



# YARN UP LISTEN UP

Community Report of  
Aboriginal and Torres  
Strait Islander Young  
People's Perspectives  
on Suicide Prevention

**November 2023**



The Centre of Best Practice in  
Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander  
Suicide Prevention

# CONTENTS

<b><u>THE PROJECT</u></b>	<b>3</b>
<b><u>THE REPORT</u></b>	<b>4</b>
<b><u>APPROACH</u></b>	<b>5</b>
<b><u>CONVERSATIONS</u></b>	<b>7</b>
<b><u>CONCLUSION</u></b>	<b>13</b>

## **Authors**

Jayden Oakley  
Lillian Edwards  
Seth Westhead  
Belinda Duarte  
Ee Pin Chang  
Jemma Collova  
Pat Dudgeon  
Tanja Hirvonen  
Thara Brown

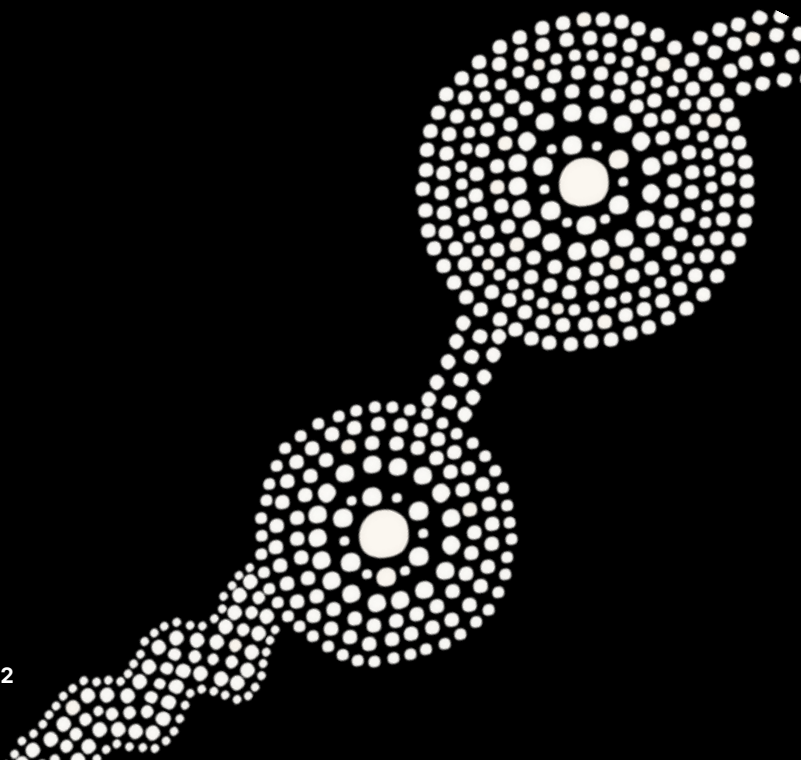
## **Cover Image**

Image: Jayden Oakley on the Fullaship Program 2022.

This report was written in partnership with Culture Is Life and The Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention (CBPATSIISP).

## **Preferred Citation**

*Yarn Up Listen up: Community Report of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Young People's Perspectives on suicide Prevention (November, 2023).* Oakley, J., Edwards, L., Westhead S., Duarte, B., Chang, E., Collova, J., Dudgeon, D., Hirvonen, T., Brown, T. Culture is Life and the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10158019>



# INTRODUCTION



Culture is Life team with Prof Pat Dudgeon (CBPATISIP) at the 2023 Gayaa Dhuwi Annual Conference.

## THE PROJECT

Culture is Life (CisL), in partnership with the Centre of Best Practice of Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention (CBPATISIP), conducted consultations with 24 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 18-27. The aim of these consultations was to understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people's perspectives on suicide prevention services/resources, and lived experiences accessing these. In total, seven youth-led consultation groups were held over a year-long period (November 2021 to November 2022) to understand these issues.

Yarns during the consultation groups revealed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people generally lacked confidence in mental health and suicide prevention services and resources. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people reported a distrust towards mainstream support services, and questioned mainstream services ability to understand and benefit them. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were more inclined to access services that were specifically tailored towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

# INTRODUCTION

## THE REPORT

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people's voices must be at the forefront of any issues that impact their lives. This Report outlines the findings from several youth-led consultations, conducted by Culture is Life and in partnership with the Centre of Best Practice of Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention.

