Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project

Justice Roundtable Report

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that this publication may contain images or information of deceased persons.
Executive Summary

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project undertook a series of national community Roundtables. The aims of the Roundtables were to ensure input by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to the overall Project, to gain specific information about contributing factors to suicide, and also to discuss effective strategies and community support for suicide prevention. This Roundtable focused on the specific theme of justice and suicide prevention. The Roundtable was held at the Healing Foundation in Canberra. For the one-day Roundtable, participants came from diverse backgrounds involved with justice and incarceration. Participants conveyed that the history of colonisation has contributed towards high rates of incarceration and suicide. Suicide and its risk factors for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders is a complex, historically and culturally embedded, intertwined situation involving transgenerational trauma, grief and ongoing dislocation. It is also a situation that impacts many communities, affecting different members of the community and the overall health and wellbeing of a large group in Australian society. Addressing suicide requires responsiveness from the Commonwealth and State governments in a coordinated way because it involves such broad cultural and social determinants. Closing the gap on suicide statistics and improving the physical and mental health of Indigenous peoples requires both immediate and long-term, upstream approaches to providing adequate mental health interventions, supporting front-line community workers and promoting effective national programs that support individuals and families. While self-determination is a significant element of the potential success of this approach, it is an initiative that requires strong government support and recognition of the resources required. While they were aware of the disempowering consequences of colonisation and the need to recover from this, participants also expressed a desire to take responsibility of individual, family and community wellbeing and to look after each other. The following specific themes emerged from the discussions:

- **Historical factors**
  
  The history of colonisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians is a profound part of the consciousness in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The consequences of this colonial history, such as the destruction of people and cultural practices, have caused significant dislocations in language groups, which has affected the Indigenous sense of identity, spirituality and wellbeing. Participants felt that dominant mainstream accounts of history still takes precedence over of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, and this therefore minimises accounts of the impact of cultural disruption. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community representatives believe this minimisation of historical trauma contributes to the break down of community, high incarceration rates and high suicide statistics. Transgenerational trauma around child removal remains one of the priority issues to address within the community. Together with the impact of colonisation on physical and mental health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, it remained a significant theme of discussion about suicide and social determinants.

- **Contributing factors to suicide**
  
  While historical factors were seen as contributing factors in high suicide rates, other identified contributing factors included homelessness and poverty. Housing issues included inadequate and/or substandard housing, overcrowding, a need for half way housing and transitional accommodation, and a need for urban accommodation for rural people requiring medical treatment. Poverty was also identified as a significant factor, particularly in areas with high rates of suicide and incarceration. Poverty among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is usually acute and long term, resulting in an inter related range of disadvantages in health, education, employment and access to legal support. Punitive systems associated with poverty, such as fines for begging and imprisonment for non-payment of fines, serve to compound the marginalization of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and can result in imprisonment of the poor – of people who are illiterate, impoverished, mentally ill, cognitively impaired or have low employment skills. Participants felt that there should be opportunities for a range programs from healing to employment training for prisoners and adequate post release programs and services.
• **Government Responsiveness**

Government responsiveness was seen key to any potential improvement of social justice issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Centralising research and information that has been gathered previously at both state and commonwealth levels was seen as crucial for historical continuity of knowledge and effective mapping of social issues. In turn, this could contribute to better outcomes in policy development and implementation. Self-determination and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership at all levels could ensure strong relationships between government and communities. Accountability, transparency, flexibility and reasonable levels of funding were perceived as the main concerns in dealing with the government and their institutional representatives.

• **Strengthening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing**

Participants felt that the resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people needed to be recognized in any program. Other factors such as holistic approaches and cultural healing needed to be available to strengthen community, families and individuals. As well as targeted programs, there was a long history of Indigenous activism, and that the significance of elders and leaders provided a valuable resource to build pride in cultural identities and a sense of belonging. The central importance of identity and culture was seen as essential in community life and as protective factors for wellbeing.

**ATSISPEP Background**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide occurs at double the rate of other Australians, and there is evidence to suggest that the rate may be higher (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014, 2015). Suicide is one of the most common causes of death among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Indigenous people between the ages of 15 to 34 are at highest risk, with suicide the leading cause of death, accounting for 1 in 3 deaths. Suicide is a complex behaviour with many causes. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people there are specific cultural, historical, and political considerations that contribute to the high prevalence and that require the rethinking of conventional models and assumptions.

In response to the urgent need to address the high rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide across Australia, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project (ATSISPEP), a comprehensive national project, was funded by the Australian Government through the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet to establish an evidence base about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide and to formally evaluate the effectiveness of existing suicide prevention services nationally.

A final report was provided to the Minister for Indigenous Affairs in November 2016. Concurrently, a culturally appropriate Suicide Prevention Program Evaluation Framework was developed and trialled. The School of Indigenous Studies at UWA undertook the Project, in collaboration with the Telethon Kids Institute and the National Healing Foundation. An aim of the ATSISPEP was to establish a much-needed evidence base of effective strategies for the prevention of suicide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

In summary, ATSISPEP:

• Undertook a review of the literature;
• Built on seminal reports dating back 25 years;
• Collated significant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consultations and subsequent reports in recent times;
• Undertook a statistical spatial analysis of suicide trends over 10 years;
• Produced a compilation of resources and suicide prevention programs; and
• Developed and trialled a culturally appropriate evaluation framework.

