

# Yoorrook Justice Commission

## Inquiry into Economic Prosperity

Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency

April 2024



**VACCA**  
Connected by culture

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VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL  
CHILD CARE AGENCY

## **Acknowledgment**

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands across Victoria that we work on, and pay our respects to their Elders, both past and present and to their children and young people, who are our future Elders and caretakers of this great land. We acknowledge the Stolen Generations, those who we have lost; those who generously share their stories with us; and those we are yet to bring home.

## **Note on Language**

We use the term 'Aboriginal' to describe the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Clans and Traditional Owner Groups whose traditional lands comprise what is now called Australia.

We use the term 'Indigenous' as it relates to Indigenous peoples globally as well as in the human rights context.

The terms 'First Peoples' and 'First Nations' are employed in the Australian context, by recognising that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the First Peoples/First Nations of this land, it directly relates to their inherent un-ceded sovereignty.

## **Note on case stories shared**

The names used in each case story are not the real names of the community members we support, all case stories shared have been de-identified, to protect their identity of community we provide services to.

## **Contact**

We welcome the chance to discuss this submission in more detail. For further information, please contact Sarah Gafforini, Director, Office of the CEO via [sarahg@vacca.org](mailto:sarahg@vacca.org).

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## About VACCA

The Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency (VACCA) is the peak Voice for Aboriginal children in Victoria. We are the lead Aboriginal child and family support organisation in Australia and the largest provider of Aboriginal-led family violence, justice support and homelessness services in Victoria. We are an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) working holistically with children, young people, women, men, and families to ensure they have the necessary supports to heal and thrive. We do this by advocating for the rights of children and providing everyone who walks through our doors with services premised on human rights, self-determination, cultural respect and safety.

We provide support services to over 4,500 children and young people, and their families and carers each year. VACCA provides support services for Stolen Generations through Link-Up Victoria which has been in operation since 1990. Link-Up Victoria provides family research, family tracing and reunion services to the Stolen Generations survivors to reunite them with their families, communities, traditional country and culture.

VACCA shows respect for observance of and compliance with Aboriginal cultural protocols, practice and ceremony. VACCA was established in the 1976 and emerged from a long and determined Aboriginal Civil Rights movement in Victoria. Today, we continue to act, serve, and lobby for the rights of Aboriginal Victorians, especially children, women and families.

While VACCA is a Statewide service provider, we operate primarily in metropolitan Melbourne, Inner Gippsland and the ovens Murray regions. Across our six regions, VACCA has 27 offices delivering over 80 programs including child and family services, child protection, family violence and sexual assault supports, youth and adult justice supports, early years, education, homelessness, disability, AOD, cultural programs and supports for Stolen Generations. We employ over 1000 staff, making it one of Victoria's biggest employers of Aboriginal people. Our Aboriginality distinguishes us from mainstream services and enables us to deliver the positive outcomes we achieve for our people.

VACCA is guided by Cultural Therapeutic Ways, our whole of agency approach to our practice of healing for Aboriginal children, young people, families, Community members and Carers who use our services, and to ensure that VACCA is a safe and supportive workplace for staff. It is the intersection of cultural practice with trauma and self-determination theories. The aim of Cultural Therapeutic Ways is to integrate Aboriginal culture and healing practices with trauma theories to guide an approach that is healing, protective and connective.

## Summary of Recommendations

1. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to make financial reparations to Aboriginal communities in Victoria for all stolen wages, commensurate to the living wage today.
2. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call on the Victorian government to apologise for the policies that led to the economic disempowerment, discrimination, and oppression of Aboriginal communities.
3. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to ensure that archives, photos and records pertaining to Aboriginal communities are controlled by community and the organisations that represent them, as well as being easily accessible for Aboriginal community and ACCOs.
4. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call on the Victorian government proactively collate evidence for and contact stolen wages victims.
5. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to fund an evaluation of the functioning of the financial counselling component of the scheme to assess if it is meeting the needs of the Aboriginal people who access it. This evaluation should be Aboriginal-led and independent of Government.
6. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call on the Victorian Government to progress the establishment of a Return to Country program immediately, and that this includes funding for a coordinator position within an ACCO to oversee the delivery of the program.
7. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call on the Victorian Government to fund ACCOs to engage in consultation process around redress and reparations and support survivors and Aboriginal Victorians to apply for these schemes.
8. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to re-fund VACCA's Narra Jarra Noun (NJJ) program to ensure Aboriginal community have access to a culturally safe, trauma-informed Aboriginal service.

- 9. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to legislate a paid parental leave scheme for both kinship and foster carers.**
- 10. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to ensure equitable financial support for kinship and foster carers, through strengthening the allowance assessment process.**
- 11. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to provide informal carers with an allowance, consistent with other types of carer payments.**
- 12. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to expand universal access to early childhood education and care to include children in the 0 to 2 age cohort.**
- 13. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Department of Education to adopt a trauma informed approach and respond to the needs of Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care and those with a trauma background by providing funding for:**
  - a. ACCOs to develop culturally appropriate, trauma-informed modules and professional development opportunities for staff.**
  - b. Schools to develop a trauma-informed and culturally safe environment, practice and systems.**
- 14. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to resource the ACCO sector to provide culturally safe and inclusive early education opportunities for Aboriginal children aged 0-8 years and meaningful transition supports for young people that includes mentors, cultural supports.**
- 15. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government Provide dedicated funding for educational resources including financial planning and counselling available for families experiencing financial hardship.**
- 16. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to provide Greater investment for Aboriginal-led accessible, good quality and culturally specific childcare.**

- 17. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to ensure grant and funding opportunities stipulate ACCO specific funding streams, or mandatory minimum ACCO allocations in guidelines and/or tender specifications, and funding be provided directly to ACCOs as standard practice.**
- 18. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to provide autonomy to ACCOs to determine the allocation of funds within their organisations and services.**
- 19. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to ensure that funding models for ACCOs are long-term, flexible, and sustainable and include a levy for consultation and evaluation.**
- 20. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to support ACCO designed and led, culturally appropriate employment and workforce programs.**
- 21. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to increase funding to implement data sovereignty across the ACCO sector in line with Aboriginal self-determination.**
- 22. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to commit funding to build the capacity of the ACCO sector and training for Aboriginal workers to create, maintain and own Aboriginal databases.**

## **Introduction**

VACCA welcomes the opportunity to provide a *nuther-mooyoop* (submission) on systemic injustice experienced by First Peoples in economic life, including economic development and prosperity. Our submission is based on our experiences in providing services across the state that support Aboriginal children, young people, families, and community members. It is well documented that Aboriginal peoples continue to face inequalities in economic outcomes that that these economic injustices are directly linked to the actions of the state and ongoing impacts of colonisation. Our submission firstly addresses the historical impacts of the economic exclusion of Aboriginal communities, followed by an analysis of the consequences of this exclusion and recommendations to end economic injustice.

## Background

Countless federal and state-level inquiries have documented pervasive and systemic issues related to upholding the rights of Aboriginal people and made recommendations to redress these problems. These inquiries and commissions regularly highlight the economic disparities faced by Aboriginal people, due to intersecting inequalities experienced across several domains including child protection, housing, employment, education, family violence, and justice. These inequalities are founded in the effects of colonisation: dispossession from traditional land, forced removal of children from families, attempted destruction of culture, family, identity, and language, and the resulting experience of intergenerational trauma across communities and families, all of which have led to higher levels of disadvantage within Aboriginal communities.<sup>1</sup> Several frameworks and plans have been put in place to address and eliminate economic disparity, including the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and the Yuma Yirramboi (Invest in Tomorrow) Strategy. Despite these commitments, economic disparity between Aboriginal peoples and the broader population persists. For example, data from the national 2021 Census of Population and Housing show that just over 1 in 3 (35 per cent) of Aboriginal adults aged 18 and over were living in households in the bottom 20 per cent of income distribution for all Australian adults (the lowest quintile).<sup>2</sup> In addition, the median personal income for Aboriginal adults in 2021 was \$540 per week, while this sat at \$805 per week for the overall population.<sup>3</sup> Despite this, Aboriginal people remain strong and resilient, and are growing the Aboriginal economy and improving outcomes. This submission takes a rights-based approach centred in Aboriginal self-determination, to respond to the issues paper and make recommendations for reforms and investment work toward economic prosperity.

### ***A note on intergenerational wealth***

The missed opportunity for intergenerational wealth creation lies beneath every issue we bring forward in this piece. It began at colonisation, and it continues today within economic, political, and socio-cultural systems in Australia. As stated above, stolen wages, stolen land, stolen children, and stolen lives during the early days of colonisation set the Aboriginal population on the back foot in terms of wealth accrual. It is impossible to put a dollar value on the impacts of ongoing colonisation, however, it is evident that Aboriginal economies that had endured and evolved over millennia were devastated. The reduced capacity for intergenerational wealth creation within the Aboriginal community continues to be perpetuated through systemic injustices within child protection system, the justice system, inequities in family violence, health, wellbeing, and the financial challenges faced by carers; issues which will be explored below.

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<sup>1</sup> SNAICC. (2017). Strong Families Safe Kids. Retrieved from [https://www.snaicc.org.au/wpcontent/uploads/2017/09/Strong\\_Families\\_Safe\\_Kids-Sep\\_2017.pdf](https://www.snaicc.org.au/wpcontent/uploads/2017/09/Strong_Families_Safe_Kids-Sep_2017.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Australian Government, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, National Indigenous Australians Agency (2021), *determinants of health, income*, retrieved from: [weblink](#).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



What must also be considered is the lack of Land Rights for Australia's First People's, and the subsequent impact this has on Aboriginal economic growth from natural resources. Australia's wealth is primarily based on natural resources, including but not limited to, coal, opals, uranium, and gas.<sup>4</sup> The so called 'nation's' wealth has accumulated from lands stolen from Australia's First Peoples, yet the wealth has scarcely been shared with Aboriginal communities. When colonisers have control, use and economic benefit from the lands, waters, and resources of which First Nations peoples were custodians of for 60 000 years, it contravenes multiple Articles within the United Nations Declarations on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples,<sup>5</sup> which makes clear Indigenous people's rights to decision making and benefit sharing from the use of natural resources.<sup>6</sup> Without Treaty negotiations with the Aboriginal community and the return of traditionally owned Lands, the opportunity to accrue intergenerational wealth is inherently inequitable at the detriment of Aboriginal peoples and to the advantage of colonisers.

