100 Families WA

LOOKING THROUGH AN ABORIGINAL LENS:

Results Of The Ngalang Moort Wangkiny Project (100 Families Western Australia)

Supported by

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Acknowledgement of Country

Ngalla kaatitj.

Whadjuk Noongar Moort, keyen kaadak nidja boodja.

Ngalla ni wer kaartidjin.

In the spirit of *djurip* (reconciliation), The Centre for Social Impact at the University of Western Australia (CSI UWA) acknowledges that their operations are situated on Noongar *boodja* (land), and that the Noongar *moort* (people) remain the spiritual and cultural custodians of their land, and continue to practise their values, languages, beliefs, and knowledge. We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea, and community. We pay our respect to their elders and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Acknowledgements

Authors

This project was led by Glenda Kickett with support from Dr Tuguy Esgin and CSI UWA researchers Dr David O'Shaughnessy, Dr Leanne Lester, and Professor Paul Flatau.

Dr Tuguy Esgin
tuguy.esgin@uwa.edu.au

Dr David O'Shaughnessy
david.oshaughnessy@uwa.edu.au

Dr Leanne Lester
leanne.lester@uwa.edu.au

Professor Paul Flatau
paul.flatau@uwa.edu.au

Glenda Kickett
glenda.kickett@uwa.edu.au

The *100 Families WA* project

100 Families WA is a collaborative research project between Anglicare, Centrecare, Jacaranda Community Centre, Mercycare, Ruah Community Services, UnitingCare West, Wanslea, WACOSS and the University of Western Australia (Centre for Social Impact, the Social Policy Practice and Research Consortium and the School of Population and Global Health). *100 Families WA* has a commitment to ongoing engagement in the project of those with lived experience of poverty, entrenched disadvantage, and social exclusion.

The overarching goal of the project is to develop an ongoing evidence base on poverty, entrenched disadvantage and social exclusion in Western Australia that will be used by the policy and practice community in Western Australia. The aim is to assist in continuously over time understanding better the lives of those in low-income poverty, entrenched disadvantage and social exclusion; the impact and effectiveness of the community sector and government initiatives and service delivery processes; and what those in entrenched disadvantage see as important for positive change.

Address for Correspondence

Professor Paul Flatau

Director

Centre for Social Impact the University of Western Australia

Business School

The University of Western Australia

35 Stirling Hwy, Crawley, WA, 6009 Australia

paul.flatau@uwa.edu.au
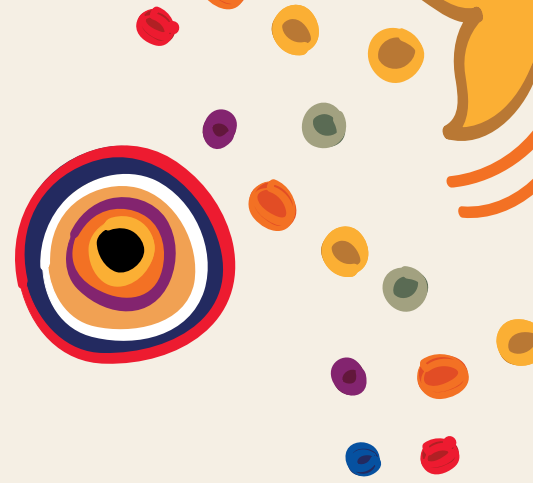
Centre for Social Impact

The Centre for Social Impact (CSI) is a national research and education centre dedicated to catalysing social change for a better world. CSI is built on the foundation of four of Australia's leading universities: UNSW Sydney, The University of Western Australia, Flinders University, and Swinburne University of Technology. Our research develops and brings together knowledge to understand current social challenges and opportunities; our postgraduate and undergraduate education develops social impact leaders; and we aim to catalyse change by drawing on these foundations and translating knowledge, creating leaders, developing usable resources, and reaching across traditional divides to facilitate collaborations.

Disclaimer

Centre for Social Impact Voice to Parliament Statement

The Centre for Social Impact (CSI) supported a "yes" vote in the referendum on a constitutionally enshrined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice.

