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VACCHO and Balit Durn Durn Centre Submission into Youth Justice and Child Wellbeing Reform across Australia



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Acknowledging Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples living experience

We acknowledge all Traditional Owner's ongoing connection to these lands, waterways, and skies. We pay our respects to all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples past and present. To the giants whose shoulders we stand on today and every day. And we acknowledge that sovereignty has never been ceded.

It is important that we hold space to acknowledge the living experiences of our Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Elders, brothers and brotherboys, sisters and sistergirls, and cousins from all Nations and language groups. Peoples who have breathed life into these lands, waterways, and skies, immersed with vibrant yet diverse cultures from the very beginning of time itself.

The ongoing impacts stemming from colonisation on the social and political determinants of Aboriginal peoples have been profound. Its impacts continue to reverberate across several generations. In Victoria, colonialism has been especially brutal. Colonial violence has been enduring and takes many forms. From various government policies intent of genocide, and those that led to the Stolen Generations – a form of cultural genocide in itself - to police brutality and the continuing torment of Black deaths in custody, to the trauma that is a product from unchecked, unchallenged racism and discrimination – whether structural, systemic, overt, casual, or “unconscious bias”. Inert, culturally unsafe service systems and models of care designed to cater to the majority are incapable of understanding our needs and ways of being. It needn't matter the form of violence, its impacts are felt deeply, the trauma compounding.

Despite all that colonisation has wrought in the last 235 years, our connection to Country, culture and kin remains enduring. It remains strong. Despite dislocation borne from colonial violence, we are healing. We are finding our voice, a voice that was so ruthlessly taken from and denied to our Ancestors. We are telling our stories, sharing our experiences with the belief that society, systems, and structures can learn from us and those who went before us – whose footsteps we follow. The belief that with our advocacy, systems and structures can evolve to place the social and emotional wellbeing model at the core of service design and delivery. A holistic model that recognises our mob's health and wellbeing as being influenced by cultural, historical, political, and social determinants.





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Language

The term 'Aboriginal' in VACCHO documents is inclusive of Torres Strait Islander peoples and 'Aboriginal Victorian' includes all Aboriginal people living in Victoria. The terms 'Community' or 'Communities' in this document refers to all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia, representing a wide diversity of cultures, traditions, and experiences.

Background

Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO)

VACCHO is the peak body for Aboriginal health and wellbeing in Victoria – the only organisation of its kind - with 32 Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) as Members. VACCHO trains, supports, and advocates with and for our Members and their Communities across Victoria. ACCOs deliver a suite of culturally safe and responsive frontline health and community care services for Aboriginal Communities. ACCOs have a proud, long history as sustainable, grassroots organisations that assist in building Aboriginal self-determination. They hold Aboriginal health in Aboriginal hands.

The Balit Durn Durn Centre for Aboriginal Social and Emotional Wellbeing

The Balit Durn Durn Centre (the Centre) was launched in May 2022 as a response to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. Although the creation of the Centre is in its infancy, it is a result of the tireless advocacy of Aboriginal peoples across generations. The Centre fosters innovation and improvement in social and emotional wellbeing practice, policy, and research.

The language term Balit Durn Durn was gifted by the Wurundjeri community to name our report in response to the Royal Commission's Interim Report. Further approval was sought to continue the use of Woi Wurrung language to name the Centre. The Centre acknowledges the generosity of Wurundjeri people for the continued use of their Woi Wurrung language. Balit Durn Durn translates in English to 'strong brain, mind, intellect and sense of self'.



Question 1: What factors contribute to children's and young people's involvement in youth justice systems in Australia?

One of the most significant factors contributing to the involvement of Aboriginal children and young people in the youth justice systems in Australia is the ongoing impact of colonisation. While many Aboriginal families are thriving, historical and ongoing social injustices, violence, and discrimination continue to impact on the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples to this day.

It is crucial to address the ongoing impacts of colonisation by fostering cultural revitalisation, and empowering Aboriginal communities to regain control over their own destinies. Efforts that respect and promote Aboriginal culture, values, and self-determination are vital to reduce the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and young people in the youth justice system in Australia.

