

☼ Acknowledgment and positionality



Ngiyampaa ngurrampaa (Country), 2025

Informing Australia's understanding of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family: Introducing the Indigenous family lifeworld

Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference **Changing Families in Changing Times**

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Director, Mayi Kuwayu Study
Director, Culture and Wellbeing Research



**Australian
National
University**



National Centre for
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
Wellbeing Research



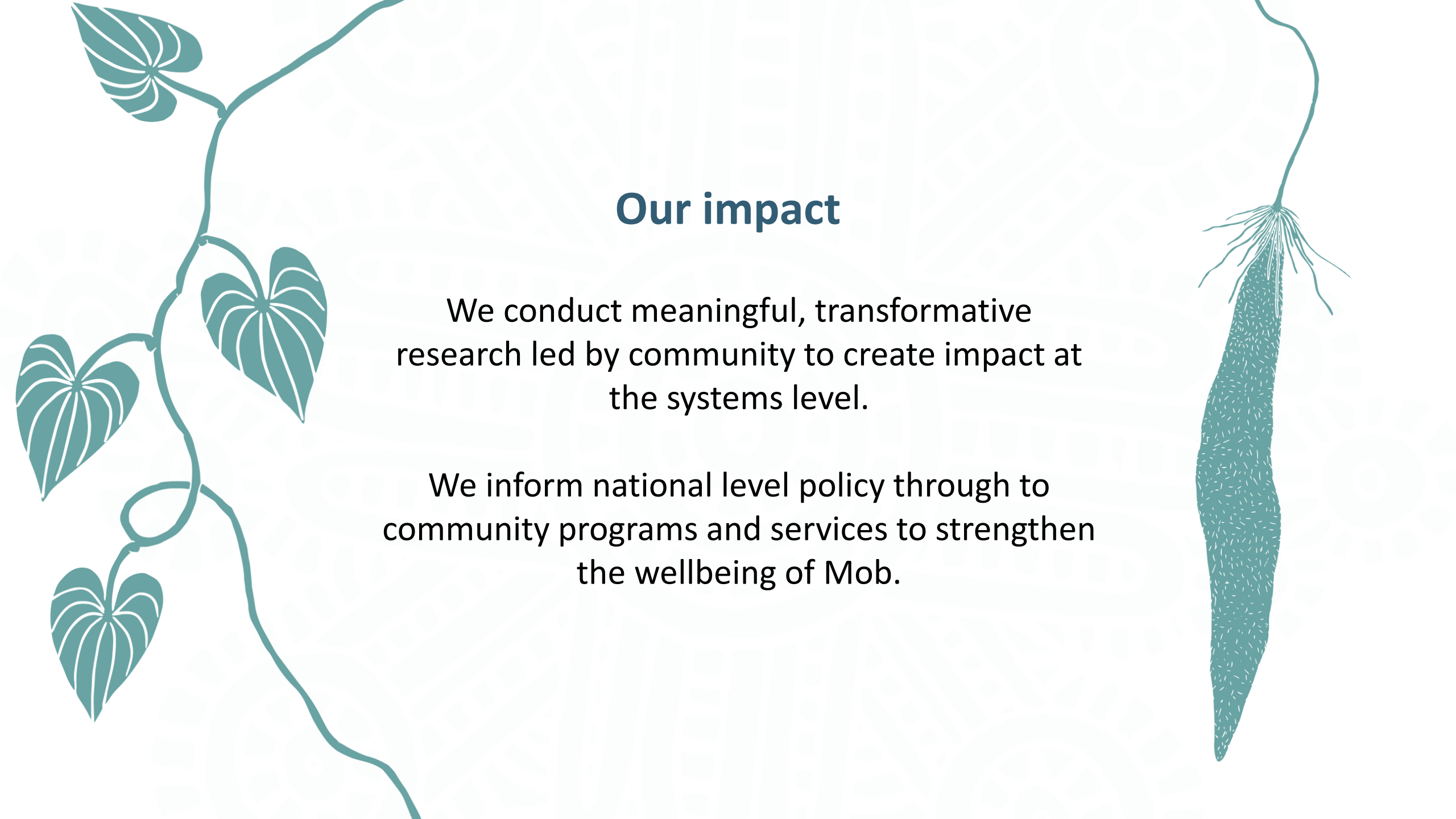
Yardhura Walani ("strong, healthy place")

Our principle is to be in service to Mob.

Our purpose is to strengthen the health and wellbeing of
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led and
governed.





Our impact

We conduct meaningful, transformative research led by community to create impact at the systems level.

We inform national level policy through to community programs and services to strengthen the wellbeing of Mob.

Yardhura Walani Research Programs



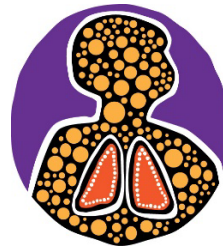
**CERVICAL CANCER
ELIMINATION**



**Enhancing Chronic
Disease Care**



**Mayi
Kuwayu**



**Tobacco
Free**



**Kulay
Kalingka**



**What
Matters
2Kids**



Family and Community Safety (FaCtS)
for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Study



**Yukaaywa
purrary**

Content warning

Today we will be talking about concepts and data that may cause sadness or distress.

If anything in this presentation is difficult to hear, please exercise self-care — step out at any time and seek support if you need.

Call 13 YARN (13 92 76) to talk to an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Crisis Supporter or Lifeline 13 11

14

13YARN's
website:



Gayaa
Dhuwi's
list of
services:



Healing
Foundation's
community
self-care
resources:



WellMob's
self-care
resources:



Presentation overview

- ❁ What is a family and how is this constructed in Australia?
- ❁ Closing the Gap and how non-Indigenous Australia comes to know about Indigenous families
- ❁ A way forward: The Indigenous family Lifeworld concept
- ❁ Mayi Kuwayu and the Indigenous Family Functioning index
 - ❁ Indigenous family functioning and Social Determinants
 - ❁ Indigenous family functioning and Settler colonial risk factors
 - ❁ Indigenous family functioning and peoplehood indicators
- ❁ What the Indigenous family lifeworld approach means for change

Defining family in Australia

☀ In Australia, family is often defined as:

‘a group of two or more people that are related by blood, marriage (registered or de facto), adoption, step or fostering, and who usually live together in the same household’. (ABS, 2012)