The purpose of the consultation was to

- 1) understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people's perspectives, experiences, and barriers faced, when accessing mental health and wellbeing support services , and to
- 2) learn more about these resource needs.

In line with an Aboriginal Participatory Action Research (APAR) approach (1), it was critical that young people were actively engaged and leading this research. Including young people in the research and decision making processes helps to 'build young people's capacity, and to strengthen their ownership of the results.' (1) Further, young people are the experts of their own lived experiences and are in the best position to advise on what is needed and how research with other young people should occur.

Research from AIFS also supports participation and leadership of young people from a programs perspective, concluding that Indigenous control of the planning, design and implementation is a critical factor to success. It is something that any successful program should uphold as a primary operating principle.(2)

Lowitja Institute's 'Aboriginal Participatory action research: An Indigenous research methodology strengthening decolonisation and social and emotional wellbeing' focuses on key Indigenous wellbeing paradigms, discourses, presenting a distinctive Aboriginal Participatory Action Research (APAR) approach as a transformative Indigenous Research Methodology.(3)

This Report includes discussions regarding what culturally appropriate resources are currently available, information relating to the most effective and accessible medium to utilise resources, and where the gaps of information are for young people who may be seeking support for themselves or someone else.

# APPROACH

The methods used included online video consultations recorded over Zoom, facilitated by youth research leads, with 24 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people aged 18-27 invited to participate.

The first round of consultation groups were made up of a majority of members from the First Nations Youth Health and Wellbeing Committee (FNYHWBC). This is a wellbeing committee led by First Nations young people and originally formed in collaboration with First Nations representatives from Canada (a need to work and develop initiatives for Australia and Canada separately was identified with a goal to come together in the near future). The committee met monthly to discuss topics of health and wellbeing relevant to young people, with aspirations to inform research and influence settings that would drive better socio-emotional wellbeing outcomes for First Nations Young people.

Other community members were also invited to be involved in the first round of consultations. These were identified through networks of the committee members and Culture is Life's Culture Squad and Fullaship Program participants.

Image: Culture is Life and Fullaship Program participants at the Indigenous Suicide Prevention Forum 2023.



# APPROACH

## THE PARTICIPANTS

The participants of round 1 were invited to act as group leads for the second round of consultation groups. The group leads reached out to their networks of young Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people to participate in the consultations. Other young people who expressed willingness and competence were also engaged to participate as group leads. Over the course of the project, six young people took up group lead roles.

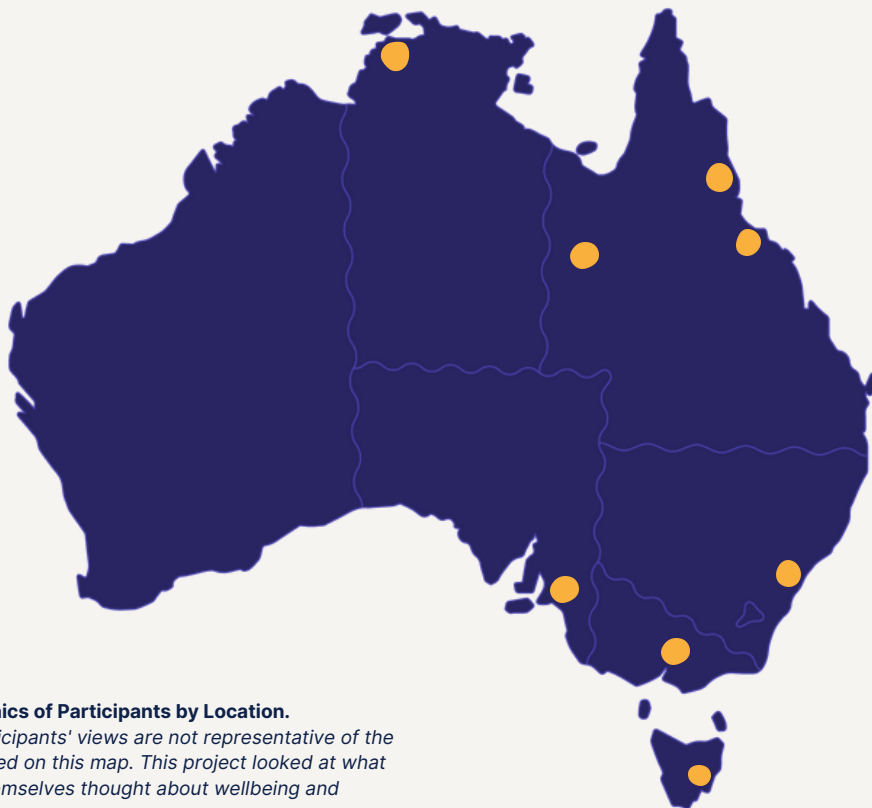
Participants represented both regional and metropolitan areas from all states and territories across Australia. See Appendix 2 Chart of where participants were located. The participants were organised into smaller groups to establish a