In preliminary findings, key themes of effective programs and services have been identified as those that offer a holistic understanding of health and wellbeing for individuals, families and communities. These successful
program and services also promote recovery and healing from trauma, stress and transgenerational loss; empower people by helping them regain a sense of control and mastery over their lives; and have local competent staff who are skilled cultural advisors. There is community ownership of such programs and services, with significant community input into the design, delivery and decision-making processes and an emphasis on pathways to recovery through self-determination and community governance, reconnection to community life, and restoration of community resilience and culture. Using a strengths-based approach, these programs and services seek to support communities by addressing broader social determinants and promoting the centrality of family and kinship through hope and positive future orientation.

There are many complexities and determinants associated with suicide and self-harm and the most successful responses have been those fostering the unique strengths and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families and communities. The most successful strategies among young people have involved peers, youth workers and less formal community relationships to help negotiate social contexts and to connect them with their cultural values, care systems and identity.

**ATSISPEP Roundtables**

As part of the Project, a series of Roundtables were conducted in a number of regional sites on a range of emerging themes. The Roundtables complement the current review of literature in the area, and intend to utilise a community consultation methodology to affirm the results of the literature and program reviews and to seek further information. This methodology ensures that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community is informed about the Project and have input, and that information is contextualised through community representation at the Roundtables, and information is relevant to rapidly changing social and political environments. Responsiveness is a key concern in the evaluation process, hence the ATSISPEP series of Roundtables is a mechanism that incorporates ongoing reciprocal discussion between senior community members and the Project researchers.

The first community consultation was held in early 2015 in Mildura in regional Victoria, an area with reported high levels of suicide. A further regional consultation has been held in Darwin. Subsequent to these regional Roundtables, additional community consultations were held in Broome, WA, Cairns, QLD, Adelaide, SA and in the Shoalhaven area of NSW. The three initial regions were chosen as the sites for the community consultations because of the high reported incidence of suicide in these regions or, alternatively, because of the substantial progress reported in reducing previously high rates of suicide in these areas.

As well as regional Roundtables, themed national Roundtables engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth, people identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or intersex (LGBTQI), and those involved in the justice system also took place and provided valuable ‘front-line’ perspectives of the central issues involved for each of these groups. The feedback from Roundtables have reinforced the initial findings of the literature review and preliminary data analysis and demonstrated the complexities involved in identifying vulnerable groups in the community.

The purpose of the Roundtables was to recognise what communities need to assist them in the prevention of suicide and to hear community perspectives and first-hand experiences of suicide prevention services and programs to help confirm and refine existing research findings of what works and why.

The Project identified vulnerable groups within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, which include youth; those identifying as LGBTQI; and those involved in the penal justice system, in particular, those re-entering communities following incarceration. Other workshops and Roundtables took place around topical issues. For instance, a meeting about determining the need for and development of a critical response service for suicide and trauma was held in Perth with Commonwealth and WA state governments, stakeholders, academics, community groups and relevant services. Other topical issues such as the role of clinical factors in suicide and measuring suicide and self-harm also took place.

These consultations enabled the Project to:

- Gain further feedback and input on the Project work to date;
- Listen to the different experiences with suicide prevention programs and services across Australia to further identify what works and why;
• Identify programs that have previously been assessed as effective and seek community perspectives to determine the relevancy of such programs within the communities and what would be needed to support effective implementation; and

• Determine what changes could be made to further improve existing programs.

ATSISPEP Justice Roundtable

The Justice Roundtable was the fourth Roundtable in an initial series of six scheduled Roundtables conducted by ATSISPEP. A total of 17 participants, with a majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, attended this Roundtable, which followed the LGBQTI Roundtable, the Youth Roundtable and the regionally based Mildura Roundtable. Participants included psychiatrists, workers in mental health, child protection workers, university researchers, community workers, activists and people already professionally involved with advocacy or acting in an advisory capacity on groups addressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the justice system. Most participants also had strong and extensive histories in advocacy for social justice, and the majority had personal experience as social change agents in their communities. Participants brought considerable experience and history to the forum as well as passion about achieving social justice.

