

Evaluation of the Aboriginal Family Violence Primary Prevention Innovation Fund 2018–2021

Summary Report

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Approaching the task of innovating family violence prevention strategies in First Nations communities requires specific processes and activities to address racism, power inequities and the ongoing impacts of colonisation, and to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to support culturally safe, community-owned and -led solutions.

The Aboriginal Family Violence Primary Prevention Innovation Fund (Aboriginal Innovation Fund or AIF) was established by the Victorian Government to support Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) to design, trial and evaluate the effectiveness of a range of innovative primary prevention interventions across Aboriginal communities in Victoria. Between 2018 and 2021, the Victorian Government funded 13 projects under the AIF.

In May 2021, Karabena Consulting was commissioned by the Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) to evaluate the Aboriginal Innovation Fund, and to provide recommendations that will support the administration, monitoring and evaluation of funded projects, and inform future primary prevention policy and programmatic directions and investments. The findings of the evaluation will also contribute to the limited evidence base on what works to prevent both family violence and all forms of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been increased reports of violence against women and children, with Victorian statistics showing the highest number of family violence incidents on record. The pandemic has also forced us to consider how to facilitate innovation in our homes, workplaces and partnerships. As a result, the policy context in Victoria is primed to generate new or improved services and opportunities for violence-involved families, partly, too, in response to global social movements such as the #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter.

About this evaluation

To complete the evaluation of the Aboriginal Innovation Fund, Karabena Consulting established a Project Steering Committee to guide and advise our work, and conducted two online surveys, seven semi-structured interviews, and two roundtable discussions. We also undertook a literature review, and reviewed project progress reports, final reports, case studies and project plans.

A number of challenges were identified: namely, the poor timing of the evaluation and the lack of evaluation readiness of the ACCOs, which were at capacity finalising their individual projects, completing reporting to the DFFH and managing the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The result of this, coupled with changes to the evaluation requirements of the Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPC) and DFFH led to low engagement with stakeholders in the evaluation. As we had a limited numbers of participants in the interviews and online surveys, we relied heavily on reviewing existing data sources which varied in quality and consistency.

The evaluation team was led by Professor Kerry Arabena and supported by researchers Aishah Jameel, Lauren Penny and external Gunditjmara consultant Judith Ahmat McDonald. As part of our remit, we reviewed the outcomes of 10 primary prevention projects being carried out by ACCOs across the region (outlined in Table 1 opposite).

Between 2018 and 2021, in excess of \$3.2 million was invested to support the design and delivery of 13 Aboriginal Innovation Fund projects, of which \$2.7 million was invested in these 10 projects. More than

1107 people were engaged directly in the projects, with 607 beneficiaries identified in a desktop review and approximately 500 people identified in this evaluation. The shift online due to the pandemic meant that organisations were able to reach a larger cohort of participants than would otherwise have been possible due to geographical challenges. For example, by moving online, the Wellah Women Aboriginal Women's Health and Happiness Project was able to secure more than 200 participants, 25 per cent of whom resided outside of Victoria. The Young Luv Instagram campaign gained 1200 followers, even reaching an international audience with followers from the United States, United Kingdom, New Zealand and Canada. There were approximately 400 outputs produced during 2018–2021, including cultural camps, Zoom sessions, health challenges and cultural workshops. It is important to note that these figures are approximate and likely to be an underestimate, as not all organisations included final numbers in their reports.

Of the 47,788 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people living in Victoria, approximately 54 per cent reside in regional areas and the remaining 46 per cent in metropolitan areas.¹ The funded projects were spread across Victoria with most delivered in Local Government Areas with high Aboriginal populations, such as the regions of Geelong, East Gippsland and Ballarat, and metropolitan Darebin, Whittlesea, Latrobe, Wyndham, Casey and Hume. This has meant the projects were delivered in areas with high need and access. Yet, there is a growing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population in the western part of Melbourne who would benefit from future primary prevention initiatives and investment.