The Indigenous family

☀ An Indigenous family might be defined as:

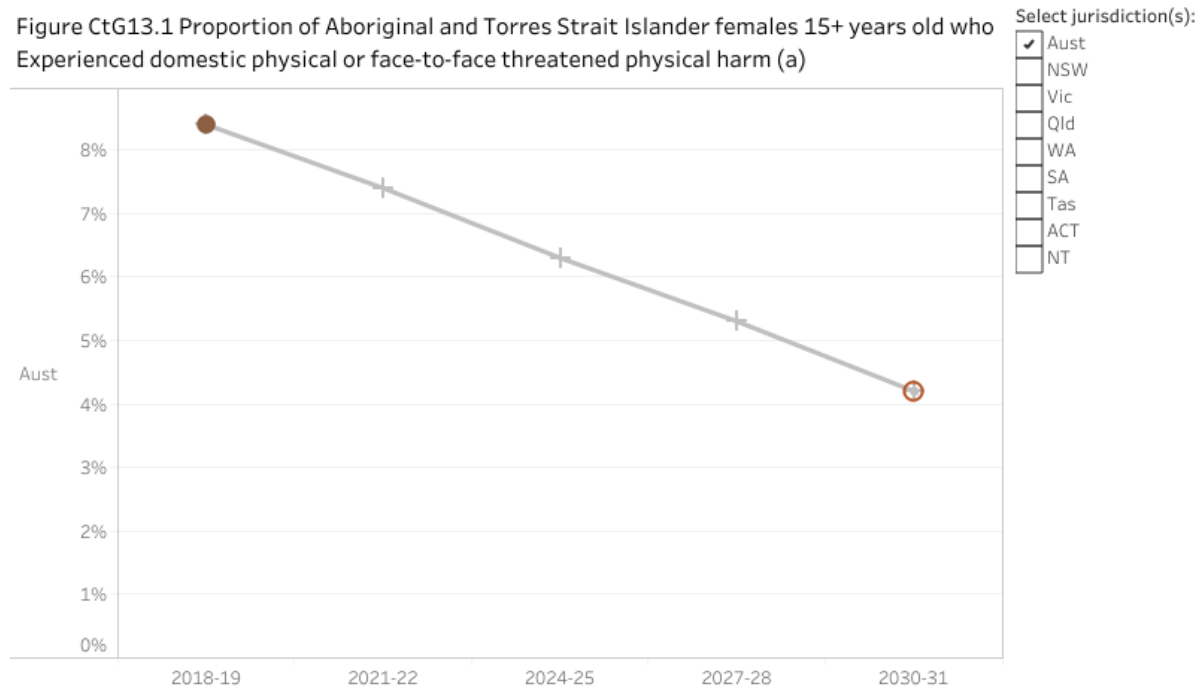
‘The valuing of social relationships, physical and emotional bonds to Country, connecting to the spirit of ancestors and how cultural characteristics and practices are reflected in the day-to-day lives of Aboriginal families, for the benefit children, families and communities (SNAICC, 2011).’

How our families are presented to the nation

🌀 Closing the Gap

🌀 Socio-economic outcome area 13 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and households are safe

Figure CtG13.1 Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females 15+ years old who Experienced domestic physical or face-to-face threatened physical harm (a)



Source: Productivity Commission, Closing the Gap dashboard, table CtG13A.1

(a) Targets and trajectories are only available nationally.

● Actual
○ Target
+ Trajectory

The Indigenous lifeworld

- ☼ Indigenous peoples, families and communities in settler-colonial societies live dual overlapping and intertwined lives referred to as the Indigenous lifeworld
- ☼ The Indigenous lifeworld includes living within a duality of Indigenous *peoplehood* and as *colonised*

Source: Walter, Maggie, 'Conceptualizing and Theorizing the Indigenous Lifeworld', in Maggie Walter, and others (eds), The Oxford Handbook of Indigenous Sociology (2023; online edn, Oxford Academic, 8 Dec. 2021),

The Indigenous lifeworld

Colonial/assimilationist	Indigenous peoplehood
Contrasts Indigenous/non-Indigenous, rating the problematic Indigene against the normed Australian as the standard	A comprehensive, nuanced narrative of who we are as peoples, of our culture, our communities, our strengths, our goals and our successes
Homogenous	Cultural diversity
Aggregated at the national and/or state level implying Indigenous cultural and geographic homogeneity	Recognises our cultural and geographical diversity to provide evidence for community-level planning and service delivery
Decontextualised	Context
Decontextualized narrative focussing on individuals and families outside of their social/cultural context	Inclusive of the wider social structural context/complexities in which Indigenous disadvantage occurs
Deficit, Government priorities	Indigenous Priorities
Reprises deficit linked concepts that service the priorities of Government	Measures beyond problems and addresses our priorities and agendas
How we are known	How we are known
Reductive, treating Indigenous identity as a dichotomous, explanatory, dependent variable	Reflects the complexity and social and cultural embeddedness of who we are as Indigenous peoples

Source: Walter 2021.

The Indigenous family Lifeworld indicators

Indigenous as colonised indicators	Indigenous peoplehood indicators
Poverty	Cultural traditions
Violence	Language
Overcrowding	Belief systems
AoD	Kinship
Education	Cultural practices
Unemployment	Building an Indigenous social identity
Marginalisation	Relationality - Belonging in local Indigenous community
Discrimination	Country
Hypervigilance	Elders
Removals (Distal and Proximal)	Agency
Forced migration	

