

Aboriginal Justice Caucus Submission to the Inquiry into the Overrepresentation of Aboriginal Children and Young People in Youth Justice

The Aboriginal Justice Caucus (AJC) is a self-determining body that works in partnership with the Victorian Government to improve Aboriginal justice outcomes, family and community safety, and reduce over-representation in the criminal justice system. Its members are the Chairs of the Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committees, Aboriginal community leaders, and representatives from Aboriginal peak bodies and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations. The AJC are signatories to *Burra Lotjpa Dunguludja* (Aboriginal Justice Agreement phase 4).

The AJC is a conduit between the Aboriginal community and justice system in order to provide leadership, advocacy and spur change to address the drivers of offending, and to amend policy and systemic reform within the criminal justice system.

October 2019



**Aboriginal
Justice Caucus**

Introduction

The Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) and the Aboriginal Justice Caucus (AJC) share the belief to promote and advocate for practices and policies that improve the safety and wellbeing of Victorian children and young people. A key feature of the AJC is that its members discuss issues, share ideas and experiences, problem solve and to develop a common view of key issues pertaining to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and young people involved in youth justice. The AJC signatory to the Aboriginal Justice Agreement (AJA) is an agreement between the Victorian Government and the Aboriginal community of Victoria with its aim to improve justice outcomes and reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal people in the justice system. The CCYP's *Inquiry into the Overrepresentation of Aboriginal Children and Young People in Youth Justice* provides the AJC with the opportunity to submit its views in support of Aboriginal children who make contact with, or are at risk of making contact with, the youth justice system.

The majority of Aboriginal young people will never enter the criminal justice system. The diverse needs of the Aboriginal and Torres Islander people are recognised in criminal justice, however corrections, youth detention and adult prisons largely fail to address them appropriately and effectively. The over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in the justice system remains a complex and enduring issue with Aboriginal youth 14 times more likely to be under youth justice supervision in Victoria. The Australian Institute for Health and Wellbeing suggests that Aboriginal children in Victoria are approximately 12 times more likely to be detained and more likely to have earlier contact with the youth justice system than non-Aboriginal children. A Victoria Legal Aid review found that children from out-of-home care are over-represented in the criminal justice system. Data presented to the Aboriginal Youth Justice Strategy Planning day showed that significant reform efforts, in the course of a year, some Victorian jurisdictions have seen up to a 6.3 per cent increase in Aboriginal justice representation. In 2017, 15 per cent of young people remanded on justice detention were Aboriginal, despite making up on .7 per cent of the Victorian population.

The Ngaga-dji Report and Self-Determination model uphold the views and goals of the AJC in advocating for the reduction or elimination of overrepresentation of our mob in youth justice. These views determine the strategies and programs that help to reduce involvement in the youth justice system and identify systemic issues that contribute to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal youth in the justice system. The voices and experiences of Aboriginal young people and communities inform how systems can be more culturally responsive to the needs of Aboriginal children and young people. Social services must be sustainable and culturally safe in order to reduce the rates of Aboriginal children and young people in youth justice.

Key recommendations of legislation reform identified by the AJC in youth justice are:

Increased access to pre-court/pre-charge diversion: At present, children and young people can only access pre-court/pre-charge diversion if they admit the offence. Therefore, young people who would benefit from existing programs are being excluded.

Raising the age of criminal responsibility: The age of criminal responsibility needs to be raised to 14. The outcomes for young people who come into contact with the criminal

justice system as young as 10 are negative. It would be more beneficial if their 'offending' was dealt with as a welfare issue.

Aboriginal responsibility for Aboriginal youth justice: Responsibility for Aboriginal youth justice should rest with the Aboriginal community similar to Aboriginal responsibility for guardianship under s18 of the Children Youth and Families Act. The scale of reform needed in the youth justice system is the same as the reform that has occurred in child protection.

Section 3A of the Bail Act needs to be reformed: Widespread problems in underutilisation - s3A is that it is the last thing that is considered and is often not applied.

Creation of an Aboriginal Justice Commission: An Aboriginal Justice Commissioner continues to be an urgent priority and should be legislated for at the soonest possible time. Requirement for Aboriginal Impact Statements is also a priority identified by Caucus.

Aboriginal Community Justice reports need to be mandatory: Aboriginal Community Justice reports (similar to Gladue reports that inform Court based decisions) need to be mandatory and properly resourced. VALS is the obvious body to manage their development.

