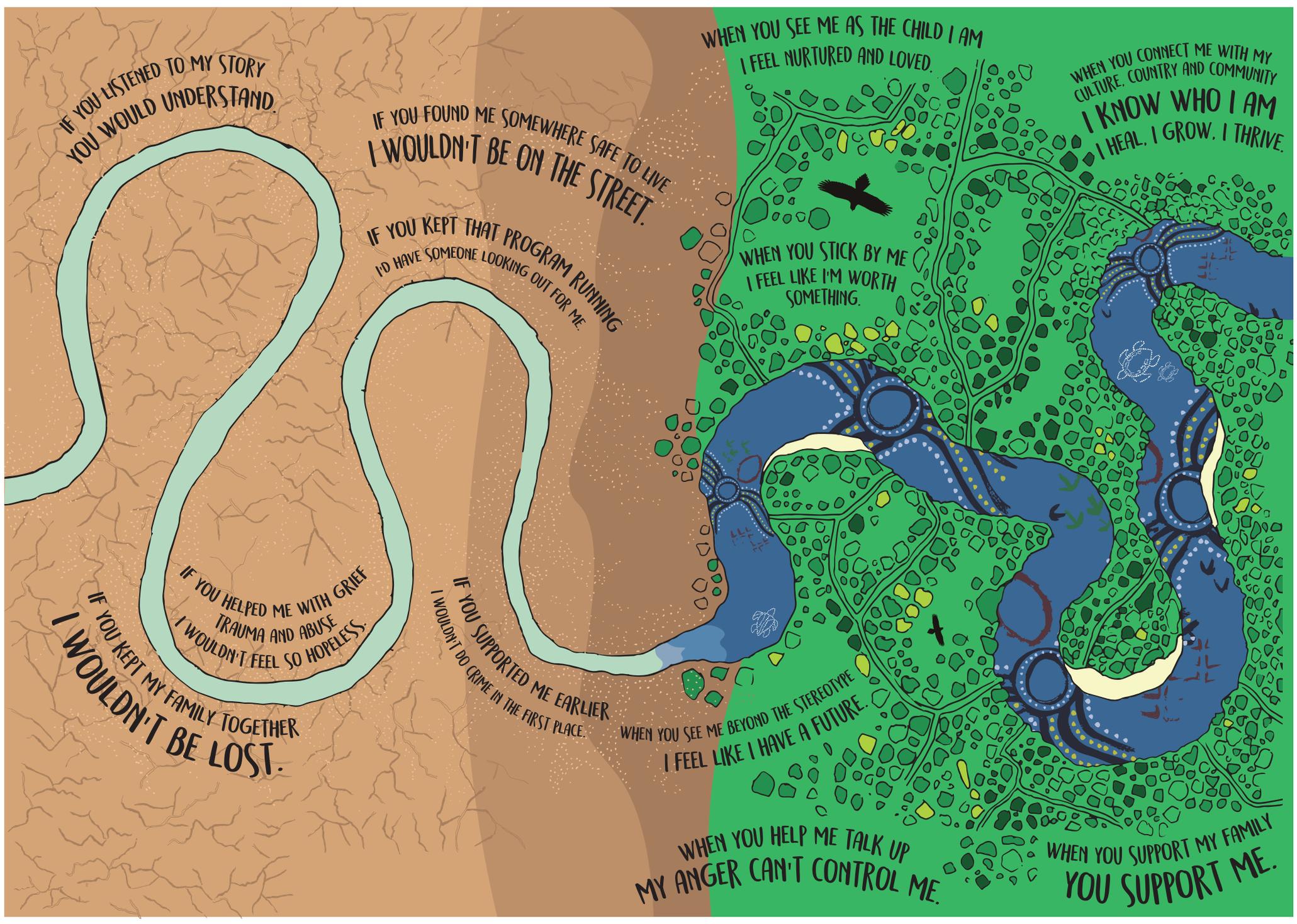
WHEN YOU CONNECT ME WITH MY
CULTURE, COUNTRY AND COMMUNITY
I KNOW WHO I AM
I HEAL, I GROW, I THRIVE.

WHEN YOU STICK BY ME
I FEEL LIKE I'M WORTH
SOMETHING.

WHEN YOU SEE ME BEYOND THE STEREOTYPE
I FEEL LIKE I HAVE A FUTURE.

WHEN YOU HELP ME TALK UP
MY ANGER CAN'T CONTROL ME.

WHEN YOU SUPPORT MY FAMILY
YOU SUPPORT ME.



NEW LIFE,
NEW FUTURE?



WILL YOU GROW UP IN A BETTER WORLD THAN I DID?

WILL THE FUTURE SEE YOU FOR WHO YOU ARE?



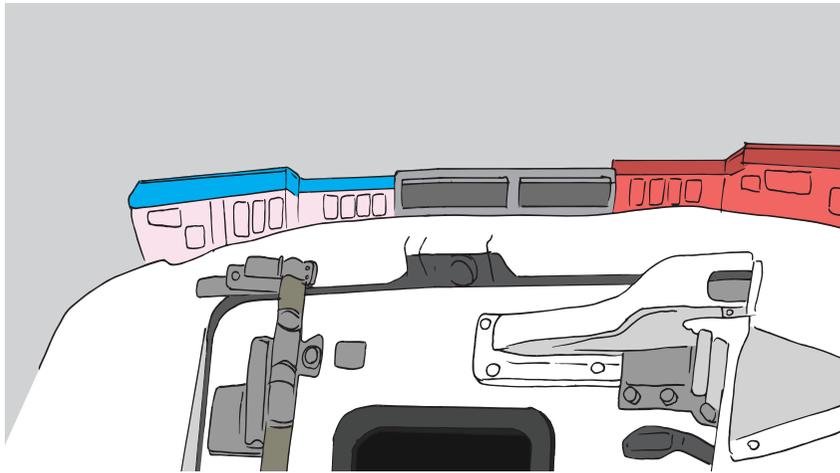


SAME CHAINS DIFFERENT TIMES



YOU'RE FROM THAT FAMILY? YOU'LL HAVE COMPANY IN PRISON

YOUR GREAT NAN WAS STOLEN FROM HER FAMILY, THEY LOCKED HER UP IN THE CITY



YOUR MUM HAD YOU WHILE I WAS IN JUVI

ALL YOU ***** ARE THE SAME

I NEVER KNEW YOUR POP,
THEY LOCKED HIM UP
FOR STICKING UP FOR HIMSELF

WILL YOU GROW UP IN A BETTER WORLD THAN I DID?



