

FIRST PEOPLES' ASSEMBLY OF VICTORIA

SUBMISSION TO THE YOORROOK JUSTICE COMMISSION

RESPONSE TO THE ISSUES PAPERS ON EDUCATION, HEALTH AND HOUSING

5 March 2024



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Acknowledgement

The First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria (the Assembly) acknowledges the unceded sovereignty of Traditional Owners of Country throughout Victoria and pays our respects to them, their culture and their Elders past, present and future. Since time immemorial, First Peoples' have practised their laws, customs, and languages, and nurtured Country through their spiritual, cultural, material and economic connections to land, water and resources.

The fight for rights and status has been shaped by First Peoples' ancestors and is the foundation of the journey to self-determination and empowerment. The honouring of First Peoples' ancestors and activation of inherent rights and benefits as sovereign peoples is now continued through Treaty-making.

The Assembly would also like to acknowledge Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) in Victoria, who have been supporting First Peoples in education, health, and housing for decades.

This submission aims to elevate the voices of First Peoples' who have long advocated to the Victorian Government for better outcomes for their communities.



Introduction

The Assembly is the independent and democratically elected body that represents First Peoples in Victoria in the state's Treaty process. The Assembly welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Yoorrook Justice Commission (Yoorrook) in response to the Critical Issues papers on education, health, housing.

For First Peoples', health and wellbeing are holistic and inclusive concepts that '*embraces social, emotional, physical, cultural, spiritual dimensions of health and wellbeing*,'¹ which includes social determinants such as access to safe and secure housing and equal opportunities through education. The Assembly will address all three inquiry areas in one submission as systemic reforms for these systems should be designed to work together.

This submission addresses all three thematic areas as follows:

- **Part 1** provides an overview of the Assembly and the Treaty process
- **Part 2** outlines the inherent rights of First Peoples
- **Part 3** acknowledges the important role of our knowledge holders
- **Part 4** identifies the structural reform that is needed through Treaty
- **Part 5** addresses reforms in the health system
- **Part 6** addresses reforms in the health system
- **Part 7** addresses reforms in the housing and homelessness system.

The Assembly acknowledges that Yoorrook will deliver its next report in December 2024 on systemic injustices experienced by First Peoples', including but not limited to education, health, and housing justice and provide findings and recommendations for healing, system reform and practical changes to laws, policy and education, as well as matters to be included in Treaties.

The foundations for Treaty-making have been agreed upon by the Assembly and the State. The stage is now set to start negotiating Statewide Treaty and Traditional Owner Treaties.

Treaty is about putting First Peoples in the driver's seat. It is about empowering First Peoples to re-imagine and re-shape systems with which they interact. Treaty will enable First Peoples to decide First Peoples' issues. Treaty can deliver the freedom and power for First Peoples to make decisions about their Communities, culture and Country. To develop the urgent recommendations in this submission, the Assembly engaged with several ACCOs across the education, health, and housing sectors.

¹ Balit Durn Durn, *Social and Emotional Wellbeing*, accessed 10 February 2024
<https://www.balitdurndurncentre.org.au/social-and-emotional-wellbeing/>.

Executive Summary

The current education, health, and housing systems continue to fail First Peoples'. The systemic injustices experienced by First Peoples in those systems today are inextricably linked to past injustices, colonial practices and State acts. Yoorrook has a unique role in examining historical practices, their lasting effects, and recent government decisions and policies.

The Assembly's submission emphasises that while progress has been made in education, health, and housing for First Peoples', true self-determination is needed. This means giving First Peoples' the power to shape and decide on systems, laws, policies, and programs that impact their communities and land. This approach is crucial for addressing historical injustices and the lasting effects of colonisation, leading to improved outcomes.

Fundamentally, this requires shifting decision-making power from the government to First Peoples through a Treaty.

The historical significance of this investigation cannot be understated. Generations of First Peoples' reformers and advocates who have fought against Victoria's discriminatory laws, practices, and policies have never had the power of a truth and justice commission behind them.

Yoorrook's investigation will reveal the extent of historical and ongoing injustices experienced by First Peoples in relation to education, health, and housing. It will provide the evidence and amplify the unanswered calls for reforms to give effect to self-determination, which can be achieved through Treaty.

The Assembly considers that it will be important for Yoorrook to hear the entire history and experiences of First Peoples' during its hearings. First Peoples are expert knowledge holders and must have the opportunity to be heard and share their experiences of injustice within education, health, housing with Yoorrook.

The Assembly makes the following recommendations:

The Assembly asks Yoorrook to make findings in relation to:

1. the extent of historical and ongoing injustices experienced by First Peoples in relation to education, health, and housing.
2. the positive and integral role that Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations play in delivering education, health, and housing justice.

Transformative change through the Treaty process

The Assembly asks Yoorrook to recommend that:

1. Issue-specific law reform in the systems affecting education, health and housing justice is not enough to address the systemic injustices faced by First Peoples'. A 'whole of system' approach to education, health, and housing justice that gives effect to genuine self-determination should be negotiated through the Treaty process.

2. Mechanisms that shift decision-making power from Government to First Peoples to give effect to self-determination in education, health, and housing should be negotiated through the Treaty process.
3. Mechanisms, processes and policies to give effect to Indigenous Data Sovereignty throughout all areas of government, including those that relate to education, health, and housing, should be negotiated through the Treaty process.
4. ACCOs, including regional ACCOs, must be adequately resourced to meet the objectives of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and other Victorian Government policies and commitments. Measures to ensure adequate, sustainable and ongoing funding to support First Peoples' self-determination in relation to education, health, and housing should be negotiated through the Treaty process, including the negotiation of specific First Peoples' decision-making roles and functions about resource-allocation.

Immediate reforms that the Victorian Government can and should implement now, that cannot wait for Treaty, include:

Education

1.1: Immediately increase resourcing for Community-led Governance, Accountability and Self-Determination

Health

2.1: Address racism within the Victorian healthcare system

2.2: Provide healing opportunities for Stolen Generations

2.3: Urgent reform is required in the aged care system to better support ageing First Peoples'

2.4: First Peoples' to be in control of their social and emotional wellbeing

2.5: Amplify the voices of First Peoples with a disability.

Housing and Homelessness

3.1: Develop affordable housing programs specific for First Peoples'

3.2: Increase First Peoples' access to private rental

3.3: Urgent support for First Peoples' households on the VHR waiting list

3.4: Transfer Public Housing Units to long-term renters

3.5: Accountability for mainstream organisations providing community housing to First Peoples'

3.6: Release the Social Housing Regulation Review

3.7: Implement recommendations from the *Blueprint for an Aboriginal specific Homelessness System*

3.8: Adopt the Housing First Model

Government must be held accountable for addressing these critical issues. Treaty and interim agreements reached in the Treaty process will hold governments accountable.

The Assembly's submission also identifies specific areas for Yoorrook's investigation in **Part 4**.

In making the above recommendations, the Assembly acknowledges Yoorrook's previous recommendations in its *Yoorrook for Justice* report for an independent and authoritative First Peoples' led oversight and accountability mechanism to be negotiated through the Statewide Treaty process.



1 About the Assembly and the Treaty process

The Assembly is the independent and democratic voice for First Peoples in the Victorian Treaty process.

The Assembly's 32 Members are all proud Traditional Owners of Country in Victoria. They were chosen by their communities to represent them in Statewide Treaty negotiations.

The Assembly reached agreement with the State on three critical pillars for future Treaty negotiations:

- The Treaty Negotiation Framework sets the ground rules for Treaty negotiations, Traditional Owner Treaties and a Statewide Treaty.
- The Treaty Authority will be the independent umpire to facilitate and oversee negotiations.
- The Self-Determination Fund is a First Peoples' controlled fund that will support First Peoples' in negotiating treaties on a level playing field with the State, and building capacity, wealth, and prosperity for future generations.

With the Treaty Authority Members announced in December 2023, the stage is set to negotiate Treaties to achieve better outcomes for First Peoples in 2024. Relevant findings and recommendations of Yoorrook will inform both Statewide and Traditional Owner Treaty negotiations.² Yoorrook's findings and recommendations can also inform interim agreements reached during Statewide and Traditional Owner Treaty negotiations.

The Treaty Negotiation Framework allows for interim agreements to be reached during Treaty negotiations. Interim agreements can relate to any topic.³ This process for interim agreements supports the early realisation of First Peoples' rights and can benefit the Community during Treaty negotiations.

Nothing is off the table when it comes to Treaty. The Assembly has heard consistently from Community the importance of taking back control of First Peoples' affairs through Treaties and a strong desire for changes to systems and structures of government to shift decision-making power into First Peoples' hands, including in education, health, and housing.⁴

Informed by Yoorrook's findings and recommendations, the Assembly intends to develop the priorities for Statewide Treaty negotiations to achieve First Peoples' aspirations, working with our Community and Community-led organisations. Yoorrook's recommendations are vital for identifying areas of injustice that should be on the table for Treaty negotiations, as subject matters that First Peoples should have decision-making power.

² Treaty Negotiation Framework, signed by the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria and the State of Victoria on 20 October 2022, section 25.2(e)(i).

³ Treaty Negotiation Framework, sections 26.5, 27.

⁴ First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria, *Our Journey to Treaty: Report on Community Feedback*, (2022).

2 Inherent Rights of First Peoples

First Peoples' rights are inherent and are not reliant on State recognition. As identified in the Treaty Negotiation Framework agreed between the Assembly and the State of Victoria, the source of inherent rights is Indigenous peoples and Country.⁵

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) is the most comprehensive instrument on the inherent rights of Indigenous Peoples. The UNDRIP establishes a universal framework of minimum standards for the survival, dignity and wellbeing of Indigenous Peoples and elaborates on existing human rights standards and fundamental freedoms. All rights in the UNDRIP are indivisible, interdependent and grounded in the overarching right to self-determination.⁶

As Yoorrook identified in its Report into Victoria's Child Protection and Criminal Justice systems, self-determination is primarily recognised in article 3 of the UNDRIP:

'Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.'

The four main pillars of self-determination (political, economic, social and cultural) are also expanded upon throughout UNDRIP and provide important context for the work of Assembly and Yoorrook.

Political self-determination is particularly significant as it explicitly provides the right to self-government. As the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples has identified, the right to political self-determination provides First Peoples with the power to organise and direct their lives according to their own values, institutions and mechanisms within the framework of the State of which they are part of. Article 4 is a particularly significant expression of political self-determination. It is further expanded in articles 5, 18, 20 and 34⁷.

Economic self-determination empowers and supports First Peoples to make decisions about First Peoples' financial resources. The Self-Determination Fund is an example of economic self-determination in action as it embodies the right to develop, maintain and strengthen the right to a distinct economic institution. The Self-Determination Fund has enabled Victorian Traditional Owners to determine their own pathway to Treaty. Articles 3, 5, 17, 20, 21, 23, 32 and 36 of the UNDRIP further expand on economic self-determination.⁸

Social self-determination provides First Peoples with the right to development. Social self-determination is expanded upon throughout UNDRIP. Article 23 is a particularly significant expression of social self-determination:

'Indigenous peoples have the right to determine and develop priorities and strategies for exercising their right to development. In particular, Indigenous peoples have the right to be actively involved in developing and determining health, housing and other economic and

⁵ Treaty Negotiation Framework, section 3.1.

⁶ United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples', (13 September 2007).

⁷ United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples', (13 September 2007).

⁸ United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples', (13 September 2007).

*social programmes affecting them and, as far as possible, to administer such programmes through their own institutions.'*⁹

Articles 14 -15, 21, 24 and 29 are also particularly relevant to education, health and housing.¹⁰

Cultural self-determination includes language, customs, ceremonies, cultural heritage, spirituality, and sports rights and is expanded upon throughout UNDRIP (articles 11-16, 31, and 34). The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights characterises culture as a broad, inclusive concept encompassing all manifestations of human existence and, among other things, ways of life.¹¹

The Assembly considers that these four components of self-determination – political, economic, social and cultural self-determination – should provide the guiding framework for Yoorrook's recommendations on structural reform to strengthen decision-making roles and powers for First Peoples'.

⁹ United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples', (13 September 2007).

¹⁰ United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples', (13 September 2007).

¹¹ United Nations, Economic and Social Council, *General Comment No. 25 (2020)(on science and economic, social and cultural rights, E/c.12/GC/25* (30 April 2020).

3 Respecting and recognising ACCOs as expert knowledge holders

The Assembly acknowledges that ACCOs have long been providing tailored support to the First Peoples' Community across a range of service areas, including but not limited to health, education, housing.

Stemming from a need for culturally safe health spaces for First Peoples in the 1970's, ACCOs have continued to grow in number and have adapted to the needs of the First Peoples' community¹². In Victoria, there are now over 90 ACCOs and Community-led organisations across the state that provide a range of holistic services to First Peoples.¹³ The support ACCOs provide to their communities is a clear example of the positive outcomes for First Peoples' when they are in control.

Despite being expert knowledge holders and providing essential services that greatly benefit the First Peoples' Community, ACCOs remain severely under-resourced and under-valued by the Victorian Government. The failure of the Victorian Government to adequately resource and value ACCOs continues the colonialist legacy of devaluing First Peoples' skills, expertise and knowledge.

The Assembly intends to highlight ACCOs invaluable expertise as knowledge holders by working together to create systemic change for First Peoples through Treaty. The Assembly advise Yoorrook to listen to the voices of ACCOs and ensure that they are respected and recognised as expert knowledge holders in their respective fields.

Closing the Gap

Closing the Gap is a national agreement between all Australian governments to work with First Peoples' communities to achieve better and equal life outcomes compared to other Australians. There are four Priority Reforms under the National Agreement that focus on changing the way governments work with First Peoples.¹⁴

Under Priority Reform 1 and 3 the Victorian Government has agreed to:

- Formal partnerships and shared decision making
- Transforming government organisations to be more culturally safe and responsive to the needs of First Peoples'

¹² National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, *Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs)*, accessed 15 February 2024

<https://www.naccho.org.au/acchos/#:~:text=What%20is%20the%20history%20of,and%20accessible%20primary%20health%20care.>

¹³ This number was provided by the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria's own database.

¹⁴ Closing the Gap, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, accessed 15 February 2024, <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/national-agreement-closing-the-gap/6-priority-reform-areas> > chapter 6.

In committing to the National Agreement, the Victorian Government has agreed to formal partnership arrangements between First Peoples' and the State to enable joint decision making and to decrease the proportion of First Peoples who have experiences of racism¹⁵.

The Productivity Commission recently released a review of the progress of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. The report highlights that while some progress has been made for priority reform 1 and 3, overall shared decision making is rarely achieved¹⁶ and work to eliminate institutional racism has received little effort.¹⁷

The Assembly advises Yoorrook to consider the Closing the Gap Agreement and recommendations should be crafted to give effect to Priority Reforms 1 and 3.

¹⁵ Closing the Gap, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, accessed 15 February 2024, <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/national-agreement-closing-the-gap/6-priority-reform-areas>> chapter 6.