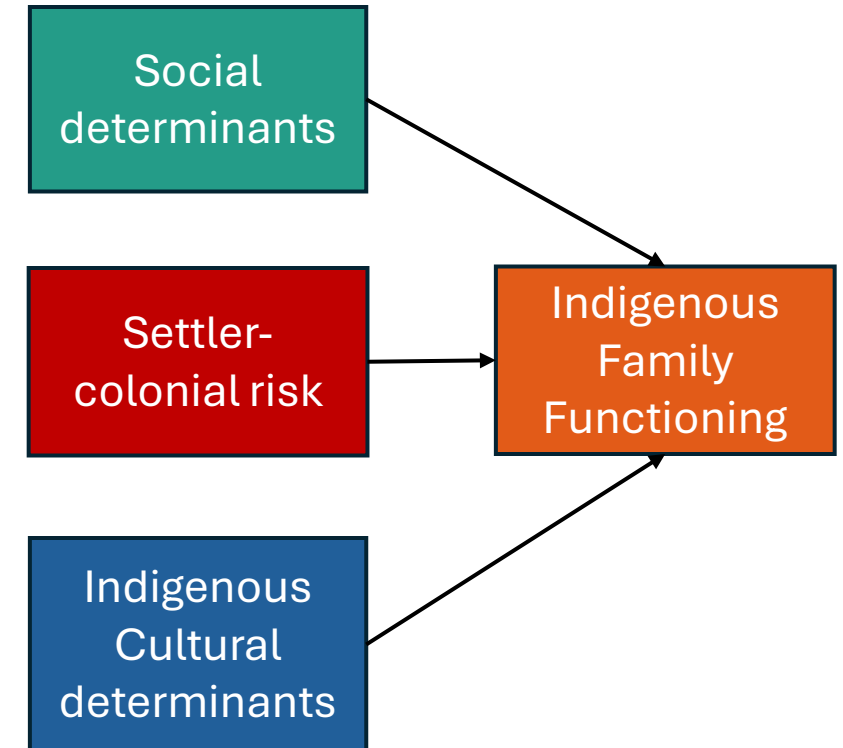
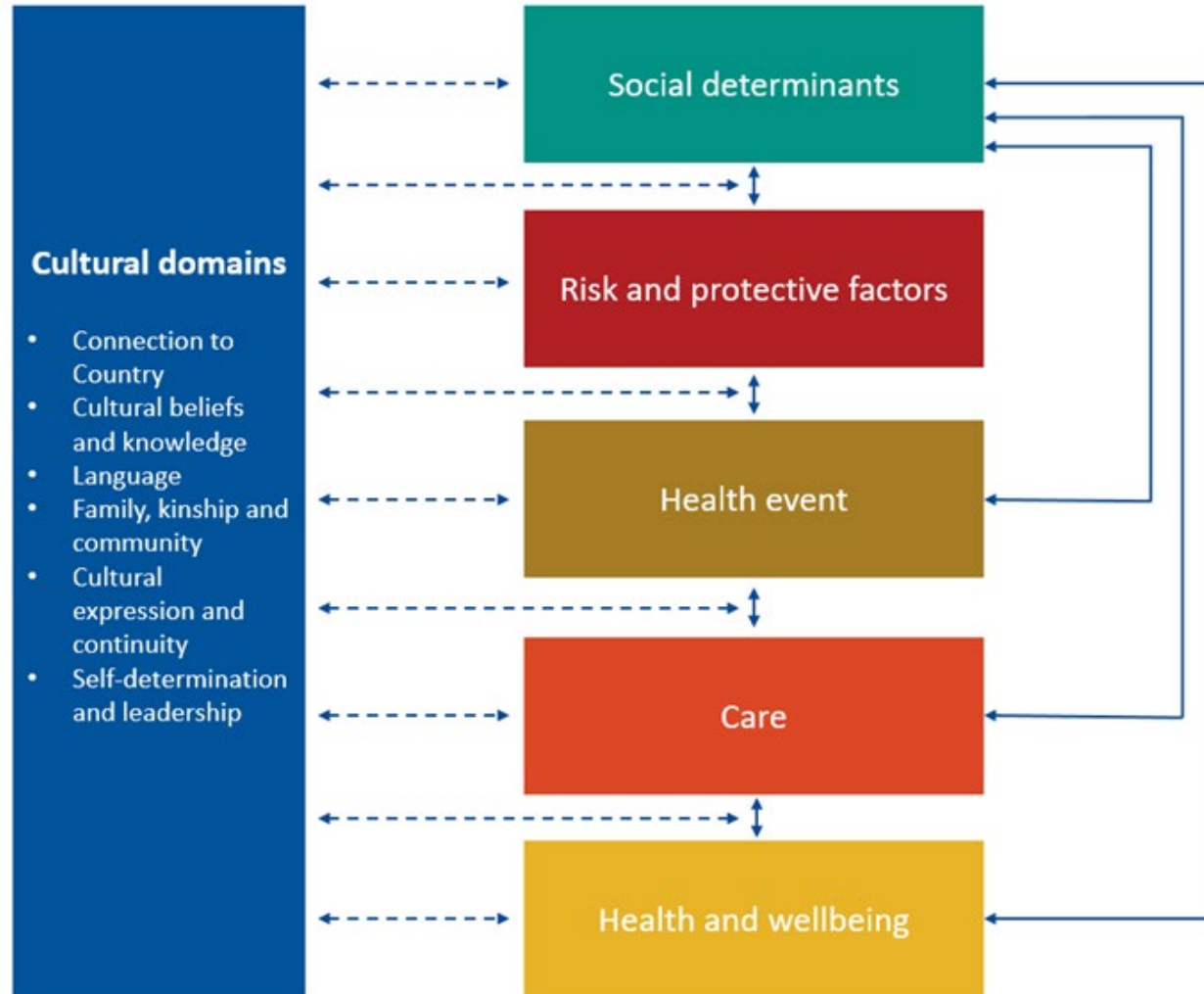
Mayi Kuwayu

❁ The Mayi Kuwayu Study is a national, cohort study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (wave 1 n=13,000)

❁ Questionnaire includes:

- ❁ Novel salutogenic measures
(cultural determinants of health)
- ❁ Novel risk factor measures
(settler-colonial harms/risk)
- ❁ Social determinants of health measures

