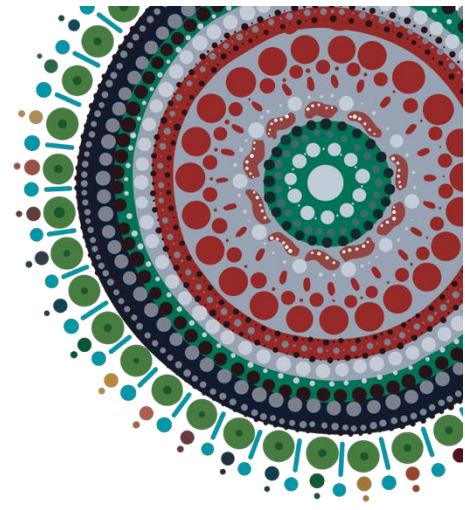




Artwork: Tiffany Hunter

# Yoorrook: Walking Together

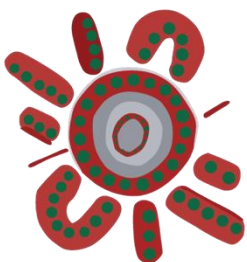
## Submission



## Yoorrook: Walking Together Submission

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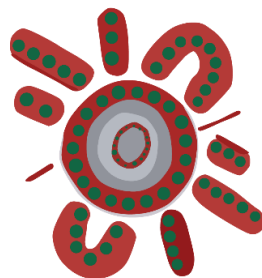


## Acknowledgement of Country

Your Community Health acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land on which our organisation is located and where we conduct our business, the Wurundjeri Woi wurrung people of the Kulin Nation.

We recognise their deep connection to the land, waters and culture and are dedicated to honouring their traditions.

We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging, and acknowledge that they have never ceded sovereignty.





## Introduction

Your Community Health (YourCH) acknowledges the profound and enduring injustices inflicted on First Nations peoples through colonisation, resulting in systemic health and social inequities that persist today. Recognising and addressing these historical and ongoing injustices is essential to advancing equity.

We know that First Nations peoples are the experts on their communities, cultures, lands, and health. We view Treaty as a vital step toward self-determination, justice, and equity, representing an opportunity to remove the systemic barriers that have affected First Nations peoples for generations and foster improved health and wellbeing outcomes.

YourCH welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Yoorrook Justice Commission's 'Shared Understanding' consultation process. Our submission reflects the insights and reflections of 27 staff members who participated in two truth-telling sessions, including both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous staff. These sessions provided a valuable opportunity to explore perceptions of colonisation, discuss the steps required to create a better understanding and respect of First Nations cultures, and examine meaningful contributions to truth-telling and the Treaty process.

YourCH recognises that there are unique perspectives regarding preferred language when referring to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. In this document, YourCH respectfully uses the terms *First Nations*, *First Peoples*, and *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander* interchangeably. When referring to *First Nations* peoples or *First Peoples*, this is specific to an Australian context. The term *Aboriginal* is respectfully intended to encompass all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples.

## About Your Community Health

YourCH has been helping people in Melbourne's north reach their health and wellbeing goals for 50 years. YourCH is a registered community health service and not-for-profit organisation delivering a wide range of services and supports that respond to a full spectrum of needs, including medical, dental, allied health, counselling, alcohol and other drug support, and social services. As a community health service, YourCH focuses on the provision of integrated and holistic support, recognising the influence of the social determinants of health on health and wellbeing. Services are delivered flexibly through three Darebin-based centres, place-based initiatives, and assertive outreach programs.

Located within the City of Darebin with a strong presence of Aboriginal-led community organisation, Darebin is a place of connection and gathering for the Aboriginal community. YourCH values the leadership of Aboriginal-led organisations, working in partnership to meet the needs of the local community.

YourCH is committed to fostering a culturally safe and inclusive environment, where individuals from all identities and backgrounds feel accepted, safe, and valued. Through a dedicated Aboriginal Health team, YourCH supports Aboriginal community members to access and navigate culturally appropriate health and wellbeing services. Aboriginal clients are given priority access to YourCH services at no charge, and Aboriginal Community Programs offer additional opportunities for connection and cultural engagement. Last financial year, YourCH supported over 400 Aboriginal community members and their families through its services and programs.

