


**Evaluation of the Aboriginal
Justice Agreement Phase 3:
Synthesis of Program Evaluations**



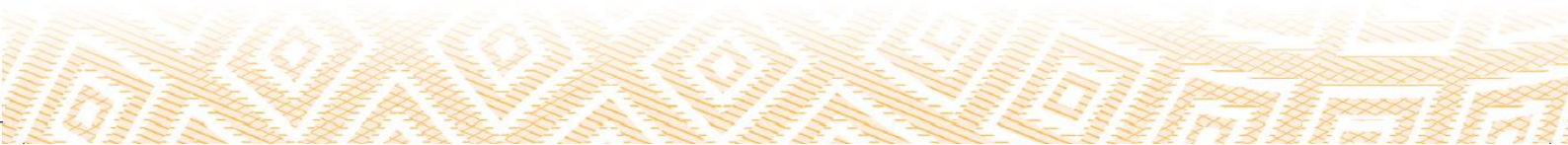


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Prepared by the Koori Justice Unit, Department of Justice and Regulation, as part of the evaluation of the third phase of the Aboriginal Justice Agreement

A note on terminology

The term 'Aboriginal' is used throughout this report to refer to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of Victoria. Where the original data, program title or direct quote refers to this population as 'Indigenous' or 'Koori', these terms have been kept for the sake of consistency.





Introduction

It has been nearly 20 years since the Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreement ('the Agreement') was first launched in response to the high and growing number of Aboriginal people in contact with the criminal justice system. Since the inception of the Agreement, there have been numerous evaluations conducted of Aboriginal justice initiatives across various government sectors, including courts, corrections services and police, among others. This is the first time that findings and recommendations from these individual evaluations have been brought together and presented in a single report.

This Synthesis identifies the common strengths of, and challenges faced by, programs and initiatives delivered under the Agreement to date, with a focus on the most recent five-year phase. It highlights what the collective evidence suggests works, and what is commonly recommended to improve the development and implementation of future Aboriginal justice programs and services in Victoria. In doing so, it draws on more data than a single evaluation can offer alone to bring about a broader perspective.

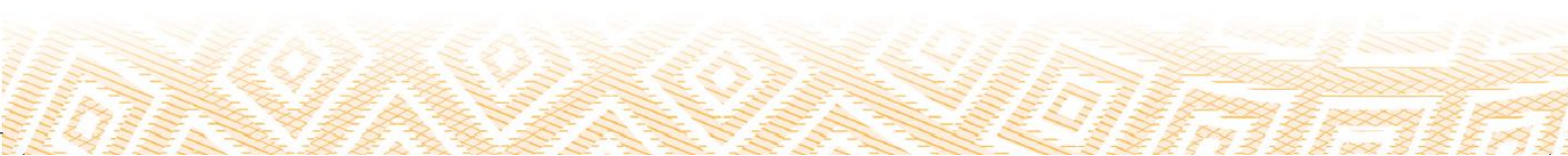
The Synthesis also makes a number of observations about the overall quality of the evaluations themselves, pointing to opportunities for improving research methodologies and processes. In particular, it explores ways in which future evaluation could be more consistent with key principles for undertaking evaluation and research with Aboriginal people.

The Evaluation of the Aboriginal Justice Agreement Phase 3

The Synthesis is one activity that forms part of the evaluation of the third phase of the Agreement. The Evaluation of the Aboriginal Justice Agreement Phase 3 (AJA3) commenced in April 2017 in parallel with the development of the Aboriginal Justice Agreement Phase 4 (AJA4). The purpose of the Evaluation was to

- Investigate whether the partnership model and governance structures of the AJA increase collaboration and contribute to improved justice outcomes;
- Determine whether the current partnership and governance models are still the most appropriate and efficient;
- Examine how effectively AJA3, as a strategy, addresses Aboriginal over-representation in the justice system and identify opportunities for improvement for AJA4.

A comprehensive approach which ensured the extensive engagement of Aboriginal community members, and the best alignment of skills and experience with the scope of work required, was taken to design the AJA3 Evaluation. The Evaluation was undertaken in five projects, comprised of a partnership evaluation; a place based evaluation; development of a data dashboard; preparing outcome papers; and this evaluation synthesis.