### **Historic and current barriers to economic prosperity**

For Aboriginal communities, one of the direct results of colonisation was the disruption and denial of traditional hunting, gathering, farming economy and trade practices. Aboriginal peoples' access to economic security, country and culture were denied, wages were stolen, and economic freedoms and cultural norms and structures were interrupted. It is impossible to put a dollar value on the impacts of ongoing colonisation, however, it is evident that Aboriginal economies that had endured and evolved over millennia were devastated, and First Nation participation in current economies continues to be harmed by systemic barriers. Australia's wealth is primarily based on natural resources, including but not limited to, coal, opals, uranium, and gas.<sup>7</sup> Australia's wealth has accumulated from lands stolen from Australia's First Nations peoples, yet the wealth has scarcely been shared with First Nations communities. When colonisers have control, use and economic benefit from the lands, waters, and resources of which First Nations peoples were custodians of for 60 000 years, it contravenes Article 26 in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>8</sup> As the examples below illustrate, both federal and state government systems and policies have worked to keep Aboriginal peoples trapped in poverty, and hinder opportunities for economic prosperity.

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Energy Information Administration. (2022, March 18). *Country Analysis Executive Summary: Australia*. [https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries\\_long/Australia/australia.pdf](https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries_long/Australia/australia.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> UN General Assembly, (2007). United Nations declaration on the rights of Indigenous peoples.

<sup>6</sup> Schrijver, Nicolaas. *Self-Determination of Peoples and Sovereignty over Natural Wealth and Resources*. New York: United Nations, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Energy Information Administration. (2022, March 18). *Country Analysis Executive Summary: Australia*. [https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries\\_long/Australia/australia.pdf](https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries_long/Australia/australia.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> UN General Assembly, (2007). United Nations declaration on the rights of Indigenous peoples.

## Stolen Wages

Perhaps the most pertinent example of how the settler-colonial state has contributed to the economic disadvantage of the Aboriginal community is through Stolen Wages. We have spoken extensively about Stolen Wages in a previous submission to the Yoorrook Justice Commission on [Systemic Injustice in the Child Protection and Criminal Justice Systems](#). To briefly summarise, from the early 1800s and extending through the post World War II period in Victoria, Aboriginal peoples wages were stolen through several mechanisms: receiving rations rather than wages, having wages paid into a trust which they never had access to, or receiving a pittance compared to non-Aboriginal workers.<sup>9</sup> Aboriginal people were also denied income support available through the Commonwealth Government up until the 1960s, a further example of stolen wages.<sup>10</sup> Inadequate record keeping and administration on reserves and restricted archival access means that the extent of wage theft is difficult to measure.<sup>11</sup> The lack of adequate data and archives also highlights the importance of data sovereignty; ensuring that the Aboriginal community has access to and control of information pertaining to the Community, which is discussed further within this submission.

The Victorian Government is trailing behind other states and territories in acknowledging and compensating Aboriginal people for their stolen wages. Queensland, Western Australia, and New South Wales have each initiated stolen wages reparations schemes. However, Queensland and Western Australia's abysmal and reparation packages of up to \$9200 and \$2000 respectively<sup>12</sup> were met with class actions which led to settlements of \$190 million<sup>13</sup> and \$180.4 million.<sup>14</sup> In comparison, New South Wales' scheme was uncapped, and compensation was indexed to present day value.<sup>15</sup> New South Wales' scheme was an improvement compared to Queensland and Western Australia, however, there was still strict evidence requirements and time restrictions for applicants.

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<sup>9</sup> Gunstone, A. & Heckenberg, S. (2009). *The government owes a lot of money to our people: A history of Indigenous stolen wages in Victoria*. (Australian Scholarly Publishing)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Gunstone, A. (2012). Indigenous Peoples and Stolen Wages in Victoria, 1869–1957. In N. Fijn, I. Keen, C. Lloyd, & M. Pickering (Eds.), *Indigenous Participation in Australian Economies II: Historical engagements and current enterprises* (pp. 181–196). ANU Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt24hfcg.17>

<sup>12</sup> Anthony, T. (2021, June 18). Stolen wages: Northern Territory class action will hold the Commonwealth to account. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/stolen-wages-northern-territory-class-action-will-hold-the-commonwealth-to-account-149155>

<sup>13</sup> Grant Thornton. (2023). *Stolen Wages Class Action*. <https://www.stolenwages.com.au/the-class-action.html>

<sup>14</sup> Shine Lawyers. (2023, November 11). *Compensation for thousands of Stolen Wages workers in Western Australia* [Media release]. <https://www.shine.com.au/media/media-releases/compensation-for-thousands-of-stolen-wages-workers-in-western-australia>

<sup>15</sup> Lewis, C. (2023, May 22). The multimillion-dollar fight for Indigenous workers' stolen wages continues. *Crikey*. <https://www.crikey.com.au/2023/05/22/indigenous-workers-stolen-wages-multimillion-dollar-fight/>

Furthermore, according to the NSW Government Submission to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Committee Inquiry into "Stolen Wages:"

*"In 2006 State Records NSW discovered a previously unknown collection of records primarily relating to the Aborigines Welfare Board for the period of 1938 to 1949.<sup>16</sup>"*

It is positive that these records were discovered, however, it calls into question why applicants are responsible for gathering their own evidence. The State of NSW owns the archival records and could feasibly find who the victims of Stolen Wages are, and how much they are owed. Yet, claimants must go through the process of finding evidence and submitting an application. At best, this is unnecessarily burdensome on applicants. In all cases, it is needlessly retraumatising. At worst, it may be perceived as way to evade compensating each victim of wage theft for the entire sum that they are owed.

The Victorian Government should take heed of the limitations of comparable schemes and offer a better Stolen Wages reparations package than Queensland, Western Australia, and New South Wales. This must start with a formal acknowledgement from the Victorian Government that it engaged in stolen wages practices. We call on the Victorian Government to acknowledge that wages were stolen from the Aboriginal community in Victoria, to compensate the theft by indexing payments to their current value and to place the burden of evidence collation on the institution responsible, with oversight by an Aboriginal organisation or body, rather than on the victims and their descendants.

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<sup>16</sup> The Cabinet Office New South Wales. (n.d.) *NSW Government Submission to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Committee Inquiry into "Stolen Wages."*

[https://www.aph.gov.au/~media/wopapub/senate/committee/legcon\\_ctte/completed\\_inquiries/2004\\_07/stolen\\_wages/submissions/sub92\\_pdf.ashx#:~:text=Earlier%20in%202006%2C%20State%20Records,copy%20and%20index%20these%20records.](https://www.aph.gov.au/~media/wopapub/senate/committee/legcon_ctte/completed_inquiries/2004_07/stolen_wages/submissions/sub92_pdf.ashx#:~:text=Earlier%20in%202006%2C%20State%20Records,copy%20and%20index%20these%20records.)

### **Recommendations:**

- 1. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to make financial reparations to Aboriginal communities in Victoria for all stolen wages, commensurate to the living wage today.**
- 2. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call on the Victorian government to apologise for the policies that led to the economic disempowerment, discrimination, and oppression of Aboriginal communities.**
- 3. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to ensure that archives, photos and records pertaining to Aboriginal communities are controlled by community and the organisations that represent them, as well as being easily accessible for Aboriginal community and ACCOs.**
- 4. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call on the Victorian government proactively collate evidence for and contact stolen wages victims.**

## **Stolen Generations**

The Stolen Generations have experienced significant systemic disadvantage in innumerable ways. We have discussed the historic and current experiences of members of the Stolen Generations in several submissions to the Yoorrook Justice Commission, including in our submission on [Child Protection and Criminal Justice Systems in Victoria](#). Since the landmark *Bringing them Home Report* in 1997 there has been extensive commentary about the systemic injustices experienced by this cohort, which will be further discussed in this submission. The trauma produced by successive governments onto these generations and therefore the wider Aboriginal community cannot be overstated, affecting all areas of their lives including economic participation and prosperity. A study by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare in 2018-2019 found that for members of the Stolen Generations aged 50 and over, 88 per cent had not completed Year 12, 66 per cent were not homeowners (compared to approximately 33 per cent in the general population in 2018<sup>17</sup>), and 63 per cent lived in households with incomes in the bottom 3 income deciles,<sup>18</sup> figures which illustrate the economic consequences for the Stolen Generations.

The trauma experienced by the Stolen Generations impacts the Aboriginal community as a whole given the close kinship systems within Aboriginal families. Estimates suggest that one in five Aboriginal children were removed due to Government policies, impacting nearly all families and

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<sup>18</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2021). *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Stolen Generations aged 50 and over: Updated analyses for 2018-19*. [https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/d7a0f2d9-c965-471c-86a7-919edcb3458f/aihw-ihw\\_257.pdf.aspx?inline=true](https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/d7a0f2d9-c965-471c-86a7-919edcb3458f/aihw-ihw_257.pdf.aspx?inline=true)

communities.<sup>19</sup> Further, because wealth is often passed through generations,<sup>20</sup> Aboriginal people descendent from the Stolen Generations are also at a significant economic disadvantage. Despite the clear negative consequences on economic wellbeing from the past actions of the Victorian Government, the Victorian Stolen Generations Reparations Scheme was only launched in 2022. The Reparations Scheme is available to Stolen Generations members who were removed prior to the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 1976 and includes a fiscal payment of \$100 000, a formal apology, and various healing supports. Family members of the Stolen Generations who passed away between 2020 and 2022, after the scheme had been announced, are also eligible to apply. The scheme was welcomed by VACCA as we had long advocated for and worked toward its establishment. Notably, we supported the decision to include Stolen Generations who had been removed by mainstream child welfare agencies, whereas the scheme in NSW only includes Aboriginal peoples removed through the Aborigines Protection Board. However, given the magnitude of trauma and suffering experienced by Stolen Generations, their families, and communities, we are still of the position that a payment of \$100,000 is too low.