As a healthcare provider, YourCH recognises its responsibility to address the health inequities experienced by Aboriginal peoples. Guided by our *Kaydo Kertherba* Plan, YourCH is committed to listening to and amplifying the voices of Aboriginal staff and community members to drive meaningful change and support improved outcomes. We are actively working to enhance policies, processes, and programs to ensure they are culturally safe, accessible, and responsive to the needs of First Nations peoples.

## Response

### Question 1: What are the impacts of colonisation on First Nations Peoples?

Colonisation has left a profound and far-reaching impact on First Nations peoples, disrupting families, communities, culture and connections to Country. Compounded by generations of systemic exclusion and discrimination, colonisation has caused ongoing injustices, *"People think this is a problem of the past, but colonisation is still happening today."* Participants described colonisation as impacting the following:

- **Health and Wellbeing Inequity**

Participants highlighted the lasting impact of colonisation on the health and wellbeing of First Nations peoples. Colonisation introduced diseases such as smallpox, influenza, and measles, while disrupting healthy, sustainable traditional diets through exploitative systems like the payment of tobacco and sugar. Traditional healing practices, deeply tied to culture and land, were actively suppressed.

Colonial healthcare systems were designed exclusively for settlers, excluding Aboriginal people or subjecting them to substandard care. Many were denied admission to mainstream hospitals, segregated into different wards, or forced to rely on poorly resourced "native hospitals" or missions. Healthcare settings also became sites of trauma, with practices such as the forced removal of children further entrenching systemic barriers to access and fostering widespread mistrust. Discrimination in healthcare persists today, through systemic biases, cultural unsafety, and barriers to access, leading to delayed treatment, underdiagnosis, and inequitable care for First Nations peoples.

First Nations peoples experience disproportionately higher rates of social and emotional wellbeing challenges, chronic illnesses, including diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and respiratory conditions, and a life expectancy approximately 10 years shorter than non-Indigenous Australians. These health inequities are deeply rooted in the enduring impacts of colonisation and intergenerational trauma. One participant stated, *"As a healthcare worker, I have witnessed firsthand the stark disparities in health outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous peoples. First Nations peoples continue to face higher rates of preventable illnesses, reduced access to quality care, and lower life expectancy. These disparities are the result of historical injustices, systemic racism, and the intergenerational impacts of colonisation."*

- **White Superiority and Cultural Suppression**

White superiority and the ideology of "White Australia" were central to the colonisation of Australia, embedding systemic racism into laws, policies, and societal attitudes. These structures have perpetuated dispossession, cultural erasure, and inequities experienced by First Peoples. As one participant

observed: *"The whole presumption that 'white way is the right way' took away the Aboriginal spiritual and cultural view of the world, imposing white culture. It took away spiritual connections to land, sea and rivers."* Others noted the profound impact of settlers suppressing First Nations spirituality and imposing Catholic practices, as spirituality nurtured purpose, connection, identity, and resilience, which are essential for overall wellbeing.

Forced assimilation policies inflicted profound harm, eroding language, identity, and traditional practices, causing intergenerational trauma and disrupting kinship systems. This cultural erosion has resulted in a loss of identity that persists today, with many working to re-learn practices that were taken away. Despite progress, white ways of being still dominate Australian culture, and the legacy of white superiority continues to create barriers for First Nations peoples. One participant noted, *"More Aboriginal people are in care now than ever before,"* highlighting that the trauma of the Stolen Generations remains ongoing.

- **Intergenerational Trauma**

The massacres, the Stolen Generations, and systemic dispossession caused immense trauma, with lasting effects that continue to impact families and communities today. We now know that stress and trauma from colonisation affects DNA that can be passed down to future generations, impacting health and wellbeing, a concept known as epigenetic inheritance. Intergenerational trauma is compounded by ongoing systemic racism and inequities, preventing healing and perpetuating cycles of disadvantage. This legacy of trauma, compounded by continued loss of land, language, and identity, continues to impact the health and wellbeing of First Nations peoples.