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Table 1 / Overview of funded organisations and projects in this evaluation

Organisation	Project summary
Ballarat and District Aboriginal Cooperative	Burron Guli is a cultural strengthening program that was delivered to Aboriginal boys within primary school settings. The eight-week program focused on empowering them to understand their Aboriginal culture and promoting respectful relationships and attitudinal gender equality change.
Djirra	Young Luv Social Media Campaign and Camps consist of a workshop, social media campaign and cultural camps for Aboriginal girls aged 13–18. The program focuses on promoting healthy and respectful relationships, the strength of culture and community in the lives of young Aboriginal girls, and the importance of staying connected to trusted people for support.
Lake Tyers Health and Children's Services	Partners in Prevention of Family Violence works with Aboriginal men and boys by running a series of cultural activities and workshops to engage and empower them to explore issues of family violence and its impact on the community and to generate solutions to these issues.
Merri Health & Long Walk Trust	Speak Up, Speak Out is an education program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 10–12 focusing on healthy, respectful and safe relationships. The program trains them to become a proactive participant against family violence and violence against women.
Spark Health Australia	Wellah Women Aboriginal Women's Health and Happiness Project aims to promote health, fitness, wellbeing and resilience in Aboriginal women and their families. Wellah Women Children's Book and Education Suite targets primary school-aged children in Victoria with the aim of promoting positive messaging around gender equality and challenging family violence.
Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA)	Safe and Strong , which runs cultural camps for young Aboriginal people in southern metropolitan Melbourne, supports them to recognise unhealthy relationships, and promotes equal and respectful relationships. By promoting the practice of, and a connection to, culture, the aim is to help young people not to become perpetrators or victims of family violence.
Wathaurong Aboriginal Cooperative	Yarning Up Our Services Our Way is a series of yarning circles ² that aim to understand how family violence prevention services and external service providers (e.g. Police, Justice/Corrections, Child Protection) can better help Aboriginal communities experiencing family violence and improve the delivery of their services.
Gunditjmara Aboriginal Cooperative	When Communities Speak , based in south-west Victoria, aims to build Aboriginal communities' understanding and awareness of family violence, to review the language used around family violence with the aim of becoming more culturally sensitive and proactive, and to strengthen family violence service provision and access.
Mullum Mullum Indigenous Gathering Place	Deadly Dads educational workshops for Aboriginal men aim to raise awareness of, and respect for, the effects of family violence, and to foster stronger connection to culture and their identities as fathers. The Ochre Program , which emerged as a result of the success of Deadly Dads, is a mixed gender program that promotes respectful relationships and communication, and increases awareness of the impacts of family violence.
Njernda Aboriginal Corporation	Nyini Health and Wellness engages young Aboriginal people in a series of activities (e.g. camps, workshops/group discussions) to build their understanding of the drivers of family violence, and to enable them to recognise, challenge and reject violence and inequality in all its forms.

Evaluation findings

The evaluation found that the Aboriginal Innovation Fund has achieved most of its intended objectives. As part of the commissioning process, funded projects were required to demonstrate achievements against multiple Victorian Government prevention and gender equality initiatives. The projects demonstrated strong alignment to the objectives of the Aboriginal Innovation Fund, the short- to medium-term outcomes of the *Indigenous Family Violence Primary Prevention Framework* and the overall aim of the prevention domain of the *Family Violence Outcomes Framework*. However, it will take more time to observe the actual impacts of the Aboriginal Innovation Fund, which is ultimately an anticipated reduction in family violence rates.

Several factors have been identified as instrumental to the success of family violence primary prevention interventions, including:

- › connection to culture, healing and trauma-informed practice
- › the involvement of First Nations staff and Elders
- › utilising strengths-based approaches and language
- › partnership and collaboration between different parties
- › community-driven initiatives
- › capacity building.

In fact, investing in education and primary prevention strategies that build capacity in relation to healthy and respectful relationships has been proven to be a key factor in breaking the cycle of family violence.

There were a wide range of primary prevention interventions that were delivered to the community such as education programs, cultural youth camps, a women's health and support group, and facilitated cultural workshops and activities. The main barriers to successful program delivery were COVID-19 and restricted funding. Although cited as a challenge, the pandemic also brought new opportunities for ACCOs to deliver their projects online and creatively. For example, the Deadly Dads/Ochre Program commissioned a cartoonist to attend several online workshops and this proved to be a fun, creative and effective way of keeping participants engaged online. Some projects such as

Burron Guli, Deadly Deads/Ochre Program, Speak Up Speak Out and the Young Luv Instagram Campaign showed potential to be expanded to different target groups and geographical areas.