In relation to the financial and therapeutic counselling offered through the scheme, VACCA is concerned that the financial counselling component is not meeting the needs of Stolen Generations. We know that the reparations payment makes Elders vulnerable to exploitation, particularly in light of the broader disadvantage within community, and we have heard of instances of Stolen Generations experiencing Elder abuse. Whilst financial counselling is important, there needs to be other avenues for engaging scheme recipients in discussions around managing the payment. For example, Stolen Generations might feel more comfortable discussing these matters with support services they are already engaged with, and in our experience they are more likely to disclose any abuse to Aboriginal services. We recommend that the functioning of the financial counselling component of the scheme be looked at in more detail to evaluate whether it is meeting the needs of Aboriginal peoples accessing it. Although the scheme opened in 2022, the Return to Country program has yet to be established. Designing and delivering a program that is culturally safe, strongly connected to the Aboriginal community, and provides the best possible opportunities for healing is highly complex and specialised work. The emphasis must be on building a program that suits the needs of Stolen Generations and their families, rather than cost effectiveness. Given that many Stolen Generations are elderly and have complex health needs, VACCA believes that this needs to be treated with urgency. In our discussions with the Victorian Government, we have recommended that funding be provided to an ACCO for a coordinator position to oversee establishment and delivery of the Return to Country program. It is essential that this program is Aboriginal-led and delivered, and it would be culturally inappropriate for it to be delivered through government. There is also a need to consider how the scheme's Return to Country program would intersect with reunions offered to Stolen Generations through Link-Up. Whereas Link-Up reunions focus more on building familial and

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> De Schutter, O., Frazer, H., Guio, A. C., & Marlier, E. (2023). *The Escape from Poverty: Breaking the Vicious Cycles Perpetuating Disadvantage*. Policy Press.

kinship ties, the scheme's Return to Country program, which will be offered in partnership with Traditional Owner groups, is an opportunity for Stolen Generations to strengthen connection to land and Country.

Justice for those who were forcibly removed deserve reparations are needed, and the announcement of the Stolen Generations Reparations Scheme is a step in that direction. However, given the magnitude of trauma and suffering experienced by Stolen Generations, their families, and communities, and the subsequent impact on intergenerational wealth, we are still of the position that a payment of \$100,000 is too low. The internationally accepted purpose of reparations is to "wipe out all the consequences of the illegal act and reestablish the situation which would, in all probability, have existed if that act had not been committed."<sup>21</sup> \$100 000 is a small sum compared to the missed opportunity for accruing intergenerational wealth, and most importantly the scale of the damage inflicted on the Aboriginal community. Prominent community leader, Yorta Yorta man Ian Hamm captured this sentiment when he said "how do you account for a life not lived, the life that you missed out on because you were taken away, and bring relief to the devastation of that? You can't."<sup>22</sup>

### **Recommendations:**

- 5. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to fund an evaluation of the functioning of the financial counselling component of the scheme to assess if it is meeting the needs of the Aboriginal people who access it. This evaluation should be Aboriginal-led and independent of Government.**
- 6. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call on the Victorian Government to progress the establishment of a Return to Country program immediately, and that this includes funding for a coordinator position within an ACCO to oversee the delivery of the program.**

## **Redress**

The National Redress Scheme faces several similar issues to the Stolen Generations Reparations Scheme. The Scheme was established by the Commonwealth Government to provide reparations to

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<sup>21</sup>*Case Concerning the Factory at Chorzów (Germany v Poland)* (Merits) PCIJ Rep Series A No 17 as cited in Cohen, J., Grgeta, E., & Temerlin, F. (2019). In All Probability: An Economic Reading of Damages Under Factory at Chorzów. *ICSID Review-Foreign Investment Law Journal*, 34(3), 577-584.

<sup>22</sup>Eddie, R., & Juanola, M.P. (2022, March 3). Stolen Generations redress scheme offers money, apology and healing support. *The Age*. <https://www.theage.com.au/politics/victoria/stolen-generation-redress-scheme-offers-money-apology-and-healing-support-20220303-p5a1an.html>

survivors of institutional sexual abuse and ensure that institutions are held accountable for this abuse. The long-term outcomes of institutional childhood abuse and neglect are well established, including impacts on physical and mental health, psychosocial adjustment difficulties and educational and employment challenges, impacting economic prosperity and opportunities of those affected.<sup>23</sup> Whilst Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children would have faced many similar forms of abuse and neglect within institutions, the experiences of Aboriginal children living in institutions had some distinctions in that the purpose of this practice was cultural assimilation, not education.<sup>24</sup> The fact that these institutions did little to prepare Aboriginal children for the transition into adulthood, and to provide them with the skills and tools necessary for navigating the bureaucracy, finding information, and accessing the appropriate supports to apply for redress, highlight the importance of survivors having access to trauma-informed culturally safe supports.

Aboriginal people were disproportionately impacted by institutional abuse and have unique and compounding challenges to accessing redress. The Royal Commission found that 14.3% of all survivors identified as Aboriginal, many of them also victims of the Stolen Generations.<sup>25</sup> For all survivors, one of the most significant barriers is the re-traumatisation from applying, with no guarantee that their application will be approved or that they will live long enough to see it happen. Furthermore, members of the Stolen Generations who were recipients of prior reparations packages have had their redress payments reduced and incarcerated people or those with serious criminal histories were ineligible for redress, systemic issues disproportionately impacting the Aboriginal community. Robyn Kruk raised these concerns in her 2021 review of the Scheme, yet they have not been addressed.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the Scheme continues to fail to adequately fulfil two of its principles, that "Redress should be assessed, offered and provided with appropriate regard to...the cultural needs of survivors [and without] further harming or traumatising the survivor".<sup>27</sup> It is critical to also note that one of the recommendations from the Royal Commission was for a process for redress that provides "equal access and equal treatment for survivors."<sup>28</sup> Without an Aboriginal controlled Redress Support Service (RSS), Aboriginal people continue to face systemic disadvantage in accessing redress.

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<sup>23</sup> Blakemore, T., Herbert, J., Arney, F., & Parkinson, S. (2017). The impacts of institutional child sexual abuse: A rapid review of the evidence. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 74, 35-48.

<sup>24</sup> Parry, S. (1995). Identifying the process: The removal of 'half-caste' children from Aboriginal mothers. *Aboriginal History*, 19, 141-153.

<sup>25</sup> Commonwealth of Australia. (2017). Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. [https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/final\\_report\\_-\\_preface\\_and\\_executive\\_summary.pdf](https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/final_report_-_preface_and_executive_summary.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> Kruk, R. (2021). Second year review of the National Redress Scheme.

<sup>27</sup> *National Redress Scheme for Institutional Child Sexual Abuse Act 2018* (Cth) S10 (3) (4)

<sup>28</sup> Final Report Redress and Civil Litigation, Recommendation 1

As part of the Scheme, Redress Support Services (RSS) were established to provide practical and emotional support to survivors in applying for redress. VACCA's Narra Jarra Noun (NJN) program was the only Aboriginal-led RSS in the country from the scheme's inception until December 2022. NJN provided a holistic, trauma-informed culturally safe service to Aboriginal people, supporting survivors of institutional child sexual abuse to access the National Redress Scheme and through their journey of healing. When NJN was defunded, it had successfully connected 67 survivors to the scheme. VACCA sought data from the Department of Social Services (DSS), which showed that over 96 per cent of all Aboriginal applicants in Victoria to the National Redress Scheme used the support of an RSS.

VACCA operated the NJN redress support service from July 2018 and it formally closed in December 2022, after receiving notification that funding would not be continued in March 2022; causing considerable distress to the community. We were told we were defunded because a case study that was included in the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse named VACCA and the Victorian Government as responsible for the abuse they suffered in 2016. It is a harrowing case, the experiences of abuse when the survivor was under the care of government and the case management of VACCA were extremely traumatic and should never have occurred. VACCA actually tabled the case study as why change was necessary, responded to the nature of the survivor's story and abuse suffered, as well as VACCA's role and how practices had changed prior to the Royal Commission's Inquiry, these are all publicly available. VACCA was funded to provide a Redress Support Service after the completion of the inquiry.

Without VACCA being in the space, there are now no fully funded Aboriginal services available in Victoria. Connecting Home receives limited funding for online redress support services and Aboriginal dedicated funding has been allocated to mainstream provider Relationships Australia. Similarly, Knowmore legal service are not Aboriginal owned or controlled, and VACCA maintains long held concerns around whether their practice and engagement with Aboriginal survivors is culturally safe. We do recognise however that they have invested in building Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement teams across the country, though this does not make their service Aboriginal-led. This has had significant implications on both current and future Aboriginal applicants of the Scheme, as we already know the numbers of Aboriginal applicants in Victoria are lower than anticipated, survivors require intensive case management support throughout their engagement with, and post determination of the Scheme.

Access to justice, through culturally appropriate, competent and safe avenues, is a fundamental right for Aboriginal people. This is of particular importance when viewed within the lens of intergenerational trauma caused by past and present government policies and laws that have had a significant impact on Aboriginal people and generational wealth building. The sense of injustice that is inevitable from a lack of access to culturally appropriate and safe services to assist survivors of abuse access redress, is also likely to produce distrust toward the legal system, rather than provide a space for healing, thus eradicating one of the prime purposes behind the Redress Scheme. VACCA are concerned that Aboriginal people will not seek to access redress via the National Redress Scheme



given the lack of Aboriginal-led redress support services in Victoria, missing out on an opportunity for financial growth that they are entitled to.