REMEMBER OUR MOB ARE SURVIVORS, CREATORS, FIGHTERS, CARERS YOU BELONG TO THIS LAND

DRAW STRENGTH FROM COUNTRY, COMMUNITY AND CULTURE



YOU ARE NEVER ALONE, YOUR ANCESTORS AND ELDERS TRAVEL WITH YOU



YOU ARE A CHILD OF THE DREAMING



YOUR FAMILY AND CULTURE STRETCHES BACK FOR OVER 2500 GENERATIONS



YOU ARE A FUTURE ELDER



I WILL ALWAYS BE WITH YOU



WILL THE FUTURE SEE YOU FOR WHO YOU ARE?



NOW YOU'VE HEARD OUR STORIES, HEAR OUR SOLUTIONS: LET'S CREATE THE CHANGE

Our vision is for all Aboriginal children in Victoria to be nurtured and supported to thrive. Now you've read our stories, you've witnessed the healing power of culture, family, Elders and communities. You know that mentors can give children hope and self-worth and that community-based services can ensure that Aboriginal children's stories are about love, culture and strength.

You've seen how discrimination and disadvantage pushes Aboriginal children into the quicksand of the justice system. You've also witnessed the way Victorian Governments have hurt generations of our children, families and communities, pushing Aboriginal children into the justice system at 14 times the rate of their non-Aboriginal peers.ⁱⁱⁱ

Victoria builds systems that tear children from their families,^{iv} force them into prison and turn them away from school.^v Victoria chooses not to support the services that keep our children safe.^{vi} We can change this story by telling the Victorian Government and opposition to create systems that understand Aboriginal communities.

Victoria's system particularly targets Aboriginal girls and children with a disability.

Victorian Governments have denied Aboriginal women and girls services that work for them, particularly appropriate housing, diversion and rehabilitative services.^{vii} This criminalises Aboriginal women and girls experiencing disadvantage instead of supporting them to stay out of the justice system.^{viii} This system has resulted in Aboriginal women being the fastest growing prison population in Victoria and across the country, with national rates of incarceration increasing 248% since 1991.^{ix}

The lack of services and criminalisation of Aboriginal girls in Victoria is reflected in their high rates of contact with the system.^x Aboriginal people make up 0.8% of the Victorian population,^{xi} yet Aboriginal girls make up 24% of girls under youth justice supervision.^{xii} Aboriginal boys, who are also overrepresented, make up 15% of the male cohort.^{xiii}

Children with a disability are also denied access to the right supports^{xiv} and pushed into the system at high rates^{xv} instead of receiving the help they need.^{xvi} This story will change when the Victorian Government and opposition provide culturally-safe services for all Aboriginal children, particularly girls, children with a disability, as well as our LGBTIQ+ community.^{xvii}

Each of these stories ended with hope, positivity and connection because we must show the strength of community-based solutions^{xviii} and support systems. The Victorian Government supports some of these solutions and we particularly acknowledge the important steps towards self-determination in out-of-home care.^{xix}

We need the Victorian Government and opposition to commit to supporting community designed and led services for all Aboriginal children. Most Aboriginal children in contact with the justice system do not receive these supports.^{xx} Many of these children's stories continue into the adult justice system, poverty and mental illness.^{xxi}

When the Victorian Government, opposition, social services sector and allies walk together with the leadership of Aboriginal communities, we can change these stories so that our youngest Aboriginal Victorians are supported to flourish.

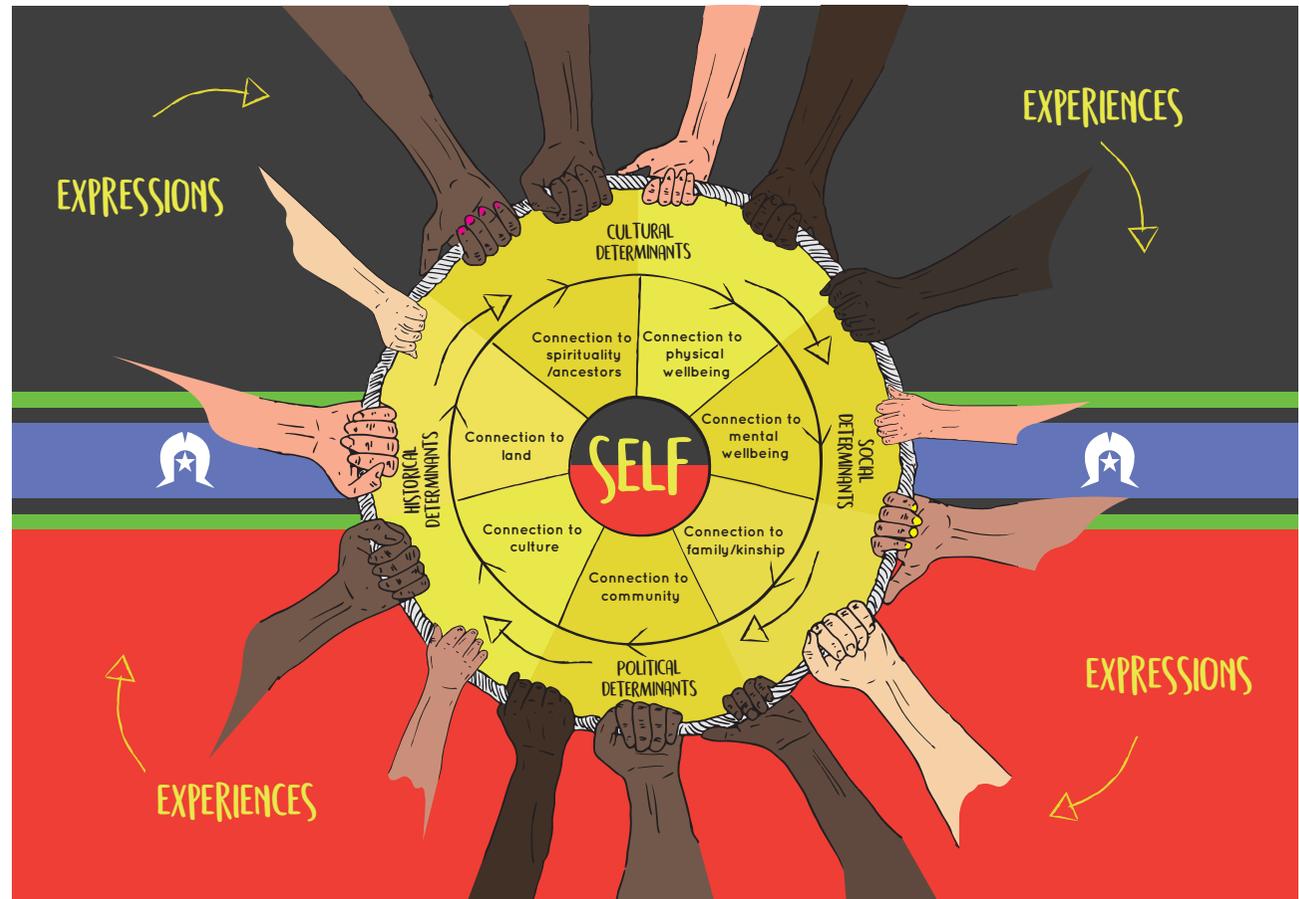
UNDERSTANDING WELLBEING IN ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

Understanding children's lives is the first step to supporting them to be happy and healthy. When supports for Aboriginal children use non-Aboriginal frameworks to understand children's needs and strengths, they are unsuccessful.^{xxii} Aboriginal children are best supported by Aboriginal definitions of identity and wellbeing.