Aboriginal cultural support plans need to be mandatory: Many Aboriginal young people are not getting cultural support plans. They need to be mandatory under legislation

The AJC's youth justice approach to programs, legislative changes and anything the AJC deems a determinate of a future program are upheld by the principles guiding further self-determination (see Appendix I). These principles are:

- Strengths based, therapeutic, restorative, holistic, family based approaches to justice
- Culturally based, community led solutions
- Increased decision making
- The importance of caring for young people and hearing their voices
- Data sovereignty and Aboriginal perspectives in analysing and interpreting data
- A rights based approach – Human rights and cultural rights at the centre of what we do, cultural integrity at its core, true valuing of Aboriginal expertise, working in genuine partnership, empowered decision making and a high level accountability by Government
- Address structural racism in our policy and laws
- Early Aboriginal involvement in justice policy and legislation
- Strengthened role of ACCOs in provision of justice related responses and services

1. What strategies and programs are working well in Victoria that help reduce youth justice involvement for Aboriginal young people, and why do they work? If available, please provide any data, evidence or evaluations in support.

Corrections, youth detention and adult prisons recognise the diverse needs of Aboriginal and people, yet they largely fail to effectively or appropriately address them. Punitive programs, incarceration and strict bail conditions fail to reduce offending and recidivism among young

people. Aboriginal people in Victoria are disproportionately represented at all stages of the criminal justice system. Despite Aboriginal young people representing less than 6 per cent of Australia's 10-17 year old population, they are estimated to account for 55 per cent of all children and young people in detention from 2015-2016. Aboriginal Victorians comprise of 1 per cent of the population yet make up 8 per cent of the adult population and 16 per cent of the juvenile population

The most effective youth justice systems and programs invest in comprehensive interventions from prevention to early intervention in order to divert young people away from the justice system, provide access to culturally appropriate interventions to rehabilitate, and offer post-release support to help prevent future offending. Alternatives to youth justice centres, such as diversion, cautioning and community support programs are effective in steering youth away from offending behaviour by offering a connection to community and culture, and are less expensive than incarceration.

Holistic service delivery for at risk youth is key in addressing youth justice involvement for Aboriginal young people. The Bert Williams Aboriginal Youth Services (BWAYS) is a service managed by the Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Limited (VACSAL). Operating since the late 1970's, BWAYS aims to deliver proactive and preventative services to Koorie youth with a focus of reducing the overrepresentation within the youth justice system and supporting progress through youth justice and homeless services. BWAYS aims to deliver culturally appropriate responses to enable quality outcomes for Koorie youth who are homeless by providing secure accommodation and/or are within the youth justice system or at risk of entering the system.

Linking Aboriginal young people to Country, community and culture through programs and services that connect or reconnect is important in helping to reduce youth justice involvement for Aboriginal young people. Wayapa Wuurk, which means 'connection to the earth', was founded by Jamie Thomas and Sara Jones to provide ReConnection programs based on a contemporary version of traditional culture and knowledge while respecting country, culture and community. The Wayapa Wuurk Aboriginal Wellness Foundation Ltd (WWAWFL) was established in 2015 to deliver the not-for-profit work of Wayapa Wuurk. The programs are preventative, long-term and community driven, focussing on holistic wellbeing and strive to strengthen a connection to culture.

Evidence from the 2016 Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence found that culturally safe family violence services are more likely to be effective for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and that ACCOs are more likely to delivery culturally safe services. Dardi Munwurro delivers a range of family violence, healing and behaviour change programs services, to break the cycle of inter-generational trauma in Aboriginal families and communities. This is achieved by empowering and inspiring individuals to heal the past, acknowledge the present and create a positive vision for the future. Dardi Munwurro provides group leadership training programs in Family Violence that is specifically tailored to Aboriginal men and youth. Their Youth Journeys Program aims to support young Aboriginal men aged 10-17 years old along their transition to adulthood, assisting them to grow into young adults with positive support networks within their peer group and the broader community. The program is delivered through mentorship by providing access to strong male mentors and Elders in community, with a focus

on cultural connection; identifying emotions; respectful relations; developing life skills; self-empowerment; team building; and, resilience.

Hearing and valuing the voice of Aboriginal young people in safe spaces in which they can be engaged and empowered to speak up is important to build self-esteem and cultural connections. Young Luv (YL) is an early intervention and prevention program delivered by Djirra in a two hour workshop to provide information about and reinforce the concept of healthy, positive relationship for Aboriginal teenagers. The aims of YL are to provide a culturally safe space for young women aged from 13-18 years to talk, reflect on and better understand important issues affecting their lives. YL fills a gap in meeting the needs of young Aboriginal women who are at a stage in their lives when destructive patterns in relationships may have already been experienced or are becoming normalised.

