



## Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Recommendation

### 71. Research into Aboriginal notions of alcohol dependence

*That research funding bodies consider commissioning or otherwise sponsoring research investigating Aboriginal conceptualisation of the nature and causes of alcohol dependence and misuse and the prevention, intervention and treatment approaches which stem from these.<sup>1</sup>*

<b>Background<sup>2</sup></b>	The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC) emphasised that Aboriginal peoples had different understandings and perceptions of alcohol misuse in the community and that these conceptualisations should be investigated. The Commission advocated for research bodies to examine Aboriginal views and conceptualisations of alcohol and incorporate them into prevention programs and treatment.
<b>Intent</b>	Commission research into Aboriginal conceptualisations of alcohol dependence and integrate these views into treatment, prevention and intervention programs.
<b>Responsibility</b>	The Commonwealth and all state and territory governments.
<b>Key contacts</b>	Department of Health (DH).

#### Key action taken

<b>2005 Review<sup>3</sup></b>	<p>The Department of Human Services assessed Recommendation 71 as <b>partially implemented</b>.</p> <p><b>Department of Human Services</b></p> <p>Drugs Policy and Services advised that there had been national research on alcohol, smoking, and illicit drug usage rates for Aboriginal populations. The Department routinely analysed quantitative data about Aboriginal clients' use of alcohol and drug treatment services.</p> <p>Research into the conceptualisation of the nature and causes of drug dependence and misuse and prevention, intervention and treatment approaches which stemmed from such work had been conducted but not necessarily in Victoria or by the Victorian Government. The small proportion of Aboriginal people in the Victorian population, and the diverse nature of Aboriginal communities were noted as reasons this type of research was more difficult and expensive.</p> <p>State-wide consultation was undertaken to determine service gaps and community needs in the development of an 'early intervention and drug prevention program for parents of young adolescents' specifically for the Aboriginal community. The 2004 report on findings identified a range of factors impacting on alcohol and other drug (AOD) use and identified elements to</p>
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<sup>1</sup> Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (Final Report, 1991) vol 2, 332 ('RCIADIC').

<sup>2</sup> Ibid vol 2, 300-317.

<sup>3</sup> Aboriginal Justice Forum (Vic), Department of Justice (Vic), *Victorian Implementation Review of the Recommendations from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (Review Report, October 2005) ('2005 Review').

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	<p>be included in an early intervention program for parents. A parent education program based on the report findings was being developed by VACCHO and VACCA.</p> <p>The Premier's Drug Prevention Council undertook a prevention project working with ten communities across Victoria to identify alcohol and drug related issues and develop prevention projects to address them. Two of these focused on Aboriginal communities.</p> <p>In 2003, Drugs Policy and Services funded the Koori About Inhalant Use Kit based on a South Australian version developed in consultation with Aboriginal people. The kit was modified for Victoria by a committee made up of representatives from the Aboriginal community. This was distributed to Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations and Koori Alcohol and Drug Workers.</p>
<p><b>2018 Review<sup>4</sup></b></p>	<p>Deloitte concluded that Recommendation 71 was <b>fully implemented</b> by the Commonwealth Government and <b>partially implemented</b> by the Victorian Government.</p> <p><b>Commonwealth Government</b></p> <p>Deloitte reported the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) received funding to conduct research, and the National Centre for Research into the Prevention of Drug Abuse established an Aboriginal Research Program to identify protective factors, develop culturally appropriate measures of AOD harm, and share findings and advice with Aboriginal communities.</p> <p><b>Victorian Government</b></p> <p>Deloitte noted the provision of funding for research into AOD issues, including into the risk factors of alcohol misuse. However, it was unclear to what extent research has been conducted into prevention, intervention and treatment approaches for Aboriginal people.</p>
<p><b>Since then</b></p>	<p><b>Department of Health<sup>5</sup></b></p> <p>The Department of Health has not commissioned any comprehensive alcohol related research in relation to Victorian Aboriginal cohorts.</p>
<p><b>Evidence of impact</b></p>	
<p><b>Authorising documents</b></p>	<p>None identified.</p>
<p><b>Outputs</b></p>	<p>Prevention of Alcohol-related Harms in Victoria's Koori Communities, research by Karen Milward published in 2009. This project aimed to support the development of a culturally appropriate research agenda to prevent problematic AOD use among Aboriginal people in Victoria. It involved reviewing AOD prevention research, identifying emerging trends and key</p>

<sup>4</sup> Deloitte Access Economics, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Review of the Implementation of the Recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (Report, August 2018) 143 - 144 ('2018 Review').

<sup>5</sup> Department of Health (Vic), 'Review of Recommendations from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC)' (Response to AJC Request).