Members of the Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association link connections and influences that define wellbeing from an Aboriginal perspective in the figure pictured.

Adapted from the original by Gee, Dudgeon, Schultz, Hart and Kelly, this Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing wheel considers the centre, self, as inseparable from culture, family and community.^{xxiii}

The Ngaga-dji solutions and guiding principles reflect this culturally-based framework. By using tools like the wellbeing wheel, supports for Aboriginal children can understand their needs and strengths to make a valuable impact in their lives.



Gee, Dudgeon, Schultz, Hart & Kelly, 2013 on behalf of the Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association.
Adapted by Jacob Komesaroff from original art by Tristan Schultz, RelativeCreative

GUIDING PRINCIPLES:

These principles set out the overarching ways of working that underpin successful implementation of our solutions.

Self-determination:

Aboriginal peoples have the right to self-determination. Self-determination^{xxiv} enables Aboriginal people to freely determine their lives. Self-determined solutions bring deep knowledge and community ownership to supports for our children and future generations.

Youth participation:

To solve systemic problems like those affecting Aboriginal communities, we need solutions from the people who live through them.^{xxv} By using youth participation we actively listen and include children's voices in decision-making processes. This helps provide relevant and effective solutions that change children's and communities' lives for the better.^{xxvi}

Culture, family, Elders and communities:

Strong connections with culture, family, Elders and communities are the foundations that enable Aboriginal children to live happy, healthy lives. By embedding the strengths of our culture, family, Elders and communities in solutions, we can address the disadvantage that leads many children into the quicksand of the justice system.^{xxvii}

NGAGA-DJI: A VISION FOR VICTORIA

Ngaga-dji sets out our vision for a Victoria that enables Aboriginal children to thrive and the path to making it happen. Yarning justice and gathering stories across the state, we met children who told us the change we need to make. It's a change based on providing Aboriginal children with the things what we all need: love, belonging and someone to look up to. These stories show us that when governments create systems that truly support the self-determination of our communities, children and their families can live free from the justice system.

We have a choice. Our state can build more prisons and force more children into concrete boxes that teach them to be angry, lonely and violent.^{xxviii} Or, we can tell the Victorian Government and opposition to stick by the youngest and most vulnerable in our community and support them to be happy, healthy adults.

We call on the Victorian Government and opposition to turn away from failed punitive approaches, listen to community and take this opportunity to create a fairer Victoria. In the current system, Aboriginal Victoria, the Department of Justice and Regulation, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Education and Training and Victoria Police are harming our children.

We call on these institutions to act on the Ngaga-dji solutions, embedding our guiding principles and the leadership of Aboriginal communities. The Victorian Government and opposition have the chance to lead the way in addressing the national problem of overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in the youth justice system.^{xxix}

We call on Aboriginal community to join us to ensure that the Victorian Government and opposition commit to justice by taking on our solutions. We particularly call on the Aboriginal Executive Council, the Aboriginal Justice Forum, the Aboriginal Children's Forum, Indigenous Family Violence Partnership Forum, Marrung Central Governance Committee, the Aboriginal Strategic Governance Forum (DHHS), the Treaty Advancement Commission, Traditional Owner Groups and Corporations as well as other governance bodies to table this report, use it to guide their work for Aboriginal children and monitor government action on these solutions.

NGAGA-DJI: A VISION FOR VICTORIA

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SOLUTION:
GIVE CHILDREN
SERVICES THAT
WORK

GUIDING PRINCIPLES:

● **SELF-DETERMINATION**

SOLUTION:
KEEP CHILDREN
SAFE AND STRONG IN
THEIR CULTURE,
FAMILIES AND
COMMUNITIES

SOLUTION:
COMMUNITY-DESIGNED
AND LED YOUTH
SUPPORT SYSTEMS

● YOUTH PARTICIPATION

● CULTURE, FAMILY, ELDERNS AND COMMUNITY

SOLUTION:
CREATE JUST
AND EQUITABLE
SYSTEMS

SOLUTION:

GIVE CHILDREN SERVICES THAT WORK

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All children need support to become happy, healthy adults. Many Aboriginal children miss out on this support because the Victorian Government and opposition choose not to fund culturally safe, trauma informed services that reach children when and where they need support. We can support children to thrive by providing the right services at the right time.

1. Embed family, culture and community at every stage of supports to keep children connected within safe, supportive networks.
 - Support the networks around children such as family, community and schools to ensure children are nurtured in every part of their lives. Ensure that programs use a holistic, whole of family approach to support children and families in key areas such as family safety, child protection, social services and support for children who are carers.
 - Strengthen community ties by providing services that support children to participate in their community such as engagement with Elders, gym memberships, schools and programs in their local area.
2. Support children who are victims of crime with access to justice and early, community-centred services to address trauma resulting from removal, family violence, homelessness and other abuses. The majority of children who have contact with the justice system are victims of crime themselves.^{xxx} Most participants in Ngaga-dji never received adequate supports to address traumas which became root causes of their contact with the justice system.

THERE ARE MORE OPPORTUNITIES FOR BOYS TO BE SUPPORTED AND CONNECTED WITH CULTURE LIKE FISHING AND MEN'S GROUP. THERE'S NOTHING FOR GIRLS.
- PARTICIPANT

TOO MANY OF OUR WOMEN ARE TRAPPED IN AN UNRESPONSIVE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM. WHAT IS NEEDED ARE APPROACHES THAT DEAL WITH DRUGS, FAMILY VIOLENCE, HOUSING, LOSS OF SELF-ESTEEM, DISCONNECTION FROM COUNTRY AND CULTURE AND THE MYRIAD OF OTHER CULTURAL COMPLEXITIES.^{xxxii}
- HUMAN RIGHTS LAW CENTRE AND CHANGE THE RECORD COALITION

THEY NEED SOMEONE BY THEIR SIDE TO GET THEM SOMEWHERE IN LIFE THAT THEY THINK THEY CAN'T GET. SOMEONE THAT'S THERE TO BE THERE STEP BY STEP DURING THEIR JOURNEYS SO THEY CAN BE ABLE TO ADDRESS THEIR PROBLEMS THE RIGHT WAY.
- PARTICIPANT

TO CHANGE YOUNG PEOPLE'S BEHAVIOUR YOU NEED TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS AND GET TO KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON IN THEIR LIVES.^{xxxiii}
- DR. DIANA JOHNS