- **Disregarding Care for Country**

First Nations peoples have cared for and managed the land for tens of thousands of years, with deep knowledge of sustainable practices that nurtured ecosystems and biodiversity. However, this knowledge was disregarded during colonisation, contributing to ineffective land management, environmental degradation, and the exacerbation of climate change and extreme weather events. *"Fire management and caring for Country were disregarded, and now we're facing the consequences."* Climate change is now the biggest global health threat of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and disproportionately impacts the health and wellbeing of First Nations peoples.

Amidst these challenges, participants reflected on the strength and resilience of First Nations communities. As one participant shared, *"There is a deep thread of resilience. Sharing stories and doing so much to educate."* The stories of survival and the ongoing fight for justice stand as a testament to this enduring resilience.

## Question 2: What is your experience of learning about First Nations history and culture in the education system?

For many participants, their experiences of learning about First Nations history and culture were minimal or entirely absent. *"I have no recollection of learning anything in school"* one participant shared. This sentiment was echoed widely, with many reflecting on how the education system prioritised white narratives while erasing First Nations histories.

Key themes included:

- **Neglect of Truth-Telling**

The curriculum often failed to acknowledge or adequately explore the sophisticated social, governance, and environmental systems that thrived for tens of thousands of years before colonisation. Instead, it perpetuated the myth of Australia as 'terra nullius' (land belonging to no one), denying the sovereignty of First Nations peoples.

Participants reflected on the absence of Australia's true history in primary and secondary schools, highlighting the false narrative that Australia was "discovered" and often described as a "young country"—ignoring its status as home to the oldest continuing culture on Earth. *"It was always about Captain Cook,"* one participant noted, as many recalled being taught to revere Cook as a hero. History lessons frequently glorified the achievements of settlers, while downplaying or completely omitting the violent dispossession, massacres, and systemic oppression inflicted on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Furthermore, the systemic discrimination, forced removals (such as the Stolen Generations), and policies of assimilation were neither adequately taught nor contextualised. This lack of truth-telling left students with a limited understanding of Australia's history and the structural and ongoing impacts of colonisation, perpetuating ignorance and bias.

- **Deficit-Focussed**

Despite being home to the longest continuing culture on the planet—a legacy that should be celebrated—First Nations peoples and cultures have often been framed through a problem-saturated narrative. Rather than honouring Aboriginal resilience, wisdom, and enduring contributions, the focus has too often been on disadvantage and deficit. This neglects the many stories of survival, strength, and cultural continuity.

Where formal education failed, media filled in the gaps—but often with harmful stereotypes. *"The media I consumed growing up was completely negative,"* one participant recalled as others reflected on the 'problem-saturated' representation of First Nations communities.

For First Nations individuals, such narratives can lead to a diminished sense of pride and belonging. For non-First Nations individuals, it reinforces stereotypes and perpetuates racism and white superiority.



- **Delayed Learning**

For many participants, exposure to Australia's true history did not occur until much later in life. As one participant reflected, *"It wasn't until I went to University and chose Aboriginal health as an elective that I began to learn about Aboriginal health and history."* For many, tertiary education and workplace training became their first exposure to understanding the realities of colonisation and First Nations cultures. However, relying on optional education pathways or workplace initiatives represents a significant missed opportunity to embed this understanding earlier in life.

Neglecting truth-telling in early education is particularly harmful, as it instils foundational biases and beliefs that are much harder to 'un-learn' in adulthood. When children are taught distorted versions of history, these narratives shape the way they view First Nations peoples and cultures, often reinforcing stereotypes and falsehoods. This lack of early understanding not only perpetuates bias but also obstructs the development of respect, cultural awareness, and allyship efforts later in life.

- **New Zealand Comparison**

Participants who had experiences outside Australia noted the differences in education systems. A participant from New Zealand shared, *"We learned about Treaty principles, language, and culture all through school. It was embedded. I was shocked at the difference when I moved to Australia."* Another participant added, *"When you arrive in New Zealand, you immediately see and feel the recognition of Māori culture."* In New Zealand, truth-telling about Māori culture is embedded into the education system through the inclusion of te reo Māori language, Māori history, and cultural practices in school curriculums, promoting greater awareness and respect for Māori heritage. New Zealand's formal commitment to the Treaty of Waitangi has led to an emphasis on reconciliation and the acknowledgment of historical injustices, including the impact of colonisation.