CDoH and SDoH



Source: Lovett et al, 2021

Mayi Kuwayu development

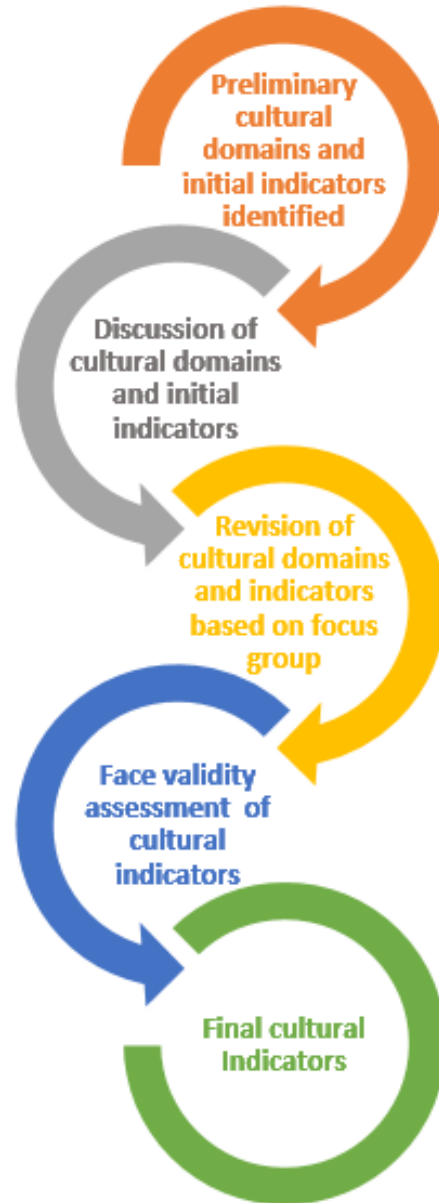
- ©Survey items, including indicators of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, have been developed through reviewing the literature and through consultation with a total of 165 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples attending 24 focus groups across Australia from 2014 to 2017.
- ©Participants were asked two questions:
 1. What is Aboriginal /Torres Strait culture to you?
 2. How does culture relate to wellbeing?

Mayi Kuwayu – Indicator development

- ◎ An important part of survey development is the conceptualisation of key concepts and how these will inevitably be measured.
- ◎ The process of indicator development has been defined as descending the *ladder of abstraction*
- ◎ The development of culturally appropriate questions was an iterative process involving extensive community consultations

Source: Bourke SC, Chapman J, Jones R, Brinckley MM, Thurber KA, Calabria B, Doery K, Olsen A, Lovett R. Developing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural indicators: an overview from Mayi Kuwayu, the National Study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing. Int J Equity Health. 2022 Aug 17;21(1):109. doi: 10.1186/s12939-022-01710-8.

Cultural determinants



1. Connection to Country
2. Indigenous beliefs and knowledge
3. Indigenous language
4. Family, kinship and community
5. Cultural expression and continuity
6. Self-determination and leadership

CDoH and Settler-colonial risks

Cultural domain						
Languages	Country and Caring for Country	Cultural Expression	Family, Kinship and Community	Self-determination and Leadership	Knowledge and Beliefs	Racism and Exclusion
- Indigenous language as a first language Speaks any Indigenous language/s - Access to Indigenous language - Exposure to language revitalisation - Number of Indigenous language/s reported	- Access to Country Connection to Country (time spent on Country) - Living on country - Visiting Country - Cultural responsibility for Country	Mob/tribe affiliation - Access and time spent on cultural activities - Access and time spent with cultural knowledge holders and Elders - Level of cultural practice	- Patrilineal/ matrilineal heritage Family Functioning measure - Extent of significant life events (modified) - Community cohesion Belonging in the local Indigenous community	Local people make community decisions - Government make community decisions - Trust in local leaders Sense of own leadership - Control over own life	Learning culture, kinship and respect - Exposure to Elders/ knowledge holders Passing on cultural knowledge	Discrimination in everyday life (EDS) - Racism as a problem where people live (local) - Settler-colonial risks - Stolen generations - Forced relocations