Section One: Roundtable Report Background

The aims of this Roundtable report were to identify the major issues of concern to professionals and workers in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities from a community perspective. Their comments are directly organised around contributing factors to suicide and self-harm, the impact of suicide on families, individuals and communities, and the capacity for resilience and strengthening with individuals, families and communities. This Roundtable worked directly with participants to ensure that they were informed about the intentions of this Project and to gather information directly from them. The Roundtable process involved facilitators and participants identifying issues and in many instances grouping these issues. The value of this process ensures that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people themselves are recognised as the experts in specific areas. Ensuring that the voices of the community are present is valuable for a number of purposes:

1. To ensure that the voices of the community are valued;
2. To ensure ownership of the issues, analysis and conclusions;
3. To ensure that new insights are recognised;
4. To connect the voices of the community directly to evolving policy wherever possible and appropriate; and
5. To guide further development of ideas found in current reports and literature to supplement the special topics that emerge in the Roundtables.
Roundtable Context

The principles used for identifying the concerns and context of the Roundtable commentary come primarily from the six action strategies listed in the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Strategy* (Department of Health and Ageing, 2013) and the nine guiding principles listed in the introduction to the national *Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework* (Social Health Reference Group, 2004). In addition there are a number of other research publications and major reports informing the approaches taken by ATSISPEP and the Roundtables that can be found in the overall report.

The principles from the *Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework* (2004), (hereon called the *Framework*), are based on a platform of human rights and recognise the effects of colonisation, racism, stigma, environmental adversity, and cultural and individual trauma. They also acknowledge the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity and cultural experience and the centrality of family, kinship and community. The *Framework* recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture has been deeply affected by loss and trauma, but that it is a resilient culture. It also recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians generally are resilient and creative people, who respond positively to a holistic approach to mental and physical health, drawing on cultural, spiritual and emotional wellbeing and seeking self-determination and cultural relevance in the provision of health services for themselves and their communities.

The *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Strategy* (2013), (hereon called the *Strategy*) is a specific response to the suicide statistics. It has yet to be released by the Department of Health. In seeking to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are supported locally and nationally to reduce the incidence of suicide and suicidal behaviour, and related self-harm, the *Strategy* aims to reduce risk factors across the lifespan of these groups, to build workforce participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in fields related to suicide prevention, and to effectively evaluate programs.

A brief list of goals for increasing early intervention and building strong communities nominated by the *Strategy* includes building strengths and capacities in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and encouraging leadership and community responsibility for the implementation and improvement of services for suicide prevention. A strong emphasis is placed on the strength and resilience of individuals and families working through child and family services, schools and health services to protect against risk and adversity.

On this basis, the *Strategy* contends that it is necessary to act in four main areas. Firstly, it is essential to have culturally appropriate, targeted suicide prevention strategies that identify individuals, families and communities at higher risk through levels and expressions of disadvantage such as poverty, alcohol and drug abuse and histories of abuse or neglect. Secondly, it is necessary to co-ordinate approaches to the prevention of suicide including health, education, justice, child and family services, child protection and housing. Thirdly, it is necessary to build an evidence base on suicide prevention activities and ensure dissemination of that information to identify relevant research, address gaps in information and recommend strategies on the basis of records. Finally, there needs to be a safeguarding of standards of practice and high quality service in the area of suicide and suicide prevention in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and an assurance that preventative activity will be embedded in primary health care.

Both the *Strategy* and the *Framework* are based on extensive consultation with representatives from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The essential shared values and the themes considered necessary for effective programs and services include:

- Acknowledgement of trauma as a significant element of ongoing mental health issues for some individuals, families and communities;
- The need for cultural relevance in the development and implementation of programs;
- Self-determination in the development and delivery of suicide prevention and related mental health programs;
- The need to centralise research and build a strong, coherent knowledge base on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide prevention, intervention and postvention; and
• The necessity of understanding the holistic physical, mental, social and spiritual approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide prevention within the communities.

While establishing foundational principles, the community consultation and research undertaken by the Strategy and ATSISPEP also highlight gaps in information that require further research and analysis to clarify information and develop questions around methodological approaches.

1. Gathering statistics presents very specific challenges due to problems with Indigenous identification, and variations in data sources, such as the National Coronial Information System, the Queensland Suicide Register, and other administrative systems. Shared protocols that ensure adequate and consistent reporting nationally are required.

2. The priorities and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities should be central. Questions could be asked about what services and programs, if any, are in place and are they adequate? Do these services and programs work together to reflect the broad, inter related and holistic nature of the realities of communities?

The preceding brief summary provides an overview of significant emerging principles that are concerned with respecting a holistic model of culture and health for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The building of individual, family and community resilience, and improving safety factors throughout the lifecycle is facilitated by addressing violence, abuse, alcohol and drug problems, and supporting the increased participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members and professionals in any initiative that concerns them, particularly in suicide prevention. These values were fundamental in a shared framework that underpinned the Roundtable dialogues and the Roundtables also enabled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members and professionals and non-Indigenous experts to come together and provide a focused discussion within the complexity of Indigenous experience.

Section Two: Roundtable Voices

The participants of the Roundtable all brought extensive experience in working with high-risk groups such as children, young people, women and criminal offenders. Their varied experience included working in hospitals, prisons and in schools. Some had experience of living and working in remote communities; others were urban-based. The Roundtable intended to draw on experiences from across Australia and, subsequently, reflected both a cross section of different communities and different sections of communities.