Aims and objectives

The aim of the Synthesis is to bring together the findings and lessons learned from recent evaluations of Aboriginal justice programs in Victoria to gain a comprehensive understanding of what is working well, what the challenges are, and what is commonly recommended to strengthen future initiatives so that they can better meet the needs of the Aboriginal community. More specifically, the objectives of the Synthesis are to:

1. Understand which initiatives have demonstrated improvements in Aboriginal justice outcomes.
2. Identify Aboriginal justice initiatives, or features of initiatives, that show evidence of good or promising practice.
3. Identify the major challenges and barriers that impede the effective development and implementation of Aboriginal justice initiatives.
4. Identify the main recommendations that have been made to improve the design and delivery of future initiatives.

A second aim of the Synthesis is to assess the overall quality of the evaluations themselves, in order to highlight where there may be opportunities for improving evaluation practices and research methods in future. A fifth objective is then to:

5. Reflect on the overall quality of the evaluations and explore ways in which future methodologies and processes can be brought into closer alignment with principles for undertaking evaluation and research with Aboriginal people.

Methodology

Twenty evaluations – covering twenty-three Aboriginal justice initiatives – are included in the Synthesis. These were selected from a larger pool of evaluations primarily on the grounds that the program fell directly under the Aboriginal Justice Agreement and the evaluation had been conducted within the past five years. In some cases, a report older than five years was included where this was the most recent evaluation of a major program.

To ensure the Synthesis spanned a wide range of program and services, efforts were made to source evaluations from various government stakeholders, including Victoria Police, Courts Services Victoria, Corrections Victoria, Youth Justice, the Koori Justice Unit, as well as programs implemented by community controlled organisations. External contractors had conducted most of the evaluations, although in a number of cases reviews carried out internally by government agencies were included where they were considered to have particular relevance and value.

Each of the evaluations were individually summarised to draw out its main findings and recommendations. The information was then coded and grouped, along with similar information from other evaluations, to form ‘themes’. The themes that emerged through this process are described in subsequent sections of this report.

Since all of the evaluations were completed before the Synthesis was undertaken, this report should not be read as reflecting the current status of programs. The findings of the evaluations relate to the time at which they were reported, and it is expected that there will have been changes to the programs since the evaluation.

Table 1 – Programs and evaluations included in the Evaluation Synthesis

	Program/initiative	Implementing agency or organisation	Year	Evaluator
1	Koori Intensive Support Program	Youth Justice (DHHS)	2010	SuccessWorks
2	Koori Youth Justice Worker Program			
3	Custodial Aboriginal Support Worker Program			
4	Koori Youth Justice Western District Case Study	Youth Justice (DHHS)	2015	Department of Health and Human Services
5	Koori Family Violence Police Protocols	Victoria Police	2015	Clear Horizon
6	Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer Program	Victoria Police	2009	Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia (CIRCA)
7	Wulunggo Ngalu Learning Place	Corrections Victoria	2013	Clear Horizon
			2011	Corrections Victoria
8	Aboriginal Cultural Immersion Program	Corrections Victoria	2013	Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia
9	Murumali Program			
10	Koori Cognitive Skills Program			
11	Dardi Munwarro	Corrections Victoria	2011	Clear Horizon
12	Koori County Courts Program	Court Services Victoria	2011	Clear Horizon
13	Children's Koori Court	Court Services Victoria	2009	LaTrobe University
14	Koori Family Violence Court Service	Court Services Victoria	2012	Department of Health and Human Services
15	Aboriginal Justice Agreement Phase 2	Victorian Government	2012	Nous Group
16	Baroona Youth Healing Place	Njernda Aboriginal Corporation	2016	Australian Institute of Criminology
17	Local Justice Worker Program <i>and</i>	Coordinated and funded through Koori Justice Unit, implemented by a number of ACCOs	2015	Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia (CIRCA)
18	Koori Offender Support and Mentoring Program		2013	Koori Justice Unit
19	Dilly Bag/ Sisters' Day Out	Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service	2014	Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service
20	Strong Men, Strong Communities Project	Yoowinna Wurnalung Healing Service / Lakes Entrance Aboriginal Health Association	2015	Clear Horizon
21	Family and Community Violence Prevention Project	Mallee District Aboriginal Services	2016	Clear Horizon
22	Rumbalara Family Harmony Project	Rumbalara Aboriginal Cooperative	2016	EMS Consultants
23	Strong Relationships, Strong Community Project	Victorian Aboriginal Health Services	2016	EMS Consultants

Common program outcomes

The evidence suggests that programs and initiatives implemented under the Aboriginal Justice Agreement have achieved, or made some positive contributions to a number of outcomes. While it is important to note that not every program demonstrates all of these outcomes, there is, on the whole, considerable evidence of progress.