Development of the Indigenous Family Functioning measure

☀️ WAACHS

☀️ MK adaptation

☀️ Psychometric validation

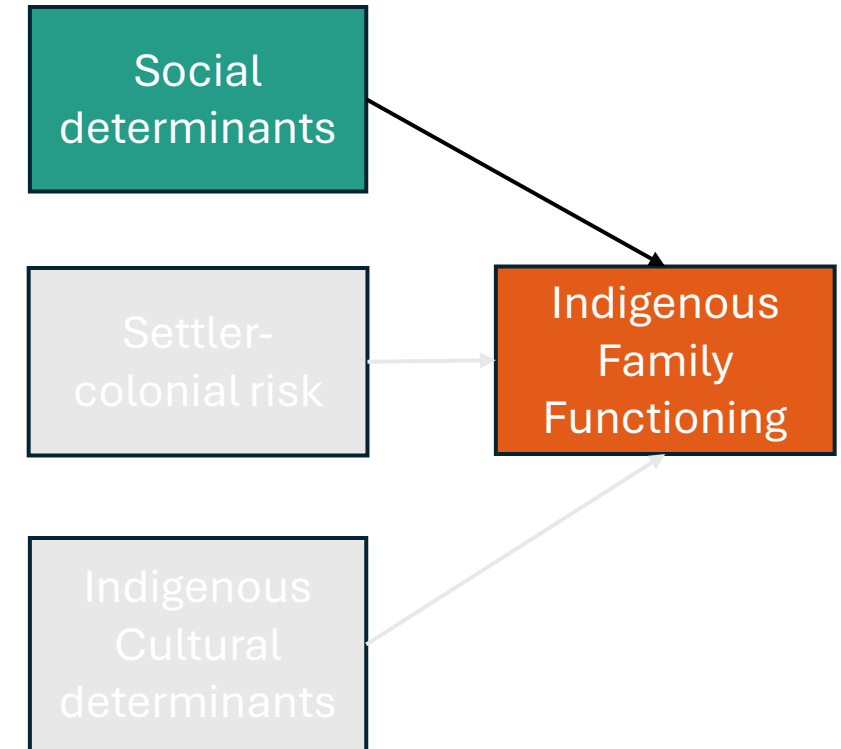
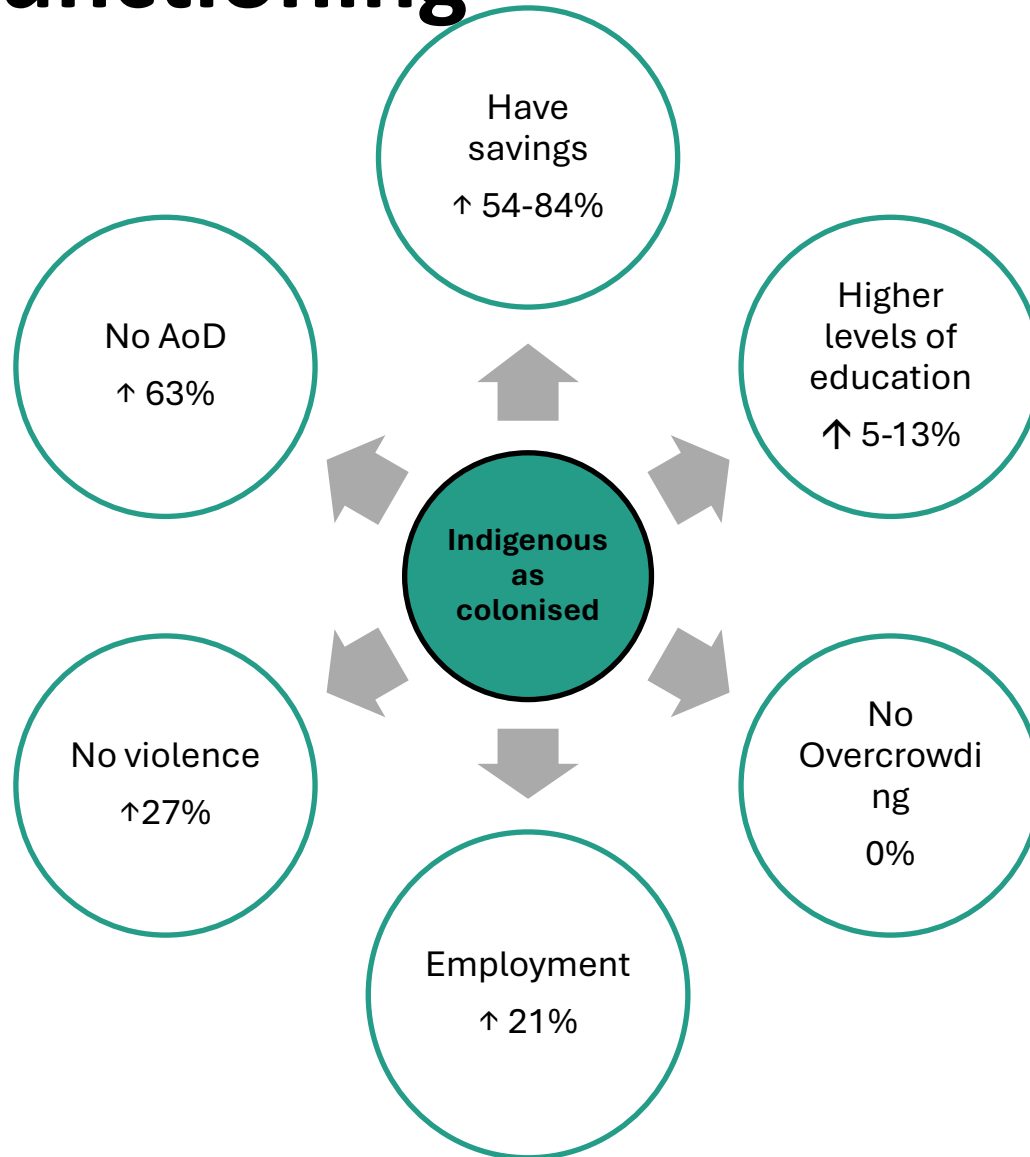
Source: Brinckley MM, Jones R, Batterham PJ, Caelear AL, Lovett R. The development and validation of a family functioning measure for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults. BMC Public Health. 2022

103. In my family...	Not at all	A little bit	A fair bit	A lot	Unsure
We get on together and cope in the hard times.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
We celebrate special days/events.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
We talk with each other about the things that matter.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
We are always there for each other.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
We manage money well.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
We have common interests.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
People are accepted for who they are.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
We have good support from mob.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
We have family knowledge and traditions that we pass on to our children.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Indigenous Family Functioning by demographic characteristics

	Family functioning category			
	Low-moderate		High-very high	
	%	n	%	n
Total sample	53.9	4756	46.1	4070
Age group*				
16-24	54.7	487	45.3	404
25-34	52.2	643	47.9	590
35-44	54.3	744	45.7	627
45-54	56.2	941	43.9	735
55-64	55.8	1118	44.2	887
>65	49.5	693	50.5	706
Missing	51.8	130	48.2	121
Gender*				
Female	51.9	2750	48.1	2548
Male	56.8	1896	43.2	1442
Other & missing	57.9	110	42.1	80
Remoteness*				
Major City	57.4	2082	42.6	1543
Regional	54.7	2164	45.3	1792
Remote/Very remote	38.4	412	61.6	660
Missing	56.7	98	43.4	75
Indigeneity*				
Aboriginal	54.3	4350	45.7	3658
Torres Strait Islander	47.1	145	52.9	163
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	51.5	204	48.5	192
Missing	50.0	57	50	57

SDoH and high levels of Indigenous Family Functioning



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Defining racism and (in)equity?

- ☼ Race is socially constructed not a biological phenomenon
- ☼ Racism assigns value and opportunity based on a person's race (worthiness)
- ☼ Racism is one manifestation of (ongoing) settler-colonialism
- ☼ Structural, systemic and interpersonal forms of racism reinforce and feed each other
- ☼ Addressing equity will create equality of outcomes

 Australian National University

Media release

Embargoed 10:30AM AEDT Friday 9 December, 2022

Eliminating everyday discrimination could halve the burden of psychological distress among First Nations adults

Everyday discrimination could be contributing up to half of the burden of psychological distress among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults, according to a first of its kind study by researchers at The Australian National University (ANU).

Thirty per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults experience high or very high psychological distress, compared to 13 per cent of non-Indigenous adults.

According to senior author Professor Ray Lovett, over 47 per cent of this gap could be caused by just eight different types of interpersonal racial discrimination.

"In a world without racism, these figures would be equivalent," Professor Raymond Lovett (Ngiyampaa/Wongaibon) said.

"The health and social inequities we see today between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous people are not due to biology or race – they are clear, direct consequences of Australia's settler-colonial history and ongoing racism."

Thurber et al. (Lovett) 2022. Population-level contribution of interpersonal discrimination to psychological distress among Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults, and to Indigenous–non-Indigenous inequities: cross-sectional analysis of a community-controlled First Nations cohort study. *The Lancet*, 400(10368), pp.2084-2094.