¹⁶ Productivity Commission 2024, *Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, Study report, volume 1*, Canberra, 41.

¹⁷ Productivity Commission 2024, *Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, Study report, volume 1*, Canberra, 58.

4 Structural reform is needed through Treaty

Treaty-making aims to build a new relationship between First Peoples' and the State based upon realising rights defined by UNDRIP.

The Treaty Negotiation Framework has been designed to operate differently from past frameworks in Victoria and Australia. It reflects a new approach where the principle of self-determination and empowerment is central and informs every element.

As the Treaty Negotiation Framework identifies, First Peoples' inherent rights are the source of authority for Treaty-making.¹⁸

The Statewide Treaty finds its authority in First Peoples on account of being First Peoples'. The premise of Statewide Treaty is recognition of the unique position of First Peoples in Victoria. Statewide Treaty will support First Peoples as a collective to exercise self-determination, including, if agreed, by structural reform to government and the education, health, and housing systems in Victoria.

The Treaty process is about moving beyond the policy statements, targets, and milestones that have failed to prevent or halt systemic injustices. It provides the potential to activate genuine self-determination – to make transformational changes to shift decision-making power to Victoria's First Peoples', so that First Peoples are making the decisions about the systems that impact First Peoples' communities. This is what we call 'structural reform'.

The Treaty Negotiation Framework contemplates that the subject matters for negotiation in a Statewide Treaty will include whether a First Peoples' representative decision-making body or other forms of institutional oversight by First Peoples should be created for the benefit of First Peoples'.¹⁹

The Assembly expects that Yoorrook will make recommendations in future reports about areas of systemic injustice which require holistic systems level change, recognising that these systems and issues cannot be considered in isolation.

It is clear from previous reform attempts that system change will not be effective if unilaterally imposed by governments without a genuine shift in decision-making power. First Peoples must be empowered to re-shape systems in which genuine self-determination is embedded.

As part of the systemic reforms to be achieved through Treaty, both Indigenous Data Sovereignty and decision-making over resourcing are central to the design and operation of re-shaped systems that give effect to self-determination.

¹⁸ Treaty Negotiation Framework, section 3.

¹⁹ Treaty Negotiation Framework, section 25.3.

Indigenous Data Sovereignty

First Peoples have been active keepers of their information and knowledge since time immemorial. However, since invasion, settler-colonial institutions in Victoria have disrupted – and continue to disrupt – First Peoples’ rights to create, collect, use, store, and control access of data by, about and for First Peoples’.

The Assembly reiterates calls for the State to uphold and embed Indigenous Data Sovereignty in all areas, including education, health, and housing. This includes returning and continuing to provide data held by the Victorian Government to ACCOs and First Peoples’-led community organisations, including data on First Peoples’ accessing education, health, housing services, ensuring that ACCOs can access, store and use data to enhance their rights and interests.

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap (the National Agreement) sets out a range of priorities related to data access and use at the local level. Data access and use is noted under Section 3 Objectives and Outcomes, subsection 17(d), which states that:

*‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to, and the capability to use, **locally relevant data and information** to set and monitor the implementation of efforts to close the gap, their priorities and drive their own development.’²⁰*

Further under Section 4, A New Approach, subsection 19 states:

‘The Parties will listen to the voices and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and change the way we work in response. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been saying for a long time that:

- a. they need to have a **much greater say in how programs and services are delivered to their people, in their own places and on their own country.***
- b. community-controlled organisations deliver the best services and outcomes for Closing the Gap*
- c. government agencies and institutions need to address systemic, daily racism, and promote cultural safety and transfer power and resources to communities.*
- d. they need to have access to the **same information and data as governments** to drive their development.’²¹*

The provision of data to relevant ACCOs, has been noted as a barrier to monitoring and strategic planning for ACCO services.

The Marrung plan provides a good example of where First Peoples data²² sets have been used well and where absolute numbers are shown to match education outcomes for all Victorian students, these include:

²⁰Closing the Gap, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, accessed 15 February 2024, <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/national-agreement-closing-the-gap/6-priority-reform-areas> > 3-4.

²¹ Closing the Gap, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, accessed 15 February 2024, <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/national-agreement-closing-the-gap/6-priority-reform-areas> > 4.

²²State of Victoria, Department of Education and Training, *Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026*, (July 2016), 10.

- an **additional 46** First Peoples' children participating in the Maternal and Child Health (MCH) home consultation would result in full participation (2014–15)
- a **further 218** First Peoples children participating in the eight-month MCH key age and stage consultation would close the participation gap (2014–15)
- **150 more** First Peoples children on track in the communication and general knowledge domain (Australian Early Development Census) would close the gap in that domain (2015)
- **197 more** First Peoples children enrolling in kindergarten would close the gap in four-year-old kindergarten participation (2015)
- an **extra 103** First Peoples children achieving at or above the NAPLAN minimum standard would close the gap in Year 3 reading.

The Treaty process provides a critical opportunity to put in the systems, process and principles to give effect to Indigenous Data Sovereignty.

Resourcing

Decisions about resourcing to support First Peoples' education, health, and housing are made by governments, not First Peoples. In addition, Aboriginal Communities and ACCOs are typically inadequately funded to deliver the education, health, and housing services and supports that Communities need.

To give effect to genuine system reform and self-determination across the education, health, and housing systems, First Peoples must be able to make the critical decisions about how resourcing is best directed within Communities. The Treaty process provides the vehicle for this transfer of decision-making powers and functions to First Peoples.

The Assembly asks Yoorrook to find that:

1. Issue-specific law reform in the systems affecting education, health and housing and justice is not enough to address the systemic injustices faced by First Peoples'. A 'whole of system' approach to education, health, and housing justice that gives effect to genuine self-determination should be negotiated through the Treaty process.
2. Mechanisms that shift decision-making power from Government to First Peoples to give effect to self-determination in education, health, and housing should be negotiated through the Treaty process.
3. Mechanisms, processes and policies to give effect to Indigenous Data Sovereignty throughout all areas of government, including those that relate to education, health, and housing, should be negotiated through the Treaty process.
4. ACCOs, including regional ACCOs, must be adequately resourced to meet the objectives of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and other Victorian Government policies and commitments. Measures to ensure adequate, sustainable and ongoing funding to support First Peoples' self-determination in relation to education, health, and housing should be negotiated through the Treaty process, including the negotiation of specific First Peoples' decision-making roles and functions about resource-allocation.

5 Education

This section addresses the systemic injustices faced by First Peoples in the education system and has been informed by feedback from Assembly members and discussions with ACCOs.

Education is a fundamental human right

Education is a basic human right that works to level inequalities and ensure sustainable development in the short, medium and longer term. Education is one of the most powerful tools in lifting excluded children and adults out of poverty and is a stepping stone to other fundamental human rights.

First Peoples have the same right to education as all other people, a right which they should be able to enjoy without discrimination. The right of Indigenous peoples to education is protected by the UNDRIP, which in Article 14 states:

‘Indigenous peoples have the right establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.’²³

This means that First Peoples should have access to education that adequately reflects their culture, language, and methods of teaching and learning. Education is central to empowerment and is critical to the realisation of all the rights contained in the UNDRIP, including the right to self-determination.

Further, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) devotes two articles to the right to education, articles 13 and 14. Article 13, the longest provision in the Covenant, is the most wide-ranging and comprehensive article on the right to education in international human rights law and encompasses rights in relation to:

- (1) primary education
- (2) secondary education
- (3) technical and vocational education, and
- (4) higher education.

First Peoples conceptualisation of education and learning

For First Peoples, education includes cultural learning and the transmission of cultural and practical knowledge. First Peoples have developed and practiced their own methods of knowledge transmission, often based on oral traditions. First Peoples’ knowledge is often shared through stories, songs, ceremony and dance. First Peoples’ education also includes contact with Elders, cultural and artistic expression and connection to language, family, community and Country. First Peoples’ knowledge is often interconnected with Country, medicine, food, engineering, ecology, kinship systems and astronomy.

²³ United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples’, (13 September 2007).

Traditional knowledge is central to First Peoples' identity, culture, language, heritage and livelihood. The transmission of traditional knowledge, including but not limited to Aboriginal Lore, Law and Cultural Authority, from one generation to the next often marks important milestones and is based on First Peoples' ways of knowing, being and doing.

Aboriginal Elders spoke to their examples of Aboriginal community ways of teaching and learning in the *Yoorrook Commission's Interim Report: With Purpose*. Uncle Lance James spoke to this point on the transmission of knowledge:

*'We'll carry them stories on forever and a day, you know? They'll never take that away because it'll be passed down to our children, our grandchildren and their grandchildren. It'll go on.'*²⁴

Impact of colonisation

Colonisation has had and continues to have a significant impact on First Peoples education. Until recently, education was used as a tool for forced assimilation and cultural genocide. Children were forcibly removed from their homes, and despite the promise of education, were often trained in farmwork or domestic service and used as a source of cheap labour, amongst other abusive practices.

The *Bringing Them Home Report* (1997) provides further invaluable insights into the struggles thousands of First Peoples faced during and since forced removals were mandated. The transmission and preservation of First Peoples cultures, languages and practices was actively discouraged and punished. The impacts of these colonial practices continue to be felt today and there remains persistent disparities with respect to educational access, retention and achievement.

Education and Treaty

ACCOs have and continue to play an important role in providing culturally appropriate and responsive education services to First Peoples in Victoria. Despite ACCOs often achieving better outcomes in education than mainstream services, they do not operate on equal footing with mainstream organisations and remain severely under resourced.

The lack of investment in ACCOs to deliver stronger educational outcomes for First Peoples is exacerbated by an education system that is based on a colonial education system. Despite the Victorian Government's commitment to self-determination, it is not doing enough to ensure that First Peoples in Victoria receive culturally appropriate and safe education. Systemic change to the education system is required to ensure that it is available, accessible and appropriate for all First Peoples.

Treaty is required to give effect to genuine self-determination and address the current injustices in the education system. First Peoples need to be afforded the opportunity to decolonise, re-design, and reclaim an education system that has historically been used as against them as tool of assimilation and oppression.²⁵

²⁴ Yoorrook Justice Commission, *Interim Report, 'With Purpose'*, (2022), 57.

²⁵ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *State of the World's Indigenous Peoples: Education*, Volume 3, (2017).

5.1 Systemic injustices in the education system

Education outcomes continue to be comparatively worse for First Peoples, despite some improvements in some areas. For example, in Victoria:

- First Peoples children were 1.5 times more likely to experience bullying than they were a year ago.
- 34.2% of First Peoples children commencing school were assessed as being developmentally on track compared with 57.7% of non-Indigenous children.
- 72.6% of First Peoples aged 20-24 years had attained a year 12 or equivalent qualification compared with 91.1% of non-Indigenous people in the same age group.
- 47% of First Peoples aged 25-34 years had completed non-school qualifications of Certificate III or above compared to 75.9% of non-Indigenous people in the same age group,
- 58% of First Peoples aged 15-24 years were fully engaged in employment, education or training compared to 79.9% of non-Indigenous people in the same age group.
- The number of education workers who identify as Aboriginal has fallen from 247 to 209 between 2021 and 2022.²⁶

Concerningly, First Peoples children are increasingly feeling less connected to their schools than their non-Indigenous peers. This trend, and others like it, are unlikely to change unless systemic issues such as racism and cultural safety are addressed.

The Assembly has heard of increased instances of overt racism in the wake of the 'no' vote in the 2023 Referendum on an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament. Both the 'no' vote and the increased racism that stemmed from it places additional pressures on First Peoples children.

There is significant research on the impacts of racism and discrimination on First Peoples' communities and on an individual and family level. The contribution of racism as a social determinant of health is receiving growing attention.²⁷ In the article *Racism as a determinant of health*, the authors have noted that:

*'...racism is thought to affect health through a number of pathways including limited access to social resources such as employment, housing and education and/or increased exposure to risk factors (such as unnecessary contact with the criminal justice system) ...'*²⁸

The need to address racism and discrimination have been common references throughout major reviews and research, including the 1991 Royal Commission Into Aboriginal Deaths In Custody (RCIADIC) through to more recent reports undertaken in Victoria. While the RCIADIC report did not explicitly use the term "racism," it highlighted systemic and individual deficiencies that disproportionately affected Indigenous people in custody. These deficiencies were often rooted in historical and social factors, including colonisation, dispossession, and discriminatory practices. The

²⁶ State of Victoria, *Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Report, Learning and Skills*, (2022), accessed 22 February 2024, <<https://www.firstpeoplesrelations.vic.gov.au/victorian-government-aboriginal-affairs-report-2022/learning-and-skills>>

²⁷ Braveman P, Egerter S, Williams DR, *The social determinants of health: coming of age*, Annu Rev Public Health, (2011), 32:381–398.

²⁸ Yin Paradies, *Racism as a determinant of health; a protocol for conducting a systematic review and meta-analysis*, (2013).

RCIADIC report aimed to address these underlying issues and promote justice and equality for First Peoples communities.

In the Victorian Government's 2017 Racism in Victoria report²⁹, it was noted in the key findings that:

- Racism is damaging to both the mental and physical health of Victorians.
- Aboriginal Victorians and Victorians who speak a language other than English at home but are not of Northern European or North American origin, are most likely to experience racism.
- As socioeconomic status declines, experiences of racism increase.
- Victorian adults who frequently experience racism are almost five times more likely than those who do not experience racism to have poor mental health.
- Victorian adults who frequently experience racism are 2.5 times more likely than those who do not experience racism to have poor physical health.

The commitment to self-determination and to tackle racism and other systemic issues by the Victorian Government, as expressed through The *Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026* (*Marrung*), the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework (VAAF), and other programs and policies has not been enough to change the lives of First Peoples and deliver them with education that is equitable, responsive and culturally appropriate.

Treaty offers a pathway for First Peoples and the Victorian Government to work together and make the systemic reform needed to holistically address the socio-economic issues facing First Peoples.

5.2 Steps in the right direction but the education system continues to harm First Peoples'

Marrung underpins the delivery of education to First Peoples learners in Victoria. It marked a turning point in First Peoples' education in Victoria, as it was the first time that the Victorian Government developed a First Peoples' education plan that sought to uphold the principle of self-determination.

The Victorian Government recognises that:

*'Access to high-quality education provides significant short-term and lifelong benefits, not just in terms of academic outcomes, but also in terms of resilience, creativity, health and well-being, and economic participation. Education is the cornerstone of economic development and self-determination.'*³⁰

The Victorian Government's vision for education as contained in *Marrung* states that:

*'Victoria will be state where the rich and thriving culture, knowledge and experience of our First Nations peoples are celebrated by all Victorians; where our universal service systems are inclusive, responsive and respectful of Koorie people at every stage of their learning and development journey; and where every Koorie person achieves their potential, succeeds in life, and feels strong in their cultural identity.'*³¹

²⁹ State of Victoria, Department of Health and Human Services, *Racism in Victoria and what it means for the health of Victorians*, (2017) vi.

³⁰ State of Victoria, Department of Education and Training, *Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026*, (July 2016).

³¹ State of Victoria, Department of Education and Training, *Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026*, (July 2016).