KNOWING IT'S ALRIGHT TO TALK TO SOMEONE...I CAN GO BACK TO [CULTURAL SERVICE] AND GET VULNERABLE AND TELL THEM HOW I'M FEELING AND POTENTIALLY IT SAVES MY LIFE. COMING FROM BACKGROUNDS WHERE IT'S NOT SAFE TO TALK ABOUT YOUR FEELINGS, IT LOOKS WEAK. IT'S NOT WHAT MEN DO...JUST GOING THROUGH THE COMMUNITY MEN, THE ELDERS... AND MATCHING THEM WITH THE POSITIVE ROLE AND NOT BEING SO DESTRUCTIVE. MY FAMILY WANT TO TALK TO ME TODAY WHERE THEY DIDN'T BEFORE.
- PARTICIPANT

3. Provide a capable and consistent workforce across youth services.
 - Provide every child with access to a mentor to give one-on-one, intensive support.
 - Train those working with young people, such as lawyers, workers, teachers, in youth participation and cultural safety to enable full access to justice and support services.
 - Provide scholarships and identified roles to support Aboriginal people to become youth support workers.
 - Provide children with consistent workers, lawyers and teachers to foster long-term relationships that increase trust and effectiveness of services.
4. Provide culturally safe services that support young people's diverse identities, particularly those facing discrimination in the form of ableism, sexism, transphobia and homophobia.
 - Support culturally-based services that break down rigid ideas of gender, particularly encouraging young men to positively explore their identities.
 - Support Aboriginal organisations to provide girls, LGBTIQ+ children and people with disabilities with programs designed and delivered with them to understand and respond to their needs.
 - Support Aboriginal organisations to lead education and awareness work in communities and services to support the diverse identities and needs of children facing discrimination in the form of ableism, sexism, transphobia and homophobia.
5. Use youth participation to focus services on the end goal of independence with skills that strengthen connections within local communities such as employment and life skills, for example, finance, literacy and obtaining a driver's licence.

I NEED MORE SUPPORT BEFORE ENDING UP IN CUSTODY. DON'T WAIT TILL I'M ON MY LAST LEG.

- PARTICIPANT

I STARTED OFFENDING AGAIN WHEN I GOT KICKED OUT OF HOME. I HAD NOWHERE TO GO AND NO MONEY SO I DID BAD STUFF.

- PARTICIPANT

SYSTEMIC BARRIERS AND AN ABSENCE OF SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY IS PLACING THEM ON A PATHWAY INTO IMPRISONMENT INSTEAD OF LEARNING AND EDUCATION. IN LIGHT OF THIS, ANY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING THE RATE AT WHICH ABORIGINAL YOUNG PEOPLE COME INTO CONTACT WITH THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM AND FOR IMPROVING YOUTH DETENTION MUST ACKNOWLEDGE THIS REALITY AND INCORPORATE MEANS FOR IDENTIFYING AND SUPPORTING THE NEEDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY AT ALL STAGES OF THE CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT.^{xxxiii}

- FIRST PEOPLES DISABILITY NETWORK

FOR TOO LONG ABORIGINAL CHILDREN HAVE BEEN ASSESSED USING MEASURES AND ASSESSMENT APPROACHES WHICH DO NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THEIR CULTURE, BELIEFS, CONNECTION TO COMMUNITY AND PLACE, SPIRITUALITY AND THEIR INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCES. FURTHERMORE THE ASSESSMENT OF AN INDIVIDUAL'S SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL STATUS INDEPENDENT OF THE FAMILY AND COMMUNITY IS AN ALIEN CONCEPT TO ABORIGINAL PEOPLE AS WELL AS BEING ECOLOGICALLY UNINFORMED.^{xxxiv}

- AUNTY, PROF. MURIEL BAMBLETT ET. AL.

WITH KOORIE YJ I HAVE CULTURAL SUPPORT. I FEEL LIKE I'M PART OF A COMMUNITY, LIKE SOMEONE WANTS ME AND I AM SOMEONE. I FEEL RESPECTED AND PEOPLE ARE TRUSTWORTHY. THERE'S SUPPORT AND I HAVE SOMEONE TO TALK TO EVEN IF THERE'S NOT A CRISIS. FIRST TIME I DON'T FEEL LIKE A PIECE OF SHIT.

- PARTICIPANT

SOLUTION:

KEEP CHILDREN SAFE AND STRONG IN THEIR CULTURE, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

Children need their family and communities to grow up safe and strong. When the Victorian Government and opposition do not support communities, problems like family violence, economic disadvantage and geographic isolation break up families, communities and cultural bonds that children need to feel safe. These become the root causes of children's offending.^{xxxv} By addressing disadvantage we can build strong communities that are supported to nurture children in their culture.

1. Support local Aboriginal organisations to ensure everyone has access to their culture.
 - Support culturally safe programs for children and adults, particularly addressing the gap in cultural services for women, girls, people with disabilities and LGBTIQ+ community members.
 - Support culturally-based behaviour change programs for the elimination of family violence.

I GREW UP WITH A LOT OF ALCOHOL AND FAMILY VIOLENCE...I WAS RUNNING FROM HOME, SMOKING WEED AT A YOUNG AGE. UP TO NO GOOD BASICALLY. JUST TRYING TO GET AWAY FROM THE LIFE I WAS LIVING...I WANTED TO FEEL WANTED AND ACCEPTED AND FIT IN WITH PEOPLE.

- PARTICIPANT

THE TRAJECTORY FROM OUT-OF-HOME CARE TO YOUTH JUSTICE IS A DISTURBING REALITY FOR MANY YOUNG PEOPLE. THE CYCLE IS INTENSIFIED BY CONTRIBUTING FACTORS SUCH AS LIMITED EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES, DRUG AND ALCOHOL DEPENDENCE AND INSECURE ACCOMMODATION.^{xxxvi}

- COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

I WOULDN'T REOFFEND IF MY FAMILY HAVE THE MONEY TO LOOK AFTER ME. I WANT TO GET A JOB BUT I'M TOO YOUNG.

- PARTICIPANT

IT IS COMPLETELY INAPPROPRIATE TO DETAIN THESE CHILDREN IN PUNITIVE, RATHER THAN REHABILITATIVE, CONDITIONS. THEY ARE ESSENTIALLY BEING PUNISHED FOR BEING POOR AND IN MOST CASES, PRISON WILL ONLY AGGRAVATE THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE, POVERTY AND CRIME. I FOUND MEETING YOUNG CHILDREN, SOME ONLY TWELVE YEARS OLD, IN DETENTION THE MOST DISTURBING ELEMENT OF MY VISIT.^{xxxvii}

- VICTORIA TAULI-CORPUZ, UN SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

I GOT TOOK [SICI] OFF MUM WHEN I WAS YOUNGER...IT WAS HARD, ESPECIALLY NOT GETTING PAID [CENTRELINK] AND THAT. NO BIRTH CERTIFICATE SO I HAD TO DO CRIMES AND SHIT JUST TO GET MONEY...I HAD TO GET LOCKED UP JUST TO GET MY PAYS [CENTRELINK] SORTED OUT. NOW I'M OUT AND OFF THE DRUGS AND SHIT. TRYING TO STAY STRAIGHT AND THAT. GET A JOB...I NEVER TRUSTED NO ONE AND WAS ALWAYS ON MY TOES...I'M STARTING TO GET MY TRUST BACK NOW.