**Recommendations:**

- 7. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call on the Victorian Government to fund ACCOs to engage in consultation process around redress and reparations and support survivors and Aboriginal Victorians to apply for these schemes.**
- 8. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to re-fund VACCA's Narra Jarra Noun (NJJ) program to ensure Aboriginal community have access to a culturally safe, trauma-informed Aboriginal service.**

## **Trapping carers in poverty**

From our experience in the out-of-home care sector, VACCA understands that poverty is a significant issue within our families caring for Aboriginal children, with over half of our kinship carers living below the poverty line. Care provided by kin in traditional Aboriginal cultures has been part of the normal fabric of society for time immemorial. Grandparents, Aunts, Uncles and cousins raising and supporting Aboriginal children and young people is a fundamental part of Aboriginal society, this 'collective community focus' is a strength of Aboriginal culture and is a protective factor.<sup>29</sup> Extended family support is how traditional societies and moieties functioned and thrived and goes beyond the western traditional views of family and parental roles. The Aboriginal Child Placement Principle also prioritises placement of Aboriginal children and young people whose parents are not able to care for them with kin.

Kinship carers undertake this critical role of support, care and nurturing that keeps Aboriginal children and young people safe physically, socially, emotionally, culturally and spiritually.<sup>30</sup> Kinship care supports Aboriginal children stay connected to their family, community and culture. In VACCA's role supporting Aboriginal children, young people and families we are involved in both informal, voluntary out of home care placements and statutory care placements, where there is a child protection order in place. All of these avenues include placement options with kinship carers. In many circumstances, voluntary placements are preferred, because they reflect the kind of shared care that

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<sup>29</sup> Shaun Lohoar, Nick Butera and Edita Kennedy, 'Strengths of Australian Aboriginal cultural practices in family life and child rearing' (Child Family Community Australia Information Exchange, Australian Institute of Family Studies, 25, 2014).

<sup>30</sup> Cindy Blackstock, Muriel Bamblett, Carlina Black, 'Indigenous ontology, international law and the application of the Convention to the over-representation of Indigenous children in out of home care in Canada and Australia' (Child Abuse & Neglect, Volume 110, Part 1, 2020)

has long been a facet of Aboriginal child rearing practices. These types of placements are also important because families are able to work together to make decisions that are in the best interests of Aboriginal children without statutory intervention. It is well established within Australian child protection legislation, policy and practice, that processes which are premised on family-led decision-making work best. Given the important place that non-parental care has in the community, VACCA calls for kinship and foster carers to be eligible for parental leave, like birth and adoptive parents are. This would afford time for the carer and child to develop a positive relationship, also recognising that many kinship carers take on the role of caring for infants, this is even more critically important.

Aboriginal children often come from large families with many siblings, and it is often most culturally and emotionally safe for sibling groups to remain together. With the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle rightfully prioritising children to be cared for by kin, we regularly see large sibling groups of five or more children living with Aunties, Uncles or Grandparents. Carers may be faced with compounding financial difficulties: extra costs associated with care, reduced income due to having less time to work, and finding housing to accommodate more people. With Victoria's ongoing housing crisis, finding adequate housing for large families is nearly impossible and carers may be forced to make decisions about remaining in overcrowded housing, splitting up sibling groups and disrupting children's education and social relationships by moving. It is unconscionable that carers are forced to make decisions like these, alongside bearing the costs of caring for children. It is the government's responsibility to provide adequate financial support to carers of Aboriginal children to ensure that the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle can be maintained without undue pressure on carers. There needs to be stronger practical and therapeutic supports for carers, particularly kinship carers, to keep large sibling groups together, as well as recognition within child protection practice of the importance that sibling placements have for supporting children to maintain their kinship ties.

Despite the costs required to provide a safe and nurturing environment, the way carer payments are structured and funded in Victoria are not reflective of the true costs associated with caring for children and young people. The Victorian Government's carer allowance, which is available to home-based carers including Foster Care, Kinship Care, Permanent Care, and Special needs local adoption placements<sup>31</sup> is allocated via a five-tiered structure scaled on determined need. Victorian carers receive substantially less than carers in every other state and territory at all allowance tiers. For example, a carer for a 7-year-old child in Victoria receives \$261 less than a carer in the ACT and \$201 less than a carer in NSW per fortnight.<sup>32</sup> It is integral that carer allowances in Victoria be increased in-line with rising costs of living. Whilst the placement of Aboriginal children with their Aboriginal kin and family is on an upward trajectory, VACCA notes that there are still significant barriers to enabling kinship placements. A 2022 report by the Victorian Auditor General's Office (VAGO) found

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<sup>31</sup> Victorian Government, Families, Fairness and Housing, 'Families and Children: Support for home based carers in Victoria' website. Accessed via weblink: <https://services.dffh.vic.gov.au/support-carers>

<sup>32</sup> FCAV. (2023, November 8). Victoria has the lowest Care Allowance rate in the country. <https://www.fcav.org.au/news/victoria-has-the-lowest-care-allowance-rate-in-the-country>

that kinship care is under resourced. The target of assessing what supports carers required to provide a safe, secure and nurturing home for a child within 6 weeks of placement was only met in 2.2 per cent of cases reviewed by the VAGO.<sup>33</sup> A survey conducted by VACCA with its carers in 2021 found one in ten had accessed emergency relief. Furthermore, Kinship carers receive the least financial support on average, in 2021, 96 per cent of kinship carers received the lowest level of care allowance, compared to 32 per cent of foster carers.<sup>34</sup> We believe that strengthening the allowance assessment process will support in bringing these payments to an equal level. Of all the different carer types, informal kinship carers are the only carers in Victoria who do not receive an allowance from the Government. This is because the Carers Recognition Act 2012 (Vic) recognises statutory kinship carers, but not informal kinship carers<sup>35</sup>. As explained above, kinship care is common within Aboriginal families and therefore this payment structure disproportionately impacts the Aboriginal community. VACCA calls for the consistency across jurisdictions to reflect the role of informal kinship carers as carers and which does not privilege statutory involvement.

### **Recommendations:**

- 9. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to legislate a paid parental leave scheme for both kinship and foster carers.**
- 10. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to ensure equitable financial support for kinship and foster carers, through strengthening the allowance assessment process.**
- 11. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to provide informal carers with an allowance, consistent with other types of carer payments.**

## **Consequences of systemic injustices**

The consequences of a lack of access to economic prosperity and equity have been far reaching and traverse a number of domains. A complex relationship exists between experiences of poverty and disadvantage and contact with statutory systems such as child protection and criminal justice, and adverse experiences such as homelessness and experiences of family violence. Disadvantage is a key concept which includes multi-layered and interrelated factors, including areas such as health,

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<sup>33</sup> VAGO. (2022). Kinship Care Independent assurance report to Parliament. [https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-10/20220622\\_Kinship-Care.pdf](https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-10/20220622_Kinship-Care.pdf)

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Carers Recognition Act 2012 (VIC)

housing, income, family violence and education, as well as racism and discrimination. VACCA explored the implications of poverty extensively in our [submission to the national inquiry into the extent and nature of poverty in Australia](#).

While it is difficult to measure the exact financial and economic implications for Aboriginal people and communities as a result of disrupted economies, stolen wages and exclusion from benefits based on race, the economic disenfranchisement of Aboriginal communities, families and individuals continues to have an enduring impact. It is also important to note that these processes of exclusion continue today for Aboriginal communities given lack of formal recognition of traditional lands, ongoing dispossession from land and culture, marginalisation, and racism. This has led to intergenerational cycles of trauma and disadvantage, entrenching social difficulties and barriers such as poverty, violence, and individual, family and community dysfunction.<sup>36</sup> This should be further understood within the interconnected systems and injustice across the criminal justice, child protection, health, and education systems.

The Yoorrook Justice Commission has sought responses from the community to several of these issues, including child protection, criminal justice, health, housing and education. VACCA encourages the commission not to consider these topics in isolation and instead work toward making recommendations which consider systemic nature of these issues and correlation between experiences of disadvantage across multiple domains. The following sections highlight four examples of how economic injustice has flow on affects to increased likelihood of involvement in the child protection and criminal justice system, experiences of family violence, and negative health effects:

## Child Protection

It is well regarded that experiences of economic disadvantage increase the risk of family involvement with child protection and the removal of children from their families. However, VACCA seeks to highlight that race plays a critical role in how disadvantage is viewed by child protection systems, and therefore, dictates how child removal decisions are made. Historically and currently, economic disadvantage and living in poverty is conceptualised as neglect and abuse of Aboriginal children by their carers, whereas in non-Aboriginal families, it is predominantly viewed as a lack of access to material goods.<sup>37</sup> This speaks to the 'removal first' policies that remain today under different guises and serve to only entrench intergenerational poverty and economic disadvantage. Through our work supporting Aboriginal families that have had contact with the child protection system, we know that issues of insecure employment, housing stress and homelessness, experiences of racism, including

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<sup>36</sup> AIFS. (2020). Child protection and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. CFCA Resource Sheet. Retrieved from Weblink

<sup>37</sup> De Leeuw, S., Greenwood, M., & Cameron, E. (2010). Deviant constructions: How governments preserve colonial narratives of addictions and poor mental health to intervene into the lives of Indigenous children and families in Canada. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 8, 282-295.

systemic racism, isolation and cultural disconnection, intergenerational trauma and poor social and emotional wellbeing erode the capacity of families to provide all that their children need. In their consultations with Aboriginal communities across the country, SNAICC also found that the “failure to address poverty and drivers of the child protection system’s involvement was seen as one of the largest systemic failures.”<sup>38</sup>