- **Hopeful Shifts in Early Years**

Some participants noted encouraging changes in how their children are being educated about First Nations' peoples and cultures. One parent shared, *"My child is being exposed to Acknowledgements of Country and stories from Elders."* Others observed that their children had access to First Nations stories and books in early childhood education, with some kindergartens incorporating activities focused on First Nations languages, traditions, and protocols. However, participants expressed uncertainty about whether these shifts were specific to individual schools/kindergartens, or were part of a broader, state-wide curriculum integration.

### Question 3: How could Victoria promote better understanding and respect for First Peoples' cultures?

Participants outlined numerous strategies to promote understanding and respect for First Nations cultures, emphasising the need for education, visibility, allyship and anti-racism.

- **Education Reform**

Moving toward a strength-based, truth-telling approach in education is essential for fostering a more accurate and respectful understanding of Australia's history. The education system should *"balance naming the violence and colonisation while also celebrating Aboriginal strengths, resilience and stories of survival."* One participant urged, *"Bring visibility to Aboriginal peoples and cultures in schools, from primary to secondary. Make it part of the curriculum—not optional."* There must be greater integration and acknowledgment of First Nations history, alongside the celebration of culture, language, and traditions, so that all Victorians can engage in life-long learning.

Other participants emphasised the importance of anti-racism initiatives in schools, stating, *"Anti-racism education should be a core part of schooling. It is never too early to learn about the harms of racism. Children can experience racism early, so all kids can learn about anti-racism early."* The curriculum should foster discussions about equity and respect, encouraging students to question stereotypes, biases, assumptions, and discrimination.

- **Language Revival**

Participants emphasised the importance of teaching Aboriginal languages, especially those local to the area. *"Start early,"* one participant recommended, noting that language is deeply connected to culture and identity, and its revival is crucial. By learning and speaking First Peoples languages, individuals and communities not only preserve a vital part of history but also foster a deeper appreciation for the richness of First Nations cultures.

- **Leadership in Truth-Telling**

There has been a longstanding separation between First Nations peoples, their histories, and our national identity, which must be addressed. It is crucial that governments and major institutions role model truth-telling by publicly acknowledging and confronting the history of colonisation. For instance, the continued celebration of Australia Day symbolises the celebration of colonisation, serving as a constant reminder of the dissonance between national identity and the lived experiences of First Nations peoples.

Governments and non-Indigenous institutions should use their influence to conduct formal truth-telling, naming injustices, educating the public on the harms caused by colonisation, and supporting the healing process.

*"Parliament and agencies need to be role models"* one participant urged. Another participant described *"The deliberate stoking of division for political*

*gain has real-world consequences. It creates an environment where misinformation spreads unchecked, racism is normalised, and constructive dialogue becomes impossible.”*

Participants called for greater cultural safety in workplaces and equitable access to services. *“Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations are great, but they can’t do it all, we need all services to be safe for First Nations peoples,”* one participant said. Others called on the police force and sporting institutions to do more to educate themselves, engage in truth-telling and make necessary changes to be more culturally safe and inclusive for First Nations peoples.

- **Celebration of First Peoples Culture**

Making Aboriginal culture more visible, celebrated, and revered is essential. One participant stated, *“All Australians should take pride in living in a country that is home to the world’s oldest continuing culture, and should actively respect and honour its traditions, knowledge and stories.”* Others believe that prominent locations should display visible signs that promote and celebrate Aboriginal culture. One participant highlighted, *“Budjim is a World Heritage site older than the pyramids. People will fly across the world to see the pyramids but won’t drive a few hours because they don’t know about it.”*

Beyond education and cultural awareness trainings, participants advocated for immersive experiences. Immersive cultural experiences are crucial for gaining a genuine understanding of First Peoples' cultures, as they allow individuals to engage with First Nations traditions, knowledge and stories in meaningful ways. These experiences foster respect and provide an opportunity to learn directly from First Nations communities, promoting deeper connections and appreciation for their rich cultural heritage.