Ongoing impacts of colonisation that contribute to children's and young people's involvement in youth justice systems in Australia include:

Systemic Racism: Systemic racism plays a significant role in Aboriginal youth overrepresentation in the justice system. Discrimination and bias can lead to disproportionate targeting, profiling, and harsher treatment of Aboriginal children by law enforcement, leading to higher rates of arrest and detention¹. A recent report found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were two and a half times more likely to be issued covid fines based on their population size and suggested that racial profiling by Victoria Police contributed to the cause of this data difference between minority groups and people in Victoria of Anglo descent.²

Racism more broadly results in Aboriginal people experiencing poorer physical and mental health outcomes, higher rates of depression and anxiety, and an exacerbation of trauma and trauma responses³, and research has found that experiencing racism and discrimination is correlated with youth offending and violent delinquency⁴. Loss of cultural connection and identity due to historical trauma, racism, and the impacts of colonisation, can contribute to a sense of alienation and disconnection for Aboriginal youth. This disconnection can lead to a search for identity often resulting in risk-taking behaviours and involvement in the justice system.

¹ Paradies, Y. (2016). Colonisation, racism and Indigenous health, *Journal of Population Research*, 33(1), 83-96

² Hopkins, T & Popovic, G. (2023). 'Policing COVID-19 in Victoria: Exploring the impact of perceived race in the issuing of COVID-19 fines during 2020' (Inner Melbourne Community Legal, 2023).

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³ Priest, N., Paradies, Y., Stewart, P. & Luke, J. (2011). Racism and health among urban Aboriginal young people, *BMC Public Health* 11(568)

⁴ Martin, M. J., McCarthy, B., Conger, R. D., Gibbons, F. X., Simons, R. L., Cutrona, C. E., & Brody, G. H. (2011). The Enduring Significance of Racism: Discrimination and Delinquency Among Black American Youth. *Journal of research on adolescence : the official journal of the Society for Research on Adolescence*, 21(3), 662–676. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2010.00699.x>





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Socioeconomic Disadvantage: Aboriginal communities are more likely to face socioeconomic disadvantage, which can contribute to increased rates of crime and involvement in the justice system. Lack of generational wealth and the stigma associated with accessing government assistance can result in parents or children being involved in poverty-related crimes, or Child Protection becoming involved. The Sentencing Council in New South Wales reported that 49% of people who committed a crime said they did so in order to do so pay off debts⁵. The intersections between poverty, experiences of racism, discrimination and social disadvantage need to be considered in youth justice response and reform.

Intergenerational Trauma: Historical factors, including the impact of colonisation, the forced removal of Aboriginal children (Stolen Generations), and cultural disruption, have led to intergenerational trauma within Aboriginal communities. This trauma can manifest as substance abuse, mental health issues, family breakdowns, and higher rates of involvement in the justice system. As noted in *Wirkara Kulpa* Aboriginal Youth Justice Strategy 2022-2032, 81% of Aboriginal young people involved in youth justice were victims of abuse, trauma, or neglect; 78% had experienced family violence; and 94% had a history of alcohol and/or drug use.⁶ These alarming statistics should not elicit a criminal justice response that persecutes children who have been victimised; rather they should prompt a health and healing response focusing on reconnecting young people to family, Country and Community to ensure their social and emotional wellbeing needs are met.

Inadequate and insufficient funding for culturally appropriate Support Services, including Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) services: Aboriginal children, young people and families often face limited access to appropriate support services, such as mental health care, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, and educational resources. The lack of culturally sensitive and community-based interventions can hinder their chances of rehabilitation and increase the likelihood of reoffending.

Early Contact with the Child Protection System: In a 2019 study, 20.1% out of 663 unborn notifications (meaning child protection risks that were flagged during pregnancy) on Aboriginal mothers in Victoria were substantiated. For non-Indigenous mothers, just 12.4% of unborn notifications were substantiated⁷. Aboriginal children are overrepresented at all levels of the child protection system, with a higher likelihood of being removed from their families and placed into out-of-home care (OoHC) care. Aboriginal children comprise around 30% of the children in OoHC, despite only representing around one percent of the Victorian population, making them 20.1 times more likely to be removed from their families compared to non-Aboriginal children.⁸

⁵http://www.sentencingcouncil.justice.nsw.gov.au/Documents/Projects_Complete/Fines/interim_report_on_fines.pdf, p.35

⁶ State Government of Victoria, Department of Justice, and Community Safety, 2022, *Wirkara Kulpa* Aboriginal Youth Justice Strategy 2022-2032.