The Healing Foundation hosted the Roundtable with a total of 17 people attending. Participants were identified by the ATSISPEP team as individuals and stakeholders working in the area of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and the justice system. As participants were contacted, they would also suggest other relevant people to attend. Through the use of such networks, a range of appropriate people were contacted to participate. As part of the process, appropriate members of the National Advisory Committee were invited to attend Roundtables. Professor Tom Calma, the Chair of the ATSISPEP National Advisory Committee, and Richard Weston, CEO of the Healing Foundation, attended the Roundtable. Three members of the ATSISPEP team facilitated the Roundtable and all information was recorded.

Participants were asked a number of questions, and from the discussion themes and sub-themes were derived. The questions were:

• What are the contributing factors (including protective factors) for the high rates of suicides in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities?

• What works in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide prevention in the past and at present?

• What hasn’t worked in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide prevention in the past and at present?
• What strategies would be appropriate to support communities to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide prevention?

The gender representation of the group was nearly even with nine males and eight females. The age range was diverse; all participants were at least 30 years of age and above, the majority of which were in the 50–60 years age group. The majority of participants were of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent. Three participants self-identified as qualified psychiatrists, two self-identified as academics, and others identified as working in family services, welfare or advocacy. Many also shared their own family experience with social justice and incarcerations and were experts on other related committees and projects.

The transcripts from the Roundtable discussion were analysed by three researchers working on the ATSISPEP Project. The researchers independently looked at the data and then deliberated to reach agreement on the thematic codes. The codes and related quotations were organised and analysed thematically. The emerging major themes included:

• Historical Factors
• Contributing Factors to Suicide
• Government Responsiveness
• Strengthening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing

Under these broad themes, the following sub-themes were identified:

**Historical Factors**

• Identity and culture
• Impact of colonisation
• Transgenerational trauma and child removal

**Contributing Factors to Suicide**

• Poverty and housing
• Impact of stolen generation
• Access to legal services
• Education and employment
• Community leadership
• Incarceration

**Government Responsiveness**

• Centralising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander information collection and access
• Culturally appropriate research and reviews
• Government policy and intervention
Strengthening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing

- Healing and empowerment

These will now be discussed in detail.

Historical Factors

- Identity and Culture

The Roundtable participants reported historical factors as significant and ranked ‘theft of identity and spirit’ as a primary contributing factor to high incarceration rates. Participants were concerned that the development of a strong cultural identity was difficult for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Participants were concerned about the engagement of young people within educational and social contexts.

I work with people who don’t have parents, who don’t have protections such as families, and cultural transmission is not there for ceremony, identity. So my job is to be an advocate for them to bring back to the sense of family through community, kinship. Kinship is important as structure of looking after our own. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

We have certain freedoms that the mainstream takes away from us where we can bring up our children in the ways we know, in reference to our cultural identity. I’ve been asked to be a foster parent, but I’ve responded to the agencies who have asked me that I can’t do the foster parenting because [they] will not let me bring up the kids my way, in our ways. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

As a [mental health professional], my work is heavily devoted to working with young offenders. We have to broaden our views. We’re not just talking about custodial justice but also civil justice. Many of these kids are caught up in fear, identity. The issue that we have is we have bastardised culture within society and in jail. Seeing young kids rotating in and out of custody and not getting a chance, culturally and developmentally, in just being kids is what we need to talk about. We need to focus on them getting that chance to be kids. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

- Impact of Colonisation

Negative perceptions of self and culture were specifically referred to as a product of colonisation. This has been achieved through historical violence and programs of assimilation. Participants expressed frustration with the gap between ‘the funding system and the cultural system’. While they acknowledged the disempowering impacts of colonisation and the need to recover from this, participants concluded there is a need to focus on self-determination and for communities to take responsibility for individual, family and community wellbeing. Communities need to be supported to enable the overall wellbeing of their community.

There is a poverty of spirit and we have to work on changing this. I grew up in a [cultural group] family that focused around the church. The White man was ‘the boss’. You didn’t look the White man into the eye. There was a lot of indoctrination... those eight children who were tragically taken in Cairns. Many of us have been walking around since, eating away inside. We’re still at war, as a people we’re still at war. We need to properly acknowledge what the colonisers have done to us. ANZAC Day should acknowledge the Frontier Wars, all the colonial wars. All that happened to our people at the violence of the colonisers should be acknowledged. In Queensland, the colonialists just shot us at will, the Jardine brothers shot our people, like snipers, taking them out, while they were at a ceremonial dance, around a ceremonial fire. And what does Queensland do, it names a bridge after the Jardines – what does that say to us as a people? (Justice Roundtable Participant)

We need a strengthening of spirit; we need brave men, strong hearts programs, the going to one house at a time. Let us take custodianship in our homes, in our communities, roll this out, making our homes and communities stronger. Those kids in Cairns were taken on our watch. We let those eight children down and we let the mother down. We are losing our cultural position, our cultural authority. We have to lead the way...
not through funding alone but from the heart. We’ve got systems – the funding system and the spiritual system. You don’t need funding for the spiritual system. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

We have to include ‘decolonisation’ in all our recommendations and strategies. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

We need stronger campaigns, ones from the heart. We need campaigns that just say it as it should be – ‘stop knocking your missus round’. This works more than going to some class and sitting around some PowerPoint. I just say it straight to those who are doing this and that stops them. Make the messages clear. We need to decolonise our people. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

• Transgenerational Trauma and Child Removal

The Stolen Generation (forcible removal of children) was acknowledged as the cause of great trauma to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people historically and this continues to be a burden on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Recognition that trauma is a major underlying contribution to incarceration rates is important.