- PARTICIPANT

2. Support community designed and led responses to end intergenerational poverty, particularly in
 - housing,
 - family violence responses and prevention,
 - out-of-home care,
 - social and emotional wellbeing,
 - economic support including employment and education,
 - legal services,
 - disability services.
3. Strengthen community resources and infrastructure.
 - Strengthen communities to be independent and resourced, particularly in rural and regional areas by providing localised youth services, transport, economic opportunity, recreational opportunity and culturally safe spaces for young people.
 - Support Aboriginal ownership of community infrastructure and gathering places to ensure future generations of children and families have access to resources and spaces.

MANY CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WHO GET CAUGHT UP IN THE VICTORIAN CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM ARE AMONG THE STATE'S MOST DISADVANTAGED AND VULNERABLE. MANY OF THESE CHILDREN HAVE BEEN EXPOSED TO AND SUFFERED TRAUMA, ABUSE, NEGLECT, VIOLENCE, RACISM, FAMILY DYSFUNCTION, AND LOW SOCIOECONOMIC CONDITIONS.^{xxxviii}

- YOUTHLAW

NEED HELP WITH MUM. RECEIVING CENTRELINK PAYMENTS, IT WAS PRETTY HARD. NEED TO BE PROPERLY SUPPORTED AND FEEL SAFE.

- PARTICIPANT

THE IMPORTANCE OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE MAINTAINING CULTURAL IDENTITY AND CONNECTION IS RECOGNISED IN THE LAW. UNFORTUNATELY, A LARGE NUMBER OF CHILDREN ARE PLACED IN OUT-OF-HOME CARE, OFTEN WITH NON-ABORIGINAL FAMILIES, AND WITHOUT CULTURAL SUPPORT PLANS IN PLACE.^{xxxix}

- VICTORIAN LEGAL AID

WHEN ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN ARE SEPARATED FROM CULTURE, THEY ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE SEPARATED FROM THE PROTECTIVE FACTORS THAT SUPPORT HIGH SELF-ESTEEM, SECURE ATTACHMENTS AND A STRONG AND POSITIVE SOCIAL NETWORK.^{xl}

- PHILIP REED, CEO, ROYAL COMMISSION INTO INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

TO BE ABLE TO CALL SOMEWHERE HOME IS A BIG HELP FOR ME. I NEVER GOT ANYWHERE TO CALL HOME. THIS [CULTURAL SERVICE] FEELS LIKE HOME...I'VE ALWAYS FELT UNCOMFORTABLE GOING BACK TO SOMEONE'S HOUSE BECAUSE I DON'T FEEL WELCOME THERE...I'VE ALWAYS FELT COMFORTABLE AND WELCOME HERE. THAT'S WHY I CALL IT MY HOME.

- PARTICIPANT

SOLUTION:

COMMUNITY-DESIGNED AND LED YOUTH SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Families and communities know their children best. By supporting Aboriginal communities to design and lead support systems, the Victorian Government and opposition are ensuring the best care for Aboriginal children and the future of our communities.

1. Aboriginal Justice Forum to embed the Ngaga-dji solutions in the Aboriginal Youth Justice Strategy.
2. Sustainably resource Aboriginal community organisations to develop youth support systems that support children in their communities with localised services across health, social and emotional wellbeing, education, family, legal, cultural, and drug and alcohol services.
 - Develop Aboriginal community led and designed youth support programs to care for children in community at every stage of their lives in place of the current youth justice system. When these supports are properly funded, there is no need for prisons, which are harming children.
 - Develop community-based systems that support children as soon as they are reported by police, diverting them from the justice system and into culturally safe programs, services, conferencing and housing where required.

CULTURE WAS REALLY STRONG FOR ME. IT KEPT ME OUT OF PRISON.

- PARTICIPANT

CURRENTLY THE AGE OF CRIMINAL RESPONSIBILITY IS NOT BASED ON A YOUNG PERSON'S COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT. DOES NOT ALLOW YOUNG PEOPLE TO FAIRLY PARTICIPATE IN THE JUSTICE SYSTEM AND FAILS TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE WELLBEING AND SAFETY OF SOCIETY BY DIVERTING YOUNG PEOPLE FROM THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM. THE AGE OF CRIMINAL RESPONSIBILITY IN VICTORIA IS ONE OF THE MAIN DRIVERS BEHIND THE OVERREPRESENTATION OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM.^{xliii}

- VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL LEGAL SERVICE

THIS PLACE [YOUTH JUSTICE CENTRE] JUST MAKES ME WANT TO HURT MYSELF. I'VE GOT CUTS ALL UP MY ARMS. I HAD TO GO TO HOSPITAL ONCE FOR SELF-HARM.

- PARTICIPANT

COMING BACK OUT TO COMMUNITY WAS FRIGHTFUL...I WAS MAKING PROMISES EVERY SINGLE DAY FOR TWO YEARS SAYING THINGS ARE GOING TO BE DIFFERENT. THINGS ARE GOING TO CHANGE, BUT GETTING OUT AND USING DRUGS. IT WAS LIKE, THIS JUST DOES NOT END. I WAS BACK OUT AND JUST THE SAME SHIT. I THINK I WAS ARRESTED A COUPLE OF WEEKS LATER. AND THEN I WAS BAILED. AND THEN I WAS OFF AND RUNNING AGAIN.

- PARTICIPANT

THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM IS OFTEN AN INEFFECTIVE OR INAPPROPRIATE WAY TO RESPOND TO PEOPLE WHO HAVE A DISABILITY OR ARE EXPERIENCING POVERTY, MENTAL ILLNESS, DRUG OR ALCOHOL ADDICTION, HOMELESSNESS OR UNEMPLOYMENT SERVICES LIKE ADEQUATE HEALTH CARE, DISABILITY SUPPORTS, EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING, DRUG TREATMENT AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING COST FAR LESS THAN PRISONS, AND HAVE A SUBSTANTIALLY BETTER RECORD OF SUCCESS.^{xliv}

- CHANGE THE RECORD

3. Community-based out-of-home care and child protection.
 - Raise the age of leaving care to at least 21.
 - Provide trauma and family supports for those removed from primary carers.
 - Restructure out-of-home care resourcing and procedures as a step towards a self-determined system, including:
 - Prioritising community care by enforcing adherence to the Aboriginal child placement principle.
 - Stop the criminalisation of young people in care by supporting workers to eliminate children's contact with the justice system.
4. Raise the age of criminal responsibility to at least 14.
Raising the age of criminal responsibility from one of the lowest in the world gives youth support services in communities the best chance to connect and support children who need them.^{xii}
5. End the imprisonment of children.
Incarceration isolates and traumatises our youngest community members, locking children away from their communities and into patterns of disadvantage, increasing the likelihood of lifetime recidivism.^{xiii} Ending imprisonment will mean localised community led responses can support children in their communities with holistic services that work.