Although the projects mostly aligned with the key objectives of the Aboriginal Innovation Fund, the key gap we identified is that most of the projects were not necessarily new or ground breaking. However, when undertaking the literature review, and considering the impact of COVID-19 on the escalation of family violence around the world, we did discover a range of innovative family violence primary prevention interventions, some of which we have included in our recommendations.

These include:

- › technology-based models
- › community-led models
- › civil, criminal and alternative justice responses
- › hybrid models (integrating community-led and mainstream responses)
- › place-based approaches
- › empowerment models
- › family-based interventions
- › couples-based approaches
- › partner education and finance programs.

Our literature review explored what is meant by 'family violence' and 'primary prevention', the drivers of family violence, an overview of current primary prevention interventions, the meaning of innovation in family violence prevention, the facilitators of First Nations-led family violence prevention interventions and opportunities for innovation, and the importance of evaluating programs involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The literature review for this project can be found in the full report.

Although we have seen innovation occurring more in family violence crisis responses, primary prevention needs to innovate in order to keep victims/survivors of family violence safe during home confinement, and to minimise the potential for escalating violence.

Recommendations

The recommendations of this evaluation were informed by:

- feedback and reflections from program implementers.
- evidence from the existing data sources
- evidence from the literature review.

We encourage the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing to consider the following key recommendations as outlined here.

Practise culturally safe commissioning

Build trusting relationships and partnerships

Co-develop and co-design all aspects of the funding processes with the funded organisations, including design and delivery of projects, evaluation planning and implementation.

- Feedback from the program implementers indicates that there is a need to involve funded organisations and program participants in the funding of projects, and for them to take an active role in how projects and the Aboriginal Innovation Fund are evaluated. This should also include co-developing evaluation metrics and indicators that are of importance to the community.
- This feedback stems from the lack of consultations held with program implementers during the commissioning process of the AIF evaluation, and the DFFH's/DPC's changing evaluation requirements on individual projects, which led to confusion and frustration on the part of the program implementers.

Establish continuity of support for funded organisations.

- We received positive feedback from several program implementers about the level of support provided by the previous Aboriginal Innovation Fund project officer. This has highlighted the importance of establishing continuity of support and the value of building partnerships with funded organisations.

Focus on genuine relationship building instead of transactional relationships. This involves providing support and resources to ACCOs instead of taking control, and recognising the difference between project management and contract management.

Improve future reporting and monitoring templates to make them more community driven and culturally appropriate

Consider using specific evaluation frameworks tailored to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Clearly articulate short-, medium- and long-term outcomes, and consider the inclusion of a capacity-building section in the reporting, as capacity building is currently not reported on by all funded organisations.

Outcomes should be co-developed with organisations that are most relevant to each local community and cultural context (not following predetermined outcomes) and sustained over the funding period, which enables consistent reporting over time.

Recommendations (cont.)

Feedback from some program implementers has indicated that the language used in the progress reports and final reports are complicated and not user-friendly. There is a need to adopt plain language in the reports to allow the staff who are actually involved in delivering the projects to complete the reports themselves with ease.

Given the gap in the literature about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family violence programs and services, ACCOs should be funded to publish evaluations of their work in this area.

Incorporate cultural elements in reporting that are co-developed with First Nations communities and aligned to the cultural determinants of health and wellbeing to ensure they are validated from a community perspective.

Allow for creative ways of reporting (e.g. videos, audio, photographs). This will enable program implementers to report project achievements and progress that cannot be captured in writing. Further, this may also reduce the burden of reporting experienced by many organisations that have to report to multiple funders.

There needs to be standardised reporting templates across the funded years for organisations to fill in as this will allow for consistency and transparency, and for evaluations to be conducted easily. This could be achieved by convening an evaluation and monitoring committee of funded stakeholders and facilitating evaluation goal setting workshops.

Support organisations to enhance their ability to acquit against all stated deliverables through their progress reporting.

- There were issues of incomplete or unsubmitted reports and project plans from the organisations that impacted on the findings of this evaluation and the process review.
 - Support could include having regular check-ins with the funded organisations and holding online tutorials, particularly during submission periods, to ensure that they adequately acquit against their funding budget and deliverables before receiving new funding.
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Allow for longer-term funding cycles

Consideration should be given to allocating funding for a minimum of three years to allow ample time for appropriate service delivery, monitoring and evaluation of short-term outcomes, and any potential to scale up successful primary prevention projects.