Improvements in Aboriginal justice outcomes

Several evaluations found improvements in Aboriginal justice outcomes as a result of the programs' delivery. Examples include an increase in the completion of community correction orders among participants of the Wulgunngo Ngalu and Local Justice Worker programs, and a significant difference in the time taken to reoffend between participants who completed the Baroona Youth Healing program and those who terminated or absconded.

Although demonstrating clear links between justice outcomes and specific programs is often very difficult (as discussed later in the report), there is evidence from the evaluation of the Aboriginal Justice Agreement Phase 2 to suggest that, on the whole, there have been better outcomes in regions of Victoria that have attracted more program funding. The evaluation also found that non-metropolitan regions of Victoria have seen a reduction in the overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in prison, and concluded that "despite uneven progress across regions and locations, there is reason to believe that without the Aboriginal Justice Agreement, the projected increase in overrepresentation would have been much greater".

The Aboriginal community is more empowered


A number of evaluations have found that under the Aboriginal Justice Agreement, the Aboriginal community in Victoria has had greater involvement in the governance, design and implementation of justice-related programs at state, regional and local levels than previously

Evaluations of Rumbalara, Strong Relationships and Sisters' Day Out programs describe the increased capacity of locally-based Aboriginal organisations to deliver support to community members impacted by family violence, while the Wulgunngo Ngalu evaluation points to the extensive input and oversight of the Aboriginal community in the program's design through the Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee and the state-wide Aboriginal Justice Forum.

The experience of Aboriginal offenders in the justice system has improved

Programs that provide culturally appropriate support have been found to be more engaging, inclusive and less intimidating than mainstream services. Consultations with clients indicate that these programs have had a positive impact on the experience of Aboriginal offenders in the justice system by making people feel more at ease, comfortable and safe, during what are typically confronting processes.

For instance, an evaluation of the Koori Family Violence Court Support Program found that assistance provided by support workers eased clients' anxieties and stress through the workers' ability to build rapport, trust and confidence with their clients, and provide culturally appropriate and relevant support. Likewise, the perception among Aboriginal defendants that the County Koori Court was an equitable and culturally



appropriate system, was found to enhance their respect of sentencing decisions, which, in turn, resulted in increased intention to adhere to court orders and motivation to address the causes of offending behaviour.

Improved connections to culture and community

Across a number of programs, participants report a heightened sense of belonging, cultural pride and identity, and a stronger sense of family and community responsibility. The majority of Wulgunggo Nglau participants, for example, felt that an important benefit of the program was the opportunity to spend time with other Aboriginal men, both participants and staff members. The chance to ‘have a yarn’ and share experiences was emphasised by these men as a crucial part of the healing process, as it gave them an opportunity to relieve their stress and to reconnect with community in a culturally appropriate way.

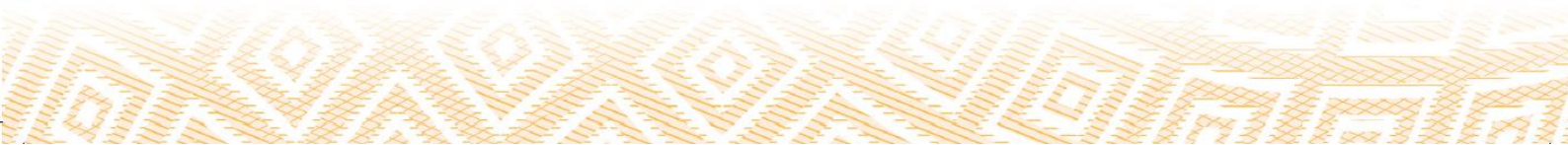
Justice agencies have greater cultural awareness

There is evidence to suggest that programs have increased the level of awareness and understanding among police, court and prison staff of the unique needs of Aboriginal people and the historical, cultural and social factors underlying the circumstances that may lead to an individual’s offending behaviour. As an illustration, the evaluation of the Koori Youth Justice Program found that advice provided by program workers to courts, parole boards and Youth Justice Management enabled these justice agency staff to make better informed and culturally relevant decisions when considering options for Aboriginal young people.