Best practice for addressing physical health, mental health, interpersonal issues, relapse management and prevention ought to utilise a holistic response. The Bunjilwarra Koori Youth Alcohol and Drug Healing Service is a 12 bed alcohol and other drugs residential rehabilitation and healing service for Aboriginal young people aged between 16-25 years. Supported in alcohol and other drugs, mental health, residential rehabilitation and youth work. The Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS) and Youth Support and Advocacy (YSAS) deliver the service in partnership with Victorian Government, VACHHO and ACCO's. The service is placed in context of the Aboriginal defined notion of healing in a cultural framework, supported by trauma informed practice; adolescent developmental framework; and, therapeutic community and recovery frameworks.

The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC) found that sport and recreation play a role in reducing offending behaviour among Aboriginal peoples. The contribution of sporting activities increases school attendance, improves self-esteem and can enhance cultural connectedness, values and identity. The Dungulayin Mileka Program has been developed to enhance and strengthen relationships between Aboriginal young people and Victoria Police through positive interaction and physical challenges. This is primarily achieved through participation in the Massive Murray Puddle (MMP). In the lead up to the MMP Puddle event, Police and Aboriginal youth will also work together building strong, positive relationships through team building exercises and local fundraising activities. The Massive Murray Puddle (MMP) is a fund raising event that provides an opportunity for people to overcome challenges, forming cultural connections between the river, the people and the land.

Aboriginal specific programs have been developed to address the overrepresentation of Aboriginal young people in youth justice in order to connect them with culturally appropriate organisations. The Koori Youth Justice Program (KYP) was developed in 1992 in response to the RCIADIC. Operating throughout metropolitan and rural regions, Koori youth justice workers are located across the state and within the Parkville and Malmsbury youth justice custodial centres. The program employs Koori youth justice workers to support young Koorie people who are at risk of offending as well as those on community based and custodial orders. These workers assist in providing access to appropriate role models, culturally sensitive support, advocacy and casework. The KYP is operated in the community and primarily facilitated by ACCO's, and aims to prevent offending and reoffending behaviour by ensuring that Aboriginal people are connected to their families and communities and have access to the supports and services they

require. Koori Youth Justice Workers develop Aboriginal cultural support plans for clients, help set goals for young people, and develop preventative strategies such as sporting and recreational programs.

The AJA4 reflects current Aboriginal community aspirations for greater self-determination and drives for significant structural and systemic change. Restorative justice offers practical approaches in dealing with social harm and managing community wellbeing. The Restorative Justice Pilot Project, funded through the AJA4 is a restorative justice program that aims to address harms of offending, or risk of offending behaviour, caused to individuals, families and communities. Restorative justice is working well in Aboriginal communities and ought to be expanded to all stages of the justice continuum, especially as early intervention. Indigenous justice processes has shaped the restorative justice movement to secure restitution for victims, to provide them with support, and to give them a voice in the criminal justice process that has previously excluded victims from meaningful participation. The Pilot Service Model of Restorative Practices is the first Pilot Project of the Placed-Based Local Community-Led Justice Projects funded through the AJA4. The object is to develop and implement a pilot service model in the Eastern Metropolitan and Hume Regions, which connects to and leverages from existing opportunities to deliver a culturally specific restorative justice response for Aboriginal young people.

2. What systemic changes are required to reduce youth justice involvement for Aboriginal young people in Victoria? For example, discrete changes to legislation, early intervention and prevention, service delivery (child protection, health, education or youth justice), policing, courts, or detention.

The Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreement (AJA) was initiated by the Victorian Government to a review of the implementation of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC). The Royal Commission presented its Final Report to the Federal Parliament in 1991, finding that the high number of Aboriginal deaths in custody was due to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in custody. The RCIADIC report along with numerous other reports and studies asserted that Aboriginal people come into contact with the criminal justice system at vastly disproportionate rates compared to the non-aboriginal population of Australia. The overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in the criminal justice system is prevalent 25 years on from the Final Report. Aboriginal youth are overrepresented in all stages of criminal justice processing, both as perpetrators and victims of crime. Further systemic changes and reforms are required to reduce the youth justice involvement for Aboriginal young people in Victoria.