⁷ Wahlquist, C 2019, 'Indigenous babies being removed from parents at rising rates, study finds', *The Guardian*, February 25, Viewed 27 June 2023 < <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/feb/25/indigenous-babies-being-removed-from-parents-at-rising-rates-study-finds>>.

⁸Victorian Government. 2022. Supporting Aboriginal children and families to be strong in culture and proud of their unique identity can ensure that every Aboriginal child has the best start in life. First Peoples State Relations, <https://www.firstpeoplesrelations.vic.gov.au/victorian-government-aboriginal-affairs-report-2021/children-family-and-home>



Loss of cultural connection and identity due to historical trauma, racism, and the impacts of colonisation, can contribute to a sense of alienation and disconnection for Aboriginal youth. This disconnection can lead to a search for identity often resulting in risk-taking behaviours and involvement in the justice system.⁹ This separation from their cultural identity and kinship networks can increase the risk of offending and subsequent involvement in the youth justice system. In December 2019, 72% of Aboriginal children and young people involved in youth justice in Victoria had been subject to a child protection report¹⁰. Keeping our children out of the child protection system is essential in preventing them from entering youth justice.

Question 2: What needs to be changed so that youth justice and related systems protect the rights and wellbeing of children and young people? What are the barriers to change, and how can these be overcome?

We need to start from a place of strength, focussing on early investment in keeping Aboriginal children with their families, connected to culture, Country and Community. Encouraging the participation of Aboriginal communities in decision-making processes and empowering them to develop and implement community-led initiatives can lead to more effective and culturally appropriate solutions. We need to:

- Invest in early years and families to reduce the number of children in Out of Home Care
- Ensure ongoing connection to Culture, Community and Aboriginal Community-Controlled services
- Provide a health-based therapeutic response to issues arising rather than detention
- Reduce racial bias in systems
- End child detention

Supports during pregnancy: The Koori Maternity Service (KMS) program provides access to holistic, culturally safe maternity care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their families during pregnancy. KMS also supports non-Aboriginal women having Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies.

Offering culturally safe and appropriate services for women during pregnancy means more engagement, and more access to health care. Mothers receive continuity of care with their local ACCO that can provide early intervention and detection support for issues such as speech delays, disabilities, and developmental issues. KMS offer flexible, person-centred care, strengthened by Aboriginal culture and practice built upon respectful trusting relationships.

⁹ Shepherd, S, M., Ogloff, P, R. J., Shea, D., Pfeifer, E. J., & Paradies, Y. (2017). Aboriginal prisoners and cognitive impairment: the impact of dual disadvantage on Social and Emotional Wellbeing, *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, doi: 10.1111/jir.12357

¹⁰ State Government of Victoria, Department of Justice, and Community Safety, 2022, *Wirkara Kulpa Aboriginal Youth Justice Strategy 2022-2032*.





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Access to KMS shows a strong correlation between caring for baby and connection to culture, and increased confidence and strength within families relationships and overall outlook on life¹¹.

A 2022 study¹² into reducing the number of Aboriginal children in Out of Home Care recommended that redesigning maternity and neonatal care to ensure parents have access to culturally safe support during pregnancy, birth, and early post-partum was vital. Expanding KMS would be a key part in ensuring Aboriginal families had access to support early on.