What do we know about racism exposure?

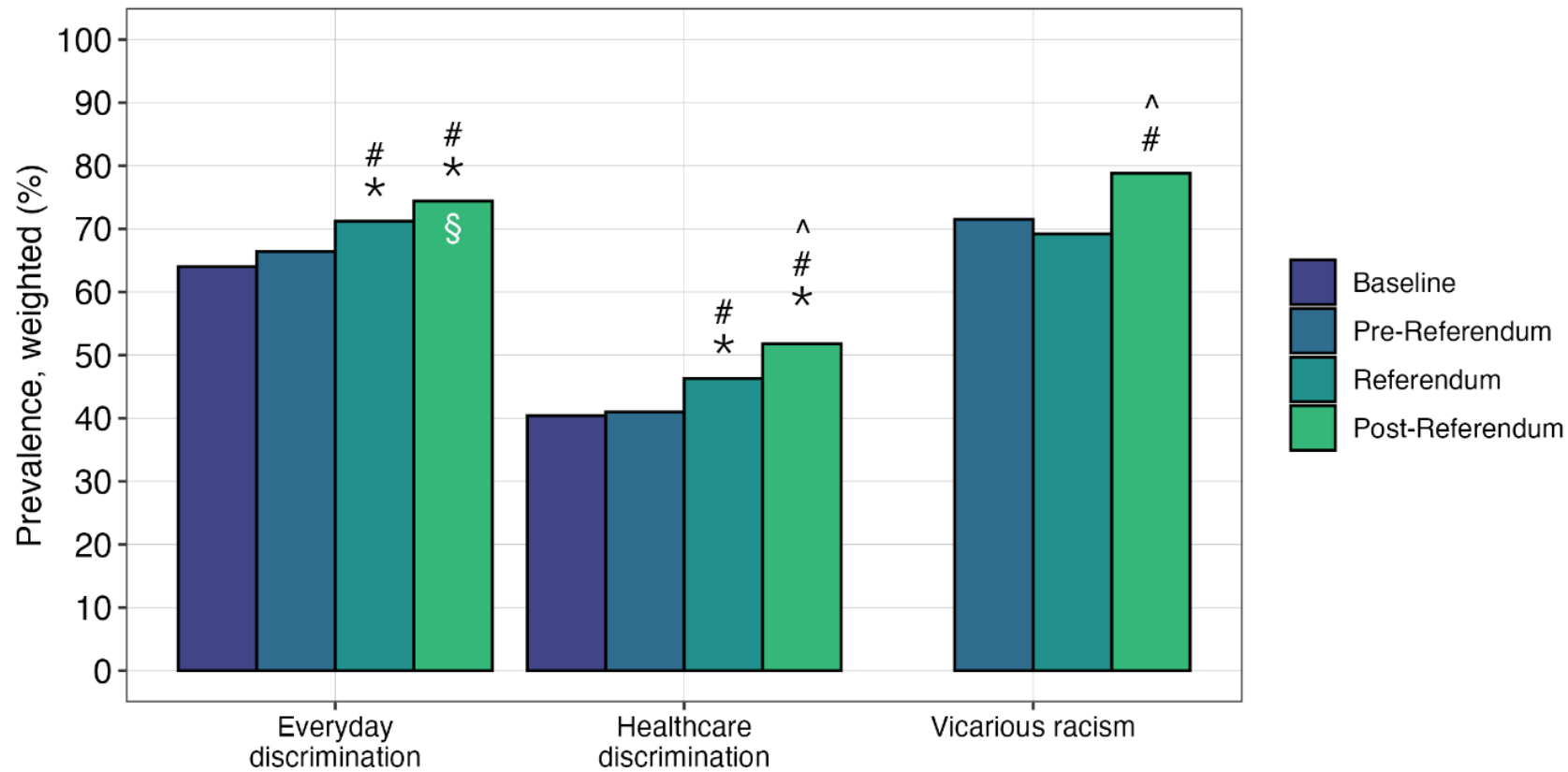


Figure: Weighted prevalence estimates for discrimination and racism variables over the four study periods.

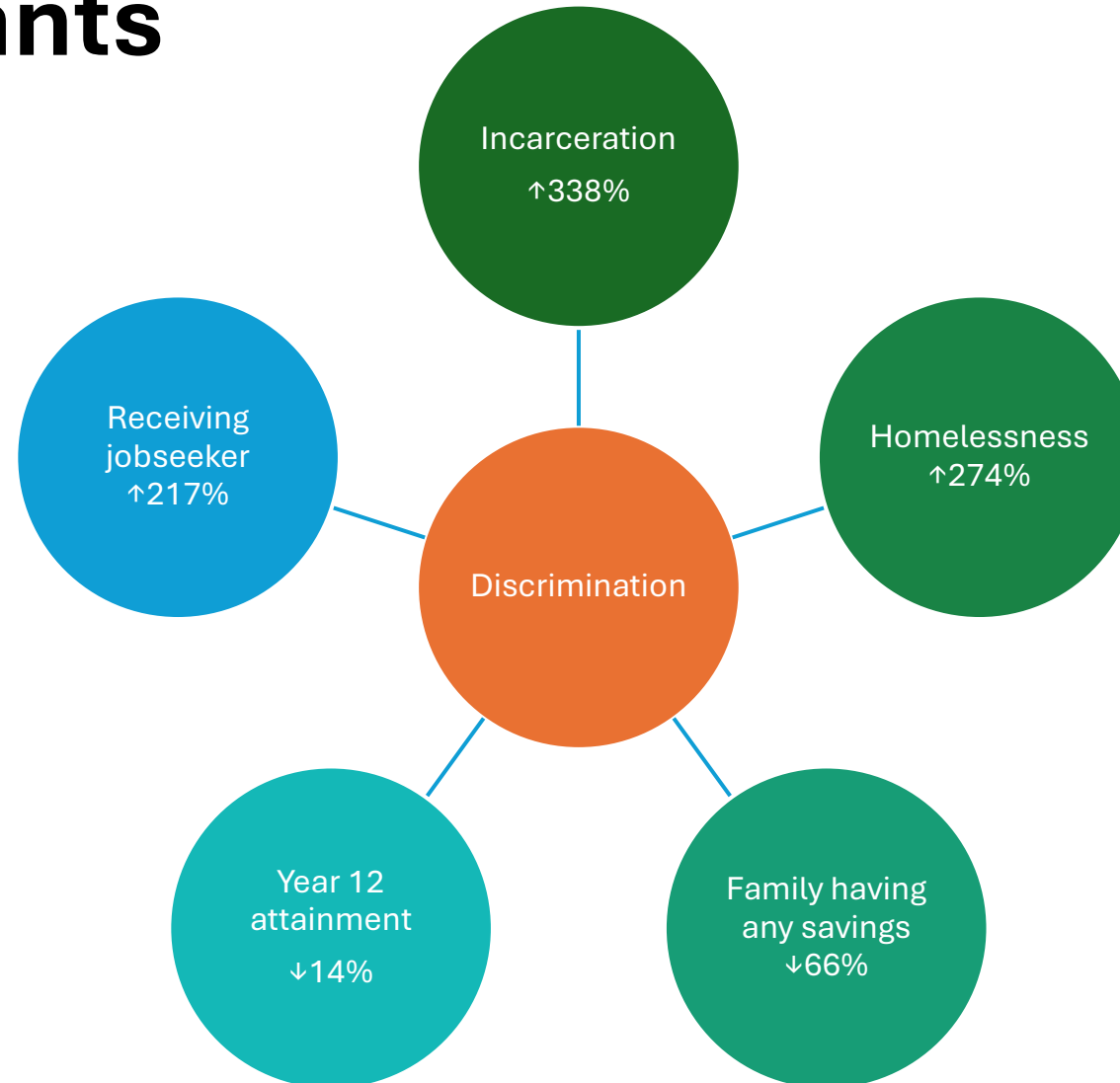
** indicates significant change compared with Baseline.*