To achieve the vision in *Marrung* the Victorian Government set out several priority areas and actions, including to:

- Create a positive climate for learning and development where services demonstrate the highest levels of respect and inclusion and, as a result, First Peoples children and learners of all ages feel strong in their identity within all services.
- Build community engagement in learning and development so that, through partnership and collaboration, services work together with Koorie people to find innovative ways to improve outcomes in local communities.
- Build a culture of professional leadership where success for First Peoples Victorians is core business for all educational leaders, and
- Achieve excellence in teaching, learning and development at all stages.

Marrung was fortuitous in that it identified that progress would only be made if there was an appropriate accountability mechanism by which the Victorian Government could be held to account at a system and service level. Unfortunately, this is the only vision in *Marrung* that has transpired. Despite best intentions, *Marrung* has not translated into outcomes that give effect to genuine self-determination. This may partly be attributed to the fact that there are not appropriate or effective oversight and accountability mechanisms in place to hold the Victorian Government account for its inaction and failures.

While the reforms under *Marrung* and associated policies has been a positive step in the right direction it has not been enough to deliver genuine self-determination. Treaty offers First Peoples the opportunity to realise the vision articulated in *Marrung* and further develop First Peoples own aspirations for the education system.

5.3 Urgent reforms required now

The Assembly joins with the long advocacy of First Peoples communities, ACCOs, and other community organisations in calling for specific reforms to the education system that need to be addressed by the Victorian Government as a matter of urgency.

In raising these issues as urgent reforms, the Assembly refers Yoorrook to the extensive knowledge of ACCOs and other First Peoples knowledge holders that are experts in the field. Those organisations, along with First Peoples' communities, have been calling for specific reforms in the education system for decades.

Increase resources for Community-led Governance, Accountability and Self-Determination Structures

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap also refers to the need for adequate resourcing so that First Peoples and ACCOs can partner with government in formally.³² As stated, this includes agreed funding for First Peoples to:

- a. engage independent policy advice,

³² Closing the Gap, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, accessed 15 February 2024, <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/national-agreement-closing-the-gap/6-priority-reform-areas> > 7.

- b. meet independently of governments to determine their own policy positions,
- c. support strengthened governance between and across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and parties, and
- d. engage with and seek advice from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from all relevant groups within affected communities, including but not limited to Elders, Traditional Owners and Native Title Holders.

These four points are critical to support local, regional and statewide decision making that is self-determined by First Peoples and community-led, best practice, based on evidence and free and informed consent.

The Assembly supports the need for increased resources to enable First Peoples communities and ACCOs to support local education activities. In the longer term, the Treaty process should involve the transfer of State decision-making, so that decisions about the appropriate allocation of resources to support First Peoples' education is made by First Peoples, and not the State.

Recommendation 1.1: Immediately increase resourcing for Community-led Governance, Accountability and Self-Determination

That the Victorian Government immediately increase resourcing and funding to support ACCOs, including regional ACCOs, and the Koorie education sector, particularly governance and policy capacity, to meet the objectives of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and *Marrung*.

In the longer term, the Victorian Government should transfer decisions about resourcing for the First Peoples' education sector to First Peoples, to be negotiated through the Treaty process.

Zoning

The Assembly understands that decisions on the choice of schools are based purely on the DET school zoning policy and does consider cultural safety. There are restrictions in terms of choice of schools based on home location, especially in the metropolitan area. Therefore, some First Peoples students have not been accepted by a school outside their zone where they have established friendships or family networks and greater cultural support. It was reported that this had a detrimental impact for some First Peoples students regarding their engagement, attendance, and feelings of wellbeing.

Zoning policies in New South Wales provide greater freedom of choice and are more culturally appropriate. This model is seen as being best practice, where students can apply for consideration to be placed outside of the allocated school zone and choose to attend one with greater cultural, friendship and family support.

5.4 Member Story – Truth-telling about Education injustice

Alister Thorpe

Member for the Metropolitan region

Gunai, Yorta Yorta, Gunditjmara and Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung

Primary school

I went to Preston East Primary School in the Northern suburbs of Melbourne. In 1988 Australia commemorated the 200 years since Cook landed by gifting every student a bicentennial medal. I rejected the medal and instead gave the class an Aboriginal flag. My dad and my Uncle Robbie and Uncle Wayne were there to support me. It was my first experience of activism and that moment left its mark on me.

The closure of Northland Secondary College

In 1992 I started high school at Northland Secondary College. Our school had one of the most successful Aboriginal education programs in the country. The program received high praise in the Aboriginal deaths in custody report as an exemplary education model. In 1992 the school was one of many public schools closed by the Kennett Government. ATSIC was also dissolved in 1992. At the time of closing Northlands had the most Aboriginal kids enrolled in Metropolitan Melbourne.

Protesting the closure

The Aboriginal community in Melbourne protested against the closure. The protest was led by people such as Auntie Dedrie Baksh, Gary Foley, Robbie Thorpe, Alister Thorpe, Alan Brown, Rieo Ellis, Archie Roach and Auntie Ruby Hunter, my Mum and Dad. They were all parents of kids from the school. We had huge protests on the steps of parliament. We were locked out of our own school. We barricaded ourselves in. We held rallies in the drama room and on the streets. We were escorted off the premises by police. For next couple of years, a lengthy court battle with the government coincided with the protest.

The Rebel School

The school was shut down however a “rebel school” was established on the site as a form of resistance. The rebel school was a direct response to the lack of appropriate alternatives in the region for Aboriginal students. It was unfunded, unrecognized, and staffed by volunteers. The principal of the Rebel School was Dedrie Bux. But she was much more than that. She was our Auntie. She was our teacher and our protector. She was a parent. She fought for us and with us. For the kids, the parents, and our community.

At the beginning we probably had about 30 kids attending. But inevitably it dropped off. By the end we were down to less than 10 kids regularly coming. Some went to other mainstream schools where they had a hard time adjusting. Those schools didn’t understand Aboriginal kids and families. They weren’t there for us like Northlands was. Northlands was our school.

After a few months we were kicked off the school site and we had to move to alternative locations. We were in the old church in Rossmoyne Street Thornbury for about a year (my year 8). The following year we ended up at the footy clubrooms in Northcote. I was taught on the streets of Melbourne.

Literally on the streets. For two years my classroom was in a football clubroom. An abandoned church. And a broken down boarded up high school in Preston.

Unique Aboriginal education program

Our school had dedicated Aboriginal Educators. They engaged with student families and were a bridge between the school and the community. At the time the school closed my mum Lyn Thorpe was an Aboriginal educator at the school along with Aunty Dedrie Bux. But many other Aboriginal community members had played the role. Our educators loved the students, they had real relationships. They helped build the culture at the school. They contributed to the curriculum. That's why we had so many Aboriginal kids. The parents trusted them because they cared about the kids. That's why the Northlands model was a problem. It disrupted the system and turned it upside down. In the early 90's mum completed her degree and became a qualified teacher. Then the school closed.

Our school

We owned the school. It was a "Koori school". And was well known for it. We were accepted there. Our culture and our identity were accepted. Our history too. But it was a multicultural school too. Before the term probably even existed. This is what allowed us to thrive. We were a motley crew that stuck together through thick and thin. That's what made us. We had the drama kids. We had incredible musicians, some of the kids were better than the teachers. The koori bands we had coming to that school were amazing. There was the Black Connection Crew. It gave us an identity.

The Koori Youth Will Shake Spears

The Koori Youth Will Shake Spears, our traditional Aboriginal dance group were formed at the school in 88. In the early 90's, an Aboriginal elder from far north Queensland came to the school just before it closed- he shared his dances and stories and gave us permission to do them. We always pay respect to that old man and to his people and country. We are forever connected. The Spears were born at Preston east tech. But we really thrived at the rebel school. That was where our dance group really took off. At the rebel school dance came before class, after class, and instead of class. But it worked. Our culture was more important. We would get painted up and lead every protest. When you get painted up you are protected. Nothing can hurt you and nobody can bring you down. It makes your spirit stronger. It represented the struggle we were fighting for at the school. It was one of the reasons Northlands was so different. Our people and our culture were embraced. We used our dance as a political spear. The dance group continues to this day. We are still teaching our kids.

The Re-opening

In 1995, after a rollercoaster battle with the government, and multiple court judgements and appeals, the school reopened. I completed VCE in 1998. In 2013 I completed my Master in Public Health.

The Future

This story happened thirty-two years ago. It didn't just happen to me it happened to our whole community. It affected a whole generation of Aboriginal kids. Right now, we are preparing for treaty negotiations with the State of Victoria and the concept of Aboriginal education will be up for negotiation. I believe we need more schools to adopt the Northland model.

In my educational journey I learnt that Aboriginal education was not always valued by governments. I learnt about life in those two years at the Rebel School. What happened to us shaped us for the rest of our lives. That's something you can't teach.

Case Study: The History of Northland Secondary College

The history of Northland Secondary College in Victoria, Australia, is a remarkable story of community resilience and activism against government decisions. In November 1992, the state government under Premier Jeff Kennett, as part of a broader cost-cutting initiative, announced the closure of Northland Secondary College among 55 other schools. This decision was met with shock and opposition from the school community, especially considering the school's significant role in supporting Indigenous students and its innovative approach to education that incorporated Aboriginal knowledge systems and cultures^{33 34}.

The school's proposed closure was particularly controversial due to its high proportion of Indigenous students and its unique educational approach. Educators and community members criticized the government's plan, arguing that it failed to recognize the integrated nature of the school's program, which was designed to support Koori children's education in a holistic manner³⁵.

In response to the closure announcement, students, teachers, and parents launched a vigorous campaign that lasted over two years. They took their fight to the Equal Opportunity Board and the Supreme Court, alleging discrimination against the school's high proportion of Indigenous students. The community's efforts included staging a mock enrolment at a prestigious private school and organising marches on Parliament¹.

Their persistence paid off when, after a prolonged battle involving legal challenges and public protests, the school was reopened in March 1995. This event marked a significant victory for the campaigners, known as the Northlands Collective Mob, and demonstrated the power of community action. The struggle to save Northland Secondary College has been commemorated and celebrated in various ways, including through a cabaret titled "A Fight For Survival," showcasing the campaign's story through storytelling, music, dance, and comedy¹.

Despite the school's reopening, the fight had lasting implications. The school, now known as the Northern College of the Arts and Technology, no longer has Aboriginal input, a change that some community members hope can be reversed. The campaign for Northland Secondary College is remembered as a testament to the importance of education that respects and incorporates Indigenous cultures and knowledge systems¹².

This history underscores the significance of community engagement in educational decisions and the impact of advocacy in shaping educational policies and practices.

³³ Carlyn Webb, The Age, *Cabaret tells how loved Melbourne school was saved from Kennett closures*, (24 April 2021) <<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/cabaret-tells-how-loved-melbourne-school-was-saved-from-kennett-closures-20210421-p57l8x.html>>.

³⁴ Victoria University, (11 November 2021) <<https://www.vu.edu.au/about-vu/news-events/news/exhibition-marks-key-moment-in-australian-history>>.

³⁵ Margaret Cook, Joanne Painter, Luke Slattery, The Age, *From the Archives, 1990s: Hundreds of school closures hit Victoria* (1 August 2019) <<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/from-the-archives-1990-s-hundreds-of-school-closures-hit-victoria-20190801-p52cwj.html>>.

The case of Northland Secondary College's proposed closure and the subsequent community response highlights several keyways in which government policies and decisions impacted the rights of Aboriginal students:

1. Government Cost-cutting Measures

The Victorian state government under Premier Jeff Kennett, in an effort to reduce costs, announced the closure of 55 schools, including Northland Secondary College. This decision was part of a broader austerity program but failed to consider the unique needs and contributions of schools with significant Indigenous populations. The closure would have disproportionately affected Aboriginal students, undermining their right to an education that respects and incorporates their cultural heritage.

2. Lack of Recognition for Culturally Responsive Education

The government's decision to close the school overlooked the importance of Northland Secondary College's innovative approach to learning, which was inclusive of Aboriginal knowledge systems and cultures. By not recognizing the value of such culturally responsive educational models, the policy indirectly impacted Aboriginal students' rights to receive an education that acknowledges and respects their cultural identities.

3. Community and Legal Mobilisation

The community's mobilization against the closure, including legal action alleging discrimination against the school's high proportion of Indigenous students, illustrates the impact of government decisions on the rights of Aboriginal students to equal education opportunities. The community's fight and eventual success in reopening the school underscore the necessity of policies that ensure educational equity and respect for Indigenous cultures.

4. Educational Autonomy and Indigenous Rights

The activists' efforts to save Northland Secondary College highlighted the broader issue of Indigenous rights to educational autonomy. The initial government decision to close the school, without adequately consulting or considering the impact on the Indigenous community, reflects a disregard for the principle of self-determination in education. The community's resistance and the school's eventual reopening serve as a reminder of the importance of involving Indigenous peoples in decisions that affect their educational institutions.

5. Transfer of Aboriginal Programs

There was an attempt by the government to transfer the school's Aboriginal program to another college, which was met with criticism from educators. This approach was criticized for misunderstanding the integrated nature of the school's support for Koori students, suggesting a piecemeal view of educational programs rather than understanding them as holistic and integral to the school's ethos. This incident reflects a broader issue of policy decisions failing to grasp the importance of culturally integrated education systems for Aboriginal students.

In summary, the government's policies and decisions regarding Northland Secondary College's closure impacted Aboriginal students by threatening their access to culturally responsive education, overlooking the importance of educational autonomy for Indigenous communities, and underestimating the community's capacity for organized resistance. The community's successful

campaign against these decisions underscores the importance of policies that support educational equity and respect for Indigenous cultures and rights.



6 Health

The right to health

The right to health is fundamental. Every person is entitled to the right to health, regardless of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition.³⁶ Everyone should have access to the health services they need, when and where they need them.

The right to health is an indispensable component of First Peoples' very existence and central to the right to self-determination. The UNDRIP expands on the interplay between the right to health and the right to self-determination. For example, Article 23 recognises the right to determine and develop priorities and strategies for exercising the right to development, being actively involved in developing and determining health programs affecting them and administering such programmes through their own institutions where possible.³⁷

For First Peoples', the concept of health and well-being is generally much broader and more holistic than for non-Indigenous people. It encompasses the physical, social, emotional, and cultural wellbeing of individuals, families, wider kinship groups, and Communities. While physical health is essential, equal value is placed on strengthening connections to mind, emotions, family, kinship, Community and culture.³⁸

Impact of colonisation

Before colonisation, First Peoples were generally strong and healthy and enjoyed a lifestyle on their traditional lands, promoting good health. First Peoples practiced their culture, customs and traditional health practices and used their traditional medicine and knowledge to facilitate and fulfil their health needs. It is estimated that Victoria could have been home to around 60,000 people.

Colonisation has had and continues to have a devastating impact on First Peoples' Communities, culture and health. Violence and epidemic disease caused immediate loss of life, the occupation of land by settlers, and the restriction of Aboriginal people to 'reserves' disrupted their ability to support themselves and maintain and uphold their holistic health and wellbeing practices. The intergenerational impact and trauma of colonisation are still being felt by First Peoples' today and continue to be passed down to current generations.