Providing a health response that intervenes early: Aboriginal children are being misdiagnosed or not diagnosed adequately. Research has linked youth offending with a high prevalence of Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) or language impairment, where young people who enter the justice system are highly likely to have an unidentified language impairment¹³. Research on offending and DLD demonstrates that the higher the level of violence or offending, an increase in language impairment severity is noted, and increases in language performance also increase the likelihood of not offending or reoffending.¹⁴ As only 35% of Aboriginal children are 'developmentally on track on all 5 domains', the likelihood of Aboriginal children developing DLD or other speech related delays, is considerably high, especially as early detection for Aboriginal children is scarce.³⁷ For these young people in custody, cognitive impairment is associated with additional experiences of racism, difficulty in handling emotions, and reduced access to meaningful activities that boost social and emotional wellbeing.¹⁵

The reaffirmation of cultural identity through language, art, storytelling, and traditional practices fosters a positive sense of self and strengthens interpersonal relationships within the Community.¹⁶ This, in turn, enhances social support networks, reduces feelings of isolation, and contributes to overall mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. Cultural connection acts as a protective factor against the negative impacts of historical traumas, discrimination, and systemic inequalities, empowering individuals to navigate challenges and maintain a positive outlook on life.¹⁷ Research has demonstrated a link between a reduced risk of reoffending, with access to and opportunities for Aboriginal cultural engagement and practices whilst in custody.¹⁸

¹¹ Victoria State Government, Health and Human Service, *KOORI MATERNITY SERVICES GUIDELINES Delivering culturally responsive and high-quality care*, 2017 <file:///C:/Users/samanthar/Downloads/koori-maternity-services-guidelines.pdf> page 9

¹² Australian Journal of Social Issues, *Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families to Stay Together from the Start (SAFeST Start): Urgent call to action to address crisis in infant removals*, 26 January 2022
<<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/ajs4.200>>

¹³ Snow, P., C. & Powell, B., M. (2011). Oral language competence in incarcerated youth offenders: links with offending severity, *Journal of Speech Language Pathology*, 13(6), 480-489, DOI: 10.3109/17549507.2011.578661

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Hopkins, T., Clegg, J. & Stackhouse, J. (2017). Examining the association between language, expository discourse and offending behaviour: an investigation of direction, strength and independence, *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorder*, 53(1), 113-129, DOI: 10.1111/1460-6984.12330

¹⁶ Gee, G., Hulbert, C., Kennedy, H., & Paradies, Y. (2023). Cultural determinants and resilience and recovery factors associated with trauma among Aboriginal help-seeking clients from an Aboriginal community-controlled counselling service, *BMC Psychiatry*, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-023-04567-5>

¹⁷ Shepherd, S, M., Ogloff, P, R. J., Shea, D., Pfeifer, E. J., & Paradies, Y. (2017). Aboriginal prisoners and cognitive impairment: the impact of dual disadvantage on Social and Emotional Wellbeing, *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, doi: 10.1111/jir.12357

¹⁸ Shepherd, M. S., Delgado, H. R., Sherwood, J. & Paradies, Y. (2018). The impact of indigenous cultural identity and cultural engagement on violent offending, *BMC Public Health*, 18(50), DOI 10.1186/s12889-017-4603-2





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Investing in keeping children in their homes: We must invest in early intervention and prevention programs that support families and address the underlying causes of child protection concerns. Providing culturally appropriate support services, such as family support programs, mental health services, housing, and parenting education, can help strengthen families and reduce the need for child removals. In the recent Victorian budget (FY23-24) funding continues to pour into placing children in out of home care and in detention. This crisis driven funding, where \$548 million dollars has been allocated to “supporting vulnerable children and families”, is predominately being invested in residential care funding and child protection worker expansion. Such fiscal decision-making leaves the ACCO sector pleading for investment into prevention and early intervention strategies that have shown effectiveness in keeping families together.

Reducing racial bias: We need to increase cultural competence and provide ongoing training to justice professionals to help them better engage with Aboriginal children and young people. Collaborating with Aboriginal communities, Elders, and leaders to develop and implement culturally sensitive policies and practices is also essential.

The Koori Court allows younger people from the community to be heard and judged by their peers and Elders. In New South Wales, it was reported that Youth Koori Court participants were 40% less likely to receive a custodial sentence relative to Aboriginal young people who were sentenced through the regular pathway¹⁹. A drawback of the current system is that Aboriginal children have to plead guilty before being judged in a Koori Court, which could incentivise pleading guilty meaning some young people receive a criminal record that would not have otherwise had.

Reducing detention as a response: The age of criminal responsibility should be raised to at least 14. Even with the current age of criminal responsibility, we should not be detaining children in jail as it is not a therapeutic place or a place of safety – it creates significant risk for young people including acting as a direct pipeline to prison.