You cannot change things for the better unless we look at the origins of problems rather than looking at the by-products. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

The intergenerational trauma remains the biggest issue but when you get down to it, no one wants to talk about the intergenerational trauma. Governments want it swept under the carpet. If we do not deal with the intergenerational trauma then we will not be able to successfully deal with preventing suicides, we will continue to fail to lower incarceration rates. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

There is fantastic work going on where people are doing everything they can but the fact we are not addressing the intergenerational trauma means their work is being lost in the big picture. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

The intergenerational trauma is real. We have to focus on it. Healing is about dealing with trauma. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

Contributing Factors to Suicide

• Poverty and Housing

Poverty and housing are major underlying factors to both incarceration and suicide risk. Poverty and housing issues interrelate with a range of other complex problems. Participants reported that from anecdotal information, it appears that high rates of arrest and high levels of psychological distress and intentional self-harm and suicides are predicated by high levels of chronic impoverishment of communities. In identified high-risk regions of suicide there are also corresponding high rates of homelessness and an array of high levels of acute housing issues, which include overcrowding and substandard dwellings.

Participants stated that there needed to be a governmental focus on addressing the circumstances of impoverished communities rather than a sole focus on individuals. The nation’s highest imprisonment rates are found in South Australia, the Northern Territory and Western Australia and these are also areas with extensive homelessness, acute levels of poverty, and some of the highest reoffending rates and the highest suicide statistics. It is not unreasonable to see acute poverty as underlying arrest rates, incarceration rates and other distress indicators including suicide. Acute poverty leads to low levels of education, employment and general social exclusion, and entrenches disadvantage. Further, participants were concerned that the high rates of poverty and homelessness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has failed to galvanise substantive government responses and consequently, circumstances are worsening for these particular groups.

There needs to be recognition of and responses to the acute levels of poverty in many regions and communities and that these economic inequalities need to be addressed. Participants felt that the marginalisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in ‘economic inequalities’ in ‘an otherwise affluent nation’ could be
seen as historical racism playing out in contemporary times. Strategies mentioned that could assist in the short-term included halfway houses, transitional accommodation for those leaving prison and more in the way of rehabilitation, education and programs supporting skilling for jobs. There were concerns that if the extreme poverty faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is left unaddressed that the spectrum of disadvantage will continue to increase. While poverty needs to be identified and addressed in regions and communities, there was also a concurrent need for immediate cultural, trauma healing, psychosocial, and educational and vocational programs, especially for young people.

Suicide prevention ties in with domestic violence, violence, substance abuse, housing issues, unemployment, intergenerational trauma, all of it, and we have to bring it all together if we are to seriously address self-harms and all the distresses. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

• Impact of the Stolen Generation

Concerns about children were frequently mentioned in the dialogue of the Justice Roundtable. At least four of the participants (nearly 25%) self-identified as grandparents working with generational child removal through a variety of community-based organisations. These participants work both within the government system and in community controlled or non-government organisations with varying degrees of success.

I worked in family services at [community] and [community]. I worked out in the communities and that is when we work at our best, with the communities. We supported the families, we did the healing. But when we were defunded we were taken out of these towns, out of the communities, and that’s when child removals skyrocketed and the social ills set in, the suicides. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

I have worked a long time in family service departments and in child protection and our biggest problem are the internal processes. As Aboriginal workers inside the mainstream we find it hard to raise issues that affect our people. Departments are restrictive places that do not comprehend Aboriginality and culture, our ways. In challenging the system from the inside we often find ourselves on the outer, diminished. I thought I could change things from the inside, like a lot of us do, and I tried for many years to work it from the inside, but it doesn’t happen. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

• Access to Legal Services

Child removals impact upon individuals, families and communities profoundly. One participant stated, ‘there is so much guilt, shame, hurt, anger and distress when a child or children are removed’. At the Roundtable, the list of factors seen as contributing to incarceration of youth included the breakdown of family and kinship networks, loss of respect for elders within the family and inaccessibility of services. When analysing the comments, the failure of access to legal services and the western domination of legal structures is a recurring issue, as is the need for strategies to deal with legal systems.

I am angry at our legal services. With child removals they are not there for our people, for our families. We have to knock ourselves out finding legal representation to get our kids back. This is the trauma, the worst trauma of the lot today, that we have our children taken away at horrific levels. Those of us that get our kids back through the courts it is only because we got lawyers that will put the work in. It can take years to find lawyers. This should not be the way. Our legal services need to be strengthened and cultured to be there for our families, to go 24/7, to get back our kids now, not for some only years later lucky enough to find outside lawyers. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

On top of this the Aboriginal Legal Services are being radically defunded which makes it a nightmare all around. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

• Education and Employment

Society-wide, multi-generational problems affecting families and kinship groups inevitably also impact on children and young people directly. A factor affecting their social adjustment is education. Schools can present particular difficulties for Indigenous students.