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issues for future work, outlining research needs and gaps, and setting short, medium, and long-term priorities for strategic investment in Aboriginal AOD prevention research.<sup>6</sup>

### Outcomes

#### Koori Alcohol Action Plan 2010-20<sup>7</sup>

The Koori Alcohol Action Plan provided a whole-of-government approach to reducing alcohol-related harms in Aboriginal communities. Developed in partnership with Aboriginal communities and VACCHO, the plan incorporated Aboriginal perspectives on the nature and role of alcohol in communities, recognising its complex and multifaceted impacts.

### Community views

None identified.

## Related recommendations

None identified.

## Assessment summary<sup>8</sup>

The intent of Recommendation 71 to support research into Aboriginal conceptualisations of alcohol dependence and integrate these views into treatment, prevention and intervention programs.

The Department of Health confirmed that they had not commissioned any comprehensive alcohol related research in relation to Victorian Aboriginal cohorts. However, the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO) partnered with Aboriginal communities to create the Koori Alcohol Action Plan 2010-20, which aimed to reduce alcohol related harms and included Aboriginal conceptualisations of alcohol dependence.

Given the evolving nature of substance use and its contributing factors, including social changes such as the influence of social media, there remains the need to research alcohol and other drug (AOD) use in Aboriginal communities in Victoria. The scope of the recommendation could be broadened beyond alcohol to encompass other substances and harmful dependencies, reflecting the diverse challenges faced by communities today.

*The fact that there has been little research on this in Victoria makes this recommendation highly relevant. Not much research has been conducted on AOD in Victorian Aboriginal communities. Most of what we have is anecdotal evidence, like stories within Yoorrook material, but there hasn't been thorough, recent research anywhere.* (John Gorton, Chairperson, Grampians Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee)

Further research could support better service delivery and inform culturally appropriate interventions but needs to lead to the development and implementation of practical programs that have meaningful impact.

<sup>6</sup> Karen Milward, 'Prevention of of alcohol-related harms in Victoria's Koori communities' (Research, DrugInfo Clearinghouse, April 2009) <[https://web.archive.org/awa/20091015171816mp\\_/http://druginfo.adf.org.au/downloads/Prevention\\_Research\\_Quarterly/IP\\_Apr09\\_Koori.pdf](https://web.archive.org/awa/20091015171816mp_/http://druginfo.adf.org.au/downloads/Prevention_Research_Quarterly/IP_Apr09_Koori.pdf)>.

<sup>7</sup> Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association, 'The Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) system and First Peoples in Victoria', Submission in *Yoorrook Justice Commission Issues Paper on Health*, NUT.0001.0458.0087, February 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Meeting with Aboriginal Justice Caucus Working Group (Project Team, Online, 22 July 2025) ('*Working Group Meeting (22 July 2025)*'); Meeting with Aboriginal Justice Caucus (Project Team, In Person, 23 September 2025) ('*AJC Meeting (23 September 2025)*').

## Assessment of Recommendation 71

**Is the intent of the recommendation accurately described?**

Yes

**Does the action taken align with the intent of the recommendation?**

0 – No action taken

1 – Action taken is of little relevance to the intent of the recommendation

2 – Action taken partially aligns with the intent of the recommendation

3 – Action taken fully aligns with the intent of the recommendation

**0.5**

(Score out of 3)

**Is there evidence of the desired impact or outcome/s?**

0 – No evidence

1 – Evidence of output rather than outcome

2 – Some evidence action contributed to outcome/s

3 – Clear link between action and impact or outcome/s

**0.5**

(Score out of 3)

**How relevant is the recommendation in the current context?**

0 – No relevance – refers to practices, agencies or laws that no longer exist

1 – Low – some relevance, but most aspects of the recommendation no longer apply

2 – Moderate – remains relevant, but some aspects of recommendation no longer apply

3 – High – entirely relevant to current context

**3**

(Score out of 3)

**Does full implementation have the potential to reduce incarceration, increase safety in custody and/or progress Aboriginal self-determination?**

0 – No potential to improve Aboriginal justice outcomes

1 – Low – potential to improve Aboriginal justice outcomes, but none of the three identified

2 – Moderate – potential to progress one or two of the outcomes identified

3 – High – potential to reduce incarceration AND increase safety in custody AND self-determination

**1.25**

(Score out of 3)

### Potential actions for further work

**Commission culturally informed research into Aboriginal perspectives on alcohol and other drug use and dependence**

Design studies and research into AOD misuse and dependence with Aboriginal community input to support development of culturally safe, evidence-based prevention, intervention, and treatment programs, as well as inform policy and funding priorities.

### Moderate priority for further work

#### Relevance and potential impact

		Low (0-2)	Moderate (3-4)	High (5-6)
Extent of action taken and evidence of outcomes	High (5-6)			
	Moderate (3-4)			
	Low (0-2)		Rec 71	

## **Bibliography**

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*Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (Final Report, 1991)