Amendments to bail laws have resulted in an increase of people spending significant time in prison before sentencing. Being held in custody whilst on remand exposes young people to a range of traumatic experiences and potential harms, further increasing the likelihood of them reoffending upon release. Although bail decision makers are required to consider certain issues in relation to children, in 2020-2021, 68.7% of Aboriginal children in youth custody were on remand on an average day. This high percentage of Aboriginal children on remand shows the inadequacy of these systems in keeping our children out of custody.²⁰

Funding for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to provide healthcare in prisons: While we strongly advocate for our children to be kept out of the justice system entirely, for those who are in these settings, it is essential that they have access to culturally appropriate and responsive services. ACCOs should be funded to provide these services as Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health and Community Services has done successfully in

¹⁹ NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, *NSW Youth Koori Court reduces custody rates for Aboriginal young people*, 28 April 2022, <[²⁰ VALS 2022, *VALS Policy Brief, Fixing Victoria's Broken Bail Laws*, Viewed 28 June 2023 <<https://www.vals.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Fixing-Victorias-Broken-Bail-Laws.pdf>> .](https://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Pages/bocsar_media_releases/2022/mr-YKC-outcomes.aspx#:~:text=The%20evaluation%20found%20that%20youth,sentenced%20through%20the%20regular%20pathway.></p></div><div data-bbox=)





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adult prisons in the ACT²¹. VACCHO supports the decision by the Victorian Government to engage Barwon Health, a public health provider, who has a partnership with Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-Operative to provide health services in Cherry Creek Youth Justice Centre, which will accommodate 15- to 17-year-old boys who are sentenced or on long-term remand. Following a Ministerial decision to engage a public health provider at Cherry Creek, Justice Health has entered into contract discussions with the local area public provider, Barwon Health, to deliver those services. This model is an example of where ACCO's should be consulted in the planning and development process to ensure the best care for the community, where Aboriginal health is in Aboriginal hands.

Question 3: Can you identify reforms that show evidence of positive outcomes, including reductions in children's and young people's involvement in youth justice and child protection systems, either in Australia or internationally?

Several reforms and initiatives have shown evidence of positive outcomes in reducing the involvement of Aboriginal children and young people in youth justice and child protection systems, including:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Years Education: Multifunctional Aboriginal Child and Family Centres (MACs) and Aboriginal Child and Family Centres (ACFCs) provide an integrated programming approach to Early Years education that meets the educational, health, social, emotional, and developmental needs of Aboriginal children²². Holistic, wrap-around, family-centred models of care that are grounded in culture and strengthen identity demonstrate positive outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families.

Bubup Wilam is an Aboriginal Child and Family Centre based in Thomastown, Melbourne delivering a long day care program, kindergarten and health and wellbeing supports to Aboriginal children aged 6 months to 6 years, and their families. They are one of only three service providers in the country to offer preventive and early childhood intervention services including allied health services such as hearing tests, speech pathologists, visiting general practitioners, children's mental health counselling, a comprehensive primary school integration program, and access to other health care services without fear, shame, racism, and without the burden of additional, often prohibitive, time-consuming costs and need to take time off work²³. Providing preventative health checks in a culturally safe, strengths- focussed, non-clinical setting sets our children up for the best start in life which has lasting impacts where Aboriginal children pave the way for a different future.

²¹ Tongs, J., Chatfield, H. & Arabena, K. 2007, 'The Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Service Holistic Health Care for Prison Model', Aboriginal & Islander Health Worker Journal, vol. 31(6).

²² Brathwaite, E & Horn, C 2019, Service Integration for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Development: Final Report, SNAICC, First 1000 Days Australia and The University of Melbourne

²³ Celebrating NAIDOC week 2023, Bubup Wilam Aboriginal Child and Family Centre, Viewed 23 June 2023, <<https://www.naidoc.org.au/award-finalist/bubup-wilam-aboriginal-child-and-family-centre>>





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Family Preservation and Reunification Programs: Programs that prioritise family preservation and reunification have shown promising results in reducing the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in child protection systems in Victoria. These programs provide intensive support services to families, addressing issues such as substance abuse, mental health, and parenting skills. They aim to strengthen families and prevent unnecessary child removals.