Although family poverty and economic disadvantage does not immediately warrant involvement from child protection or the removal of children, studies have identified poverty to be a key indicator for involvement from child protection, and is identified by child protection as a form of neglect.<sup>39</sup> This was confirmed in SNAICC’s consultation report where community widely believed that child protection services associated child risk concerns, such as neglect, with what were poverty issues – thereby reprimanding families for their experience of material poverty rather than supporting them.<sup>40</sup> Whilst experiences poverty and economic insecurity contribute to the likelihood of a child experiencing adverse events such as family violence, maternal distress and reduced parental responsiveness, a child’s access to learning opportunities and their quality of care are all factors correlated with poverty and could be reduced through support to overcome disadvantage.<sup>41</sup> This is extremely problematic, as after being removed from their families and placed in out-of-home care, young people then become highly vulnerable to continued complex disadvantage due to the risks associated with spending time in care as well as the challenges they face when leaving care.<sup>42</sup>

The 2022 SNAICC Family Matters Report also highlights that barriers such as poverty and homelessness reduce the likelihood of timely family reunification, and given the higher rates of these factors for Aboriginal families, has significant implications for reconnecting families and preventing further disconnection from family and culture for Aboriginal children and young people in care.<sup>43</sup> VACCA considers that too often the main response of the State to the intergenerational impoverishment of Aboriginal families is a punitive child protection system that is orientated towards the removal of children rather than the resourcing and support of families. We therefore advocate for child-centred, holistic responses to reduce poverty that connect families to wrap around supports

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<sup>38</sup> SNAICC - National Voice for Our Children. (2021) National Framework for Protecting. Australia’s Children 2021–2031 – Successor Pan Consultation Report. Page 9. Retrieved from [Weblink](#)

<sup>39</sup> Fong, K. (2017). Child welfare involvement and contexts of poverty: The role of parental adversities, social networks, and social services. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 72, 5-13.

<sup>40</sup> SNAICC - National Voice for Our Children. (2021) National Framework for Protecting. Australia’s Children 2021–2031 – Successor Pan Consultation Report. Retrieved from [Weblink](#)

<sup>41</sup> Blackstock, C., & Trocmé, N. (2005). Community based child welfare for Aboriginal children. *Handbook for working with children and youth: Pathways to resilience across cultures and contexts*, 105-120.

<sup>42</sup> Lima, F., Maclean, M., & O'Donnell, M. (2019). *Exploring outcomes for young people who have experienced out-of-home care*. Telethon Kids Institute.

<sup>43</sup> Family Matters (2022) The Family Matters Report 2022. SNAICC. Retrieved from [Weblink](#)

early to prevent child protection involvement. Such responses must honour a child's right to be with their family and amongst their culture and community.

## Contact with the Criminal Justice System

The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC) confirmed that the most significant contributing factor in the overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in the criminal justice system was disadvantage and their unequal position in wider society.<sup>48</sup> The Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework and the Aboriginal Justice Agreement both recognise that current social and economic disadvantage of Aboriginal people and communities, as well as their overrepresentation in criminal justice, are strongly linked to the ongoing impacts of colonisation and dispossession.<sup>49</sup> PwC's *Indigenous incarceration: Unlock the facts* research also shows strong links between intergenerational disadvantage, poverty and incarceration.<sup>50</sup> Unemployment and housing insecurity are strongly connected with increased criminal justice involvement.

While experiences of poverty and disadvantage contribute to justice involvement for Aboriginal people, those who leave custody also often do so into poverty and financial stress. This has implications for greater risk of reoffending and entrenching the intergenerational cycle of poverty.<sup>51</sup> It is also well documented that systemic racism in the justice system is driving Aboriginal overrepresentation and we can make the argument that systemic racism is also therefore driving disadvantage and poverty. Addressing this cycle requires system-wide reform that acknowledges the complex intersection between dispossession, poverty, disadvantage, and justice involvement.

## Family Violence

Economic exclusion and poverty because of colonisation and systemic discrimination also both contribute to the high rates of family violence among Aboriginal communities. It is difficult to accurately determine the prevalence of family violence across society due to underreporting, culturally inappropriate assessment tools, the poor identification of Aboriginal status at the point of police involvement including misidentification of the affected family member, as well as a fear of involving state authorities, such as criminal justice and child protection systems.<sup>44</sup> The Victorian Health Population Survey found that in 2017, Aboriginal women were 2.5 times more likely to report experiencing family violence than their non-Aboriginal peers.<sup>45</sup> It is important to note, however, that Aboriginal respondents were twice as likely than non-Aboriginal participants to refuse to answer questions about family violence, indicating a potential underreporting in these figures. Financial abuse is a highly prevalent issue in Australia with severe impacts on women and children yet is often

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<sup>44</sup> Willis, M. (2011). Non-disclosure of family violence in Australian Indigenous communities. Canberra, ACT: Australian Institute of Criminology. [Weblink](#)

<sup>45</sup>

not given the adequate weight it deserves in family violence prevention and response.<sup>46</sup> Anne Summer's report 'The Choice: Violence or Poverty' articulates what is so often the experience of Aboriginal women, that they are faced with living with family violence or entering policy induced poverty identifying the insufficient social security payments contribute to the experience of financial hardship.<sup>47</sup> While poverty can be a contributing factor for family violence, experiences of family violence can also increase the risk of housing stress and homelessness and therefore poverty. Unaffordable or insecure housing means that those fleeing violence, in particular women and children, are often economically dependent on perpetrators. VACCA has explored these issues in detail within our Submission to the [Inquiry into the Rental and Housing Affordability Crisis in Victoria](#) and the [National Housing and Homelessness Plan in 2023](#), and most recently in our submission to the Yoorrook Justice Commissions Housing and Homelessness Issues Paper.

## Health and wellbeing

As discussed above, the impact of colonisation and consequent dispossession from land, denial of culture, removal of children and exclusion of Aboriginal people from society is recognised as having a fundamental impact on the disadvantage and poverty experienced by Aboriginal people today. It is well documented that these experiences cause health disparities within the Aboriginal community resulting in greater disease burden, significant implications for health behaviours and access to health services.<sup>71</sup> Poverty stems from the inequitable access of social determinants of health which derive from the social and economic structures in current society.

Limited access to income resulting in financial stress is a key social determinant of health and wellbeing. VACCA staff have reported that to their knowledge, nearly all VACCA clients have experienced income support payment suspensions, with a high percentage of families experiencing this recurrently. This has severe impacts on the family's physical, emotional and mental wellbeing with reoccurring feelings of shame, hopelessness and poor self-esteem as well as lack of financial security for children and families.

## Ending systemic economic injustice

### Addressing Financial Stress

A range of factors including increased cost of living and inadequate social security payments have contributed to significant financial stress experienced in recent years by Aboriginal families. VACCA

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<sup>46</sup> Deloitte Access Economics and Commonwealth Bank (2022). The cost of financial abuse in Australia. [Weblink](#)

<sup>47</sup> Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety. (2022). *Economic security and intimate partner violence: Research synthesis*. ANROWS.

staff have reported that a significant number of families have sought assistance over recent years for support with basic living expenses, [rent](#) and utilities and public transport.

In responding to this need, VACCA's Emergency Relief program covers a wide variety of essential items supporting Aboriginal people living in Victoria. It gives vital food relief, personal care items, utility bill support, public transport, travel costs to get to work or visit family in crisis, material aid and other supports. Offered as an additional support to many families already participating in VACCA programs – Kinship Care, Playgroup, Family Services or those experiencing family violence – Emergency Relief plays an important role in offering holistic, wrap around support. Providing food relief is often a gateway to facilitate further conversations around care and access to ongoing services. Helping families at a critical time, in a safe and culturally sensitive way, encourages trust between VACCA staff and community members who may be new to VACCA's services. Once trust has been developed, further assistance, healing and preventative programs can be offered as per the case study below.

### **A case study**

Early one evening a staff member from VACCA's Ovens Murray office noticed James was sleeping rough in a local park. James was not local and had no family or friends living nearby. With no available crisis accommodation, the staff provided James with some camping equipment and provision to see through the night. Early the next morning two VACCA staff went out to look for James and spent time with him learning more about his situation. James had recently separated from his family due to an incident. He had been left stranded, without any means of contacting family. James is a resilient Aboriginal man proud of his culture and people. James spoke of his previous struggles with addiction but had been 14 years sober. Staff were able to bring James back to the VACCA office where he had a meal, charged his phone and provided phone credit. VACCA staff spent the day with James and organised crisis accommodation and support through our Emergency Relief program. The next day James felt more rested, safe and able to travel by train so he could be with family. He thanked our staff for their help and staff have kept in touch with James. He was surprised, but grateful to come across multiple people he'd never met that were willing to help him out.

Staff reflected that community recognition of VACCA is vast and as an ACCO we're recognised as a safe place for Aboriginal people. The small things we do like wear our uniforms or lanyards that is culturally identifiable is important and makes our people feel safe to approach us and maybe even ask for help. Emergency Relief is a small program, but it can make a big impact in a time of need. We all face challenges in life, sometimes it might make us question who we are and what we believe. But we should never be ashamed of our culture and keep walking tall and proud.

With increased cost of living and recent natural disasters, all VACCA offices have seen a significant increase in families seeking assistance through our Emergency Relief programs. This has need been



challenging to meet given the reduction in federal funding for Emergency Relief programs. Further, any funds that VACCA has been allocated for Emergency Relief is not enough to meet increased demand. Given this reduced federal funding, VACCA has been seeking additional philanthropic funding to continue this essential support service for our families.

The Federal Government has a responsibility to all Aboriginal people regardless of where they live. Therefore, additional funding for Emergency Relief is needed to ensure that Aboriginal families experiencing hardship across urban, regional, rural, and remote areas can afford basic living expenses and support their immediate and extended families.