Communication and relationships between stakeholders are stronger

The majority of evaluations found that, to various degrees, programs have facilitated communication and strengthened relationships between justice agencies, service providers and the Aboriginal community, resulting in improved access to programs and services.

This is clearly exemplified in the evaluation of the Local Justice Worker Program, which found that many of the program’s achievements were based on mutual respect between Local Justice Workers, staff from community organisations and justice agency officers. The program effectively enhanced communication between Sherriff’s Officers and the Aboriginal community, where the community had previously tended to avoid contact. Similarly, the evaluation of the Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer Program noted an increase in the confidence of the Aboriginal community to present at police stations where there was an Aboriginal representative or ‘face’ at the station who could act as an advocate on their behalf.



Good and promising practice

The evaluations consistently highlight a number of features that show evidence of good or promising practice and are likely to enhance program effectiveness.

Community involvement in the oversight, design and delivery of initiatives

Through the partnership structure of the Aboriginal Justice Agreement, the Aboriginal community has had substantive involvement in the oversight, design and delivery of programs. In particular, the vast majority of evaluations emphasise the importance of community input at the local level through Aboriginal community-controlled organisations. Under the Agreement, significantly more services are now being delivered through community organisations. Locating programs in local organisations allows for greater community ownership and has enhanced the capacity of Aboriginal people and organisations to deliver justice-related programs and services.

Several evaluations also note the salience of community involvement at the regional and state levels through representation at the Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committees and Aboriginal Justice Forum, in which senior representatives from justice agencies and the community work together to improve justice outcomes

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN THE DESIGN AND DELIVERY OF ABORIGINAL JUSTICE INITIATIVES THROUGH THE AGREEMENT'S PARTNERSHIP STRUCTURE

The Local Justice Worker and Koori Offender Mentoring Support programs are based on models of services that were formerly delivered (generally unfunded) by Aboriginal organisations around Victoria. As such, the two programs were designed with considerable involvement of Aboriginal community members and organisations. Nowadays, local organisations contracted by the Department of Justice and Regulation recruit and employ workers to deliver the service in each location. The Chief Executive Officers of the organisations - themselves respected members of the Aboriginal community - typically worked closely with the Local Justice Workers and Mentoring Support Coordinators to design and implement the program at the specific project sites.

An evaluation conducted in 2013 found that the programs reflect a strong partnership framework that allows for effective community consultation and participation. In particular, the evidence suggests that the success of the programs relies on the fact that they are delivered through Aboriginal community-controlled organisations. In addition, the programs are effectively structured so that they include avenues for continued input from, and feedback to, the Aboriginal community via Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committees and the local project steering committees at each project location.

Culturally appropriate program models

There is extensive evidence to suggest that programs which incorporate the following elements into their designs are able to provide a more culturally appropriate response to the needs of Aboriginal clients, and consequently tend to have higher rates of client participation. These key elements are:

- A holistic approach to culture, where culture is not viewed as a set of stand-alone activities that can be separated or isolated from other programs and services.
- Aboriginal staff who are known in the community, respected and trusted by program participants, highly motivated, well-trained, and skilled at providing cultural support. The importance of finding the right people for staff roles was a widespread finding across the evaluations.
- The Involvement of Elders as cultural mentors and positive role models. Elders have also been found to play a valuable role in helping to introduce participants to programs and services, and in connecting participants to their community.
- Physical spaces dedicated to Aboriginal program delivery, as these 'culturally safe' settings enhance feelings of security and community for participants.
- Flexibility in the design of the program structure that allows it to adapt to local contexts.
- Cultural awareness training for justice agency staff that enhance their understanding of the unique needs and circumstances of Aboriginal offenders and the historical, social and cultural factors that may contribute to an individual's offending behaviours.