Health and Treaty

Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) continue to provide integral health support to the First Peoples' Community that is more culturally appropriate, safe and effective. However, ACCHOs remain underfunded and under-resourced, and their services alone cannot resolve ongoing problems plaguing the health system.

³⁶ World Health Organisation, *Constitution of the World Health Organisation*, (1948), 1.

³⁷ United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples', (13 September 2007).

³⁸ Verbunt, E., Luke, J., Paradies, Y. et al. *Cultural determinants of health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – a narrative overview of reviews*, (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-021-01514-2> 181.

Although there are examples of good practice and growing acknowledgement of self-determination, First Peoples' still face higher health risks, poorer health, and more unmet needs compared to non-Indigenous people. The Victorian Government and mainstream health services often misunderstand, overlook, or ignore First Peoples' ways of being. It is evident that the health system fails to provide equitable care and continues to harm First Peoples'.

Systemic reform that gives effect to genuine self-determination and the transfer of decision-making power into the hands of First Peoples' is needed to address the current injustices and the ongoing legacy of colonisation in the health system.

6.1 Systemic injustices in the health system

Health outcomes continue to be comparatively worse for First Peoples', despite improvements in some areas. For example:

- First Peoples' have a life expectancy approximately 10 years lower than non-Indigenous Australians. Nationally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males born in 2015-2017 are expected to live to 71.6 years and females to 75.6 years, non-Indigenous males and females to 80.2 years and 83.4 years respectively.³⁹
- Chronic disease is responsible for 64 per cent of the disease burden of Aboriginal Australians, with presentations to Victorian hospital emergency departments by Aboriginal people double the rate for non-Aboriginal people.⁴⁰
- Aboriginal people are 2.4 times more likely to have a disability than non-Aboriginal people.⁴¹
- Aboriginal Victorians are approximately four times more likely to present at emergency departments for alcohol-related causes than non-Indigenous Victorians⁴².
- Rates of diabetes are three times higher in Aboriginal Victorians than non-Aboriginal Victorians.⁴³
- Aboriginal people are around three times more likely to experience high or very high levels of psychological distress than non-Aboriginal Victorians.⁴⁴

³⁹ Australian Government, *Closing the Gap Report*, (2020), accessed 10 February 2024, <

⁴⁰ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Australian Burden of Disease Study Impact and causes of illness and death in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Summary Report*, (2021), 1.

⁴¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Chapter 5, *The health and welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples* (2015).

⁴² State of Victoria, Department of Health, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians*, accessed 10 February 2024, <<https://www.health.vic.gov.au/your-health-report-of-the-chief-health-officer-victoria-2018/health-inequalities/aboriginal-and>>.

⁴³ State of Victoria, Department of Health, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians*, accessed 10 February 2024, <<https://www.health.vic.gov.au/your-health-report-of-the-chief-health-officer-victoria-2018/health-inequalities/aboriginal-and>>.

⁴⁴ State of Victoria, Department of Health, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians*, accessed 10 February 2024, <<https://www.health.vic.gov.au/your-health-report-of-the-chief-health-officer-victoria-2018/health-inequalities/aboriginal-and>>.

- Self-harm emergency department admissions are four times the rate of non-Aboriginal Victorians.⁴⁵

Systemic racism across the health sector, and a lack of transparency and accountability mechanisms remain endemic. While Victorian Government policy has attempted to rectify certain issues, it has failed to make tangible change for First Peoples'. Additionally, a recent review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap revealed many instances where government actions contradicted their commitments and policies, showing a clear gap between what is said and what is done.

Despite efforts and commitments to increase shared decision-making in the health sector and increase the autonomy and operations of ACCOs and other First Peoples' led initiatives that are supporting and supplementing mainstream health services, more needs to be done to ensure that resourcing is equitable and adequate.

There needs to be more accountability within mainstream healthcare services to ensure they provide First Peoples' quality, culturally safe care. First Peoples should be able to access both mainstream services and services provided by ACCOs in accordance with their right to self-determination.

6.2 Steps in the right direction but the health system continues to harm First Peoples

Korin Korin Balit Djak: Aboriginal Health, Wellbeing and Safety Strategic Plan 2017-2027 marked the State's first step towards recognising and advancing the self-determination of First Peoples in the health sector. The development of *Korin Korin Balit Djak* was recognition that the State's approach to First Peoples' health was not working and was not responsive to the needs of First Peoples'. *Korin Korin Balit Djak* focuses on five priority domains, including:

- Aboriginal community leadership
- Prioritising Aboriginal culture and community
- System reform across the health and human services sector
- Safe, secure, strong families and individuals
- Physically, socially and emotionally healthy Aboriginal communities.

The State promised to review and update *Korin Korin Balit-Djak* every three years to keep it relevant to current and new issues, but it's not certain if this promise has been kept.

The Victorian Government acknowledges in the *Balit Murrup* framework (2017-2027) that colonisation, generational trauma, and racism have led to poor mental health among First Peoples'. The principle of self-determination is embedded into the four domains that guide the framework, which include:

- Improving access to culturally responsive services
- Building a robust, skilled and supported workforce
- Supporting resilience, healing and trauma recovery

⁴⁵ State of Victoria, Department of Health and Human Services, *Korin Korin Balit Djak Aboriginal health, wellbeing and safety strategic plan 2017-2027* (August 2017), 14.

- Integrated and seamless service delivery.

Both *Korin Korin Balit Djak* and *Balit Murrup* marked a paradigm shift in how the Victorian Government conceptualises First Peoples' health. The development of these policies and the implementation of associated programs have been welcome and necessary. However, the commitment to self-determination by the Victorian Government, as expressed through the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs framework 2018-2023, *Korin Korin Balit-Djak*, *Balit Murrup*, has not been enough to tackle the complex challenges facing First Peoples in the health sector.

The Victorian Government Aboriginal Affairs Report, which tracks the progress of the Victorian Government's commitment to improving outcomes for First Peoples in Victoria by measuring against the outcomes in the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework (VAAF), shows that the government is still failing First Peoples' with their health and wellbeing.

Access to necessary services for First Peoples has declined, and universal health services still fail to meet cultural safety standards. This has led to ongoing distrust and underuse of critical medical services.

Despite the success of Community-driven programs, they remain limited in scope, accessibility and locations. They are often inadequately or inconsistently funded and are often piecemeal in application.

Statewide Treaty has the potential to secure the structural reforms required to implement these policies, aspirations, and goals. Traditional Owner Treaties will give First Peoples' the chance to guide the development of culturally suitable solutions within their communities.

6.3 Urgent reforms required now

The Assembly joins with the long advocacy of First Peoples' communities, ACCOs, and other community organisations in calling for specific reforms for the health system to be addressed by the Victorian Government as a matter of urgency.

In raising these issues as urgent reforms, the Assembly refers Yoorrook to the extensive knowledge of ACCOs and other First Peoples' knowledge holders who are experts in the field. Those organisations, along with First Peoples' communities, have been calling for specific reforms in the health system for decades.

The way forward is clear. Urgent reforms can happen now: it is untenable for the State Government to hide behind the cloak of Treaty.

Racism within the Victorian Healthcare System

Systemic racism across the health sector remains endemic. First Peoples are 47% more likely to experience racism in a healthcare setting than non-First Peoples' in Victoria.⁴⁶

There are countless reports and reviews that have identified racism within Victoria's healthcare system as a persistent barrier to First Peoples' accessing adequate healthcare. For example, the

⁴⁶ State of Victoria, *Aboriginal Affairs Report: Health and Wellbeing*, Goal 13.1 Increase the cultural safety and responsiveness of services < <https://www.firstpeoplesrelations.vic.gov.au/victorian-government-aboriginal-affairs-report-2021/health-and-wellbeing> >.

position statement from the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners acknowledges the systemic racism found within the healthcare system including stereotyping, and communication issues, lack of cultural safety among healthcare workers, causes First Peoples' not to trust the healthcare system.⁴⁷

The Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation's (VACCHO's) submission to Yoorrook, also identified that "*institutional racism within the health care system reduces access to and quality of health care for First Peoples*".⁴⁸

The Assembly joins the First Peoples' Community and VACCHO in calling for urgent reform to address and eliminate racism within the healthcare system.

Recommendation 2.1: Address racism within the Victorian healthcare system

Stolen Generations

The dispossession of First Peoples' and the forcible removal of children from their families from the 1800s up to the 1970s resulted in complex experiences of trauma and loss. Today, First Peoples' children are still being removed from their families at a higher rate than non-First Peoples' children due to the child-protection system⁴⁹. The historical and ongoing trauma of First Peoples' can be 'passed on intergenerationally to entire communities, as well as individuals and families.⁵⁰ It is estimated that, one-third of the total First Peoples' population may be affected by intergenerational trauma as descendants of the Stolen Generations.⁵¹

Survivors of the Stolen Generations and their descendants have poorer health and wellbeing outcomes, compared to those who were not removed and their descendants – resulting in poorer mental health, suicidal ideation, attempts and/or death⁵². While the Victorian Government opened the Stolen Generations Reparations Package in March 2022 to help address the trauma and suffering caused by the forced removal of First Peoples' children, the scope of support is limited and does not address the ongoing trauma of the child protection system. The Assembly recommends that Yoorrook seek support for Stolen Generations and their children to recover and heal from past and current injustices to break the cycle of intergenerational trauma.

⁴⁷ The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, *Racism in the healthcare system*, Position statement (September 2018).

⁴⁸ Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, *Submission to Yoorrook Justice Commissions Inquiry into Education, Health and Housing*, (February 2024), 38.

⁴⁹ First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria, *Submission to Yoorrook Justice Commission Response to Critical Issues papers on the criminal justice and child protection systems*, (5 December 2022).

⁵⁰ Darwin L, Vervoort S, Vollert E and Blustein S, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Australian Government. *Intergenerational trauma and mental health*. Catalogue number IMH 18, (2023) vi.

⁵¹ Darwin L, Vervoort S, Vollert E and Blustein S, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Australian Government. *Intergenerational trauma and mental health*. Catalogue number IMH 18, (2023) vi.

⁵² Darwin L, Vervoort S, Vollert E and Blustein S, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Australian Government. *Intergenerational trauma and mental health*. Catalogue number IMH 18, (2023) vi.

Recommendation 2.2: Provide healing opportunities for Stolen Generations

Current recommendations for Yoorrook to draw on include:

- Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse Recommendation 9.2 – the Australian and state and territory governments should fund Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing approaches as an ongoing, integral part of advocacy and support and therapeutic treatment service systems for responses for victims and survivors of child sexual abuse. These approaches should be evaluated in accordance with culturally appropriate methodologies, to contribute to evidence of best practice.
- Stolen Generations Reparations Steering Committee Report
- Bringing them Home Report

Elder Care

First Peoples tend to age faster than the rest of the population due to higher rates of disease. First Peoples aged 45-64 are three times more likely to require assistance with core activities than the mainstream populations.⁵³ First Peoples' also have higher rates of early onset dementia, blindness and vision impairment. This problem will likely worsen as the number of First Peoples over 60 is set to double from 4,359 in 2016 to almost 9,000 in 2016.⁵⁴

The Assembly recognises that the First Peoples' Community is concerned that Victoria's aged care system is not adequately serving the needs of their Elders, families, and communities.

This concern is reflected in the 2021 final Report into the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, which states:

*'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people do not access aged care at a rate commensurate with their level of need. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people prefer to receive services from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations. However, there are currently not enough Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and other people with high levels of cultural competency, employed across the aged care system.'*⁵⁵

⁵³ Aboriginal Housing Victoria, *Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort: The Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework*, (2020), 45.

⁵⁴ Aboriginal Housing Victoria, *Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort: The Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework*, (2020), 45.

⁵⁵ Commonwealth of Australia, Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, *Final Report: Care, Dignity and Respect*, (2021), 9.

Urgent work is required to ensure Elders have access to culturally safe aged care, and reform needs to recognise that First Peoples' age earlier.

Recommendation 2.3: Urgent reform is required to the aged care system to better support ageing First Peoples', families and communities

The Assembly recommends Yoorrook seek examples of best practice in Elder care and review relevant recommendations from the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety:

- Recommendation 47: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aged care pathway within the new aged care system
- Recommendation 48: Cultural safety
- Recommendation 49: An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Aged Care Commissioner
- Recommendation 51: Employment and training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aged care
- Recommendation 52: Funding cycle
- Recommendation 53: Program streams

Social and Emotional Wellbeing

First Peoples' social and emotional wellbeing is a complex, multidimensional concept encompassing connections to land, culture, spirituality, ancestry, family and community.⁵⁶

First Peoples' communities in Victoria favour the community-focused, strengths-based approach of 'social and emotional wellbeing' over the individual and often deficit terminology of 'mental health'.⁵⁷ The Balit Durn Durn Centre, the peak body for First Peoples' Social and Emotional Wellbeing, was created in response to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. This followed years of advocacy by ACCOs and community leaders for a specialised research centre to support First Peoples' social and emotional wellbeing.

According to the *Balit Durn Durn Response to Compulsory Treatment and Assessment*, the current mental health system goes against First Peoples' understanding of social and emotional wellbeing as it is fragmented and not holistic, clinically centric, culture is not valued as a protective factor, racist, discriminatory, and stigmatising.⁵⁸ Without this understanding, the mental health system will continue to fail First Peoples', as mainstream health services do not address the needs of First Peoples' social and emotional wellbeing.

⁵⁶ Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, Balit Durn Durn Centre, *Response to Compulsory Treatment and Assessment*, accessed 15 February 2024, <https://www.balitdurndurncentre.org.au/the-centres-response-to-compulsory-treatment-and-assessment/> 5.

⁵⁷ Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, Balit Durn Durn Centre, *Response to Compulsory Treatment and Assessment*, accessed 15 February 2024, <https://www.balitdurndurncentre.org.au/the-centres-response-to-compulsory-treatment-and-assessment/> 6.

⁵⁸ Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, Balit Durn Durn Centre, *Response to Compulsory Treatment and Assessment*, accessed 15 February 2024, <https://www.balitdurndurncentre.org.au/the-centres-response-to-compulsory-treatment-and-assessment/> 7-8.

In Victoria, First Peoples are disproportionally represented in the mental health system, with 3.3% of First Peoples receiving clinical mental health care compared to only 1% of the non-Indigenous population.⁵⁹

To address the over-representation of First Peoples within the mental health system, First Peoples' understanding of social and emotional wellbeing must be prioritised. The Victorian Government has committed to many reforms, frameworks and strategies that have supported First Peoples' self-determination within the mental health system. However, there continues to be inadequate resourcing and recognition of the importance of social and emotional wellbeing for First Peoples'. "The persistent minimising of the model and privileging of clinical western medicine reveals systems level stigma and discrimination."⁶⁰

Recommendation 2.4: First Peoples' to be in control of their social and emotional wellbeing

The Assembly joins VACCHO and the Balit Durn Durn Centre to embedded First Peoples' ways of knowing, being and doing, within the mental health system.