culturally safe environment for the young people and to ensure each person had an intimate environment to share their perspectives and be listened to.

Where possible, a trusted support person was engaged in the discussions to ensure debriefing sessions could occur along with any follow up required for the young people to assure they received adequate support.

To recognize their time and expertise, young people were offered \$150 remuneration for their participation, and group leads were offered \$250.

This project received ethics approval (reference: HREC1095).



**Figure 1. Demographics of Participants by Location.**

*Note: The youth participants' views are not representative of the communities illustrated on this map. This project looked at what the young people themselves thought about wellbeing and suicide prevention.*

# CONVERSATIONS

## CONVERSATIONS

The young people were asked 11 questions. These questions aimed to determine:

- How Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people stay mentally and spiritually strong
- Who/what services they seek for support, and whether these services are perceived as accessible and culturally safe
- If they prefer Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander specific services
- Where they may refer loved ones and whether they are comfortable in providing support
- Whether there are specific wellbeing needs for particular groups (e.g., females, males, LGBTQI+, those in the justice system)
- And any other important information to ensure Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people get the services and information they need to promote their wellbeing and prevent suicide

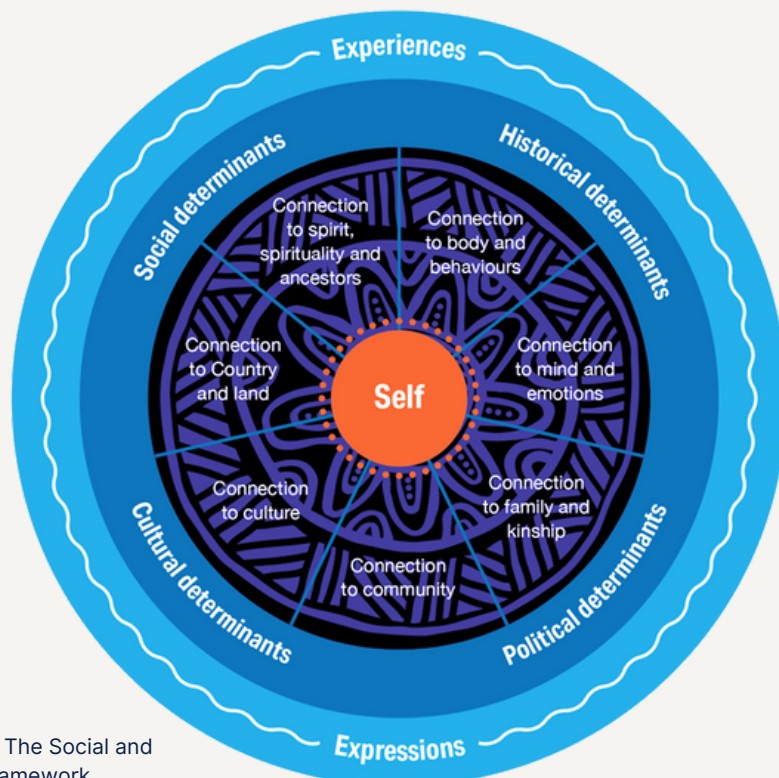


Figure 2. Adaptation of The Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework

# CONVERSATIONS

## FINDINGS

Five key themes were drawn from responses from the consultation groups, as determined by key Author and young person working at Culture is Life. The themes are as follows:

1. Connection to culture, Country and family
2. Accessing mainstream mental health services
3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services
4. Accessing Targeted mental health services
5. Preventative mental health care

The five key findings for each of these themes are as follows:

1. Connection to culture, Country and family are vital in keeping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people mentally and spiritually strong.
2. There is a perceived lack of trust, understanding and consistent support that prevents young people from accessing mainstream mental health services.
3. Young people are more willing to access Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander support services compared to mainstream services, though feel they need more Indigenous workers with diversity (representation) across the nations.
4. Access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health services needs to be more affordable, appropriate and able to respond more immediately.
5. Health care needs to focus on prevention and early intervention, including promoting positive mental health practices throughout all stages of life.