Recent economic conditions have had compounding effects for Aboriginal families, many of which are already experiencing financial stress. As discussed above, Aboriginal peoples today experience significant rates of poverty as a direct result of colonisation. In 2018-19, almost two in five Aboriginal people in Australia reported that their household had days without money for basic living expenses in the last 12 months.

Financial stress is further accentuated for Aboriginal families due to inadequate rates of income support payments to meet mounting cost of living and other expenses. Inadequate income support payments are widely regarded by the community sector as a key driver of rates of poverty in Australia. This has also been reflected in multiple inquiries, with the 2020 Adequacy of Newstart inquiry finding that the income support system itself is forcing people into poverty. It has also been found that changes to the Parenting Payments in 2009 have had a significant impact on sole parents which are often single mothers. This payment was excluded from an increase and was also exacerbated by the transfer of 80,000 sole parents from Parenting Payment to the lower Newstart Allowance (now JobSeeker) in 2013, and the freezing of Family Tax Benefits.

Aboriginal families are already facing compound pressures and inequalities, the daily experience of getting by on inadequate income support payments can further cause distress and anxiety. As discussed later in the submission, financial hardship can also have flow on effects for Aboriginal children and families in increasing the risk of child poverty, child protection involvement, rates of family violence, as well as poor health, wellbeing, and education.

Experiences from VACCA staff reveal that the income support payment amount received by the Aboriginal families we support to be insufficient to meet basic daily needs. This was predominantly due to housing costs and bills absorbing most of the payment.

Not only is the JobSeeker allowance inadequate, but often mutual obligations to receive payments are paternalistic, impractical or unattainable. In addition, payment suspensions as a consequence of not meeting requirements can further drive Aboriginal families into poverty. The Adequacy of Newstart inquiry found that instead of supporting people to find work, the social security system has

increasingly become punitive with the expectations that it will incentivise people to find work, irrespective of personal individual circumstances nor local and regional labour-market conditions.

In 2020, VACCA collected anecdotal evidence from a range of client services staff working in programs from early years to homelessness services. We found that a significant number of VACCA clients struggled in one form or another as a consequence of social security policy. Estimates from our Family Services programs found that 60-70 families were being adversely affected. Some of the key problems highlighted were difficulties with accessing and navigating Centrelink, poor experiences and racial discrimination, onerous mutual obligation requirements, everyday struggles with insufficient payment amount and consequences of payment suspensions.

VACCA staff identified many long-term adverse effects on families and children due to the pressures of mutual obligation requirements placed on parents, particularly for families experiencing complex circumstances as detailed in case study below.

### **A case study**

Our Family Services Program supports Sarah who suffers from complex mental health. With the support of her mum, Sarah is also caring for her daughter Nelly. Sarah is eligible and has applied for the Disability Support Pension but is still on the waitlist and currently receiving the Newstart Allowance. Due to her mental health, Sarah has been struggling to manage some of the requirements around her Newstart. This has meant that her payments have been cut off several times. Sarah's Case Worker has had to call Centrelink on a number of occasions to explain the situation and get the payments reinstated, but this has also been a challenge. The impacts of payment suspensions are significant for Sarah's mental health, in addition to the financial strain on her and Nelly. Times when the payments have been cut, Sarah has fallen behind on rent and can't afford basic household items.

Given the significant flow on impacts of financial hardship due to inadequate income support payments on risk of child protection involvement, rates of family violence, homelessness, as well as poor health, wellbeing and education, VACCA advocates for a child-centered, rights-based and equitable reform to social security policy so that Aboriginal families are able to receive the support they need and are able to thrive, rather than just survive.

VACCA welcome's the Albanese Government's announcement that it will establish an independent statutory body to review and publicly report on the adequacy of income support before every federal budget. VACCA hopes that this will strengthen accountability around the adequacy of income support payments and improve the social security system in the long term. While this is an important step forward, many Aboriginal families are currently missing out and in hardship due to inadequate social security payments. More needs to be done immediately to improve the lives of Aboriginal families. We therefore support the Australian Council for Social Service's (ACOSS) 'Raise the Rate For

Good' campaign to increase the base rate of JobSeeker and related payments to at least \$80 and call for rights-based reform to mutual obligations practices.

## **Intersection between access to education and economic outcomes**

It is crucial note that the process of colonisation historically denied access education to Aboriginal people unless they assimilated. Initially 'Protection' measures sought to deny education all together, then the 'Assimilation' era used access to (a very limited offering) of education to suppress Aboriginal culture and identity.<sup>48</sup> Research indicates that in particular a mother's level of education achieved is a predictor of their child's future success.<sup>49</sup> Given the insufficient investment in early years education and childcare supports, this predominately impacts the mother's ability to work or progress to higher education and in doing so limits the family's ability to create generational wealth and stability.<sup>50</sup> Poverty and disadvantage is both a contributing factor to and also an outcome of a lack of access to quality, culturally appropriate educational opportunities.

Our contemporary national education curriculum still does not have adequate Aboriginal content across all areas of learning, rather than embedding an understanding about Aboriginal ways of knowing and being and ensuring that education provides a culturally safe and inclusive space. Educational institutions that seek to improve their practice are having to turn to external resources like Reconciliation Australia's Narragunnawali Reconciliation Action Plan resource to retrofit what is an inherently racist system. Education is one of the key areas impacted by poverty and disadvantage, with disadvantaged children and young people experiencing poorer educational outcomes, social exclusion, lower school completion rates and lower levels of life satisfaction.<sup>51</sup> In this section, we explore access to education, focusing primarily on educational outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people, and its intersection with economic outcomes.

## **Access to early childhood education and care**

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<sup>48</sup> Stone, A., Walter, M., & Peacock, H. (2017). Educational outcomes for aboriginal school students In Tasmania: is The achievement Gap closing?. Australian and International Journal of Rural Education, 27(3), 90-110.

<sup>49</sup> Crosnoe R, Johnston C, Cavanagh S. Maternal Education and Early Childhood Education across Affluent English-Speaking Countries. Int J Behaviour Dev. 2021 May 1;45(3):226-237.

<sup>50</sup> Jenkins, K (2021) 'The Gendered Costs of Childcare: A feminist analysis of the effects of Australia's early childhood education and care system on women's inequality in the workforce and beyond, University of Melbourne: The Future of Work Lab ensuring equitable work future series. Retrieved from weblink.

<sup>51</sup> Redmond, G. (2022) 'I just go to school with no food' – why Australia must tackle child poverty to improve educational outcomes. The Conversation. Retrieved from weblink

During the critical early years of childhood development, it is important families are able to afford necessities to support their children, including stable housing, access to food and medication and access to early years education services. Evidence demonstrates that participation in quality early childhood education and care (ECEC), particularly for vulnerable children, can support a child's development, improve their readiness for school, and promote social and emotional wellbeing across the life span.<sup>35</sup> In effect, ensuring that Aboriginal children in out-of-home care have access to ECEC can help prepare them for primary and secondary school, mitigating challenges in attendance, engagement, and completion that many young people in out-of-home care experience in their later years.<sup>36</sup>

There is growing evidence that Aboriginal-led ECEC services are particularly successful at engaging Aboriginal families experiencing vulnerability and best placed to support the wellbeing and development of children and their families.<sup>37</sup> This is because Aboriginal-led ECEC services work from a paradigm that "focuses on relationships and recognises the importance of family, community and connection to Country as places that provide sustenance, a sense of identity and meaning" for children and their families.<sup>38</sup> These services offer unique support beyond the mainstream model of education and care, which is culturally grounded, holistic, and tailored to the specific needs of children and their families.<sup>40</sup> MACS and ACFCs are often described as one-stop shops for Aboriginal children and their families because they integrate early childhood education and care programming alongside diverse health programs such as health assessments, psychology, hearing, speech pathology and maternal health; transition to school programs; culture and art programs; playgroups; parenting and family support programs; legal and housing supports; and family violence counselling.<sup>41</sup>

VACCA would like to see a strong commitment from the Victorian Government to enable ACCOs to providing access to early learning and care services for Aboriginal children and families. Unfortunately, thus far the provision of ACCO-led ECEC in Victoria has not been planned, supported, or resourced in alignment with the needs of Aboriginal communities, families, and children, or with Aboriginal population growth. In Victoria, there are currently 6 MACS spread across the entire state, and only two ACFCs. In effect, the platform of Aboriginal-led ECEC centres has remained largely unchanged since the mid-1980s' when the Multi-Functional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS) were established with funding from the Commonwealth. Whilst we welcomed commitments from the Victorian Government in June 2022 to fund universal access to kindergarten for three and four-year old children, VACCA would like to see this broadened to include children aged two and under.<sup>52</sup>

## **Access to education for Aboriginal young people in out-of-home care**

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<sup>52</sup> Victorian Government (2022) *Best Start Best Life Early Childhood Education Works*. Retrieved from [weblink](#).