WULGUNGGOO NGALU LEARNING PLACE: AN EFFECTIVE MODEL FOR CULTURAL STRENGTHENING

Wulgungoo Ngalu Learning Place is a state-wide, community-based, residential facility and diversion program that supports Aboriginal men to complete their supervised corrections orders and address their offending behaviours. Through attendance in the program, participants unanimously reported feeling stronger in their culture, indicating that the program's approach to cultural strengthening had been effective. The evaluation identified a series of good practices within the Wulgungoo Ngalu program model that has enabled the achievement of these outcomes:

- Cultural strengthening processes are embedded within and central to all aspect of the program. Culture underpins and is at the centre of the program's rationale.
- All core staff are Aboriginal men, providing participants with an opportunity to connect with strong positive role models from the Aboriginal community.
- Elders and Respected Persons play an important role in providing cultural advice and mentoring.
- The program has established a culturally safe physical environment that incorporates locally significant totems, as well as traditional protocols around meeting places.
- The program has a highly individualised approach to cultural strengthening where each participant is supported to engage with culture in a way that is most appropriate to his needs as an individual.
- The program promoted cultural awareness throughout the justice system and local residents in the Yarram area by encouraging opportunities for informal interactions with participants. Local police, in particular, highlighted the respectful way that the men behaved when in town and described the advantages of engaging with the men in more positive way.

Active networking and strong relationships

The evidence shows that in locations where programs have been successful, there tends to be a high level of active networking and strong collaboration between justice agencies, service providers and the Aboriginal community. Although work needs to continue to build on existing relationships, there are lessons that can be learned from these programs in regard to effective stakeholder engagement:

- In general, successful programs have adopted a holistic approach to the provision of services that focus on underlying protective factors, such as employment, education, housing, drug and alcohol services.
- Referral processes, where they exist, have improved client access to various support services. In some cases, referral systems between justice programs have also increased client participation in these programs.
- Programs that have strong stakeholder relationships provided staff with opportunities for networking and sharing information, and ensured they had the necessary time and resources dedicated to undertake these activities.
- Basing program workers in Aboriginal organisations has been found to improve the credibility of programs within the community, strengthen the level of coordination at the local level, and increase client access to a range of programs and services.
- Where they have been well-functioning, steering committees located in project locations have been instrumental in strengthening collaboration between local stakeholders, and in providing oversight and management support to project activities.
- A client-centred approach was found to be effective for connecting people with appropriate services. In a client-centred approach, support is tailored to each person in accordance with his or her individual needs and circumstances.

BUILDING EFFECTIVE NETWORKS AND RELATIONSHIPS

The Koori Youth Justice Worker Program aims to prevent offending and re-offending behaviours of young Aboriginal people by ensuring they are connected to their families and communities and provided with access to services they require. The Western District Case Study explored the factors that contributed to a reduction of the number of Aboriginal young people on youth justice orders in the Warrnambool and Glenelg areas, during 2013 and 2014, with the aim to document and share these good practices across the Koori Youth Justice Program. Effectively building relationships and networks between programs and services featured strongly among the good practices identified in the case study, including:

- Establishing a range of informal and formal networks between local services that worked to support each other, including police, Koori Education Support Officers, and the Aboriginal Community Justice Panel.
- Liaising with schools so that teachers proactively contact the Koori Youth Justice Worker when they began to have concerns regarding an Aboriginal young person, preventing issues from escalating further.
- Locating the Koori Youth Justice Worker in the Gunditjmara Aboriginal Cooperative so that the worker is able to link clients up with a wide range of community programs offered by the organisation.
- Providing individualised support to meet the young persons “where they are at” in terms of physical locations, such as home and school visits, and also in terms of connecting them to their interests through sports clubs and other activities.

Challenges and barriers

The collective findings of the evaluations point to a number of challenges and barriers to the effective design and delivery of Aboriginal justice programs.

Intended justice outcomes are often too ambitious

On account of poor program planning, the intended outcomes of initiatives are often unrealistic and cannot be achieved nor measured. In the vast majority of cases, program aims and objectives that relate to crime prevention and reduction were found to be too high level for the small-scale, short length and type of initiatives being implemented, and were not commensurate with funding nor human resourcing.

In addition, there are a range of limitations that make it difficult to attribute the impacts of specific programs to justice outcomes, including the relatively small population size of the Aboriginal community in Victoria, the inaccuracy of Aboriginal identification data, and the wide range of complex and interrelated factors that influence the level of crime.