Current reports and recommendations for Yoorrook to draw on include:

- Balit Durn Durn Response to Compulsory Treatment and Assessment
- Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System
- Balit Durn Durn Submission into the National Stigma and Discrimination Reduction Strategy

Disability

Case Study

In 2017, a trial for a hospital-based treatment successfully treated 72% of Aboriginal children and adolescents with serious mental health problems. This compares with only 31% of Aboriginal children and adolescents being successfully treated prior to the program (Vance et al. 2017). The program was developed in extensive consultation with the First Peoples' community, including 31 Elders. The treatment utilised First Peoples' ways of knowing and being, conducted in a culturally safe place with either a First Peoples' clinician or a clinician accompanied by a First Peoples' mental health worker. It also included sharing the importance of Aboriginal culture with the patient and encouraged the patient to reciprocate. – Victorian Agency for Health Information, *The Health and Wellbeing of Aboriginal Victorians; Findings from the Victorian Population Health Survey* (2017)

The experiences of First Peoples with disability cannot be separated from the ongoing impacts of colonisation, intergenerational trauma and racism experienced by First Peoples' more generally. First

⁵⁹ Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, Balit Durn Durn Centre, Response to Compulsory Treatment and Assessment, accessed 15 February 2024, <https://www.balitdurndurncentre.org.au/the-centres-response-to-compulsory-treatment-and-assessment/> 12.

⁶⁰ Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, Balit Durn Durn Centre, Response to Compulsory Treatment and Assessment, accessed 15 February 2024, <https://www.balitdurndurncentre.org.au/the-centres-response-to-compulsory-treatment-and-assessment/> 5 pg. 10.

Peoples with a disability are more likely to experience threats of violence, problems accessing health services, high levels of psychological distress and be detained due to their disability.⁶¹

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is an international human rights treaty of the United Nations, which intends to protect the dignity and rights of people with disabilities. The Victorian Government and all levels of government have agreed to the Convention to work towards all people with a disability enjoying equal human rights and freedoms.⁶² However, the needs of First Peoples with a disability are often ignored as First Peoples' cultural understandings of inclusion do not align with Western concepts of disability. Culture, Country, kin and community protect First Peoples with disability from violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation.⁶³

- around 35% of First Peoples under 65 have a disability. This is nearly three times the percentage of people with disability in the general population.
- Nearly 79% of First Peoples aged 65 and over have a disability
- Around 22% of First Nations children under 18 have a disability, compared with 8.3% of children in the general population.
 - *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey 2018-19*

While the Victorian Government acknowledges First Peoples' self-determination as an essential aspect in supporting First Peoples' with a disability in the *Inclusive Victoria: State Disability Plan 2022 – 2026*, Victoria's plan for making the community inclusive and accessible for everyone, there are no targets, recommendations, or measures in the plan to support First Peoples' with a disability better. Policy frameworks and service delivery often fail to recognise and respond to the distinct needs of First Peoples with disability, and their needs are frequently overlooked, ignored or forgotten.

Recommendation 2.5: Amplify the voices of First Peoples with a disability

In September 2023, the Final Report into the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability was published. The Royal Commission made 222 recommendations on how to improve laws, policies, structures and practices to ensure a more inclusive and just society that supports the independence of people with disability and their right to live free from violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation. Volume 9, First Nations people with disability sets out themes and issues identified by First Nations people with disability, their families and communities. It proposes changes to prevent violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation, and to strengthen the voices of First Nations people with disability.

The Assembly recommends Yoorrook review the Recommendations from the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability.

⁶¹ 3 Hindman, L, First Nations Disability Network, *Disability Royal Commission Media Release, First Nations People with Disability issues paper*, (2020).

⁶² State of Victoria, *Inclusive Victoria: State Disability Plan (2022 – 2026)*, accessed 15 February 2024 <<https://www.vic.gov.au/state-disability-plan/about-plan/human-rights>>.

⁶³ Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation of People with a Disability, *Final Report Volume 9 First Nations people with disability* (September 2023), 3.

7 Housing and Homelessness

This section addresses the systemic injustices First Peoples' face in housing and homelessness. Reforms to these systems must work together to improve outcomes for First Peoples in housing and homelessness.

First Peoples continue to experience injustices related to housing and homelessness at rates that far exceed those of the non-Indigenous population, demonstrating a failure by the Victorian Government to uphold the right to secure adequate housing.⁶⁴ Although often neglected, the right to secure and adequate housing is essential to the right to self-determination and the pursuit of economic, social and cultural development. Safe and secure adequate housing depends on various factors, including legal security of tenure, availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure, affordability, accessibility, habitability, location and cultural adequacy.⁶⁵

For First Peoples' experiencing homelessness, many of their other human rights are also violated, including but not limited to the right to education and the right to access health services, demonstrating the importance of an intersectional lens for reforms addressing these areas.

Impact of colonisation

Before invasion, there is evidence that First Peoples lived in stone dwellings and villages.⁶⁶ For example, stone structures have been discovered in Lake Condah, on the land of the Gunditjmarra people, where some houses shared walls for strength and had interior doors. The roofs were often thatched by grass or leaves and would even feature a central chimney that could be closed for rain.⁶⁷ This evidence shows that housing was necessary for First Peoples before colonisation.

"Before settlers came among them had a regular Village. My informant who drew this states that there were between 20-30 evidently some of them big enough to hold a dozen people, their shape as under an aperture at top to let out smoke, which in rainy weather they covered with large sod, The form like a Beehive about 6 feet high + or - and about 10 feet in diameter. An opening about 3 feet for a doorway which they could close at night with piece of bark."

Brough Smythe Papers, c 1840

As outlined in the Assembly's submission to Yoorrook on Land Injustice, when invasion occurred, First Peoples were violently removed from their homes and forced off their lands and into reserves and missions. During this period, only around 90,000 to 100,000 hectares of land was set aside for First Peoples', which progressively became smaller and smaller.

The violations affecting First Peoples today are embedded in and a consequence of colonisation, dispossession and the denial of land rights. The Victorian Government has also failed to address the

⁶⁴ United Nations, *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, (ICESCR, article 11).

⁶⁵ Australian Human Rights Commission, *Housing, homelessness and human rights*, accessed 8 February 2024, <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/rights-and-freedoms/projects/housing-homelessness-and-human-rights>.

⁶⁶ Bruce Pascoe, *Dark Emu*, Magala Books Aboriginal Corporation, Broome (2015), 128.

⁶⁷ Bruce Pascoe, *Dark Emu*, Magala Books Aboriginal Corporation, Broome (2015), 128.

inequalities First Peoples' face in building generational wealth through home ownership, denying First Peoples' the ability to accumulate assets and generate wealth. These failures can be viewed as a continuation of the colonialist legacy of causing and perpetuating harm.

Housing is fundamental to an enriched life

As outlined in the response to the Health Inquiry above, First Peoples are more likely to experience injustice in most social services, including but not limited to health, education, justice, youth justice, child protection, and family violence. According to the Australian Human Rights Commission, many interconnected social factors, such as the right to health and education, determine population health and inequality. If one right is impacted, it will likely affect other rights.⁶⁸ Secure housing is fundamental to safety, economic participation, psychological resilience and physical health.⁶⁹

Without the foundation of safe and secure housing, it's more challenging to endure life's crises and get back on one's feet. First Peoples are more likely to have complex needs requiring stable housing. Still, housing is often overlooked as a solution in major government policies and frameworks aimed at improving outcomes for First Peoples'.

Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort, the Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework, states that for First Peoples', a culturally enriched home supports mental and spiritual health and helps maintain a strong connection to their culture, providing strength and resilience in difficult times.

Housing and Homelessness and Treaty

ACCOs and Community-led organisations have and continue to support their communities in housing and homelessness. The vital support that ACCOs provide their communities has long gone underacknowledged by the Victorian Government as ACCOs continuously receive less funding to mainstream organisations, despite the First Peoples' population in Victoria experiencing housing stress and homelessness at a higher rate⁷⁰.

The only way to achieve genuine self-determination for First Peoples in housing and homelessness is through systemic reform, through the vehicle of Treaty. The Victorian Government must hand over power to First Peoples to guarantee substantive equality and non-discrimination currently pervasive in the housing and homelessness systems.

⁶⁸ Australian Human Rights Commission, *Social determinants and the health of Indigenous peoples in Australia – a human rights-based approach*, accessed 8 February 2024, < <https://humanrights.gov.au/about/news/speeches/social-determinants-and-health-indigenous-peoples-australia-human-rights-based> >.

⁶⁹ Aboriginal Housing Victoria, *Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort: The Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework*, (2020), 28.⁷⁰ Aboriginal Housing Victoria, *Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort: The Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework*, (2020).

⁷⁰ Aboriginal Housing Victoria, *Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort: The Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework*, (2020).

7.1 Systemic injustices in the housing system

Housing

“Aboriginal people own houses at a rate far lower than the mainstream community. Lower incomes, higher unemployment rates, the absence of inherited wealth or community collateral, and a limited cultural exposure to home ownership are all implicated.”⁷¹

In addition:

- 22% of First People households live in social housing, compared to 0.9% of the mainstream population⁷²
- Only 41% of First Peoples in Victoria own their own home compared to 70% of the mainstream population.⁷³

Successive governments have long ignored the disparities faced by First Peoples in housing. Discrimination against First Peoples in the housing system is deeply embedded in State structures, legal systems, laws and policies.

In 2020, senior ministers of the Victorian Government, in collaboration with Aboriginal Housing Victoria and the First Peoples’ Community, launched *Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort*. This strategy aims to tackle the housing and homelessness challenges faced by First Peoples’. While *Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort* has made some progress in the past three years, it is severely underfunded and has not achieved its yearly targets. Without adequate funding, it will be impossible to improve outcomes for First Peoples in housing and homelessness - outcomes that continue to worsen.

The Assembly understands that the current safety nets within the system that support people through difficult periods, such as social housing (public and community housing) and homelessness services, are also failing First Peoples. The way the housing sector is currently designed is incapable of responding to the issues faced by First Peoples’. Whole system reform is required through Treaty, not just in social housing but in increased access to homeownership and private rental, and a reformed homelessness system that supports First Peoples’ out of homelessness and into long-term housing.

Homelessness

In Victoria, 17% of First Peoples seek specialist homelessness support each year. If the non-Indigenous population sought homelessness support at the same rate, it would equal over 1 million people per year.⁷⁴ It is unfathomable to think that the Victorian Government would allow such a housing crisis to exist and continue to exist if it affected the non-Indigenous population to this extent. The Victorian Government would likely ensure that the non-Indigenous population never reached such a crisis point. For the Victorian Government to allow such a crisis to occur in the First Peoples’

⁷¹ Aboriginal Housing Victoria, *Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort: The Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework*, (2020), 61.

⁷² The Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Forum, *Focus Areas: Social Housing*, accessed 1 February 2024, <https://vahhf.org.au/focus-areas/>.

⁷³ Aboriginal Housing Victoria, *Mana-na woorn tyeen maar-takoort Annual Report Card 2022*, (August 2022) 33.

⁷⁴ Aboriginal Housing Victoria, *Mana-na woorn tyeen maar-takoort Annual Report Card 2022*, (August 2022) 13.

Community demonstrates the underlying and systemic racism and discrimination that exists in the homelessness sector. The Victorian Government needs to do more to address this issue.

In addition, First Peoples' who enter the homelessness system seeking support are more likely to exit homeless⁷⁵. This is in part due to the lack of culturally safe options within mainstream organisations and ACCOs being chronically underfunded for homelessness support.

For First Peoples to receive any homelessness support, ACCOs are required to connect with a mainstream organisation to provide brokerage, housing and services, which are often not culturally safe.⁷⁶

Mainstream organisations often rely on ACCOs to meet the cultural needs of their clients instead of building their own competencies. This puts additional strain on the limited resources of the ACCOs.

This current approach does not enable self-determination and the Victorian Government must act urgently to decrease the shocking rate of First Peoples' seeking homelessness support.

- 1 in 6 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians experience homelessness each year.
 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians are 13.1 times more likely to experience homelessness when compared to other Victorians.
 - The number of First Peoples' women accessing specialist homelessness services increased by 20% in the past 5 years, compared to a decrease of around 14% of non-First Peoples' women in the same period.¹
- **Mana-na worm-tyeen maar-takoort**

7.2 Steps in the right direction, but the housing system continues to harm First Peoples'

The Victorian Government has committed to reducing the rate of First Peoples' seeking homelessness support and progressing self-determination in the housing system, through its commitment to *Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort*, Closing the Gap and the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework (VAAF).

Aligned with these commitments, important initiatives and steps have been taken towards self-determination in key areas of the system. However, their effectiveness requires resourcing and a genuine shift in control and decision-making power to First Peoples'. ACCOs have repeatedly advocated to the Victorian Government that the one housing target in the Closing the Gap Agreement – that by 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in appropriately sized (not overcrowded) housing to 88 per cent - has been achieved in Victoria and the Victorian Government needs to push for more relevant outcomes for housing under Closing the Gap.

Additionally, the Victorian Government Aboriginal Affairs Report tracks the progress of the Victorian Government's commitment to improving outcomes for First Peoples in Victoria by measuring against the outcomes in the VAAF. The last report from 2022 shows that the government is still failing First Peoples', and First Peoples' must be in control of their housing and homelessness outcomes.

The table below shows how the VAAF is performing in relation to First Peoples' housing and homelessness:

⁷⁵ Aboriginal Housing Victoria, *Mana-na woorn tyeen maar-takoort Annual Report Card 2022*, (August 2022), 15.

⁷⁶ Aboriginal Housing Victoria, *Blueprint for an Aboriginal-specific homelessness system in Victoria*, (2022), 20.

VAAF goal	Status	Comments
Goal 3: Aboriginal families and households thrive <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Objective 3.2 Increase income and housing security for Aboriginal households 	Measures have varied in performance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family violence has a disproportionate impact on Aboriginal people in Victoria. Concerningly reports of family violence incidents involving Aboriginal people have increased considerably in recent years. Aboriginal Victorians were far more likely than non-Aboriginal Victorians to access homelessness services in 2021-22.
Goal 8: Aboriginal workers achieve wealth equality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Objective 8.2 Increase Aboriginal homeownership in line with the Victorian average 	Measures have remained the same	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Homeownership remains a significant barrier to increasing First Peoples' inter-generational wealth.

The goals within the VAAF do not reflect the crises First Peoples are currently facing in housing and homelessness, as there is no specific goal to address improving outcomes for First Peoples'. Instead, objectives to improve housing and homelessness are weaved into other goals. Housing solutions are often the missing piece in Victorian Government policy reform, and First Peoples are disproportionately affected by it.

7.3 Urgent reforms required now

The Assembly joins with the long advocacy of First Peoples' communities, ACCOs, and other community organisations in calling for specific reforms in housing and homelessness to be addressed by the Victorian Government as a matter of urgency.