Every year in Victoria approximately 600 young people aged between 16 and 18 exit out of home care.<sup>53</sup> It is widely known that children living in out of home are at a greater risk of poor educational outcomes than their peers, which leads in future to challenges associated with gaining employment and income. The data on educational outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people is widely documented, and five of the seventeen targets under the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* (Closing the Gap) relate directly to Aboriginal children and young people's access to education. Recent *Closing the Gap* data for Victoria shows that although some areas have seen positive change, on the whole educational outcomes for Aboriginal students remain lower than their non-Aboriginal peers. For example, 72.6 per cent of Aboriginal people aged 20-24 had attained year 12 or equivalent, compared to 91.1 per cent of non-Aboriginal students.<sup>54</sup> Despite this being an improvement, it is still nowhere near the national target of 96 per cent. Further, Victoria is not currently on track to meet Target 7, that 67 per cent of Aboriginal youth aged 15-24 are engaged in employment, education or training by 2031.<sup>55</sup> There was only a 0.1% improvement between 2016 and 2021, from 65.4 to 65.5 per cent.<sup>56</sup> For Aboriginal children in out-of-home care, data provided to the Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) shows that, overall, NAPLAN results for Aboriginal students in out-of-home care are lower compared to all Aboriginal students, all non-Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students in care.<sup>57</sup> Higher levels of education attainment have been linked with positive life outcomes including overall wellbeing and access to employment, accordingly education is a major focus in efforts to improve health outcomes of Aboriginal peoples. Exclusion from education, by whatever means, has implications for wellbeing, health, income, employment, and a range of other social benefits.<sup>58</sup> Upon leaving care, the transition into further education and employment is challenging. Research from the Australian Government Institute of Health and Welfare in 2021 found that nearly 3 in 5 (59 per cent) of the out of home care population received income support payments in young

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<sup>53</sup> DHHS (2021) Better Futures factsheet for providers. Retrieved from [weblink](#)

<sup>54</sup> Australian Government, Productivity Commission (July 2023), *Closing the Gap Annual Data Compilation Report*. Retrieved from: [HYPERLINK "https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/annual-data-report/report/closing-the-gap-annual-data-compilation-report-july2023.pdf"](https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/annual-data-report/report/closing-the-gap-annual-data-compilation-report-july2023.pdf)[weblink](#).

<sup>55</sup> Closing the Gap, *Closing the Gap Targets and Outcomes*, retrieved from: [weblink](#).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Commission for Children and Young People, (2023). Let us learn: Systemic inquiry into the educational experiences of children and young people living in out-of-home care. Melbourne: Commission for Children and Young People. [Weblink](#)

<sup>58</sup> AIHW (2021) *Indigenous education and skills*. Retrieved from: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/indigenous-education-and-skills>

adulthood, are four times as likely to stay on payments for longer than other young people and are more likely to remain on unemployment payments rather than student payments.<sup>59</sup>

Aboriginal children have the right to the best life opportunities including access to education, healthcare, and the chance to develop social and emotional wellbeing and assist them to achieve positive outcomes when they leave care.<sup>60</sup> VACCA has submitted to several inquiries highlighting the need for improvements to education and care settings, including the Systemic inquiry into the educational experiences of children and young people in out-of-home care by the Commission for Children and Young People in 2023, the Victorian Government Inquiry into State Education in 2023 and submitting to the Yoorrook Justice Commission in response to the education issues paper. These submissions highlighted the inadequacies of the current education system in this state and made several recommendations for reform, we encourage the commission to call upon the Victorian Government to consider these previous recommendations and report on actions undertaken to achieve them.

VACCA has explored systemic injustices within Victoria's education system in our [Submission to the Inquiry into the state education system in September 2023](#).

## Digital Poverty

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the critical nature of digital inclusion in today's society. Due to the lockdowns across Melbourne and the state of Victoria throughout 2020 VACCA had to be agile and adapt to a new way of delivering services and supporting community. Technology allowed us to reach many but relying on reciprocal ways of communicating highlighted the inequity many of our community face. The ADII 2020 detailed that "digital inclusion follows some clear economic and social contours. In general, Australians with lower levels of income, employment, and education are significantly less digitally included. There is consequently a substantial digital divide between richer and poorer Australians."<sup>3</sup> Since the pandemic, the landscapes of both work and education have vastly shifted with larger proportions of engagement taking place online. This has further entrenched the issue of inequality in access to the internet and devices, known as 'digital poverty' or 'digital exclusion'. Between 2019 and 2020, there was no improvement in the overall ADI score for Aboriginal

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<sup>59</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2021. Income support receipt for young people transitioning from out-of-home care. Cat. no. CWS 82. Canberra: AIHW.

<sup>60</sup> K, McLean, J, Clarke, D, Scott, H, Hiscock, S, Goldfeld, (2020). Foster and kinship carer experiences of accessing healthcare: A qualitative study of barriers, enablers and potential solutions, Children and Youth Services Review. Vol. 113.

people.<sup>61</sup> For low-income families with school aged children, affordability is the most significant barrier to digital inclusion, research has identified that affordability is one of the main factors for reduced rates of household internet access.<sup>62</sup> For Aboriginal students nationally, 21 per cent do not have internet access at home compared to 5 per cent for all public school students.<sup>63</sup> Limited access to resources, appropriate learning stations, devices and reliable internet all have implications for the facilitation of home learning, engagement and quality of the children's home learning experience. VACCA is concerned that as more schools require access to devices to keep up with home-based learning, children can fall behind. This has an impact on their lifelong trajectory of learning, as once behind it is incredibly difficult for students to catch-up to their peers.

Furthermore, the lack of access to digital technology alongside a lack of digital literacy creates a digital poverty that has detrimental effects on those that are already vulnerable. From learning online to telehealth appointments, paying for bills, accessing Medicare and Centrelink, and the (in)ability to work from home. The families, carers and Elders without computers or tablets, internet connections, data or technological knowledge struggle, adding an extra layer of disadvantage. Digital exclusion is another facet of the deep inequalities which run through Australian society. Just as COVID changed many aspects of how we live, it has also allowed us to change our practice, how we support others. Addressing digital inclusion is critical in addressing the realisation of fundamental human rights, and the Australian Human Rights Commission has recently observed that as technology evolves, people who experience multiple forms of disadvantage may be at greater risk of the harmful impacts of digital exclusion and undermine the right to education.<sup>64</sup>

## Post-secondary attainment

Target six of The National Agreement on Closing the Gap commits to increasing the proportion of Aboriginal people aged 25-34 years who have completed a tertiary qualification (Certificate III and above to 70 per cent).<sup>65</sup> As a country, we are still celebrating when an Aboriginal person achieves a

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<sup>61</sup> Thomas, J, Barraket, J, Wilson, CK, Holcombe-James, I, Kennedy, J, Rennie, E, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, (2020), *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2020*, RMIT and Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, for Telstra, p. 15

<sup>62</sup> Ogle, G (2017) *Submission on the Productivity Commission Telecommunications Universal Service Obligation Draft Report*, SACOSS, Adelaide

<sup>63</sup> Preston, B (2020) *Digital Inclusion for all Public School Students*, Barbara Preston Research, p. 5

<sup>64</sup> PwC Indigenous Consulting, submission to the IP cited in [https://tech.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-12/TechRights2019\\_DiscussionPaper.pdf](https://tech.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-12/TechRights2019_DiscussionPaper.pdf)

<sup>65</sup> *Closing the Gap, Closing the Gap Targets and Outcomes*, retrieved from: [weblink](#).

tertiary education, which only speaks to the low expectations held for Aboriginal peoples, rather than embedding an educational system where Aboriginal history, cultures, languages and ways of knowing and being are celebrated and in turn supports all Australians to achieve their educational aspirations. In Victoria, we are continuing to see an increase in the proportion of Aboriginal young people engaged in education, training or employment after leaving school. According to 2020 data from the Department of Education and Training (DET), Aboriginal Year 12 completers were more likely to go on to do a bachelor degree, apprenticeship or traineeship or to be employed, and were less likely to be looking for work than Aboriginal year 12 completers in 2009.<sup>66</sup> Nationally, we have seen an increase in Aboriginal people aged 25-34 years completing non-school qualifications. However, despite these improvements we are still not on track to meet Closing the Gap Target six as a nation.<sup>67</sup> It is integral that further support is provided for pathways into post-secondary engagement, including resourcing ACCOs to expand and deliver programs focused on engaging disconnected children and families in programs that provide practical supports as well as opportunities for personal development capable of offering pathways back into education, training, employment and the community.

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<sup>66</sup> The Department of Education and Training (2020), current data.

<sup>67</sup> Australian Government Productivity Commission, *Closing the Gap Information Repository, Socio-economic outcome area 6*. Accessed from: [weblink](#).



### **Recommendations:**

- 12. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to expand universal access to early childhood education and care to include children in the 0 to 2 age cohort.**
- 13. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Department of Education to adopt a trauma informed approach and respond to the needs of Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care and those with a trauma background by providing funding for:**
  - a. ACCOs to develop culturally appropriate, trauma-informed modules and professional development opportunities for staff.**
  - b. Schools to develop a trauma-informed and culturally safe environment, practice and systems.**
- 14. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to resource the ACCO sector to provide culturally safe and inclusive early education opportunities for Aboriginal children aged 0-8 years and meaningful transition supports for young people that includes mentors, cultural supports.**
- 15. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government Provide dedicated funding for educational resources including financial planning and counselling available for families experiencing financial hardship.**
- 16. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to provide Greater investment for Aboriginal-led accessible, good quality and culturally specific childcare.**

## **Building strengths-based economic participation and growing the Aboriginal Economy**

### **ACCO sector growth**

Self-determination is a key factor in building strengths-based First Peoples's economic participation. This entails ongoing and sufficient funding for ACCOs to design, deliver and review programs and services, and to build the capacity of their workforces. The current model of funding for ACCOs through fundraising, government funding and philanthropic donations is unsustainable in upholding self-determination since effective implementation of Aboriginal programs and services is often

reliant on achieving government set outcomes. Often the government defunds Aboriginal programs and services which may not have reached the desired outcomes, despite being well received by clients and community as a whole, particularly when considering the Aboriginal lens they offer. Priority Reform Two of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (CtG) calls for preferential funding towards ACCOs and sustained ACCO sector development. The agreement identifies a “dedicated, reliable and consistent funding model designed to suit the types of services required by communities, responsive to the needs of those receiving the services, and is development in consultation with the relevant peak body” as a key element of strong community controlled sectors.<sup>68</sup> A key concern for VACCA is the ongoing reliance on small-scale, short-term, pilot project funding in the child and family services sector, which is prohibiting long-term and sustainable change being made across the sector.