CHALLENGES WITH LINKING CRIME PREVENTION AND REDUCTION OUTCOMES TO SPECIFIC PROGRAMS

Like many of the evaluations of Aboriginal justice programs, the evaluation of the Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer Program was not able to make direct causal claims linking the program's impacts to crime prevention or reduction. A few police who participated as interviewees, questioned whether it was realistic to expect the program to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal people in the criminal justice system, and felt that expectations should instead focus on improving stakeholder relationships between the police and community.

Evaluations carried out of the County Koori Court, Children's Koori Court and Family Violence Court Support programs found that the anticipated outcomes were difficult to achieve within the length of the time that the programs had been running. The Children's Koori Court evaluation, for instance, concluded that "it is unrealistic to expect that Aboriginal sentencing courts will result in a major reduction in recidivism and, in turn, the overall rate of incarceration, at least in the short-term".

In similar vein, three separate evaluations of projects funded under the Koori Community Safety Grants scheme – Rumalara, Family and Community Violence Prevention, and Strong Relationships – reported that measurable justice and community outcomes were unlikely to appear within the project timeframes. The evaluators found that while the grants scheme intended to achieve broad, societal level goals related to the prevention of family violence, in reality, the three year projects were insufficient to do so on account of their length, size and funding.

Overlaps in the scope of programs and duplication in staff roles

The devolved governance structure of the Aboriginal Justice Agreement has created significant program diversity and innovation across the state – however, this also has meant that there are a large number of activities, piecemeal funding and no cohesive program logic. Consequently, the evaluation findings indicate that there is some overlap in the scope of different programs and duplication in staff roles and responsibilities.

OVERLAP IN PROGRAM SCOPE

The Koori Youth Justice Program covers four different programs; the Koori Youth Justice Worker Program, Koori Intensive Bail Support Program, the Koori Pre and Post Release Program, and the Custodial Aboriginal Support Worker Program. In 2010, a review undertaken of the Koori Youth Justice Program in its entirety drew attention to the need for greater clarity and demarcation between the roles and responsibilities of workers across these four programs and recommended that the issue be continually discussed and regularly reviewed at local levels to ensure minimal overlap. Similarly, a 2015 review of the Local Justice Worker Program found some duplication between the Local Justice Worker and Sheriff Aboriginal Liaison Officer roles and a lack of clarity among these staff in terms of who is responsible for doing what.

Inadequate, fragmented and short-term funding

Program delivery has been seriously impeded by resourcing constraints. Funding arrangements for programs implemented under the third phase of the Agreement have typically been short-term and fragmented. Funding shortfalls for the employment of program staff are especially acute. Many of the evaluations conclude that current resourcing arrangements are inadequate given the complexity and long-term nature of the issues being addressed and call for a different resourcing structure to build on the gains made so far.

In addition, the lack of resourcing for support services has been a significant barrier to their engagement in a number of justice programs and their capacity to respond to referrals. This has, in turn, affected the delivery of these programs.

IMPLICATIONS OF FUNDING CONSTRAINTS ON THE DELIVERY OF ABORIGINAL JUSTICE PROGRAMS

The Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service Victoria (FVPLSV) provides a range of services for Aboriginal victims of family violence and sexual assault, including the Sisters Day Out and Dilly Bag programs. An evaluation of these programs, conducted in 2014, found that insecure funding has significantly impeded planning processes, resource allocation and program implementation. Funding cuts in 2012 and 2013 resulted in low program participant rates due to a sharp decrease in the number of workshops that were held during the two year period.

Likewise, delivery of the Aboriginal Cultural Immersion, Murumali and Koori Cognitive Skills programs in Corrections Victoria prisons have been heavily impacted by funding cuts. For instance, resourcing constraints precluded the Marumali healing program from being run between 2008 and 2011. Although deemed part of the agency's core business, funding for these programs has been ad hoc year to year, and consequently they are only run when funding permits. An evaluation carried out in 2013 reported that these three programs were not being run frequently enough to include all Aboriginal prisoners who may have wanted to participate.

An evaluation of the Children's Koori Court conducted in 2009 found the absence of service delivery representatives in some Court hearings to be highly problematic, noting that the support services on which the Court relies had not been sufficiently funded and required substantive additional resources. A number of stakeholders interviewed for the evaluation felt that it was almost nonsensical to invest in the establishment of an innovative court without a commensurate investment in the support services upon which its success so greatly depends.