- Current funding cycles for the Aboriginal Innovation Fund are for one year, with opportunities to extend annually. Restricted funding has been cited as a consistent limitation across the literature and reporting to delivering and expanding family violence prevention services.
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More funding is required to reflect the additional contributions that ACCOs provide to ensure the successful delivery of their project.

- Current funding does not take into account the extraordinary commitment of the community and the in-kind contributions provided by program implementers. Many staff go above and beyond their job description to support participants to attend programs, which needs to be considered in the distribution of funding.
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Incorporate capacity building opportunities for funded organisations in the funding process

The DFFH should consider publishing evaluation reports on those of its commissioned projects affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to build the evidence on the impact of First Nations-led interventions in the State.

- Our findings from the literature review have identified a lack of evaluations conducted on First Nations-specific programs and of published evidence.
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Hold evaluation training workshops with funded organisations to build evaluation literacy of program implementers.

- This could include a two-day workshop with integrated roundtable discussions, where program implementers can discuss and decide what the evaluation process should look like. The DFFH should then continue to facilitate biannual workshops at which program implementers can complete their evaluations and discuss what is working and where improvements can be made.
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Allocate dedicated funding within the grant for the professional development of program implementers.

Establish an Aboriginal Innovation Fund community of practice for funded organisations to facilitate opportunities for them to cross-fertilise ideas through sector workshops and professional development opportunities, and to establish a project steering group made up of a representative from each funded program.

- There is currently no opportunity for funded organisations to facilitate knowledge sharing in relation to their family violence prevention work. Establishing a community of practice would provide the program implementers with an opportunity to meet regularly, share experiences about their projects and learn from each other.
 - Ensure that efforts are coordinated across the DFFH, and are aligned with Building the Aboriginal Evidence Base partnership, the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance and VACCA.
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Establish a Family Violence Prevention Summit in Victoria to encourage network building and knowledge sharing among family violence prevention organisations in the State.

Establish opportunities for services to incorporate peer researcher initiatives, where end users and beneficiaries of programs can be engaged and empowered to undertake research and support.

Recommendations (cont.)

Programmatic changes for family violence primary prevention sector and the DFFH

Address discourses that construct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's behaviours and experiences as 'identities' by challenging the use of language that is heteronormative and positions men as perpetrators and women and children as victim/survivors. Instead, use approaches that recognise the impact and expression of trauma, and acknowledge the chronic stress and lack of access to resources that will facilitate behaviour change in families.

- Reflections from program implementers have shown that there is a need for sectoral change to shift the language used in the family violence space to be less deficit-focused (e.g. the use of perpetrator, victim) and instead adopt more positive, empowering terminology in consultations with survivors of family violence, First Nations communities and others. Shifting from a deficit lens to using strengths-based and preventive terminology is more likely to be effective in preventing violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
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Shift the focus away from men who perpetrate violence against women and children, and broaden all DFFH-funded family violence prevention projects to include other less recognised forms of violence (e.g. financial control, elder abuse and animal cruelty), and the different groups who perpetrate violence (e.g. women and adolescents).

Broaden the focus from primary prevention interventions to embrace all levels of prevention interventions.

- In undertaking the evaluation, the evaluators found it challenging to focus solely on primary prevention interventions as there is significant overlap between the various levels of prevention. We found that participants in primary prevention activities generally have previous experience of family violence themselves, making a siloed approach ineffective. Prevention interventions cannot be examined in isolation as family violence prevention requires a holistic approach.
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Use population and demographic data to expand where and how services are delivered

Investment and distribution of funding should take into account population and demographic data to ensure that services are delivered in areas of greatest need.

- The impact of lockdowns has seen an increase in migration away from metropolitan areas in favour of regional areas, which have limited infrastructure in place.
 - There is a growing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population in the western suburbs of Melbourne, and yet there is currently limited access to Aboriginal community-controlled infrastructure in the area. This means that victims/survivors of family violence are more likely to present to ambulatory services and emergency departments, which have fewer Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers with specific skills in implementing innovative family violence initiatives.
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Innovative approaches in the family violence prevention space, such as delivering services online and increased funding for these approaches, can lead to greater population reach across multiple geographic boundaries thereby allowing people to access much needed services.