Grants and funding opportunities are currently constructed to reflect the experience of mainstream service delivery, which does not take into account the specific needs of the ACCO sector, including the increased costs associated with providing a culturally safe workplace, and delivering culturally-led service delivery. These costs include but are not limited to:

- Providing cultural supervision and cultural leave
- Conducting Community consultations to ensure service model and/or project development enshrine Aboriginal voices and representative of the unique cultural needs of the diverse communities
- providing a trauma informed environment
- Increased training for staff to reflect the complexity of work in the sector
- More intensive client work, including engaging with clients for longer periods than mainstream organisations and providing wrap around, holistic support.

Often ACCOs are required by governments to compete for service delivery, or partner with a mainstream organisation. As our funding proposals specifically target Aboriginal populations, our proposals therefore reflect a proportionate service delivery, which can disadvantage us in assessment and procurement processes for open tender opportunities. Dedicated funding streams for Aboriginal service delivery, allows ACCOs appropriate and fair access to funding, and circumvents the need to engage in a partnership, supporting self-determination. Economy of scale is also a factor that impinges ACCOs when we are forced to partner, due to the available funding being split, thereby does not take into consideration critical corporate levy or administration that is required by both parties engaged in the partnership. This can result in ACCOs receiving allocated amounts that must be directed predominantly to the service delivery, and a shortfall to adequately meet the administration needs of the ACCO. Organisational scale is also a big consideration, yet ACCOs will

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<sup>68</sup> Closing the Gap, *Priority Reforms*, accessed from: [weblink](#).

never be able to compete if they do not have investment to build scale and evidence that Aboriginal approaches are effective. Similarly, ACCOs have been forced to compete so often that partnerships between ACCOs are sadly uncommon. ACCOs are more adept at partnering between sectors like child protection and legal for example but less likely within a sector for service delivery.

When ACCOs are asked to partner with mainstream organisations, ACCOs are often confronted with added expectations from the mainstream organisation in providing cultural oversight and advice on service delivery, which is not adequately accounted for and funded. This increases the burden placed on ACCOs, which is not reflected in grant and service delivery costings.

At present, short-term grant agreements compromise the ability of services to make significant change and run to their full potential. Fixed 12-month funding creates multiple obstacles, notwithstanding the challenge of achieving optimal results in such a small and restricted time frame. Delayed procurement processes and notification periods, coupled with the effort entailed in commencing a new program or service, places an inordinate amount of pressure on a 12-month timeframe. Notwithstanding the challenge of reaching optimal service delivery outcomes and delivery in such a short time period. Furthermore, the ACCO sector currently receives grants based on pilot programs, which often do not continue once the pilot has concluded, regardless of whether it has achieved success or not. This reliance on pilot programs compromises the ability for ACCOs to make meaningful and sustainable change with clients. When working with Mob it takes time to build

trust and relationships, and it is important to have the security of ongoing programs and relationships to build trust in services.

### **Recommendations:**

- 17. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to ensure grant and funding opportunities stipulate ACCO specific funding streams, or mandatory minimum ACCO allocations in guidelines and/or tender specifications, and funding be provided directly to ACCOs as standard practice.**
- 18. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to provide autonomy to ACCOs to determine the allocation of funds within their organisations and services.**
- 19. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to ensure that funding models for ACCOs are long-term, flexible, and sustainable and include a levy for consultation and evaluation.**

Improving economic participation and growing the Aboriginal economy has been a desired outcome in a range of different contexts, notably, under Closing the Gap Outcome 8: 'Strong economic participation and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.'<sup>69</sup> Target 8 of the Closing the Gap, which seeks to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25-64 who are employed to 62 per cent by 2031, is on track to be met with 55.7 per cent of Aboriginal people aged 25-64 currently employed in 2021.<sup>70</sup>

Achieving strong economic participation and development for Aboriginal communities which can reduce rates of poverty requires achieving commitments around employment outlined in Closing the Gap. This includes recruiting and retaining Aboriginal staff across several sectors and bolstering the ACCO sector workforce. Cultural safety in the workplace is critical factor for recruitment and retention and VACCA is in a strong position to help inform a cultural safety framework as we understand the barriers that government and mainstream Community Service Organisations face in

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<sup>69</sup> National Indigenous Australian Agency. <https://www.niaa.gov.au/2023-commonwealth-closing-gap-implementation-plan/delivering-outcomes-and-targets/outcome-8-strong-economic-participation-and-development-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people-and-communities>

<sup>70</sup> Closing the Gap. Socio-economic outcome area 8. <https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard/se/outcome-area8>

regard to building an Aboriginal workforce. We understand that for many Aboriginal people, their jobs must also provide a connection to their community and sense of belonging. VACCA has done considerable work to build a workforce strategy where cultural safety is embedded into organisational development, including cultural supervision, wellbeing, and our Cultural Therapeutic Ways, which is our whole-of-agency approach to our practice of healing for Aboriginal children, young people, families, community members and carers who use our services, and to ensure that VACCA is a safe and supportive workplace for staff. The framework acts at the intersection of cultural practice with trauma and self-determination theories. The aim of this practice is to integrate Aboriginal culture and healing practices across the organisation and guide our service delivery approach to be healing, protective and connective.

VACCA has invested significant resources into the development of a number of employment initiatives that support community who are starting out in their careers, to enter the workforce through a range of pathways including traineeships, internships and student placements.

**Traineeships:** VACCA's traineeship program provides an entry level opportunity for ten Aboriginal people each year to gain 12 months practical work experience, structured on the job training and a Certificate IV in Community Services. Upon successful completion of the 12-month traineeship, trainees are assisted to find ongoing employment at VACCA.

**Student Internships and Placements:** VACCA also has a student internship program which sees partnerships with education providers to provide a short-term opportunity to Aboriginal students undertake paid internship with VACCA.

**Barreng Moorop Work Ready Program:** In partnership with Bridge Darebin VACCA has run a number of work ready program over the past couple of years for 14–18-year-olds. The program was designed to support Aboriginal young people learn skills and information to acquire a part time job. Skills and training included developing your CV and cover letter and preparing for interviews. Aboriginal employment officers from Coles, Bunnings and Bakers Delight come and speak with the young people as well as one of VACCA's Organisational Development team to discuss VACCA's trainee and internship programs. The program runs over six weeks including one week of undertaking a food handling course and work experience at the social enterprise café run by Bridge Darebin 'Moon Rabbit'. The feedback for this course has been overwhelmingly positive, and this model shows a flexible, local partnership between an ACCO and an employer.

Since 2017 VACCA has supported 27 Aboriginal trainees complete a twelve-month traineeship, 21 of them have been offered ongoing employment. During this period, we have also had 15 Aboriginal university students complete internships through Career Trackers and provided 75 student placements, 28 of these resulted in employment at VACCA and 12 of those who were successfully employed were Aboriginal students.

It is evident more systemic reforms such as formally recognising the right of Aboriginal people to self-determination and self-governance and implementing this in policy and legislation also has implications for economic development. Internationally, a recent report from the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development has found that federal US policies around tribal self-determination and self-governance have resulted in significant economic growth across most of First Nations Country, as well as concurrent expansions of the responsibilities and capacities of tribal governments. The research found that legislation unique to the state of Maine allows the state government to block the full application of the federal policy, and as a consequence, the Wabanaki Nations of Maine have not experienced the same level of economic development relative to the tribes in other states.

### **Recommendations:**

**20. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to support ACCO designed and led, culturally appropriate employment and workforce programs.**

## **Data Sovereignty**

Data sovereignty is a rights-based framework informing the ownership, control, management, and acquisition of data. In the Indigenous context this reinforces self-determination through enabling Aboriginal organisations, communities and individuals to understand data generation, maintenance, ownership, control, access and possession. Building an Aboriginal-led evidence base requires strong partnerships between ACCOs and government. Access to Aboriginal data should be the foremost principle in establishing an Aboriginal-led evidence base. There are many mainstream, government and ACCO databases that contain a myriad of statistics, reports and information on Aboriginal people and communities. Giving complete access to this data is essential in the truth-telling process as the lives, experiences, genealogy and narratives of our people is held up in these databases. In line with building the economic capacity of Aboriginal organisations, communities and individuals, data sovereignty practices underly the ability to manage research, assessments and data.

Governments also have a responsibility to ensure the systematic implementation of Indigenous data sovereignty, including:

- Stronger ACCO and government relationships through data sharing agreements that ensure two-way communication, including a working partnership to embed Indigenous data sovereignty as a mechanism for achieving self-determination.

- Implementation of an Aboriginal community-controlled government reporting system across all sectors such as a data dashboard to ensure government accountability.
- Transfer Aboriginal data held by government to ACCOs that will be monitored and reported on through a data dashboard.
- All Stolen Generations records to be repatriated to community and to be held by ACCOs.
- All program funding should include an ACCO led, evaluation component.
- Aboriginal-led evaluations of measures and outcomes to determine what success looks like for Aboriginal families and communities and to ensure comprehensive reporting and planning to guide decision making.

Whilst ACCOs have deep practice expertise and experience delivering services, there is a lack of culturally aligned research evidence which captures the effectiveness of Aboriginal approaches. This means that there are significant missed opportunities to strengthen programming and practice for Aboriginal children and families because ACCOs are not funded to capture, build, and share their knowledge and practice.

### **Recommendations:**

**21. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to increase funding to implement data sovereignty across the ACCO sector in line with Aboriginal self-determination.**

**22. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call upon the Victorian Government to commit funding to build the capacity of the ACCO sector and training for Aboriginal workers to create, maintain and own Aboriginal databases.**

## **Conclusion**

VACCA wishes to thank the Yoorrook Justice Commission for its work thus far in uncovering and documenting systemic injustices experienced by Aboriginal peoples in Victoria, and for the opportunity to provide guidance and advice on strategies to redress these injustices.

We welcome the chance to discuss this submission in more detail.

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