



the  
**Lowitja**  
INSTITUTE

Australia's National Institute  
for Aboriginal and Torres Strait  
Islander Health Research

*Incorporating the Cooperative Research Centre  
for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health*

National Children's Commissioner  
Australian Human Rights Commission

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## **The Lowitja Institute – Submission to the National Children's Commissioner Enquiry into intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour in children**

The Lowitja Institute welcomes the opportunity to provide comment to The National Children's Commissioner's examination of how children and young people under 18 years can be better protected from intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour.

The Lowitja Institute is Australia's National Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research. We are the only research organisation in Australia with a sole focus on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Further detail about the Lowitja Institute is set out at Appendix One.

The Lowitja Institute strongly supports this enquiry into the health and wellbeing, and indeed the lives, of our young people.

In terms of developing environments in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people can thrive and meet their potential, the Lowitja Institute makes the following recommendation:

*Based on our research findings and related work, The **Lowitja Institute recommends** that the enquiry take into consideration the impacts of:*

- *Racism, as a risk factor for self-harm and suicide;*
- *Empowerment and the centrality of culture, as a protective factor for self-harm and suicide; and*
- *The broader context of the social determinants of health and wellbeing, particularly the role of education.*

### **Relevant Lowitja Institute Research**

#### ***Racism***

We would like to draw your attention to our recent research regarding the mental health impacts of racial discrimination. This research found that racism is bad for health and wellbeing.

The *Experiences of Racism 2010-2011*<sup>1</sup> survey was funded by the Lowitja Institute, and undertaken in Victoria as part of a broader study. The survey investigated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

<sup>1</sup> Ferdinand, A., Paradies, Y. & Kelaher, M. 2012, *Mental Health Impacts of Racial Discrimination in Victorian Aboriginal Communities: The Localities Embracing and Accepting Diversity (LEAD) Experiences of Racism Survey*, The Lowitja Institute, Melbourne; <https://www.lowitja.org.au/lowitja-publishing/L023> (accessed 21 May 2014)

participants self-reported experiences of racism, their responses and reactions to racist incidents and the association between these experiences and measures of psychological distress. The survey is not about suicide and self-harm but it does make clear links between racism and health and wellbeing, which are obviously significant protective factors for harm and suicide.

The survey findings are detailed in the project report and summary (referenced above and available at [www.lowitja.org.au/lowitja-publishing/L023](http://www.lowitja.org.au/lowitja-publishing/L023)) summarised as follows:

- 97% of those surveyed had experienced racism in the previous 12 months;
- Racism can occur in a range of settings, such as shops and public spaces, education and employment settings;
- Many who experienced a high level of racism incidents reported high or very high psychological distress.

### **Empowerment**

The Lowitja Institute and its predecessor organisations has supported and been closely associated with the Family Wellbeing Program over a long period of time. This program was developed in the early 1990s by a group of Indigenous leaders in Adelaide who had been affected by the Stolen Generations. The 150-hour program is enriched with material from complementary philosophies and empowerment principles and seeks to empower participants through personal transformation that involves harmonising physical, emotional, mental and spiritual aspects of life and applying this to practical, day-to-day living. Program content is delivered in group settings through five 30-hour stages.

The Family Wellbeing program facilitates a process of empowerment and agency in peoples' lives. As Lowitja Institute Chair, Ms Pat Anderson has stated in the foreword of a recent publication about the program<sup>2</sup> "As Aboriginal people, we need to have a sense of agency in our lives, that we are not stray leaves blowing about in the wind". Evaluation reports of the program across a range of settings have confirmed that many participants learned to deal with emotions and avoid conflict, and found more peace in their lives. They were able to analyse situations more carefully, take better care of themselves, give and demand more in their relationships, and participate more actively.

A pilot study<sup>3</sup> was conducted to adapt the program to the needs of Indigenous school children living in remote communities. The pilot was developed, conducted and evaluated in the schools. The study found that participation in the program resulted in significant social and emotional growth for students. Outcomes described by participating students and teachers included increased analytical and reflective skills, greater ability to think for themselves, to set goals, less teasing and bullying and an enhanced sense of identity, friendship and 'social relatedness'.