In raising these issues as urgent reforms, the Assembly refers Yoorrook to the extensive knowledge and research of First Peoples' Community-led organisations that have dedicated expertise and play a lead role in addressing systemic injustices. Those organisations, along with First Peoples' communities, have been calling for specific reforms in the housing and homelessness systems for decades.

The Assembly is concerned that the State has been waiting for Treaty to be the vehicle to enact the recommended reforms found in *Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort*. First Peoples are currently facing a crisis in housing and homelessness. Reforms in these areas should not wait for Treaty.

7.3.1 Urgent reforms in housing

Homeownership and private rental

For First Peoples', there are several barriers to homeownership and private rental, including systemic racism, lack of affordability and action from the Victorian Government to address these issues. These barriers have led to First Peoples' having an overreliance on social housing.

Many studies on racist attitudes in Australia have found a prevalence of overt racism towards First Peoples'.⁷⁷ This discrimination also manifests in the private housing market. The Swinburne research report, *Excluded from the Start*, investigated the barriers First Peoples' experience accessing private rental in Victoria and found that most tenants and professionals surveyed indicated that racial discrimination is an active part of the challenge First Peoples' face in finding appropriate rental housing.⁷⁸ The report identified an urgent need for an increased focus on culturally appropriate, safe and informed processes, practices and cultures at all stages when accessing private rental.⁷⁹

In addition, due to the intergenerational impacts of colonisation and dispossession, First Peoples are more likely to depend on income support or be on low salaries,⁸⁰ locking them out of both the housing and private rental market. In the past year, the private rental in Melbourne alone was up 15.2%.⁸¹ Similarly, the private housing market has skyrocketed over the past ten years, becoming unaffordable for most.⁸² To address the increases in the housing market, the Victorian Government created the Victorian Homebuyer Fund, a shared equity scheme to make homeownership more achievable for Victorians. However, the program requires participants to partner with the Victorian Government to secure a deposit for a property. This is not a culturally safe option for some First Peoples', due to the mistrust First Peoples' experience with the Victorian Government.

The Victorian Government's lack of understanding of tailoring services or programs to the specific needs of First Peoples' is also evident in the support programs provided for securing private rental. The Victorian Government has committed funding to the Aboriginal Private Rental Assistance Program (APRAP), which empowers First Peoples to navigate the private rental market. However, it does not service the entire state and replicates the same program for non-First Peoples'. Therefore,

⁷⁷ Stone, W.M., Goodall, Z.A, Peters, A. and Veeroja, P. *Aboriginal Private Rental Access in Victoria: "Excluded from the Start"*, A Report Commissioned by the Consumer Policy Research Centre, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, (2021) 32

⁷⁸ Stone, W.M., Goodall, Z.A, Peters, A. and Veeroja, P. *Aboriginal Private Rental Access in Victoria: "Excluded from the Start"*, A Report Commissioned by the Consumer Policy Research Centre, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, (2021) 84.

⁷⁹ Stone, W.M., Goodall, Z.A, Peters, A. and Veeroja, P. *Aboriginal Private Rental Access in Victoria: "Excluded from the Start"*, A Report Commissioned by the Consumer Policy Research Centre, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, (2021)85.

⁸⁰ Aboriginal Housing Victoria, *Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort: The Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework*, (2020), 57

⁸¹ State of Victoria, Homes Victoria, *Rental Report December Quarter 2023*, (December 2023), 4.

⁸² Residential property prices rose 23.7 per cent through the year to December quarter 2021, the strongest annual growth since the Residential Property Price Index series began in the September quarter 2003, Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022, Strongest annual growth in property prices on record, ABS, viewed 05 January 2024, <<https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/strongest-annual-growth-property-prices-record>>.

they do not acknowledge that First Peoples' may require more support to retain and sustain their tenancies due to injustices stemming from colonisation. The Assembly recommends that Yoorrook review and recommend additional affordable housing and rental options so First Peoples' can enter the private housing market.

Recommendation 3.1: Develop affordable housing programs specific to First Peoples'

The Assembly recommends that Yoorrook research existing affordable housing programs that provide opportunities to enter the housing market. *Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort* recommends various options to make homeownership more accessible for First Peoples under Goal 3: Opening doors to Homeownership and Private Rental.

Recommendation 3.2: Increase First Peoples' access to private rental

The Assembly recommends Yoorrook review the report and recommendations from the Residential Tenancy Commissioner, *Aboriginal Private Rental Access in Victoria: "Excluded from the Start"*, which provides recommendations for the private rental market accessible for First Peoples'.

Public housing

According to the Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Forum (AHHF), the peak body for First Peoples' housing and homelessness in Victoria, one in five First Peoples' households live in social housing, compared to one in fifty within the mainstream population.⁸³ Currently, there are not enough housing units to match this need.

There are over 55,000 households on the Victorian Housing Register (VHR), the government's waiting list for social housing. 10% (5,815) of those on the VHR identify as First Peoples', despite only making up 1% of Victoria's population.⁸⁴ Out of those First Peoples' households waiting, many identify as homeless⁸⁵ yet are not provided any support while waiting to be allocated an appropriate unit, which can be years.⁸⁶ The Assembly joins ACCOs in advocating for urgent funding for First Peoples on the VHR.

The recent \$5.3 billion investment in social housing through the Big Housing Build, with a commitment to allocate 10% to First Peoples', is insufficient to fully address the issues with housing stock. Even with this increased investment, there is projected to be a shortfall in social housing units for First Peoples of 2,488 by 2026, 3,700 by 2031, and 5,085 by 2036.⁸⁷

⁸³Aboriginal Housing Victoria, *Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort: The Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework*, (2020), 7.

⁸⁴ State of Victoria, Homes Victoria, Applications on the Victorian Housing Register (VHR), accessed 10 January 2024, <https://www.homes.vic.gov.au/applications-victorian-housing-register-vhr>.

⁸⁵ Aboriginal Housing Victoria, *Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort: The Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework*, (2020), 70.

⁸⁶ Aboriginal Housing Victoria, *Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort: The Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework*, (2020), 69.

⁸⁷ The Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Forum, *Focus Areas: Social Housing*, accessed 1 February 2024, <https://vahhf.org.au/focus-areas/>.

Recommendation 3.3: Urgent support for First Peoples' households on the VHR waiting list**Recommendation 3.4: Transfer Public Housing Units to long-term renters**

In the 1960s, the Housing Commission started selling public housing units to the tenant families to generate more funding.⁸⁸ Assembly Members have acknowledged that their own families who have lived in Victorian Government owned public housing units for over 30 – 40 years have likely paid equivalent rent to paying off a mortgage on a private property. The Assembly recommends that Yoorrook research the historical transfer of Government-owned public housing units to understand the possibility of transferring current public housing units to First Peoples' families to support the opportunity to create generational wealth.

Community housing

While on the VHR, First Peoples' can be allocated a unit within a mainstream community housing organisation. However, the Assembly understands that this option also has significant barriers for First Peoples' needing access to an adequate housing unit, including limited availabilities and culturally safe options.

Community housing organisations are not-for-profit organisations that manage affordable, long-term housing for low-income people or with special needs. Currently, Aboriginal Housing Victoria (AHV) is the only registered First Peoples' community housing provider in Victoria. Therefore, for First Peoples on the VHR waiting for housing, AHV is the only guaranteed culturally safe option available. If First Peoples are allocated a house within a mainstream organisation, it is not guaranteed to be culturally safe.

While some ACCOs provide housing services to their communities, their housing stock is limited.⁸⁹ ACCOs do not receive any government funding to provide housing to their community, as only registered housing providers can receive government funding. Becoming registered is difficult and ACCOs find it hard to comply with the administratively burdensome regulations and rules.⁹⁰ ACCOs that do own properties or seek housing funding either have them privately managed or collaborate with mainstream organisations. The current social housing system is not set up to support self-determination.

Recommendation 3.5: Accountability for mainstream organisations providing community housing to First Peoples'

In 2020, the Community Housing Industry Association Victoria (CHIA Vic) launched the *Community Housing Aboriginal Cultural Safety Framework*, which provides guidance and tools for mainstream community housing providers to support First Peoples' renters in a culturally safe way. However, there are no accountability measures or reporting mechanisms to ensure the tools are being implemented. The Assembly recommends that Yoorrook ensure the community housing sector is

⁸⁸ Victorian Public Tenants Association, *Timeline of Victoria's Public Housing 1850's to 2020's*, accessed 1 February 2024, <<https://vpta.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Public-Housing-Timeline.pdf>> 14.

⁸⁹ There is an estimated 360 ACCO housing units in total across Victoria. Aboriginal Housing Victoria, *Mana-na woom-tyeen maar-takoort: The Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework*, (2020),.38.

accountable for providing support to First Peoples' renters in a culturally safe way, so they have more options to access community housing.

Recommendation 3.6: Release the Social Housing Regulation Review

The Assembly understands that the Victorian Government reviewed the social housing regulations to identify future regulatory arrangements that best support social housing renters and communities, which included recommendations to make it easier for ACCOs to become registered housing providers. The final report was delivered to the Minister on 31 May 2022 but has not been published publicly. The Assembly recommends that Yoorrook compel the Victorian Government to release this report and address the recommendations.

7.3.2 Urgent reforms in homelessness

As outlined above, the systemic issues within the homelessness system are so deeply embedded that to support First Peoples' out of homelessness, a system that addresses the specific needs of First Peoples' must be implemented to address the current crises First Peoples are facing.

Recommendation 3.7: Implement recommendations from the *Blueprint for an Aboriginal specific Homelessness System*

The Assembly recommends that Yoorrook review the framework to implement a First Peoples' specific homelessness system developed as an outcome under *Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort*. It outlines the barriers First Peoples' currently face and provides the pathway to creating a better system to support First Peoples' out of homelessness.

Transitional housing

A lack of sufficient housing for First Peoples' remains a major issue in this area. More transitional housing for people leaving social services like justice, child protection, youth justice, mental health systems, and those fleeing from family violence is required.

As outlined above, housing is the foundation for breaking cycles of disadvantage and homelessness. In Victoria, First Peoples are 18 times more likely to seek homelessness support after exiting a custodial setting than non-Aboriginal Victorians⁹¹. Lack of access to stable accommodation after exiting custodial arrangements is a driver of reoffending, as prisoners who are homeless upon exiting prison are more likely to return.⁹² The Assembly recommends Yoorrook research options for more transitional housing, including reviewing the Housing First model.

Recommendation 3.8: Adopt the Housing First Model

The Assembly joins with *Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort's* recommendation for adopting the Housing First model. This proven approach connects people experiencing homelessness with long-

⁹¹ Aboriginal Housing Victoria, *Mana-na woorn tyeen maar-takoort Annual Report Card 2022*, (August 2022), 20.

⁹² Aboriginal Housing Victoria, *Mana-na woorn tyeen maar-takoort Annual Report Card 2022*, (August 2022), 20.

term housing as quickly as possible and without conditions. It acknowledges that housing is a human right that must be met before one can address personal issues. The Housing First model would ensure that those exiting the justice, youth justice, child protection, and mental health systems and those escaping or recovering from family violence can better support themselves to recover instead of ending up in the homelessness system or repeat offending.



Appendices

Appendix 1: Timeline – education, health and housing justice events relevant to the Assembly’s submission

	Date or Date Range	Event	Reference
	65,000 /time immemorial	First Peoples' cared and thrived on Country. Estimates of 60,000 First Peoples' in Victoria prior to invasion	
1700's	1770	Cook asserts British sovereignty over Eastern Australian	
	1778	26 January First Fleet land on Gadigal Country (Sydney Cove)	
	1789	Diseases like smallpox, tuberculosis, and syphilis, introduced at Botany Bay and neighboring areas, wreaked havoc on Aboriginal communities, spreading swiftly and causing widespread devastation. Both European settlers and Aboriginal populations suffered greatly, with the latter experiencing the loss of entire generations and community structures. Broome notes that two smallpox epidemics severely impacted the Kulin tribes in the 1790s and around 1830, each time potentially halving their population.	Healing Foundation Aboriginal History of Yarra
1800's	1834	Unlawful squatting and pastoralism start, Traditional Owners dispossessed from Country, frontier wars and massacres increase.	
		Henty brothers settle on Gunditjmarra Country, Portland Bay	
	1837	Government Missionary George Langhorne opened his Mission in Melbourne with his first lessons on the grounds of what is now the Botanic Gardens. The school was unsuccessful in terms of attracting students, closing in 1839 when Langhorne resigned.	p159, My Heart is Breaking, PROV & Australian Archives, 1993
	1839	Wesleyan Missionaries at 'Buntingdale' near Birregurra was established, closing in 1845.	
	1840's	In the 1840s, anthropologist William Stanbridge recorded that the First Peoples, known as the <i>Boorong</i> , had their own names for two stars. They called the star Eta Carinae ' <i>Collowgulloric War</i> ' and the star <i>Canopus</i> ' <i>War</i> '. They believed these stars were married.	
	1841	Efforts to establish schools or regular classes were observed by Assistant Protectors Thomas and Parker at Narre Warren and Loddon Stations respectively. These were closed in 1843.	
	1842	Governor Bourke of New South Wales set up the Native Police in the Port Phillip district. Their job was to break up groups of Aboriginal people. This force was stopped in 1853. The Native Police, along with other institutions, were influenced by Social Darwinism, economic liberalism, and a belief in Christianity that said, "land belongs to those who farm it."	Moonee Pond History <i>Aboriginal Education in Australia: Policies, Problems,</i>

		<i>Prospects,</i> Anthony Welch, Patricia Königsberg, Judith Rochecouste, and Glenys Collard, 2016
1846	<p>In 1846, one of Victoria's earliest Aboriginal schools was founded near the Yarra Aboriginal Protectorate Station, located between Merri Creek and Yarra River. The school, backed by the Wurundjeri tribe, received support from clan leader Billibellary, who not only sent his children but also encouraged other community members to participate.</p> <p>Student numbers reduced to four by 1849. To increase numbers, it was suggested by the school committee that Superintendent of the Port Phillip District, Charles La Trobe, direct Magistrates to send any orphaned or deserted Aboriginal children to the school.</p>	Victorian Collections
1850-1860's	First missionaries were established in Victoria, aiming to assimilate Indigenous children into European culture, impacting traditional education systems.	
1850	With help from Charles La Trobe, the Superintendent of the Port Phillip District and son of a Moravian Church Bishop, missionaries established the Moravian Mission near Swan Hill at Lake Boga.	
1851	Victoria becomes a separate colony from NSW.	
	Goldrush starts, focusing on central Victoria	
	Over the next 9 years, includes Acherson and Mohican Stations (1859).	
1854	The Anglican Church established the Yelta Mission near the junction of the Murray and Darling Rivers.	
1856	Surveyor-General responsible for Aboriginal Affairs	
1859	Ebenezer mission established	Broome 121
1860	Central Board Appointed to Watch over the Interests of Aborigines established. The Central Board was responsible for managing the reserves.	