In my work in schools, all around the country I can see that we can do a lot better for our people. (Justice Roundtable Participant)
There is not recognition of our people and cultures in schools and in life in general. We are invisible. Invisibility goes to identity and how we feel about ourselves. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

Assimilation policies in schools traumatise many of our children, alienate them. Why is it so many of our kids are resisting assimilation in schools? Governments and policy makers need to understand this. We have to associate many of the problems among our kids with schools. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

Schools force norms we are not accustomed to. We have to have early enculturation programs. Get them on Country and then send them to schools when they are enculturated in their cultural identity, in who they are and when they are strong. I am talking about getting our people back to who we are and therefore in feeling better, strong inside. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

Even higher education was perceived as a mixed experience:

We will reduce suicide and self-harm and all the community distress by promoting equity, pride. We need to take messages of all that is good to everyone. Our children are told that they will never get to university and we have to tell them they can. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

We push our children to go to university, to make money. What’s it all for when it makes for unhappiness? (Justice Roundtable Participant)

Schools could be sites that strengthen cultural identity. Suggestions made to increase the relevance of the educational experience for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children included the teaching of Indigenous languages and the daily practice and experience of culture:

Reclaiming the wholeness and fullness of our culture is pivotal and by doing this we can practice it, and by practicing it daily we impart identity to our children, expectations of identity are tied to this. We need this type of positive identification of ourselves. We’re so assimilated that despite the cultural longings inside us we don’t see what’s happening. We need to impress upon Aboriginal families and communities to reclaim their cultural identities and practice it daily in terms of identity. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

Are our children learning about our cultures in school? Are schools bilingual? (Justice Roundtable Participant)

There are so many programs and ways that can work but they are not funded, or funding is not made available for the rollout across everywhere for programs that work. For instance my daughter teaches language, our language, in the school her children go to. Every lunchtime on Wednesdays she has a packed room of children learning language. This should be across the board. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

Unemployment was also discussed as a contributing factor.

A lot of my work is to be there, to walk alongside those we help. In my mental health and youth work I find that we need to be strong advocates for people. We have to stand beside, alongside families who are experiencing long-term grief, long term unemployment, who have been burnt by incarceration, homelessness. So strong case management means standing alongside, walking alongside, advocate strongly and this works. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

Community Leadership

The participants recognised the influences of various substance misuse and the consequent increase in violence and various dysfunction – social and familial. These influences were seen as contributing risk factors to further self-destructive behaviour and suicidal ideation.

An important theme of concern was the influences and consequences of dysfunctional and self-destructive behaviours on children within families and communities. Participants stated a dire need for community leadership to be adequately supported. Such leadership should be defined both within the community context and also in a potential relationship with governments.

Commitment to family, to each other has to be highlighted as part of any campaign. (Justice Roundtable Participant)
We need to manifest rules of how adults need to respond, in ensuring we have Elders involved, in order they engage with the children. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

My cultural discipline saw me give up alcohol when I was [middle aged] and I am now [older]. You have to be a role model. We have to build an onus on role modelling. We have to educate, [send] the message that your own actions have a contagion effect, influence others, and if we can transmit the message culturally this is the best way. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

We must also do more to ensure that everyone takes responsibility. This includes responsibilities taken by the parents, families and communities. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

Shame is a major factor. Shame masks some of the underlying factors that lead to suicide. Childhood sexual abuse is factor; it’s a big factor, one of many big factors. We have just finished a study in a women’s prison on post-traumatic disorders. We asked them if they had ever attempted suicide, ever contemplated suicide, and we looked at whether they have had PTSD. We found a prevalence of trauma. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

We cannot pass all the responsibility to governments. Commitment to family, to each other has to be highlighted as part of any campaign. Our leaders cannot be seen by our people as compromised by government, because they don’t listen, don’t trust, lose faith and then are aimless. Our leaders have to be urged to speak freely, on behalf and for us. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

• Incarceration

The high incarceration rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are of significant concern. In addition, the impact on the potential wellbeing of families and communities dealing with family members in prison needs consideration. There is limited research and data collection on how many Australians have been to prison and what happens to people after their custodial sentence. It is estimated that 400,000 Australians have been to prison (Kinner et. al., 2011). From this figure, it can be estimated that at least 70,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have been to prison – this equates to at least one in ten Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. This high rate of incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait has a ripple effect of stress upon families and communities.

Research demonstrates that in the first year post-release from prison, ex-inmates are up to ten times more at risk of an unnatural death than in any year while in prison. The majority of these deaths are avoidable; the situation arises due to ex-offenders being stranded post-release without adequate support programs and mentoring (Kinner et. al., 2011). This has not been specifically found for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners and further research should be undertaken here. Given the considerable disadvantage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people suffer in general, post-prison experiences may not be risk factors in themselves.