- › Support the workforce transition from face-to-face to online and remote work and understand that the current stressors will be exacerbated as COVID-19 moves into regional and remote Aboriginal communities. Just as there have been calls on other First Nations-focused workforces to uptake COVID-19 activities (i.e. Integrated Team Care workers being part of the community health response to vaccinations), it is likely other First Nations workforces will be pulled into this work as outbreaks occur in places with high Aboriginal populations, like Shepparton. Planning needs to be done now in order to meet that eventuality.
- › Address inbuilt program initiation and implementation inequities by recognising the contribution of in-kind services.

Innovative family violence prevention strategies

Utilise technology and digital platforms

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the increasing need to fund and deliver more culturally safe family violence prevention services online. There is an opportunity to adopt more technology in the family violence prevention sector by utilising mobile apps, SMS-based services, social media platforms, gaming and artificial intelligence to educate and raise awareness within the community and protect and support victims/survivors.

- › We have seen a change in how people are accessing support services, with an increasing number of victim/survivors seeking support online from midnight into the early hours of the morning. We need to ensure that staff are available to meet this demand.

It is important to recognise and address issues related to the growing 'digital divide' in communities as family violence prevention measures increasingly move to online and remote interventions. Support needs to be available for those who do not have access to digital platforms 24/7.

Form partnerships across sectors

Another strategy to promote innovation in the family violence prevention sector is to encourage the formation of cross-sectoral responses and innovative partnerships.

- › Legislation in Victoria recognises companion animals and pets as family violence victims. There is an opportunity for veterinarians, family violence workers, animal shelters and women's refuges to collaborate in supporting women, children and their pets to leave violent circumstances.
- › There is potential for funded organisations to form partnerships with the police, the public housing and homelessness sectors, the ICT industry and software developers, Elders, drug and alcohol rehabilitation services, and the Department of Justice to create innovation pipelines in which people can be supported to move out of unsafe circumstances.

Form partnerships with other areas of the DFFH and the Victorian Government to coordinate across all evaluation frameworks and information to ascertain substantial opportunities for learning and transformation.

Final word

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, including those funded under the Aboriginal Innovation Fund, are designing programs and responses to family violence that are focused on culture, healing and sharing information through kinship and extended family networks. These approaches have proven to be central to the success of First Nations-led family violence prevention programs.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating effects on family violence rates worldwide, but it has also highlighted the opportunity and need for family violence prevention organisations to adopt and deliver more innovative strategies to communities. Moving forward, it is crucial for funded organisations, as well as the DFFH, to facilitate the implementation of innovative strategies, such as those recommended in this evaluation, to address the family violence experienced by First Nations families.

Acknowledgments

Karabena Consulting respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the many lands on which the Victorian Government Department of Families, Fairness and Housing operates and where this evaluation took place. We acknowledge the staff of the 10 Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations across Victoria that participated in the evaluation:

- > Ballarat and District Aboriginal Cooperative
- > Djirra (previously Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention & Legal Service Victoria)
- > Lake Tyers Health and Children's Services
- > Merri Health & Long Walk
- > Spark Health Australia
- > VACCA
- > Wathaurong Aboriginal Cooperative
- > Gunditjmara Aboriginal Cooperative
- > Mullum Mullum Indigenous Gathering Place, and
- > Njernda Aboriginal Corporation.

Your knowledge and experiences have informed the recommendations in this evaluation and will continue to play a vital role in supporting families and preventing family violence. We also thank the DFFH and its hard-working staff who played a pivotal role in supporting this evaluation.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2019, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Population – Victoria*, ABS, Canberra.

² Yarning circles are used within both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures 'to learn from a collective group, build respectful relationships, and preserve and pass on cultural knowledge'. For more information see: <https://www.yarning.com.au/what-is-yarning>.

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Suggested citation: Jameel, A., Penny, L. & Arabena, K. 2021, *Evaluation of the Aboriginal Family Violence Primary Prevention Innovation Fund, 2018–2021: Summary Report*, Karabena Publishing, Melbourne.

A copy of the full report, *Evaluation of the Aboriginal Family Violence Primary Prevention Innovation Fund, 2018–2021* by Aishah Jameel, Lauren Penny and Kerry Arabena can be found at: <https://www.karabenapublishing.com/publications/>.