## CONNECTION TO COUNTRY, COMMUNITY AND FAMILY

The young people felt that a connection to Country, community and family were vital to keeping themselves mentally and spiritually strong. This finding is consistent with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing framework (See Figure 2: Gee et al., 2014), which also highlights the centrality of these connections to wellbeing. The young people expressed that they felt safe around family and community, as these support groups have a better understanding of their lived experience.

***"You can be around mob, and it just feels like home. There's a sense of safety, there's a sense of sharing the same experience, and that there's nothing else like it, being a part of our mob, our community." - Young Person***



Image: A Welcome to Country ceremony.

***"...Family for me and close friends, I think they're by far the closest and safest and most appropriate things you can talk about as an Aboriginal younger person." - Young Person***

## ACCESSING MAINSTREAM MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Another common theme amongst the young people throughout the consultation groups was a difficulty in reaching out to mainstream mental health services. The young people also reported a lack of trust towards mainstream mental health services. Many stated that they would rather seek support from family and/or friends. Others reported that they would prefer to not seek help, over accessing a mainstream service. Contributing factors to lack of trust towards mainstream mental health services include a perceived absence of understanding of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people and their issues. Those that have accessed the services, felt it was difficult to get consistent support.

***"(Mainstream health services) doesn't take all the facets of our people into consideration... And I think the second thing is it's also really hard to get access to consistent mental health treatment."***

***"I feel like a lot of services are pretty inadequately equipped to understand, especially through not having lived experience."***

***"It's like they're listening but not understanding." - Young Person***

## ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER SERVICES

When asked if they preferred seeking support from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander organisations and professionals, many participants stated that they would feel more comfortable accessing these mental health services.

Despite a majority of the participants stating that they would be more willing to access mental health services offered by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander organisations and professionals, as compared to mainstream services, two key points were made regarding this model. Firstly, within Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander organisations, sometimes the practitioners and/or professionals that young people are referred to and working with, are not Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. The second point is that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander organisations and professionals must acknowledge the diversity across communities to ensure all young people are comfortable accessing services.

***"Also, I'm very cautious of when they label Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health services as reliable for Indigenous people because of the diversity of Indigenous nations within Australia."***

***"(I would access) Aboriginal service providers if they're actually genuinely invested in your mental health wellbeing and your wellbeing in general."***  
**- Young Person**

## ACCESSING TARGETED MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

In building on the previous theme, there was consensus among the young people that accessibility to these services must be improved. Accessibility was defined by the young people as being affordable, having the appropriate staff, and being able to respond more immediately. Unfortunately, mental health services were not seen to meet these criteria.

***"I feel like it's kind of talked about, but no one addresses how hard it is to access mental health services. And to be in the lowest of the low and you are just stuck in this weird loop of being bounced from provider to provider, or when you finally do get a mental health care plan, there's still a cost attached to it. It's just such a hard system to navigate generally, much less when your mental health is really poor."***

***"...it would just be an organisation or a framework of really accessible, affordable, Indigenous, Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander psychologists, therapist, people there to support us, that doesn't have a turnover time of three weeks to a month, because for many people, that's way too late."***

***"It needs to be better accessibility for services and especially mental health plans." - Young Person***

Image: 13YARN Targeted Crisis Hotline.





Image: Elder and jarjum (child) holding hands.

## PREVENTATIVE MENTAL HEALTH CARE

The young people were asked what is not being addressed and what resources/information would be beneficial to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people. An important theme that surfaced across several consultation groups, was to shift focus on prevention through the younger generation. Discussions around prevention involved the need for regular mental health check-ins, as well as conversations promoting positive mental health practices throughout all stages of life, through a strengths-based approach.