Participants pointed out that ‘prisons are full of people who should not be there’, including people with mental illness and cognitive impairment. Further, far too many people are incarcerated for poverty-related low-level offending when there could be non-custodial alternatives and various support to address their circumstances instead of a prison sentence.

There were concerns that the high prison rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were increasing with little substantive governmental intervention. Participants generally agreed that a criminalising of marginalised peoples was occurring. There were discussions about the need for various programs for prisoners – cultural, trauma healing, psychological, psychosocial, educational and vocational. Some described a missed opportunity to ‘heal and help’ prisoners who were described as a ‘captured audience’ and with huge ‘unmet needs’. Participants said far too many prison inmates were illiterate and from impoverished backgrounds. There are some common characteristics with prison entrants that indicate the influence of social determinants and lack of opportunity. For instance, they have a lower level of educational attainment than the general Australian population (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2009).

Participants also focused on the inability of many to acquire substantive legal representation. There were concerns about the removal of children and the impacts of the trauma on families and communities, which was compounded by inadequate legal representation. The comments below reflect these concerns.

We have to go back to the beginning, go right back. This is about justice and there is no justice. We have a
prison industrial complex in this country that is scooping up Aboriginal people, our men and women, the poor. We are propping up a system that is a fundamental failure. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

Our people are the most surveilled people. In surveilling people (this) leads to higher jailing rates. Aboriginal people, the homeless, the poor, they clash with the police and finish up in prison. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

Laws vary across the nation. In Western Australia you can be jailed for poverty-related fine defaulting. One quarter of the Western Australian prison population are comprised by people with unpaid fines. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

As a [mental health professional] my work is heavily devoted to working with young offenders. We have to broaden our views. We’re not just talking about custodial justice but also civil justice…. We can’t leave out any high needs risk group, that means reaching people in jail, dysfunctional families, the poor. Jailing people for poverty related fine defaulting has to be banned nationally. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

Criminalisation destroys lives and does contribute to self-harm and suicide. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

Government Responsiveness

Participants expressed concerns with government responses to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide. These were categorised into three mains areas. Firstly, the need to systematically gather and analyse studies that already exist; secondly, that investigations and research need to be culturally appropriate; and thirdly, the need to connect community voices directly to any policy development and implementation.

• Centralising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Information Collection and Access

Participants felt that one of the main issues affecting the area of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs is the failure to systematically gather and analyse studies and research that already exist. This is an issue not only with the energy and resources required to reinvent the wheel, but is one of continuous geographical and historical fragmentation of information. Considerable information exists already to construct an integrated picture of communities and their experience and needs over time and across regions. However, communities and individuals who are unable to access this information must continually reinvent basic knowledge bases. Gathering and utilising existing reports in centralised archives would ensure historical continuity on social issues, a broad-based sharing of knowledge, informed decision-making and – in the long run – could prove financially beneficial for both communities and for government bodies. Two of the aims of the ATSISPEP are to facilitate this collation of relevant information and to provide a systematic review of research already undertaken.

There is a lot of grey literature and in that grey literature there are already some great stories but we need more journal articles, position papers, cited works, peer reviewed work that governments can be leveraged to respond to. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

The more papers we get out there, the more information, the more informed we will become, the more informed the sectors become. We have too many of our people uninformed and ill informed, too little public information out there for us. This makes us isolated. We have to work cross-sectoral and together in holistic information sharing ways if we are to improve services. We have to align services together and public information sharing can do this. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

There are also a lot of reports out there, some decades old which are more valuable than anything today but which are not included in the literature, and we need to extend the literature reviews to cover a broader range of views and understandings. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

1 If you do not pay your court fine or fail to complete your work and development order, a warrant of commitment will be issued for your arrest and imprisonment. Sourced from www.courts.dotag.wa.gov.au
Culturally Appropriate Research and Reviews

In addition to an urgency for systematic review of information, there was also an awareness among Roundtable participants that the terms of reference for any investigation and evaluation must be culturally appropriate and that the strategies need to focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-based models. Participants expressed considerable frustration with existing strategies and were concerned that many of the current programs are not working or are repeating mistakes. Participants expressed the following:

- We do not need to reinvent the wheel if we look further at what is already out there to include in our systemic reviews and strategies. (Justice Roundtable Participant)
- We need our evaluation tools for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders not in mainstream flowchart ways, or in White terms of reference, but in our Aboriginal terms of reference. (Justice Roundtable Participant)
- All strategies seeking to influence the ways and solutions for our people must be set in culturally appropriate bases. The content has to be formulated along our terms of reference. (Justice Roundtable Participant)
- We must not be stranded in deficit models, which are not our terms of reference. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

Government Policy and Intervention

High levels of frustration were expressed about dealing with government policies, requirements, processes and relationships, which showed this area of concern was one of the highest community priorities. This included dealing with providers including legal, medical and prison institutions. Therefore, addressing the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community representatives and government departments and providers needs to be an important consideration. Failure of dialogue with community leaders, limitations of funding, government accountability and transparency, and lack of flexibility to enable community priorities to be addressed and to contribute positively as solutions, were some of the concerns expressed. It was evident from the Roundtable discussions that there was anger and disappointment in this failure of developing constructive relationships that enable communities’ agency and empowerment.