Trauma-Informed Care: Recognising and addressing the impacts of trauma on Aboriginal children and young people is crucial.²⁴ Trauma-informed care recognises and responds to the underlying impacts and causes of trauma for a child, their families and the wider Community, and it ensures physical, spiritual and cultural safety. Trauma-informed care and programs that incorporate Aboriginal healing methods, which integrate cultural practices and therapies, have shown positive outcomes in supporting healing and reducing the risk of further involvement in the justice system. Such practices are especially important for children in OoHC or in residential care settings²⁵.

Cultural Connection and Healing Programs: Initiatives that prioritise cultural connection, healing, and strengthening Aboriginal identity have shown positive outcomes in increasing social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, reducing recidivism, and helping people with alcohol and other drug addiction problems^{26,27}. Bunjilwarra Koori Youth Alcohol and Drug Healing Service is a 12-bed rehabilitation service for Aboriginal Young people based in Hastings, Victoria. Bunjilwarra uses a culturally designed, therapeutic model to rehabilitate, and support young people to find employment, work on life skills, finish school, and connect back with the community. These programs emphasise the importance of cultural practices, language, and connection to Community, with the aim of restoring cultural identity, building resilience, and reducing the risk of involvement in the justice system.²⁸

Diversionary and Restorative Justice Programs: Programs that divert young people away from the formal justice system and focus on rehabilitation have been successful in reducing reoffending rates. Restorative justice programs, such as family conferencing and circle sentencing, provide opportunities for young offenders to take responsibility for their actions, make amends, and be held accountable in a culturally appropriate and community-oriented manner.

²⁴ Balaratnasingam, S., Chapman, M., Chong, D., Hunter, E., Lee, J., Little, C., Mulholland, K., Parker, R., Watson, M., & Janca, A. (2019). Advancing social and emotional well-being in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians: Clinicians' reflections. *Australasian Psychiatry*, 27(4), 348–351. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1039856218789765>

²⁵ Gatwiri, K., McPherson, L., Parmenter, N., Cameron, N., & Rotumah, D. (2021). Indigenous Children and Young People in Residential Care: A Systematic Scoping Review. *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, 22(4), 829–842. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838019881707>

²⁶ Rowan, M., Poole, N., Shea, B., Gone, P. J., Mykota, D., Farag, M. et al. (2014). Cultural interventions to treat addictions in Indigenous populations: findings from a scoping study, *Substance Abuse Treatment, Prevention, & Policy*, 9(34),

²⁷ Shepherd, M. S., Delgado, H. R., Sherwood, J. & Paradies, Y. (2018). The impact of indigenous cultural identity and cultural engagement on violent offending, *BMC Public Health*, 18(50), DOI 10.1186/s12889-017-4603-2

²⁸ Bunjilwarra 2014, *Fact sheet, Bunjilwarra Service Model*, Viewed 29 June 2023 < http://bunjilwarra.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/FactSheet_BUNJILWARRA_Service-model.pdf>.



Question 4: From your perspective, are there benefits in taking a national approach to youth justice and child wellbeing reform in Australia? If so, what are the next steps?

A common challenge VACCHO experiences is the persistent misalignment with Federal policy and State policy, coupled with a siloed approaches to addressing the root causes of problems at hand.

It is important to have a national approach to youth justice and child wellbeing reform that addresses and breaks down silos, particularly when it comes to funding for early years education and health and wellbeing programs. If there is not a coordinated, joined up approach across all parts of Government (horizontal) and across all levels (vertical), there is a lack of ultimate responsibility and accountability for Australia's children. A siloed approach also risks duplicating functions, unnecessary competing for resources, and missing opportunities to work collaboratively to improve outcomes.

There should be a national commitment to Raising the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 14, instead of 12, to protect vulnerable children from further disadvantage and poorer lifelong outcomes.

Key recommendations

1. Invest in early years to ensure Aboriginal have the best start to life
2. Support families to keep children in their homes providing health-based therapeutic services
3. Ensure ongoing connection to Culture, Community and Aboriginal Community-Controlled services
4. Reduce racial bias in systems
5. End child detention