[KOORI YOUTH JUSTICE WORKERS] IF WE SAID WE WERE STRUGGLING WITH FOOD, THEY'D GO AND GET IT...CLOTHES TO GO TO SCHOOL, I'D ASK THEM AND THEY'D BRING THEM AROUND...THEY'RE TRYING TO GET YOU OUT OF THE DEEP END. THEY REALLY DO TRY.

- PARTICIPANT

THE EFFECTS OF INSTITUTIONALISATION ON ABORIGINAL CHILDREN IS PARTICULARLY DESTRUCTIVE BECAUSE ABORIGINAL CULTURE AND 'INSTITUTIONAL' CULTURE ARE VIRTUALLY DIRECT OPPOSITES, THE FORMER BEING PERMISSIVE, EGALITARIAN, STRONGLY INTERACTIVE, AND KIN BASED WHILE THE LATTER IS AUTHORITARIAN, PUNITIVE, HIERARCHICAL, INDIVIDUALISTIC AND IMPERSONAL.^{xlv}

- ROYAL COMMISSION INTO ABORIGINAL DEATHS IN CUSTODY

ONE OF THEM [KOORIE YOUTH JUSTICE WORKER] LOOKED AFTER ME FOR YEARS. HE HELPED HEAPS. EVERY DAY HE HELPED. I SAY THAT BECAUSE HE'S STILL DOING IT NOW. HE WAS LOOKING AFTER A LOT OF KIDS...GIVE [SICI] US A GOOD ENVIRONMENT.

- PARTICIPANT

OUR PRINCIPAL FINDING IS THAT SELF-DETERMINATION FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES PROVIDES THE KEY TO REVERSING THE OVER-REPRESENTATION OF INDIGENOUS CHILDREN IN THE CHILD WELFARE AND JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEMS OF THE STATES AND TERRITORIES AND TO ELIMINATING UNJUSTIFIED REMOVALS OF INDIGENOUS CHILDREN FROM THEIR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES.^{xlvi}

- BRINGING THEM HOME REPORT

[ON ISOLATION] GET FED THROUGH A SLOT. SHIT. IT'S FUCKED. IT'S BEYOND ANYTHING. THE FOOD COMES OUT STALE AND HARD. IT'S NOT SOMEWHERE YOU WANT TO BE. IT'S FUCKED. IT'S THE WORST EXPERIENCE OF MY LIFE...IT'S DEFINITELY NOT A WAY TO LIVE. IT HAS A MASSIVE IMPACT ON YOU. IT'S WEIRD.

- PARTICIPANT

SOLUTION:

CREATE JUST AND EQUITABLE SYSTEMS

Systems work for everyone when they are fair and equitable. Victoria's justice system isolates, disempowers and criminalises Aboriginal children. The Victorian Government and opposition can create just and equitable systems with a whole of government approach, embedding the guiding principles of self-determination, youth participation and culture, family, Elders and communities.

1. End systemic abuses and institutional racism using self-determination, youth participation and cultural responsiveness.
 - Embed policies and procedures that commit the Victorian Government and opposition to eliminate systemic abuse, bias and racism across systems and institutions.
 - Embed procedures to eliminate 'gaps' in system processes, particularly problems with interdepartmental communication that cause exclusion and delays for children, families and communities accessing supports.
2. Create an inclusive education state that supports children's needs and pathways to independence, including:
 - Expand curriculum in mainstream schools to cater for a broader range of interests, increasing focus on assisting children into employment pathways and trade courses.
 - Support all children to thrive in schools, replacing the current approach that isolates some students by placing them in alternative schools and programs.

THERE'S RACISM. PEOPLE THINK JUST 'COS YOU'RE BLACK YOU'RE A CRIMINAL, AN ALCOHOLIC. I FEEL IT AT SCHOOL, I FEEL IT DOWN THE STREET. I FEEL LIKE I GET LOOKED DOWN ON IN MY COMMUNITY.

- PARTICIPANT

DEMAND IN THE JUSTICE SYSTEM IS DRIVEN BY A NUMBER OF FACTORS, BUT A CRUCIAL ONE IS SUCCESS (OR OTHERWISE) OF THE STATE'S EDUCATION, HUMAN SERVICES AND HEALTH SECTORS, WHICH ARE OFTEN CONCEIVED OF SEPARATELY. THESE SECTORS ALSO HAVE A GREAT OPPORTUNITY TO COME TOGETHER TO JOINTLY SUPPORT PEOPLE AT RISK AND DRIVE A MORE PREVENTATIVE APPROACH TO CRIME.^{xlvii}

- INFRASTRUCTURE VICTORIA

[I HAVE] SCARS ALL UP MY ARMS FROM POLICE DOGS.

- PARTICIPANT

IF THEY [POLICE] TALKED TO ME THEY WOULD HAVE GOTTEN [SIC] MORE THROUGH TO ME THAN THROWING ME AROUND AND SPRAYING ME AND DOING ALL KINDS OF THINGS. THEY WOULD HAVE GOTTEN THROUGH TALKING TO ME...I GOT THROWN AROUND AND BASHED UP A BIT FOR RESISTING. I WAS ALWAYS PRETTY OUT OF IT UNTIL THE STATION AND THEN I WOULD COME TO, AND I WOULD BE LOCKED UP.

- PARTICIPANT

NATIONALLY ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN ARE ABOUT HALF AS LIKELY TO RECEIVE A CAUTION OR BE DIVERTED FROM THE JUSTICE SYSTEM AS NON-INDIGENOUS CHILDREN, AND VICTORIA HAS THE LOWEST RATE OF DIVERSIONS, WITH ONLY 14% OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER YOUNG PEOPLE BEING PLACED INTO DIVERSIONARY PROGRAMS.^{xlviii}

- VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL LEGAL SERVICE

- Support schools and teachers to find positive alternatives to address student disengagement, replacing formal and informal exclusion from school.
 - Provide adequate support services in schools such as social workers, youth workers and diverse extra-curricular activities to engage children in school and provide safe spaces outside school hours.
3. End police violence and discrimination.
 - End unjust policing in all forms including racial targeting, violence, discriminatory legal treatment, neglect and abuse in police custody.
 - Support community controlled services that prevent and intervene in unjust policing and its causes.
 - Hold police members who perpetrate unjust policing to account.
 4. Create an informed Victoria that is free of discrimination.
 - Provide societal education about Aboriginal culture and history particularly in schools, media and for those working with Aboriginal young people.
 5. While developing a self-determined youth support system, strengthen and provide full access to existing services that embed Aboriginal knowledge systems and values such as:
 - Expand Children's Koori Court access to state-wide availability.
 - Expand Children's Koori Court structure to enable children to plead not guilty thereby increasing their access to the existing justice system.
 - Expand Marram-Ngala Ganbu to state-wide availability.
 - Expand Balit Ngulu to state-wide availability.