	1861	Framlingham Mission reserve established.	(Broome, p 126)
		Lake Tyers Mission reserve (Bung Yarnda) established	(Broome, p 126)
		Estimated population 1,907	(Broome, p 126)
	1863	The Coranderrk Children's Asylum and Dormitory is established as part of the Coranderrk Aboriginal Reserve near Healesville.	Healing Foundation
		Ramahyuck Mission and Lake Wellington established	(Broome, p 126)
	1865	The Ballarat District Orphan Asylum was established. It hosted thousands of 'neglected' children. It was later renamed Ballarat Orphanage and remained open until 1968.	Healing Foundation
	1869	The Aboriginal Protection Act of 1869 was established, a system allowing for significant control over the lives of Aboriginal people by the Protection Board including forced child removal.	
	1867	The Board was tasked with establishing reserves for Aboriginal people. By 1867, it managed reserves at Framlingham and Coranderrk, indirectly controlled missions with government aid, and oversaw smaller reserves and ration depots. At Coranderrk, a school with separate children's quarters was built. The Coranderrk manager, without legal authority until 1869, removed 'neglected' children from Indigenous communities for the school.	
	1872	The schools that were opened at Aboriginal Stations and Reserves had remained under the jurisdiction of the Board of Education. However, in 1872 the Education Department superseded the Board of education and these schools applied for re-registration with the Education Department. It was noted in the Eighth Report of the Central Board, in 1872 that "these results were used to show that Aboriginal children were equal in intellect to white children".	p160, My Heart is Breaking, PROV & Australian Archives, 1993
	1875	In 1875, the Eleventh Report of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines noted that at Ramahyuck (Lake Wellington) Mission School: "The last examination by the Government Inspector reached again 100 percent, or highest standard which can be gained at State schools."	p161, [AAV: b332: item 1] My Heart is Breaking, PROV & Australian Archives, 1993
	1881	Presbyterian minister Peter MacPherson recorded the First Peoples' knowledge of the sky. He specifically mentioned their identification of	

	Collowgulloric War as a small red star, showing their deep understanding of their environment.	
1883	<p>J.F. Mann noted in his address to the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia earlier in 1883 that:</p> <p>“These blacks, when taken away at an early age from the tribe, are capable of receiving a good education, and in this respect, many compare favourably with the whites; but it is a question whether educating beyond a certain standard is advisable, for when they grow up no white person likes to place them on an equal footing, notwithstanding their learning.”</p>	p41, J.F. Mann, Notes on the Aborigines of Australia, Proceedings of the RGSA, NSW & Victorian Branches, 1st Session, 1883-4
1886	<p>Aborigines Protection Act 1886 ('Half-caste' Act)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduces policy of forcing Aboriginal people of 'mixed descent' off reserves, controls employment, residence, education, and care of children. At that time the government estimated there were about 833 Indigenous people remaining in Victoria, of whom 233 were classed as 'half-castes', including 160 children. 	
1887	<p>A new Program of Instruction was issued to all schools by the Department, including Aboriginal schools.</p> <p>The low expectations and racist views of the day were common in correspondence and reports from teachers back to the Department, however there were also positive achievements. Official records show some of the contrasting outcomes achieved from this time.</p> <p>A letter from teacher D.R. Morris at Lake Tyers to the Education Department on 1 April 1887, noted receipt of the Program of Instruction but was critical of their that the Aboriginal student's capacity to learn and their living conditions. Morris noted that:</p> <p><i>“The school is simply an Aboriginal school connected with the Church of England Mission...nearly all pure blacks – one half-caste and four of European descent...”</i></p> <p>For Aboriginal children the relevance of their education and opportunities for engagement with life outside the Mission was an underlying theme. Morris noted that:</p> <p><i>“There knowledge of English is extremely limited...and they are wholly dependent on the school for their knowledge of the language...being isolated from...any surrounding population...”</i></p>	p160, [PROV: VPRS 640: box 1106: School 1319] My Heart is Breaking, PROV & Australian Archives, 1993

	<p>The Program of Instruction, in relation to a First Peoples world view was reflected in Morris' comments as was the comparison with European values and intellect, he noted:</p> <p><i>"As a consequence, their vocabulary is confined to the expression of their simplest wants. In class work every word not ordinarily used by them, allusion, or idiom, requires careful and repeated explanation, which would be clear to any English child. The Aboriginal children have no homework – mostly living in Mia-mias or camps...their social condition precludes this: they are simply savages being brought under the first influences of civilisation."</i></p> <p>Morris' views on the parents and their future aspirations were also noted:</p> <p><i>"Parents [are] hunters...without any forethought or aspiration, other than the supply of their animal wants. Intellectually, their capacities are of the lowest type hardly any power of abstraction or reasoning...this is the material we have to work upon...by the Department we stand on precisely the same footing as the best State School in Victoria as regards the inspector's results and reports..."</i></p> <p><i>"...At last examination, the question of the new Program of Instruction was referred to, with the exceptional difficulties we had to contend with, and its unsuitability to a people such as those who would be unable to comprehend it, and to whom it would not be of the slightest utility in their future lives as simply wandering Aborigines..."</i></p>	
1888	<p>In correspondence from Ramahyuck School teacher H.A. Hahn to the Secretary, Education Department, dated 17 March 1888, Hahn wrote:</p> <p><i>"...I have been Head Teacher about 12 years and have had seven times above 90 percent; my last percentage, under the new Program of Instruction is 92.456..."</i></p>	
1890	<p>Aborigines Protection Act 1890</p> <p>Provides some assistance for Aboriginal people of mixed descent and allows residing on reserves temporarily. Restricts where people can live (only 5 reserves), work, location and pay etc.</p>	Broome, 187

	1891	<p>In the Ramahyuck School example, teacher H.A. Hahn had left the school by 1891 and student outcomes and relationships had deteriorated as Aboriginal Mother, Bessy Cameron, and others, noted in correspondence to the Secretary, Education Department, dated 29 February 1891:</p> <p><i>“We the undersigned Aborigines at Ramahyuck most respectfully request that you will be so good to remove from our school as soon as you can the two ladies who have the charge of our school, as they demoralise our children so that we felt it our duty to take them from school and shall not send them back until we get a properly trained and truthful teacher.”</i></p>	
		<p>In its Annual Report for 1891, the Board for the Protection of Aborigines announced a new policy for primary school leavers whereby most would now come under the jurisdiction of the Department of Neglected Children (DFFH inherits certain functions related to child welfare) as Wards of the State. Board records from this time noted:</p> <p><i>“In connection with the merging of the half-castes with the general population, the question of giving the boys and girls a suitable industrial training, in order that they may enabled to earn their own living, has been well considered by the Board, and, after careful enquiry, the practice of transferring these half-caste children on leaving the station schools to the Department of Neglected Children has been adopted.”</i></p>	pp163-164, [37th report BPA: 1891 p3] My Heart is Breaking, PROV & Australian Archives, 1993
	1899	<p>Board able to transfer ‘any Aboriginal child for its better care, custody and education’ to an institution.</p>	Broome, 192
		<p>The Board of Protection meeting minutes from 6 December 1899 included a reference to an Aboriginal student, Lissy Hamilton, who had successfully passed all the requirements available to her at Ramahyuck School:</p> <p><i>“Miss Armour, the teacher at Ramahyuck has had a very successful Inspector’s Examination whereby the little nine-year-old girl (full Aboriginal) obtained her certificate as an educated person under the standard of Education. The Board unanimously voted 10/- as a reward for the child. The money to be expended for some useful articles.”</i></p>	pp163-164, [37th report BPA: 1891 p3] My Heart is Breaking, PROV & Australian Archives, 1993
1900's	1901	The Commonwealth of Australia is formed.	
		States retain exclusive power over Aboriginal Affairs until Australian Constitution amended in 1967.	

	Estimated population 652. 39% decrease from 1877	1901 Victorian census
	<p>In 1901, the Manager of Lake Tyers Station, John Bulmer, reported to the Board that William Hayes had developed skills as a builder, noting:</p> <p><i>"A few alterations have been made in some of the houses. The work has been done by William Hayes, an Aboriginal, who has developed into a very creditable carpenter and bricklayer."</i></p>	p164, [37th report BPA: 1901 p10] My Heart is Breaking, PROV & Australian Archives, 1993
	<p>A former Coranderrk student, Joesph Wandin, entered teacher training in 1901, with the Board of Protection voting to formally provide an allowance. Official records noted that:</p> <p><i>"A letter from School Inspector W. Gamble was considered asking if the Board would assist the boy Joseph Wandin, half caste from Coranderrk, who as a pupil could be appointed at Brunswick State School, but whose salary at present would not be enough to keep him with board and lodging...The Board unanimously passed the following resolution on the subject: 'That in the opinion of the Board an allowance should be made by the Board to provide board and lodging for the pupil teacher J. Wandin who has been appointed to Brunswick School and that some respectable persons might be selected where he could be taken in'".</i></p>	p165, [AAV: B314: item 5: p.107] My Heart is Breaking, PROV & Australian Archives, 1993
1904	Ebenezer Mission closes, given over to farmers (selectors)	Broome, 195
1908	<p>Ramahyuck closes. Residents transferred to Lake Tyers or elsewhere.</p> <p>At the Ramahyuck Mission School, students achieved more than 90 percent using the same Program of Instruction. The Ramahyuck School was amongst the highest percentage attainment of any school in the Colony. "</p>	Broome, 195 p160, My Heart is Breaking, PROV & Australian Archives, 1993
1910	3,706 hectares of reserve lands remain, about half of former area, includes Coranderrk, Lake Condah, Framlingham, Lake Tyers, and small reserves at Elliminyt (Colac) and Lake Moodemere.	Broome, 196
1910 - 1916	<p>Aborigines Act 1910 and 1915</p> <p>Board's coercive powers over the lives of Aboriginal people increases – controlled movement on and off reserves, visiting family</p>	Broome, 203
1917	Lake Condah closes, residents moved.	Broome, 208
1927	514 Aboriginal people in Victoria, 27% decline from 1901 (Commonwealth census)	Broome, p 194

1937	The Australian Government convenes first 'native welfare' conference and states adopt assimilation policies for Aboriginal people.	Healing Foundation
1946-1948	In NSW, Aboriginal Children required a medical certificate to attend public schools.	AECG
1962	The Commonwealth Electoral Act is amended to give the vote to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in federal elections.	
1968	The Commonwealth Office of Aboriginal Affairs was established ('The Office')	
1969	The Office identified health as a crucial sector for Indigenous advancement and began offering targeted grants to States for Aboriginal health initiatives. In response, State health departments created specialised units focused on Indigenous health needs and the management of these federal funds.	
1971-1972	The Whitlam Labour Government, upon election, formed the Department of Aboriginal Affairs to replace the Office of Aboriginal Affairs. This new department maintained the state grants program and began providing direct funding to Aboriginal Medical Services (AMSs), including the establishment of the first community-controlled AMS in Redfern, Sydney.	Lowitja
1973	First national 'Ten Year Plan' for Aboriginal Health'	Lowitja
	Victoria Aboriginal Health Service Established in Fitzroy, Melbourne.	
1974	The national AMS umbrella organisation, the National Aboriginal and Islander Health Organisation (NAIHO), was formed.	
1975	The Racial Discrimination Act was enacted.	
	A universal health insurance system named Medibank was introduced.	
	The National Aboriginal and Islander Health Organisation was established.	
1976	The Report on the Delivery of Services by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs was published. It assessed the capability of the DAA to fulfil its responsibilities for Indigenous policy development and administration. It detailed key achievements in Aboriginal land rights, health, education, and employment. It highlighted the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act and noted improvements in legal services, housing, and community development. Notably, the report underscored a decrease in infant mortality and an uptick in Aboriginal students in higher education, reflecting positive strides in the well-being and advancement of Aboriginal Australians.	Parliamentary Paper

	The Commonwealth asked the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs (HRSCAA) to conduct a review of Aboriginal health.	
1977	The National Trachoma and Eye Health Program finds that more than half of 60,000 Aboriginal people examined have trachoma. The infection rate is as high as 80% in some areas.	
	The National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC) was created to make sure that Aboriginal views are included in developing and carrying out education programs and policies for Aboriginal people at all levels of education.	
1978	The Commonwealth Coalition Government terminated Medibank.	
1979	The HRSCAA's report Aboriginal Health was released, which notes 'little progress had been made in raising [Aborigines' standard of health] and that poor Aboriginal health is due to low standards of environmental and housing conditions, socio-economic factors, and inappropriate health services.	Lowitja
	The Victorian Social Welfare Department adopted policy guidelines on Aboriginal adoption and foster care.	
1980	The Aboriginal Development Commission was created to advise the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs on issues related to the social and economic progress of Indigenous Australians.	
1984	Responsibility for all Commonwealth Aboriginal health programs, including the Department of Health's role in the funding of some AMSs, was consolidated within the Department of Aboriginal Affairs.	
	Universal health insurance was reintroduced as Medicare.	
	A Commonwealth Task Force on Aboriginal Health Statistics was established.	
1987	The Australian Departments of Health and Community Services combined to create the Department of Community Services and Health.	
	The Australian Institute of Health became an independent agency for statistics and research, particularly in Indigenous health.	
	A joint ministerial forum on Indigenous health was established, leading to the creation of the National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party, tasked with developing a comprehensive Indigenous health strategy addressing funding, participation, coordination, and stakeholder approval.	
1988	The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was initiated.	

	1989	The National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party's final report led to the creation of the Aboriginal Health Development Group (AHDG). The report focused on enhancing health service delivery for Aboriginal and Islander communities, with strategies for improvement. It emphasised planning, implementation, and evaluation for future health initiatives. Moreover, the report highlighted the need for increased coordination within health systems and integration with sectors like housing, employment, and education.	
		Indigenous communities, dissatisfied with their limited representation in AHDG, protested, resulting in the creation of the Aboriginal Health Advisory Group (AHAG).	
		The third national health survey by the ABS marked the first time Indigenous people were identified in such data collection.	
	1990	The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) was established, absorbing the roles of the DAA and the Aboriginal Development Commission, and took on national Indigenous health responsibilities.	
		The Aboriginal Health Development Group released a report with recommendations including forming a Council for Aboriginal Health, State/Territory Tripartite Forums, an Office of Aboriginal Health within ATSIC, and a national Aboriginal health organisation. These were accepted by the Joint Ministerial Forum.	
	1991	The Department of Community Services and Health was restructured and renamed as the Department of Health, Housing, and Community Services.	
		The Australian Institute of Health expanded its focus and was renamed the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.	
		ATSIC produced an interim report on health goals and targets as a tool to evaluate the National Aboriginal Health Strategy.	
		The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody's final report reviewed Indigenous health needs and strategies, supporting the implementation of the NAHS. The NHMRC's ethical guidelines for Indigenous health research were also endorsed.	
	1992	The Council for Aboriginal Health convened for the first time to advise on Indigenous health policy.	
		Mabo decision overturns 'terra nullius', acknowledging Indigenous Australians as the rightful custodians of Australian land, impacting land rights and housing policies.	