In 2015, the Victorian Government announced its commitment to self-determination as the primary driver of Aboriginal affairs policy. The report, *Aboriginal Self-Determination in the Victorian Justice Context: Towards an Aboriginal Community Controlled Justice System*, prepared for the Aboriginal Justice Caucus is a strategic document promoting capacity of self-determination to create the human, institutional and financial infrastructure to bring those into being. It asserts the RCIADIC's Final Report stressed the significance of promoting community wellbeing as a means to address overrepresentation. Promoting the right to self-determination is reflected in recommendation 188 of the RCIADIC;

That governments negotiate with appropriate Aboriginal organisations and communities to determine guidelines as to the procedures and processes which should be followed to ensure that the self-

determination principle is applied in the design and implementation of any policy or program or the substantial modification of any policy or program which will particularly affect Aboriginal people.

Self-determination relates to the capacity of the Aboriginal community itself to determine its preferred future and to create the human, institutional and financial infrastructure to bring those aspirations into being. The United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) enshrines the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to self-determination and to uphold the aspirations of Indigenous people. Article 18 of UNDRIP states the rights of Aboriginal people to participate in decision making matters which would affect their rights, through representations chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures, and to maintain and develop their own decision making institutions. The Aboriginal Justice Agreement (AJA) supports the right to self-determination in the criminal justice context, and seeks to achieve these goals by improving access to justice through effective justice-related services and programs.

The strength and resilience of Aboriginal people, families and communities is compromised by multiple complex problems, including historical and ongoing dispossession, marginalisation, racism, as well as the legacy of past policies of forced removal and cultural assimilation. When delivering services, policy makers must consider that social problems are deeply entrenched and ought to be approached with consideration of historical, social, community, family and individual factors. It is thus instrumental to involve the Aboriginal community in service delivery, both in planning and implementing justice solutions. When Elders, community members, and other local service and justice providers are engaged in a consultative process the most important needs of a community can be distinguished and the most appropriate methods of implementation can be identified.

Self-determination is the only strategy that has generated sustainable cultural, physical, spiritual, economic, social and emotional wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Furthering the self-determination model with systemic change is required to reduce youth justice involvement for Aboriginal young people in Victoria.

The Ngaga-dji report facilitated by the Koorie Youth Council captures the voices, stories and experiences of Aboriginal children who come into contact with Victoria's youth justice system. The report has led to legislative changes that children, their families and their communities, the opportunity to be safe and strong in their culture. The Ngaga-dji report led to systemic and legislative change. Changes were achieved through the advocacy of many Aboriginal community members and organisations to keep Aboriginal children safe and strong in their culture. Ngaga-dji report achieved change on the following asks:

- To raise the age of leaving care from 18-21
- To support Aboriginal ownership of community infrastructure and gathering places

3. How could the system become more culturally appropriate in its responses to Aboriginal youth offending? For example, alternative methods to the ways remand, supervision or custodial orders are served?

The issue of overrepresentation of Aboriginal young people and children in the justice system must focus on the key drivers of crime. For Aboriginal children and young people in the youth justice system, it is important to be provided with opportunities to strengthen their cultural

identity and increase their connection to family, community and country. Systemic innovations ought to tackle the issue of overrepresentation within the criminal justice system while also carving a pathways forward for an Aboriginal self-determined justice system. This includes holistic supports and wrap around services from start to finish, inclusive of physical health, housing, social and emotional wellbeing, cultural strengthening, financial supports, and in some cases reunification with family and community. Thus, justice should prevent youth interaction with the justice system by reducing the trajectory of justice system engagement for young people by increasing connection to land, positive peer relationships, reducing boredom and access to licences, and reducing youth recidivism by shifting long term pathway and life trajectory for young people after they have encountered the justice system.

On behalf of the Aboriginal Justice Forum as part of the development of the AJA4, the Koori Justice Unit (KJU) and The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) supported the progression of the AJA4 work to address complex criminal justice challenges facing the Aboriginal community and to improve justice outcomes. The report asserts interconnected initiatives to systematise on-going Aboriginal-led innovation that is sustainable in justice for Victoria. The five guiding principles developed by the Aboriginal Justice Caucus are:

1. Impact and Outcomes for People: Promote self-determination and cultural strength. Furthers the right to choose and the right of choice.
2. Ways of Working and Being: Recognises diversity, fosters collaboration and takes a whole family approach.
3. Kind of Change to the System: Working toward decolonisation of the Justice System and restoring a power balance.
4. Alignment to Strategy and Past Work: Acknowledges the past and builds culturally safe futures for Aboriginal people.
5. Sustainability and Feasibility: Grounded in Community and supports long-term impact. Considers ideals, needs and vision from community and supports long term growth and impact.