- We need to bring our leaders together from all over the country and work more closely together to influence change. Governments are failing to respond to us because they are not working with our leaders. Governments are not close to them…. We need to bring together our community leaders, regional leaders and build a voice through them for our governments to engage with. (Justice Roundtable Participant)
- I see this project – the ATSISPEP – as a bit of a foundation for the next steps. I don’t want in 30 years to be where we are today. My blood boils when I see many of the injustices. We have done some great things in the past and we have to carry on and do more. I am a career public servant. I do believe we also have to work from the inside. I have to learn to play the game in government if I am to make a difference. I hated the Intervention but I took a job there, was one of the faces of the Intervention because on the inside I could help my people. Working in those positions is where we can make a difference. We need to infiltrate every single sector if we are to make any real difference. I like to think that in ten years there will be enough of us inside to make a difference. (Justice Roundtable Participant)
- It is important that the commentary from today, that the report to government, that all the research you are undertaking at the ATSISPEP, that government responses and engagements are made public, for their analysis, for public scrutiny, so we can build on this, and hold government accountable. (Justice Roundtable Participant)
Strengthening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing

- Healing and Empowerment

While there were considerable frustrations expressed about some government programs and processes, there were positive comments in the Roundtables about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander potential and possibilities that could strengthen the resilience and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities. Participants recognised the effect of despair and hopelessness as contributing to suicide and acknowledged that building hope was central in prevention.

_We have to build and inspire hope. Suicide is the giving up of hope. And this hopelessness is around a community. I am not trying to diminish a sudden death but when it’s suicide then it’s a hopelessness spiralled. Suicidal behaviour is about hopelessness. So we have to address the sense of hopelessness, the fact of hopelessness._ (Justice Roundtable Participant)

Participants had many suggestions about building positive futures and resilience in a range of different ways. Coping with racism and shame had already been mentioned, but also using histories of activism, the significance of elders to build pride in cultural identities and a sense of belonging. The central importance of identity and culture was seen as essential in community life and as protective factors for wellbeing.

_Reclaiming the wholeness and fullness of our culture is pivotal and by doing this we can practice it, and by practicing it daily we impart identity to our children, expectations of identity are tied to this. We need this type of positive identification of ourselves. We’re so assimilated that despite the cultural longings inside us we don’t see what’s happening. We need to impress upon Aboriginal families and communities to reclaim their cultural identities and practice it daily in terms of identity._ (Justice Roundtable Participant)

Healing approaches that were culturally appropriate and focused around reclaiming and practicing culture was considered important. Taking responsibility and working in culturally appropriate ways around social problems was seen to be most effective and long lasting. With local community members involved it also provided role modelling and educating around expectations of identity, which are core to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. Owning cultural strengths and history resulted in stronger resilience and pride:

_We will reduce suicide and self-harm and all the community distress by promoting equity, pride. We need to take messages of all that is good to everyone._ (Justice Roundtable Participant)

_Franz Fanon stated that the liberation struggle is suicide prevention. The best suicide prevention can be found in affirmative premises such as ‘always was Aboriginal land, always will be’. Such statements should be endorsed by every Aboriginal community in this nation._ (Justice Roundtable Participant)

_We have to get cultural-based healers into every community, on radio, social media, reaching everyone._ (Justice Roundtable Participant)

_Despite the misuse of the empowerment word, we have to be powerful and proud people. Our cultural identity should not be lowered to token. We have to resist this._ (Justice Roundtable Participant)

_We should never underestimate the need to continuing developing resilience among our people; there is so much to cope with._ (Justice Roundtable Participant)

Both the Framework and the Strategy emphasise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences are inevitably a reflection of the health of the culture of the whole nation, and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide is an issue for everyone – for affected individuals and families in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, for the wider community that provides a larger social context for the issues and for the departments and services who work to bring about positive change.

_We need to keep on getting out to the communities. In communities is where suicide prevention is needed. Suicide is not just a Black issue; it’s everyone’s issue. It has been brought on us. If a country is invaded and the existing population is deteriorated to an oppressed minority then wherever this occurs suicides will be disproportionate. It’s everyone’s issue, Black and White, to address._ (Justice Roundtable Participant)
Australia as a whole owns the issues that lead to the high rates of Indigenous suicide. We need to educate Australia about this and not just dump it on us. Awareness campaigns will lead to shared understanding and shared vision. We have to talk about everything that affects us to everyone, to the media, to schools, to government agencies, everywhere. We have to put positive programs, about feeling deadly, not shame. (Justice Roundtable Participant)

Attendees at the ATSISPEP Justice Roundtable, Healing Foundation, Canberra, 2015.

References