In terms of health and wellbeing, and its consequential relationship to self-harm and suicide, the Family Wellbeing Program has demonstrated that the concept of empowerment is highly relevant. More information about the Family Wellbeing Program can be found on the Lowitja Institute website at <http://www.lowitja.org.au/family-wellbeing-program-empowerment-research>

### **Social Determinants**

It is of course vital that our young people have equal opportunity to school and health services, that houses and physical environments are safe and properly serviced, and that they and their parents have

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<sup>2</sup> *Promoting Aboriginal Health – The Family Wellbeing Empowerment Approach*, Whiteside M, Tsey K, Cadet-James Y, McCalman M, Springer Publications, 2014, p v

<sup>3</sup> Adapting the Family Wellbeing' empowerment program to the needs of remote Indigenous school children, Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health, 2005, vol 29, No. 2, Tsey K, Whiteside M, Daly S, Deemal A, Gibson T, Cadet-James Y, Wilson A, Santhanam R, Haswell-Elkins M.

income opportunities and have purposeful lives. These are of course broader and challenging issues but must still be considered within the context of being able to thrive and reach one's potential. The issues are discussed in broader detail in the Lowitja Institute's publication – *Beyond Band-aids – Exploring the Underlying Social Determinants of Aboriginal Health*, available at our website at <http://www.lowitja.org.au/beyond-band-aids>

### ***The role of culture***

Culture plays an important protective role in the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. For the first time, the centrality of culture to peoples' health and wellbeing has now been acknowledged in a national Aboriginal health policy instrument<sup>4</sup>. As that document states, culture must be differentiated from the excessive behaviours which contribute to ill-health and harm. Rather, culture is about sharing life-giving values from which individuals, families and communities can draw strength, resilience and empowerment and thus contribute to health and wellbeing.

The significance of culture in relation to high-risk and self-harm is addressed in work supported by our predecessor organisation, the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health. Brian McCoy<sup>5</sup> has explored the cultural process of "nurture" or 'Kanyirninpa' (holding) and its role in health and wellbeing. His research is set in the Kimberly WA area, and showed that the fracture of 'kanyirninpa' over recent generations seriously affected key social processes and generational relationships within desert society. This wounding had implications for men's health and provided some understanding as to why young men attempt self-harm and suicide. The study finds also that the social expression of kanyirninpa can also sustain important meanings for young men as they grow up by protecting them from high-risk behavior and self-harm.

We should also draw to the attention of the enquiry, an overseas study of First Nations Youth in Canada by Chandler and Lalonde. This was a study in 1998 across 200 BC Aboriginal groups that demonstrates cultural continuity as a protective factor against suicide in young people. The study concludes that communities that took steps to preserve and rehabilitate their own cultures are shown to be those in which youth suicide rates were dramatically reduced. The study supports calls for culture to be understood as a social determinant of health and wellbeing.

If you have any questions regarding the above, please do not hesitate to contact me on 02 8341 5500.

Yours sincerely



Lyn Brodie  
Chief Executive Officer

2 June 2014

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<sup>4</sup> *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-2023*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2013  
<http://www.health.gov.au/natsihp> (accessed 21 May 2014)

<sup>5</sup> McCoy, B. 2007, 'Suicide and Desert Men: *The power and protection of kanyirninpa (holding)*', *Australasian Psychiatry*, vol. 15, pp. 63-7

## **The Lowitja Institute**

The Lowitja Institute is Australia's National Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research. We are the only research organisation in Australia with a sole focus on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

We are largely funded by the Cooperative Research Centres (CRC) Program, an Australian Government initiative, and we host the CRC for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health.

### **What we do**

Our overarching research strategy, and that of our predecessor organisations since 1997, is to produce the knowledge, tools and resources by which those who use the research, such as primary health care providers, can enhance positive health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Our current research program focuses on the individual healthy start for a healthy life, on the healthy communities and settings that support individuals, and on the policy and systems that will ensure the health and wellbeing of Australia's First People's over the long term.

### **How we do it**

The Lowitja Institute works with communities, researchers and policy makers across Australia to help facilitate research where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people set the agenda and own the outcomes.

Our way of developing research is very different from traditional approaches. The voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people informs all our activities, whether we're conducting community-based research or setting our strategic direction. This puts Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' knowledge and cultural understanding at the heart of the research process and outcomes.

### **Our partners**

Partnerships are our strength. Our 14 partners from around Australia—community-controlled health services; state, territory and federal government departments; and academic research institutions—support the implementation of our current research agenda.

**Further information** about our organisation can be found at our website [www.lowitja.org.au](http://www.lowitja.org.au)