The overall strategy is an interlinking system collectively work together towards justice responses for all Aboriginal individuals. These principles inform the five Initiatives to further self-determination and reduce Aboriginal over representation in the criminal justice system, these are:

- Our Mob, Our Choices

A family-focused, holistic and restorative support model that can be applied at every stage of the continuum, from prevention to response. Identify what can be adopted and adapted and what will need to be developed. Ensure it has a joining up mechanism to connect multiple systems around a family.

- Self-determined Justice Innovation

Community level self-determination of most concerning criminal justice issues. A methodology and approach to foster community-led identification of issues, design of solutions, implementation and ongoing learning. Build the pathway toward a self-determined, Aboriginal Community Controlled Justice system through placed-based action and data sovereignty.

- No Stepping Back

A set of approaches and tools intended to reduce the number of Aboriginal people who receive unnecessary or culturally inappropriate bail conditions and the number of Aboriginal people who breach conditions once set. The model emphasises building community and social connection while leveraging the existing workforce.

- First Contact is the Last Contact

Prevention for young people, ensuring the first contact is the last. A layered approach to support young people across the continuum of risk or crisis, ensuring that for young people coming in contact with the justice system, the first time is the last. Supports focus on building health, positive relationships, connecting to land, connecting to culture. The approach engages young people pre-justice system contact, at the point of first contact and those at risk of offending.

- Koori Voices

Koori driven media. An Aboriginal led media strategy to put power of narrative, messaging and storytelling about Aboriginal people, back into the hands of Aboriginal people. This initiative would amplify the Aboriginal Justice Caucus voice and influence, reinforce positive identity with strong social media strategy and enhanced Caucus communications role.

First Contact is the Last Contact is a strategic initiative stemming from the TACSI report, which aims to prevent unnecessary escalation of contact with the system following exposure to violence or crime through healing and community support. This model suggests a strategy for the protection of and response to young people who are at risk of coming into contact with the justice system or have had their first contact. This layered preventative and response approach builds support depending on the level of risk.

The model supports young people right after they come into contact with the justice system by providing supports at community, programs and justice continuum levels; hearing the voices of the young person to inform the process to follow; support young people to build healthy and positive relationships; walking alongside young people, providing long term and ongoing support to help them define boundaries and get connected to culture; and, keeping young people connected to support networks and understanding who can advocate for them.

To improve justice outcomes for Aboriginal communities, Victoria Police has committed to supporting an enhanced police cautioning program for Aboriginal young people. Under Recommendation 240 of the RCIADIC, the implementation of a Koori Youth Cautioning Program to serve as a system-level approach to encourage the use of cautions against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth. The Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program (AYCP) is a five year program in its pilot stage, funded through the AJA4, implemented across three initial sites. The AYCP aims to increase and enhance the use of cautioning and diversion options through a community-led model, based on principles of self-determination, early intervention and harm-reduction, to address the issue of overrepresentation of Aboriginal young people in the justice system. The program will draw on local Aboriginal culture, knowledge and community to ensure a tailored response for young people coming into contact with police.

The Standard Indigenous Question (SIQ) is means to determine an individual's cultural background, to ensure correct services are being provided to people in the justice system. The SIQ is a tool used by Victoria Police in order to offer Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people culturally specific supports and cultural plans. The SIQ should be used by Victoria police as a mandatory, however, data surrounding the use of the SIQ is unreliable. The SIQ should be mandatory at all stages of the justice system, and people should have numerous opportunities to answer the question in order to gain the appropriate supports available. Communication around the SIQ is lacking as young people are not aware of the services that can be provided to them. Communication of the SIQ is important because Aboriginal young people and children may find the SIQ stigmatising as they do not want to be treated poorly if they choose to identify.

Concluding Comments

The Aboriginal Justice Caucus endorses a community-led, end-to-end youth justice system that supports a holistic and restorative approach. This requires investment and reinvestment toward the existing programs that are designed and led by Aboriginal communities. Community led and co-designed programs that build partnerships alongside mainstream entities ensure that there is a wrap-around support that is both individual and inclusive of family/kinship networks.

The Ngaga-dji report shows how self-determined advocacy highlighting Aboriginal young people's voices can deliver legislative change. It asks all bodies within and outside the justice system to advocate for grassroots to across government systemic change and to ensure young people are at the heart of this change.

It has been long proven, but not evaluated, that programs designed in community by their individual communities have more sustainable outcomes than services that are piloted for funding rounds of 2-3 years. Justice increased investment and reinvestment into Aboriginal youth justice services would support ACCO service delivery partnerships and create a new generation of holistic service modelling that encourages, strengthens and enables young people to have autonomy in their decision making for their futures.

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