indicates significant change compared with Pre-Referendum period.

^ indicates significant change compared with Referendum period.

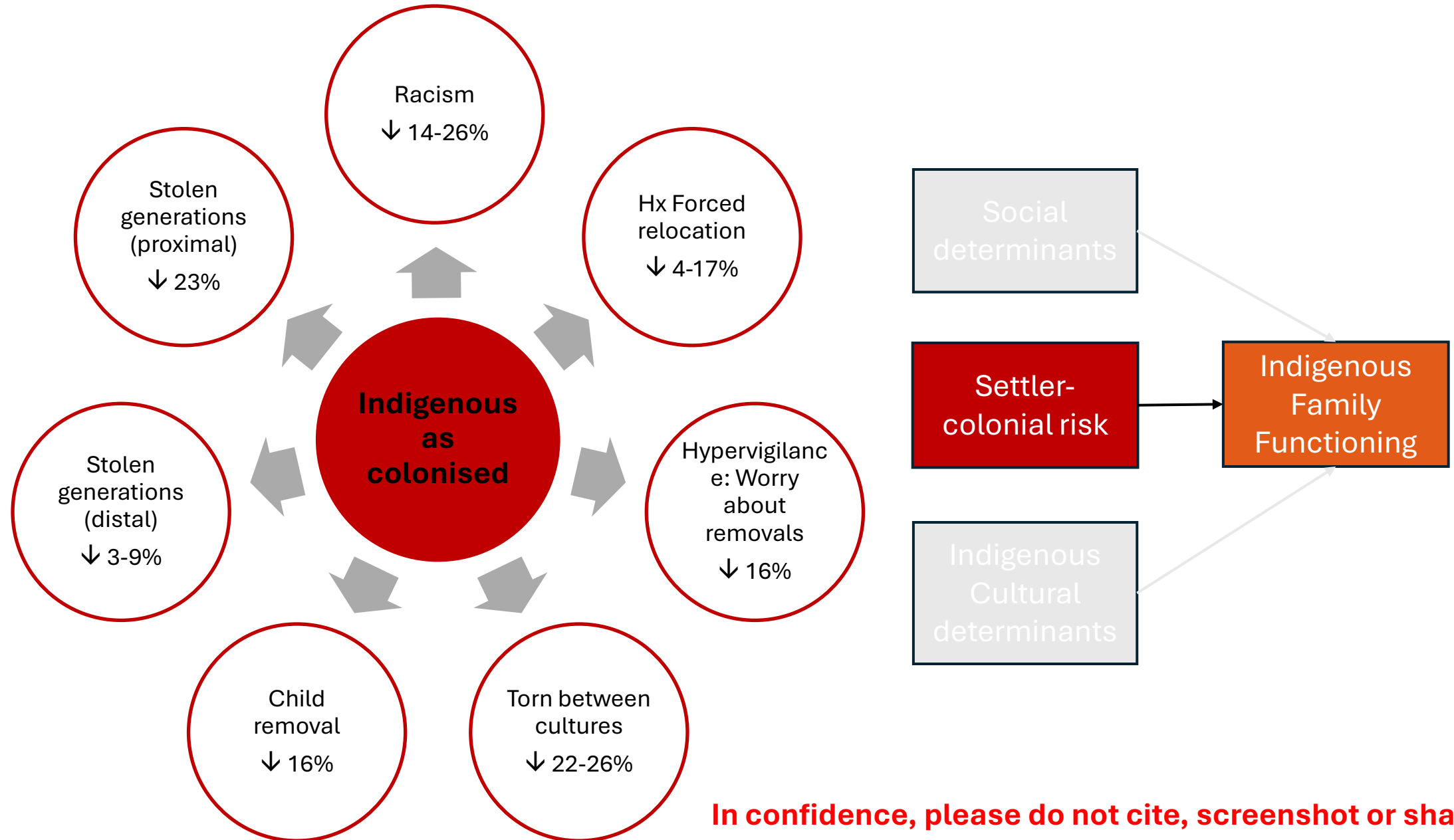
Wilkes, B. et al (2025). Monitoring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health and wellbeing around the Voice to Parliament Referendum, Department of Health, Canberra.