***“Mental health check-ups. We talk a lot about the closing the gap check-ups and you get them every year, but having an element of mental health in that. I think we focus so much on poor mental health that we forget about prevention and actually checking in, even when you are doing better, but keeping you strong and healthy as opposed to only addressing when you're doing bad.”***

***“But in general, the common problem that I see across all of these specific groups is not enough early intervention from a very young age.”***

***“So I would say as young as possible, that is the age group that I would feel like would have the most benefit and the most impact if you did.”***

***- Young Person***

# CONCLUSION

Overall, this project identifies the importance of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander specific resources in mental health and wellbeing, and suicide prevention. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people connect and feel more trusting towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific resources, although these resources must become more accessible.

Many of the young people reported a lack of cultural safety in mainstream services, with these lacking understanding towards Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples and their issues. This has led to a mistrust with the mainstream services. The report also highlights the importance of resources which support early prevention and wellbeing across the lifespan.

The research demonstrated that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people feel the most important things to keeping mentally and spiritually strong are connection to family, culture, Country and community. The research recommends mental health services to consider how they can better connect young people to family, Country, community, and preventative practices to strengthen mental health and wellbeing outcomes.

Further research could address suicide ideation more directly with young people to better determine their understanding and needs. It is crucial that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people are empowered to lead work which is about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth wellbeing.

# APPENDIX

## REFERENCES

1. <https://www.outcomes.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/UNICEF-tools-for-participatory-evaluation-with-youth.pdf>
2. <https://aifs.gov.au/resources/policy-and-practice-papers/what-works-effective-indigenous-community-managed-programs-and>
3. [https://www.lowitja.org.au/page/services/resources/Cultural-and-social-determinants/mental-health/aboriginal-participatory-action-research-an-indigenous-research-methodology-strengthening-decolonisation-and-social-and-emotional-wellbeing\\_](https://www.lowitja.org.au/page/services/resources/Cultural-and-social-determinants/mental-health/aboriginal-participatory-action-research-an-indigenous-research-methodology-strengthening-decolonisation-and-social-and-emotional-wellbeing_)

## APPENDIX

### **Image: Jayden Oakley on the Fullaship Program 2022.**

Sofii McKenzie-Kirkbright (2022). Jayden on Bunurong lands. [Photograph] Culture is Life.

### **Image: Culture is Life team members with Prof Pat Dudgeon (CBATSISP).**

Culture is Life (2023). Gayaa Dhuwi Conference 2023. [Photograph] Culture is Life.

### **Image: Culture is Life and Fullaship Program participants at the Indigenous Suicide Prevention Forum 2023.**

Culture is Life (2023). Indigenous Suicide Prevention Forum 2023. [Photograph] Culture is Life.

### **Figure 1. Demographics of Participants by Location**

McKenzie-Kirkbright, S. (2023). Demographics of Participants by Location. Yarn Up Listen Up - Community Report of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Young People's Perspectives on Suicide Prevention, pp.6, illus.

### **Figure 2. Adaptation of The Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework**

Gee, G., Dudgeon, P., Schultz, C., Hart, A., & Kelly, K. (2014). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing. Working together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health and wellbeing principles and practice, 2, 55-68.

### **Image: 13YARN Targeted Crisis Hotline.**

13YARN (2023) 7 February. Available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/CoUmuPQBcW0/> (Accessed 14 September 2023).

### **Image: Elder and jarjum (child) holding hands.**

Tourism Australia. (2023). Holding Hands. [Photograph]. Canva.

# THE AUTHORS

## CULTURE IS LIFE

Culture is Life is an Aboriginal-led Not-For-Profit organisation. We believe that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people have the right to thrive and flourish; strong in knowing who they are, where they come from and who they are connected to.

All our efforts deepen young people's experiences of culture as protection through thoughtfully designed, simple to access and easy to use policies, projects, resources and campaigns.

We join together with others to create meaningful lives for all our young people with a special emphasis on those experiencing vulnerability and who are at risk of self-harm and suicide.

## CENTRE OF BEST PRACTICE IN ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER SUICIDE PREVENTION

The Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention (CBPATSISP) was established in 2017 to develop and share evidence about effective suicide prevention approaches for Indigenous people and communities.

Building on the foundation of the earlier [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project \(ATSISPEP\)](#), the CBPATSISP influences Indigenous suicide prevention policy, practice and research by promoting access to evidence and resources and through advocacy.

The work of the CBPATSISP is centred on the rights of Indigenous people and communities to self-determination, and the critical importance of cultural responses to distress alongside clinical approaches.



The Centre of Best Practice in  
**Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander**  
**Suicide Prevention**