Constraints on staff resourcing

Almost all of the programs were affected by serious constraints on staffing resourcing. In particular, programs experienced difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff and engaging the participation of Elders. Evaluation findings also point to the need for increased capacity development and cultural awareness training.

- The evidence in the evaluation reports clearly demonstrates that programs suffer alarmingly high staff turnover. Staff burnout is common due to overburden and a shortage of staff has meant that programs are often unable to meet client demand. Further, many staff are on low-paid, part-time and short-term contracts. In some programs, positions have remained vacant for periods of time, leading to disruptions in service delivery.
- Aboriginal staff report their roles can be stressful given the fine line they are often required to walk between community and program expectations. This is especially challenging where staff have to balance the demand for assistance from community members outside their normal work hours.
- Engaging Elders and Respected Persons to participate in programs has been challenging in some locations. These community members are often overstretched with other commitments.
- More induction and ongoing professional development training for program staff is needed, as well as Aboriginal cultural awareness training for justice agencies and mainstream service providers. Notably, there are examples of low attendance at training courses where staff were not able to prioritise participation due to competing demands on their time and resources.

STAFFING SHORTAGES AND OVERBURDEN

Two separate evaluations of the Local Justice Worker and Koori Offender Support Mentoring Programs, conducted in 2013 and 2015, raised a number of concerns with respect to staff resourcing. The examples described below are representative of staffing issues that have been identified in a multitude of other Aboriginal justice programs evaluations:

- In the context of limited resourcing, positions are often part-time. These part-time positions tended to generate a high turnover of personnel as people would leave the position to take on a full-time role elsewhere.
- Staff wages were not considered to be competitive. A minimum wage component was not stipulated in the funding agreements.
- Clients often required assistance outside of the workers' part-time schedules. This was particularly an issue when participants had court dates that did not fall on the workers' usual working days.
- Some program sites encountered staff recruitment difficulties whereby positions remained vacant for several months, leading to disruptions in service delivery.
- Program staff who were new to the role indicated that their experience was overwhelming and suggested that some issues could have been addressed through more structured induction training.

Maintaining project steering committees

In locations where project steering committees had been established, they appeared to lose momentum as time passed. In the absence of a steering committee, these projects were left without much needed guidance, support and strategic linkages to other programs and organisations.

CHALLENGES WITH ESTABLISHING AND SUSTAINING PROJECT STEERING COMMITTEES

The Strong Men, Strong Relationships, and Koori Family Violence Police Protocols projects each experienced considerable difficulties in setting up or sustaining project steering committees.

- A lack of strong project governance, including the failure to establish a cross-sectoral steering committee, was detrimental to the Strong Relationships project as evidenced by the continual changing of project plans, and the scope and timing of activities. The steering committee met three times in the first year, and only once more in the second year, with declining attendance.
- A local reference group was initially formed to steer the development of the Koori Family Violence Police Protocols. However, it was not established strongly enough to guide the process beyond the launch of the Protocols.

Relationships and referral pathways

Weak collaboration between stakeholders was repeatedly identified as a significant barrier to the effective implementation of programs.

- There is a need for regular, systematic communication and networking opportunities between programs, services and justice agencies.
- Referral pathways between programs and services require clarity and strengthening.
- There are widespread resourcing constraints that limit the capacity of support services to effectively respond to referrals, engage in networking, and participate in programs as required.

THE NEED FOR A COMPREHENSIVE AND INTEGRATED SERVICE MODEL

The majority of the informants consulted for the evaluation of the Strong Relationships program were aware of some participation of external agencies, particularly in the project activities assisting Aboriginal men. Overall, however, they felt there could have been stronger linkages between related programs to enhance support and deliver more positive outcomes for participants. The general view among interviewees was that a lot more work could be done to develop collaborative approaches with other stakeholders working in family and community violence, especially in regards to support for Aboriginal women. The evaluators observed that where connections and cross-referrals occurred it was mainly because of professional and personal relationships and individual practice, rather than the application of across-agency service model.

Monitoring and evaluation requires strengthening

Opportunities exist to better capture, record and share program information. Many evaluations discussed the need for improved data collection and reporting on program outcomes, program delivery and referral processes. According to these evaluations, there is a need for more regular and systematic monitoring, as well as the establishment of information sharing systems across programs and departments.