Discrimination structures social determinants

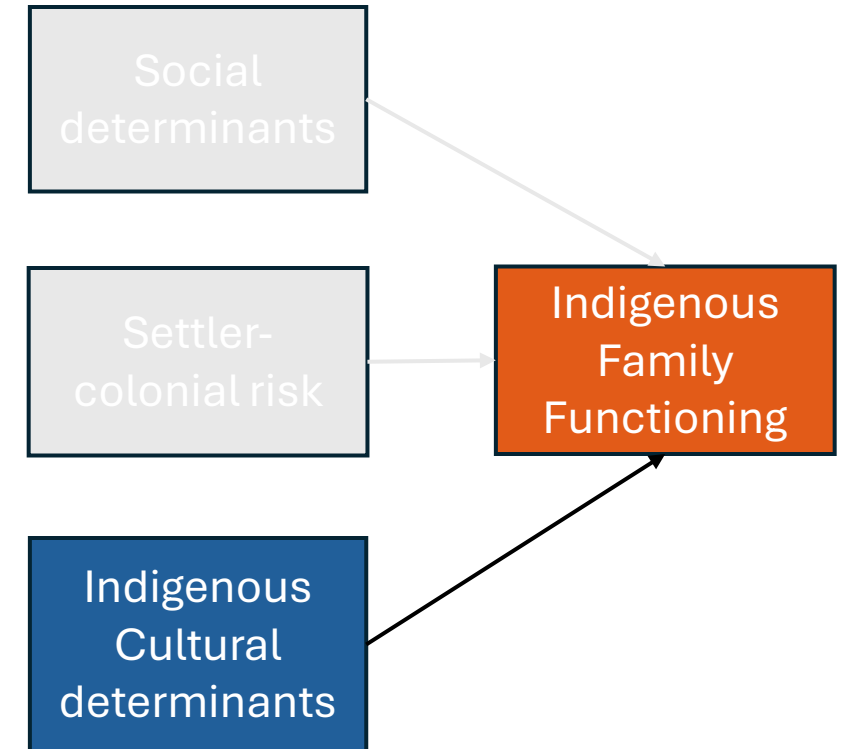
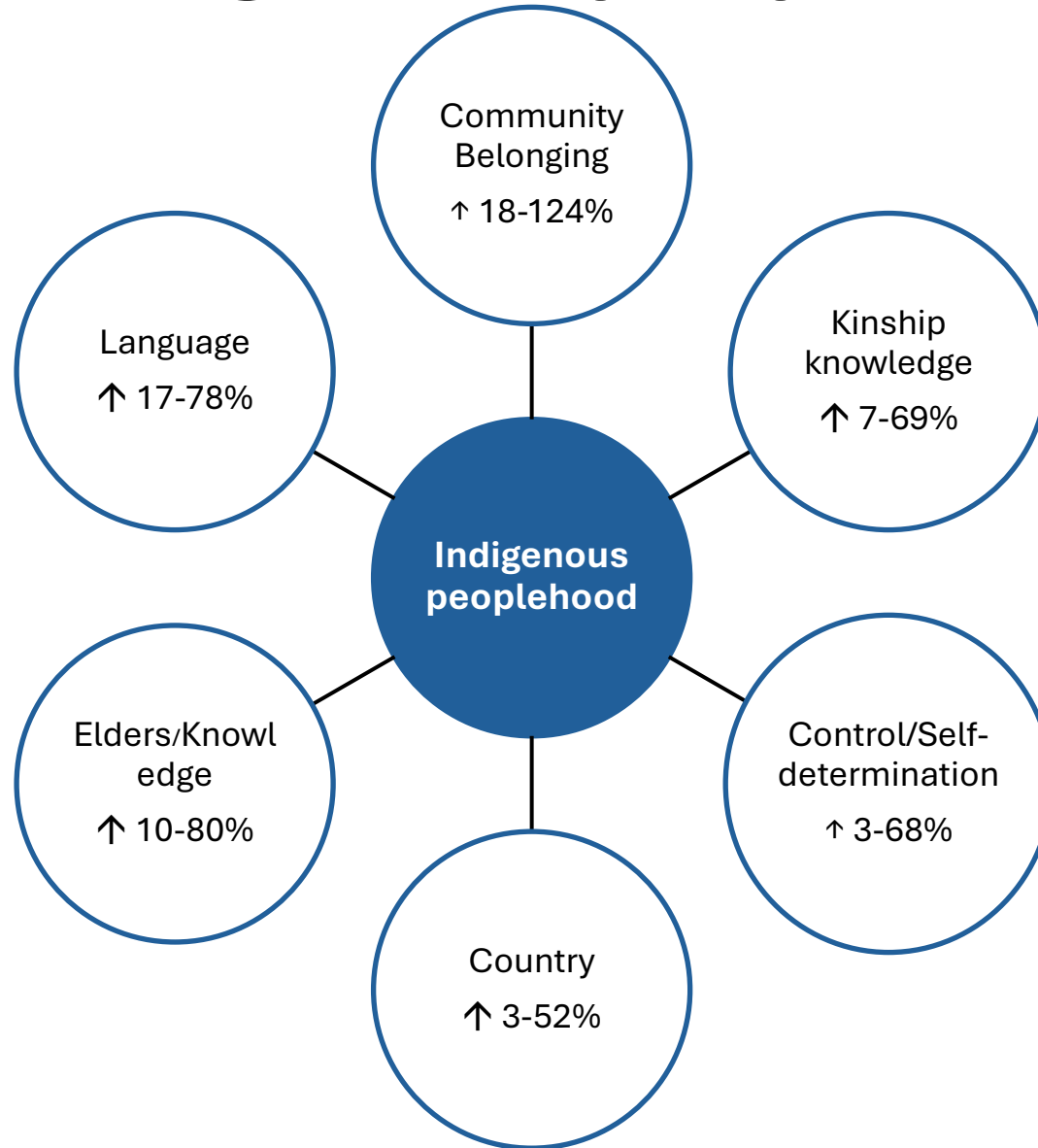


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The unrecognised risk to family functioning



Indigenous peoplehood



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Conclusions

- ☼ Family is socially constructed
- ☼ Current CtG measures do not represent the Indigenous family
- ☼ Violence prevention and family functioning in this country has been built on framing that does not address racialised harms specific to mob, including their pervasiveness or complexity
- ☼ The very factors that potentially strengthen our families continue to be diminished and denied
- ☼ Our family violence prevention and family strengthening apparatus and must be enabled – through our communities and organisations
- ☼ Focus on systems to enhance and amplify change

Yata Wiitja (Thanks) Our research partners

Community/Peak partners



Academic partners



Funding partners