	1993	The Commonwealth's departmental restructuring led to the creation of the Department of Health, Housing, Local Government, and Community Services.	
		The National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) was established as the primary national body for Aboriginal Medical Services, taking over from the now-defunct NAIHO.	
		A review of the Council for Aboriginal Health was initiated by the Commonwealth Ministers for Health and Aboriginal Affairs.	
		Additionally, there were public calls for transferring Indigenous health responsibilities from ATSIC to the Commonwealth health department.	
	1994	ATSIC launched the Health Infrastructure Priority Projects scheme for environmental health through housing and infrastructure construction.	
		A high-level evaluation noted the ineffective implementation and underfunding of the National Aboriginal Health Strategy.	
	1995	Responsibility for Indigenous health shifted from ATSIC to the newly renamed Department of Human Services and Health, and the Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Services was established.	
		Following the 1992 National Commitment, Health Ministers agreed to develop multilateral framework agreements with States and Territories. These agreements included national and regional forums for Indigenous health policy advice.	
		The Department and ATSIC signed a Memorandum of Understanding outlining their roles.	
	1996	The Commonwealth Health Minister announced the formation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Council, a national health advisory forum.	
		The ATSIHWIU, a joint AIHW and ABS initiative, reviewed to create a National Plan for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Information. Additionally, all existing AMSs received Commonwealth approval for Medicare bulk-billing.	
		The Minister launched a \$20 million National Emotional and Social Well-Being (Mental Health) Action Plan and approved the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Hearing Strategy. Six of the eight States and Territories signed the Framework Agreements by year's end.	
		The 1996-97 financial year saw the Commonwealth allocate \$121.8 million to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander primary health and substance abuse services.	

	1997	Following a request from health and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs ministers, a House of Representatives inquiry into Indigenous health commenced. This inquiry saw significant developments such as the NHMRC's report on health infrastructure, the introduction of a sexual health strategy, a comprehensive review of eye health, and the adoption of health performance indicators.	
		The year saw pivotal publications in Indigenous health and welfare, advancements in health data quality, and a human rights report on child separation. Efforts included collaboration for health program funding, formation of new NHMRC sub-committees, a strategy for training and employing Indigenous health workers, and steps towards a national health strategy.	
		The Commonwealth dedicated \$135.8 million to Indigenous health services for 1997-98.	
	1998	The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare ('AIHW') released a review on health expenditures for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.	
		A new Health Infrastructure and Capital Replacement Program focused on health infrastructure maintenance and personnel accommodation.	
		The first Service Activity Reporting questionnaire was issued to Aboriginal primary health care services.	
		Post-re-election restructuring led to renaming the Department of Health and Family Services to the Department of Health and Aged Care.	
		An audit report on the Department's Aboriginal health program was published, and the final two Framework Agreements were signed.	
		Commonwealth funding for Indigenous health in 1998-99 was approximately \$158.4 million.	
	1999	The Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Services (OATSIHS) was rebranded as OATSIH to reflect its strategic focus, still operating within the Commonwealth health department.	
		The Australian National Audit Office examined ATSIC, publishing a report on housing and infrastructure in Indigenous communities.	
		The Primary Health Care Access Program was launched to improve community-controlled primary health care. Concurrently, the Minister for Health and Aged Care restructured the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Council to align with these initiatives.	
2000's	2000	The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs published its final report "Health is life," summarising its findings and recommendations from the inquiry into Indigenous Australians' health. For the first time, comprehensive national data was	

		collected on the activities of Commonwealth-funded Indigenous substance use services for the 1999-2000 period.	
2001		In February, AHMAC agreed to develop a National Strategic Framework for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce, with its objectives endorsed in October. This included a stakeholder consultation process and an implementation plan. The Northern Territory and South Australia renewed their Framework Agreements.	
		Celebrating its 30th anniversary, Redfern Aboriginal Medical Service continued its healthcare services.	
		The draft National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Strategy was released, responding to the "Health is Life" report. The "Health is Life" report focuses on enhancing Indigenous health in Australia, stressing improved coordination in health services. It advocates for greater Commonwealth participation and deeper involvement of Indigenous communities in health planning. The report also points out the crucial role of social and cultural factors like education and employment in health outcomes. It highlights the need for community-driven healthcare and environmental health services, calling for better funding in these areas.	
		It was estimated that \$77 million, which is 77% of the \$100 million Commonwealth funding for ACCHSs in 1998-99, was allocated to health services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This was published in the AIHW report on Indigenous health spending for 1998-1999.	
		AHMAC replaced the HAHU forum with SCATSIH, and the Department of Health and Aged Care was renamed to the Department of Health and Ageing.	
2002		In April, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to regular reports on Indigenous disadvantage.	
		The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce National Strategic Framework was released for AHMAC endorsement. Victoria and Western Australia renewed Framework Agreements.	
		NHMRC's Road Map for improving Indigenous health through research was developed.	
		The ANAO followed up on the Department of Health and Ageing's 1998 audit.	
		The AIHW's "Australia's Health 2002" report detailed Indigenous health. OATSIH and the Office of Hearing Services released a report on hearing services for Indigenous peoples, focusing on Otitis Media and hearing loss.	

	2003	The ABS and AIHW released the fourth edition of a report on Indigenous health and welfare in 2003.	
		The National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, building on the 1989 strategy, was endorsed, and signed by all Health Ministers, focusing on contemporary primary healthcare approaches.	
		OATSIH started developing a national Indigenous maternal and child health policy framework.	
		ATSIC released a Family Violence Action Plan aimed at improving health and social conditions.	
		The SCRCSSP's report on overcoming Indigenous disadvantage was endorsed by COAG.	
		A consultation paper for a national framework on Indigenous mental health and wellbeing was published, seeking diverse input for a 5-year plan.	
	2004	The Australian Government restructured Indigenous policy delivery, adopting a 'whole-of-government' approach, and transferring Indigenous programs to mainstream agencies.	
		ATSIC and ATSIH were abolished, replaced by the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination.	
		Major initiatives included a \$7 million NHMRC research grant for Indigenous health, a review of the national eye health program, a new Medicare health check for Indigenous Australians, and COAG's agreement on principles for Indigenous service delivery and frameworks for family violence and child protection.	
		ABS released a survey highlighting Indigenous social challenges, and the AMA reported on the need for an expanded Indigenous health workforce.	
	2005	In his 2005 Social Justice Report, Professor Tom Calma AO, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, called for Australian governments to commit to achieving health and life expectancy equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within 25 years.	
			Closing the Gap
	2006	In 2005, the HREOC Social Justice Report examined the implementation of the new whole-of-government Indigenous administration.	
		The ABS released a health survey detailing the health status of Indigenous Australians.	

		Medicare-funded health checks for Indigenous Australians began in May.	
		The National Indigenous Violence and Child Abuse Intelligence Task Force was established to address child abuse and violence.	
		The Australian Government released its implementation plan for the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health.	
		COAG pledged funding for Indigenous community reforms, particularly targeting violence, child abuse, and health issues.	
		Following the 2005 Social Justice Report by the Social Justice Commissioner, non-government agencies launched the National Indigenous Health Equality Campaign, a response aimed at improving health outcomes for Indigenous communities.	Closing the Gap
	2007	The "Little Children are Sacred" report, focusing on Indigenous child protection, was published.	
		Evaluations of Indigenous social and emotional wellbeing programs were conducted, alongside the release of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework report.	
		The Australian Government limited kava importation and supported Opal fuel to address petrol sniffing. Despite initial opposition, Australia eventually endorsed the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Kevin Rudd's Labour government assumed office and COAG committed to narrowing the life expectancy and education gaps for Indigenous Australians.	
		Despite initial opposition, Australia eventually endorsed the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.	
		Kevin Rudd's Labour government assumed office and COAG committed to narrowing the life expectancy and education gaps for Indigenous Australians.	
		In December, COAG committed to reducing disparities in Indigenous health and education: aiming to equalise life expectancy, cut the mortality rate for Indigenous children by half, and halve the gap in literacy and numeracy achievements, all within ten years.	Closing the Gap
	2008	Prime Minister Kevin Rudd formally apologised to the Stolen Generations.	
		A Statement of Intent was signed to achieve health equality by 2030.	
		The Social Justice Report 2007 proposed a plan to modify the Northern Territory intervention.	

		The federal budget focused on closing the health gap, and the Northern Territory emergency response's health check results were released.	
		The formation of the Indigenous Health Equality Council and the presentation of National Indigenous Health Equality Targets aimed to address life expectancy disparities.	
		The COAG committed \$4.6 billion to Indigenous issues, and the AMA's 2008 report highlighted health gaps in Indigenous children.	
		In July, the establishment of the National Indigenous Health Equality Council took place. Later, in November, COAG endorsed the National Indigenous Reform Agreement, outlining six ambitious 'Closing the Gap' targets. These included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • equalising life expectancy • halving child mortality and literacy/numeracy gaps for Indigenous children • improving year 12 attainment rates • enhancing employment outcomes for Indigenous Australians COAG identified crucial areas like early childhood, schooling, health, economic participation, and governance to support these goals.	Closing the Gap
	2009	Closing the gap on Indigenous disadvantage: the challenge for Australia, which summarises the Australian Government's progress in 'closing the gap' and addressing Indigenous disadvantage was released in January. The government supported the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and allocated substantial funds for Indigenous health in the federal budget, with a focus on various health services. Revised data indicated a reduced life expectancy gap for Indigenous people. There were key appointments and elections to enhance Indigenous representation and health management. Finally, a new National Indigenous Representative Body was proposed for greater self-representation and independence.	
		2009 Closing the Gap Report tabled in the Australian Parliament.	Closing the Gap
	2010	The Social justice report 2009, the final report by Tom Calma as Social Justice Commissioner was released, the focus of the report was justice reinvestment to reduce Indigenous overrepresentation in the criminal justice system, protection of language and sustaining Aboriginal homeland communities.	Lowitja
		Launch of the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples', providing a platform for Indigenous voices, particularly in policy discussions affecting health, housing, and education.	
		The Lowitja Institute was established, the first national body solely committed to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research.	

		2010 Closing the Gap Report tabled in the Australian Parliament.	Closing the Gap
	2011	2011 Closing the Gap Report tabled in the Australian Parliament.	Closing the Gap
	2012	The Australian Government commits to a National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development, focusing on access to early education, maternal and child health services.	
		2012 Closing the Gap Report tabled in the Australian Parliament.	Closing the Gap
	2013	2013 Closing the Gap Report tabled in the Australian Parliament.	Lowitja
		Indigenous Advancement Strategy is introduced, aimed at improving the lives and outcomes for Indigenous Australians in 5 key areas: jobs, land, and economy. children and schooling. safety and wellbeing.	Lowitja
		Australian Government commits further \$777 million to National Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap in Indigenous Health Outcomes.	Lowitja
		Australian Government announces the Lowitja Institute will be funded \$25 million from a new CRC Public Good Fund	Lowitja
		Australian Government releases National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan (NATSIHP) 2013–2023	Lowitja
	2014	The Forrest Review was published, recommending changes to better align Indigenous employment and education programs. Its purpose was to advise the Prime Minister on how to effectively connect Indigenous people who are unemployed with stable jobs.	
		COAG agreed to add an additional target for school attendance. 2014 Closing the Gap Report tabled in the Australian Parliament.	Closing the Gap
	2015	The Australian Government released an Implementation Plan for the NATSIHP 2013–2023, which aims to advance the goals of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-2023. This plan focuses on implementing strategies and actions to enhance the health outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples while also addressing systemic racism and discrimination in the healthcare system.	Lowitja
		COAG agreed to add an additional target on early childhood. 2015 Closing the Gap Report tabled in the Australian Parliament.	Closing the Gap
	2016	Ahead of four of the seven targets expiring in 2018, COAG agreed to refresh the Closing the Gap framework, and to work on this with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders people. 2016 Closing the Gap Report tabled in the Australian Parliament.	Closing the Gap
	2017	The Uluru Statement from the Heart calls for a First Nations Voice in the Australian Constitution and a Makarrata Commission for agreement-	

	making and truth-telling between the government and Indigenous peoples.	
	The Commonwealth Government announces a refreshed Closing the Gap strategy with 10-year targets.	
	50 th Anniversary of 1967 Referendum	
	25 th Anniversary of Mabo v Queensland decision	
	20 th Anniversary of Brining Them Home Report	
2018	From November 2017 to August 2018, the Australian Government conducted 29 national roundtables across major cities and regional centres. These discussions, along with meetings and informal talks led by the Minister for Indigenous Affairs and officials, involved over 1,200 stakeholders. The aim was to engage deeply on various issues, culminating in the presentation of the 2017 Closing the Gap Report to the Australian Parliament.	Closing the Gap
	In February, a group of eminent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians presented COAG with a statement outlining new priorities for the Closing the Gap agenda. This called for a strategy led by principles of empowerment and self-determination.	Closing the Gap
	During May and June, the Australian Government held two technical workshops in Sydney and Canberra, focusing on 23 draft targets reflecting these priorities.	
	On December 12th, COAG agreed to a formal partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for finalising the Closing the Gap Refresh. This included a draft framework for further discussions, featuring draft targets, accountabilities, and a plan for developing action plans.	
	The 2018 Closing the Gap Report was both made interactive online and tabled in the Australian Parliament.	
2019	On March 22, a groundbreaking Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap 2019-2029 was signed by all Australian Governments, the Coalition Peaks, and ALGA.	Closing the Gap
	The first meeting of the Joint Council was held on March 27 in Brisbane. At its second meeting on August 23 in Adelaide, the Council endorsed new Reform Priorities for the National Agreement, aiming to fast-track improvements in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These priorities were set for public engagement led by the Coalition of the Peaks, ensuring they were effective and adaptable to various contexts.	

		The Council also approved high-level accountability measures for transparency and collaborative work between governments and Indigenous peoples. From October to December, the Coalition of Peaks, with government support, conducted engagement sessions nationwide to inform the new National Agreement.	
		The 2019 Closing the Gap Report was both made available as an interactive website and presented to the Australian Parliament.	
	2020	On November 17, the Joint Council on Closing the Gap convened for its fourth meeting via telepresence, agreeing on four Priority Reform target indicators, two new socio-economic targets, and funding priorities for housing and early childhood development sectors.	Closing the Gap
		The National Agreement on Closing the Gap, signed on July 27 by key national leaders, including First Ministers and the Coalition of Peaks, formalised this commitment.	
		The Joint Council's third meeting on July 3 recommended this National Agreement for signature. Additionally, on June 24, the Coalition of Peaks released a report detailing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement insights, crucial for shaping the National Agreement.	
		The 2020 Closing the Gap Report was both released as an interactive online resource and tabled in the Australian Parliament.	
		COVID-19 pandemic highlights and exacerbates existing health disparities for Indigenous Australians but also showcases effective community-led responses.	
	2021	On August 16, all relevant parties submitted their Implementation Plans to the Joint Council on Closing the Gap.	Closing the Gap
		The Council's fifth meeting on April 16, conducted via telepresence, focused on three key outcomes: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. prioritising the establishment of a justice policy partnership to reduce youth and adult incarceration rates. 2. reviewing the first annual Partnership Health Check Report and formulating a response, 3. launching a Joint Communications Strategy. 	