The collective evidence also points to a clear need for improved evaluation frameworks and processes. Evaluation activity is not consistently being built into the design of every program, and where evaluations have been conducted, the quality is variable and overly reliant on qualitative feedback from people with some vested interest in the outcome.

Most frequent recommendations

The Synthesis identified the most common recommendations that appear across the twenty evaluations of Aboriginal justice programs.

Design programs with realistic objectives, outcomes, indicators and targets

- At the program planning stage, develop appropriate, achievable and measurable objectives, outcomes, indicators and targets that are commensurate with the scale, timeframe and type of program being implemented.

Provide sufficient and longer-term funding to programs and support services

- Provide sufficient and stable funding to ensure ongoing and frequent program delivery.
- Increase resourcing for support services to enhance their capacity to effectively engage with programs and respond to referrals.

Increase staff resources and training

- Create full-time roles and appropriately remunerate staff. Ensure salaries are competitive and there is consistency in wages across locations.
- Explore opportunities to increase the engagement of Elders in programs, particularly in some locations.
- Increase professional development training and support for program staff, and resource accordingly.
- Ensure consistent delivery of Aboriginal cultural awareness training for staff from justice agencies and mainstream services, and resource accordingly.

Strengthen local governance structures in project locations

- Establish local project steering committees with clear governance structures and multi-year plans.

Strengthen relationships and referral pathways between programs and services

- Strengthen coordination and communication across Aboriginal-specific, mainstream, justice, and non-justice programs and services, particularly at the local level.
- Provide regular opportunities for information sharing and networking in each location, and ensure staff have time and resources dedicated to undertake these activities.
- Develop and formalise referral pathways between programs and services.

Improve monitoring and evaluation

- Improve data collection and reporting systems that record information on program outcomes, program delivery and referral processes.
- Ensure evaluation frameworks are routinely embedded within program designs and adopt measures to improve evaluation quality.
- Provide ongoing support and coaching to Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and local partners to build their capacities in project management and monitoring and evaluation.
- Create systems to share information within and across government departments.

Considerations for evaluation under AJA4

The synthesis provides an opportunity to reflect on the overall quality of the evaluations themselves, in order to identify opportunities for improving future research methodologies and processes. Suggestions are made here as to how future evaluations can be brought into closer alignment with accepted guidelines for conducting ethical research

Actively engage Aboriginal community stakeholders in all aspects of evaluation

As routine practice, the Aboriginal community should have input at all stages of evaluation, including:

- As members of evaluation reference or governance groups
- As researchers or evaluators
- As participants and key informants
- Through analysis and dissemination of results

In general, the Synthesis found limited examples of community involvement in evaluation processes. Of particular concern, there was either no or very little evidence of consultation with program participants in over half of the evaluations. Consequently, the voices and perspectives of this important group of people have not been adequately reflected in evaluation findings to date. Efforts should be made to understand and address any barriers to the engagement of program participants in future evaluation and research.

Moving forward in the next phase of the Agreement, government stakeholders may wish to consider adopting a system whereby evaluators are required to submit a 'community inclusion strategy' alongside the submission of a final evaluation report, outlining what steps were taken to consult and involve community members throughout the various stages of the evaluation process.

Ensure evaluation findings are communicated and provided to relevant stakeholders

In gathering evaluations for the purpose of this Synthesis, the researchers experienced difficulties with sourcing reports as they had to approach each government agency directly. Plans for the communication and use of evaluation findings should be agreed between evaluators, evaluation commissioners and Aboriginal community members at the start of every evaluation, and consideration should be given to the development of an information sharing system.

Ideally, findings should be made available and presented to a range of stakeholder audiences, including evaluation participants, using methods to communicate information in ways that are appropriate, clear and comprehensible to them. This is an area with scope for real improvement.

Produce findings that can be used to inform future program design and policy

It appears that a number of evaluations included in the Synthesis were simply conducted as a compliance mechanism or for the sole purpose of sourcing additional funding. Several evaluations concluded that the programs warranted a continuation of funding on account of their strengths, without giving balanced consideration to the program challenges. Several others described the challenges and barriers, but did not make associated recommendations. Findings such as these limit the usefulness and application of the evaluations. Efforts should be made to ensure that evaluation findings under the fourth phase of the Agreement are practical and contribute to the improvement of programs and policies.