## Question 4: How can non-First Nations Victorians contribute to truth-telling and Treaty?

Participants provided actionable steps for non-First Nations Victorians to support truth-telling and Treaty, emphasising the importance of allyship, education, and accountability. Suggestions were:

- **Educate Yourself**

Many participants emphasised the importance of individuals taking responsibility for their own learning. *“There is so much information out there, don’t always rely on First Nations peoples to teach you,”* one person said. This involves reading, attending events, and engaging with First Nations media. One participant highlighted, *“It starts from the home. If your children ask you questions, be able to have some knowledge to answer.”* Another participant pointed out the cultural load placed on First Nations peoples to educate others, noting how taxing it can be, *“The learning is centred on trauma, trying to convince the population that the problem still exists.”* Another

participant agreed, acknowledging the unfair expectation of First Nations peoples re-telling trauma to educate others *“without balance in the discussion of strength of celebration of spirit, culture and knowledge of the community.”*

- **Challenge Racism**

Participants urged non-First Nations people to call out racism whenever they encounter it, this includes dinner-time conversations with friends and family, as well as being an active bystander when someone is experiencing racism. Participants identified that there is a tendency to back away from challenging racism to maintain harmony, *“You are the problem you walk past. There is a large part of the population content with living in a culture that still perpetrates harm. There is a tendency to look the other way and plead ignorance to abate the cognitive dissonance that would result if they acknowledged there was systematic repression and they are complicit or even perpetrators of it”* one participant said.

- **Support Self-Determination**

Participants emphasised the importance of self-determination, urging all Australians, particularly governments and institutions, to listen to First Nations peoples. As one participant stated, *“Blak fellas know what Blak fellas need.”* Non-Indigenous people can support self-determination by advocating for policies that recognise and respect Aboriginal rights, land ownership, and governance systems, while challenging the systems of oppression that hinder First Nations autonomy. It is crucial that these efforts amplify the voices of Aboriginal communities and ensure they lead the way in decisions that affect their futures.

- **Amplify Aboriginal Voices and Advocate for Systemic Change**

Amplifying Aboriginal voices involves actively listening to First Nations leaders and communities and sharing their stories, *“Social media is a powerful tool for elevating Aboriginal voices, particularly when media often presents biased perspectives.”* Non-Indigenous people can also advocate for systemic change by signing petitions, attending rallies, and supporting Aboriginal-led movements that call for justice, land rights, and policy reforms. These actions demonstrate solidarity and help amplify the voices of Aboriginal communities. Additionally, participating in these activities raises awareness among broader audiences and pressures institutions and governments to take meaningful action. *“We are only 3% of the population, we can’t do all the work,”* an Aboriginal participant reminded.

- **Reparations**

Non-First Nations Victorians can contribute to truth-telling by supporting reparations initiatives. One example is the 'Pay the Rent' campaign, which encourages non-Indigenous Australians to financially contribute to the empowerment and self-determination of First Nations communities. By participating in such initiatives, individuals help address historical injustices and support the efforts of First Peoples to reclaim their land, culture, and rights. This form of reparative action is a tangible way to engage with truth-telling.

- **Support Truth-Telling Initiatives**

Participants called for greater engagement with initiatives like cultural events and storytelling projects. By participating in these events, people can deepen their understanding of First Nations histories, hear firsthand accounts from Aboriginal peoples, and engage in conversations that challenge misconceptions and promote healing. Supporting these events shows a commitment to learning, listening, and standing in solidarity with First Peoples in their pursuit of justice and recognition.

## Conclusion

This submission reflects the voices of YourCH staff and their commitment to equity and truth-telling. The impacts of colonisation are profound and ongoing, as is the resilience of First Nations peoples. It is essential that Victoria address gaps in education, promote cultural understanding, strengthen anti-racism efforts, and take meaningful action toward truth-telling and Treaty. At YourCH, we remain committed to amplifying First Nations voices, supporting self-determination, and standing alongside communities in their pursuit of equity and justice. We thank the Yoorrook Justice Commission for their vital role in formal truth-telling in Victoria.