I WENT IN AND OUT OF PRIMARY SCHOOL, THREE DIFFERENT SCHOOLS WHICH WAS HARD. GOING IN AND OUT OF ONE TO ANOTHER. DIDN'T HAVE INTEREST IN SCHOOL I DIDN'T DO MUCH SCHOOL - I WAS ALWAYS GETTING BULLIED I DIDN'T GET MUCH EDUCATION. [I NEEDED] MORE SUPPORT AT SCHOOL [LIKE] TEACHERS OR TUTORS OR I DON'T KNOW. TO KEEP ME OFF THE STREETS AND AWAY FROM BAD CROWDS.

- PARTICIPANT

IF THE GAP BETWEEN ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES AND THEIR FELLOW AUSTRALIANS ACCESSING JUSTICE IS EVER TO BE PROPERLY ADDRESSED, THE STARTING POINT HAS TO BE A GENUINE ENGAGEMENT BY ALL LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT WITH ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER COMMUNITIES, THEIR ORGANISATIONS AND REPRESENTATIVE BODIES.^{xlix}

- THE REDFERN STATEMENT

I NEED MORE CULTURE AT SCHOOL TO FEEL COMFORTABLE. I FEEL LIKE THEY DON'T WANT ME.

- PARTICIPANT

RACIAL PROFILING [BY POLICE] HAS DEVASTATING IMPACTS ON INDIVIDUALS. AS A SYSTEMIC PRACTICE HOWEVER, IT ALSO HAS SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES FOR WHOLE COMMUNITIES. REDUCING THE RISKS INVOLVES COMMUNITY ADVOCATES, RESEARCHERS, INSTITUTIONS AND POLICE WORKING TOGETHER TO IDENTIFY PATTERNS OF DISPROPORTIONALITY MAKE APPROPRIATE CHANGES TO POLICING PRACTICES AND PROCEDURES.¹

- POLICE STOP DATA WORKING GROUP

IT FEELS GOOD TO BE HEARD IN KOORI COURT. THEY'RE NOT JUST LISTENING TO MY LAWYER BUT TO ME AND THAT'S THE WAY IT SHOULD BE.

- PARTICIPANT

MAKE NGAGA-DJI HAPPEN

Thank you for listening to the voices of our children, their stories and our vision for a Victoria that sees them as children of this land: daughters, sons, sisters, brothers and children beyond the binary.

These children are our future Elders, our custodians of culture, our carers for Country.

Ngaga-dji is an opportunity for real justice for Aboriginal children and our communities. It is an opportunity to change the stories of loneliness and hurt to stories of healing and love. Ngaga-dji is an opportunity for Victoria to uphold the lore of this land, to stand for justice and equality for Aboriginal children and to lead the change we need across the country.

Take the opportunity: share our stories, share our solutions, let's work together for our children.

LANGUAGE

Ableism: Discrimination against people with disabilities.

Aboriginal: We use Aboriginal as a term inclusive of Torres Strait Islander peoples.

ACCO: Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation

AJA: The Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreement (AJA) is a partnership between the Victorian Government and the Aboriginal community, established to achieve improved justice outcomes for Aboriginal people.^{li} AJA3 is phase three of this agreement.

Blackfulla: A term that many Aboriginal community members use to refer to each other and themselves.

Brotherboy: A term that many Aboriginal community members use to refer to male friends and family members.

Children and young people: In this report, we use 'children' to refer to those under 18 years of age and 'young person' to describe anyone under 25 years.

Community: Networks of family, kin and friends.

Culture and identity: We define culture and identity together as they are interconnected, complex and dynamic. Culture and identity

are essential to a person's belonging and sense of self and can be defined in many different ways. Uncle Andrew Jackomos writes one definition, "culture is about family networks, Elders and ancestors. It's about relationships, languages, dance, ceremony and heritage. Culture is about spiritual connection to our lands and waters. It is about the way we pass on stories and knowledge to our babies and children; it is how we greet each other and look for connection. It is about all the parts that bind us together."^{lii}

Elder: A senior, respected member of Aboriginal community.

Family: Aboriginal family connections go far beyond immediate family. SNAICC describes the large networks of Aboriginal families and their importance in children's lives, "family is the cornerstone of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, spirituality and identity. As an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child grows up, maintaining their connections to family and community forms the basis of the development of the child's identity as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person, their cultural connectedness and their emerging spirituality...Those involved in children's lives, and helping to raise them, commonly include grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews, and members of the community who are considered to be family."^{liii}

Intergenerational trauma: The Healing Foundation describes intergenerational trauma as, "the trauma experienced by Indigenous people as a result of colonisation and subsequent policies, such as the forced removal of children, has had devastating consequences. The disruption of our culture and the negative impacts on the cultural identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has had lasting negative effects, passed from generation to generation. The cumulative effect of historical and intergenerational trauma severely reduces the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to fully and positively participate in their lives and communities, thereby leading to widespread disadvantage."^{liv}

Juvi: Slang for juvenile/children's prison.

Koori/Koorie: The Koorie Youth Council uses Koorie in its title as a term inclusive of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in Victoria. We have retained the spelling of Koori/Koorie in this report as it appears in programs, services and quotes.

Koori court: The Children's Koori Court is a division of the Children's Court. Koori Court provides Aboriginal children and young people a culturally safe alternative to mainstream Children's Court with Elders and respected community members present.^{lv}

KYC: Koorie Youth Council

LGBTIQA+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Intersex, Queer or Questioning, Asexual.

Mob: Used by many Aboriginal people to describe Aboriginal communities or a groups of Aboriginal people.

Resi: Slang for residential care home. A house where young people in out-of-home care live under the supervision of a worker.

Self-determination: Aboriginal people have a right to self-determination.^{lvii} Self-determination is the right to free choice and determination of one's future.

Social and emotional wellbeing: The Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association describes social and emotional wellbeing as a holistic view of health that “incorporates the physical, social, emotional, and cultural wellbeing of individuals and their communities.”^{lviii}

Story: This report embeds the continued practice of storytelling in our communities. Stock et. al. explain, “Indigenous people are embedded in traditions of storytelling, both in everyday social life and in the upbringing and education of their children...ideas and practices of the narrative approach were considered to honour and re-empower Aboriginal ways of being. Denborough et al. (2006) highlight the importance of the sharing of stories and outline how narrative

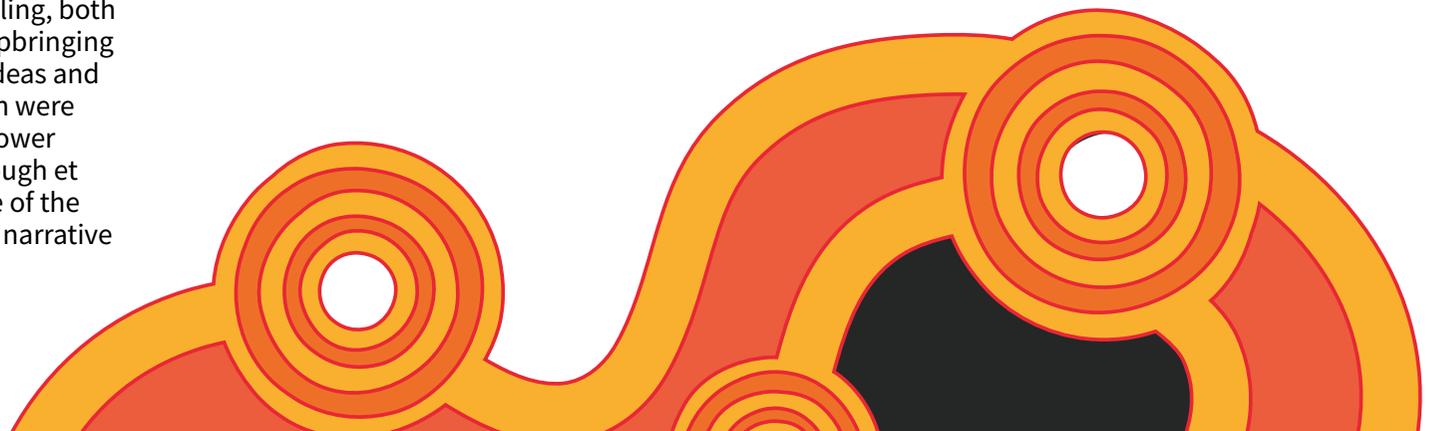
approaches can be used to engage with communities who experience difficult times, making it more possible for people to reconnect with their own skills and knowledge.”^{lviii}

Talk up: Used by many Aboriginal people, ‘talk up’ means to speak up and express yourself honestly.

Woolies: Woolworths supermarket

Yarn: Used by many Aboriginal people, ‘yarn’ means to share informal dialogue.

Youth participation: Young people having genuine and meaningful involvement in decision-making processes in a way that recognises and values their skills, knowledge, experiences and rights to self-determination.^{lix}



THANK YOU

Thank you to the children and young people who shared their stories and insights, this work exists because of you. We also thank the families and communities around these children who supported them to be a part of this project.

Thank you to the organisations who hosted KYC for the story-gathering in communities.

We particularly acknowledge Koori Youth Justice workers who do life-changing work for children and young people. We have not identified organisations, locations and workers to preserve the privacy of children and young people involved in this project.

We also acknowledge the work of the Department of Justice and Regulation, the Department of Health and Human Services as well as staff at Parkville and Malmsbury Youth Justice Centres for supporting our engagement with children and young people in the centres.

Thank you to the many Aboriginal community members, ACCOs and other experts who provided advice and insight for this project.

We particularly thank members of the Ngaga-dji Reference Group for your valuable contributions to this project as well as the Aboriginal Justice Caucus and the Commission for Children and Young People for their endorsements.

Thank you to the Wurundjeri Land Council for allowing us to use the powerful title and names in Woiwurrung. Much of the Koorie Youth Council's work takes place on Wurundjeri Country and we extend our deepest respect to Elders past, present and emerging. We also acknowledge the support of Mandy Nicholson for her guidance in identifying Woiwurrung for our report.

We acknowledge the ongoing contribution of the KYC Executive who guide our work and gave their insights and knowledge to this project. We thank all KYC supporters including our auspice, Youth Affairs Council Victoria, for the ongoing energy and support they bring to amplifying the voices of Aboriginal young people.

This work was made possible by the advocacy of the Aboriginal Justice Forum and the AJA3. We thank the forum for valuing the voices of Aboriginal children and enabling this project.

KYC acknowledges the support of the Victorian Government, Aboriginal Victoria, the Department of Justice and Regulation and the Department of Health and Human Services.

KYC acknowledges the support of our auspice, Youth Affairs Council Victoria



KYC acknowledges the support of the Victorian Government



NGAGA-DJI ARTWORK

KYC is proud to feature artwork from children in youth justice custody, we wish to acknowledge and thank these artists for sharing their skill and stories through art. Artist names have been kept private for confidentiality.



Family and friends
3 figures representing me, family and workers



Family tree
Dark blue with black gathering point and the male and female symbols, kangaroo tracks and emu tracks



Embracing culture
An Elder playing didgeridoo under stars in the Dreamtime



Waterhole
Waterhole with connecting creeks



Bunjil



Untitled



Untitled





JACOB KOMESAROFF

Illustrator

I am a Jewish and Queer activist, artist and youth facilitator, living on the lands of the Boon Wurrung people. I would like to acknowledge their Elders; past, present and emerging. Sovereignty has never been ceded.

I would also like to pay my respects to those who have contributed their stories, artworks, experiences and time to create this document. I am thankful to have been guided by the Koorie Youth Council, contributing to a project that will amplify young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices for greater empathy, compassion and social change.

Through illustration and story-telling, I am committed to sharing the truth and elevating the experiences of marginalised communities. Using the platform of Instagram, I share my thoughts, comments and hand-drawn illustrations addressing social issues, current affairs and themes important to me, encouraging others to do the same! My page is called 'jkomments'.

At the University of Melbourne, I am studying a Masters of Urban Planning, advocating for social policy and planning to better address the needs of marginalised community groups.

It has been an immense privilege to work alongside KYC and the young artists. Thank you KYC for this opportunity.

CASSIDY WANGANEEN LIDDLE

Animator

My proud heritage, the Mparntwe, Arrernte tribe a Central Desert clan, means being brought up influenced by Indigenous art, which is a key way I've been able to learn and connect to my culture. I'm currently studying a Bachelor of Design (Animation and Interactive Media) and am looking to pursue further animation projects.

I'm humbled to have been able to work on these animations and to share these stories.

Instagram: 'cassidyliddle'

See www.ngaga-djiproject.org.au for videos



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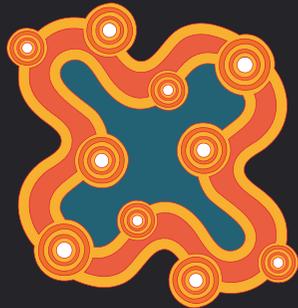
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