In saying "yes" to the Voice, we affirmed our support for the Uluru Statement from the Heart and its call for substantive constitutional change and structural reform. The Voice referendum was a once-in-a-generation opportunity for Australians to shift our system for the better, to build a more equitable society and, in support of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, empower First Nations people to take a rightful place in leading their own future. Despite the result, we stand ready to not only continue, but to extend, our work in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in their journey for justice.

CSI is an unincorporated academic collaboration of the University of Western Australia, the University of New South Wales, Flinders University, and Swinburne University of Technology. The members of the CSI Executive Team make this statement in their individual capacities, and not on behalf of their employing universities.

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Introduction

Inspired by Auckland City Mission's Family 100 project (Hodgetts et al., 2013),[1] the *100 Families WA* project is a large-scale multi-year study that aims to deeply understand the experience of entrenched disadvantage (or hardship) in Perth, Western Australia. The project intends to not only promote *kadadjiny* (knowledge), *goolyara* (inclusion), *kadjininy* (understanding), and *koort-kadak* (empathy), but to translate research in ways that support effective policy change and positive transformation of everyday life. Situated within the broader 100 Families WA project is the *Ngalang Moort Wangkiny* (Our People Yarning) project, which aims to amplify the Aboriginal voices from 100 Families participants in a culturally secure way. The Aboriginal leadership of Ngalang Moort Wangkiny shows that we are not simply objects of study but active participants, leaders, and scholars working together to shed light on our strengths, resilience, and the challenges we face. This report concerns the Ngalang Moort project specifically, although comprehensive 100 Families reports (Callis et al., 2020; Phillips, Seivwright, Young, et al., 2021; Seivwright & Flatau, 2019a) and shorter bulletins (Phillips, Seivwright, Fisher, et al., 2021; Seivwright et al., 2019; Seivwright & Flatau, 2019b; Tighe et al., 2019) are available for greater detail on the broader study context and findings.

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1   https://www.aucklandcitymission.org.nz/

Research Approach

Wandjoo is a word meaning "welcome" in Noongar, but it is also a song often sung during gatherings and ceremonies to extend a warm welcome to all present. Yet Wandjoo is more than just a word or a song; it is a symbol of unity and inclusivity that underlines our culture's deep sense of community. By honouring and echoing the strains of Wandjoo, we are setting the tone for this report—a tone that signifies the respect and importance given to Noongar voices. This report is the result of Noongar leadership (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2020), and was developed through a perspective that celebrates our abilities, courage, and endurance, rather than highlighting our struggles. This approach focussed on strengths but did not involve overlooking challenges, ignoring history, or creating positive stereotypes; and it shifted the focus away from a deficit-based approach which would accentuate vulnerability, risk, and hardship (Askew et al., 2020; Brough, 2001; Bryant et al., 2021; Fogarty et al., 2018). The overall purpose of the Ngalang Moort project, grounded in Noongar values and worldview, was expressed by a Noongar researcher and co-author who concluded one of the group research sessions (yarning circles, see below) with the following:

"I just hope that we do your stories justice, and that we put your stories, your voices first in this project—because that's what's really important. We want to take this information through the university and present it to government. This is what Noongar people are saying in our community. This is what Aboriginal people are saying."

Data Sources

The analyses in this report were based on three primary sources:

- ▶ **Yarning circles:** "Yarning" here means a culturally appropriate group research method which seeks to privilege Aboriginal ways of being, knowing, and doing (Haebich & Kickett, 2018; Kennedy et al., 2022). The yarning circles were led by two Noongar researchers[2] and an Aboriginal elder, and involved around six family members[3] per session. The sessions lasted up to three hours and sought to draw out the perspectives of Aboriginal and Noongar family members, with an orientation towards finding out what is working in communities and services, and what needs changing.

- ▶ **100 Families surveys:** Three surveys were conducted over the years 2018–2019 (Baseline; *N* = 133), 2019–2020 (Wave 2; *N* = 72), and late 2020 (COVID-19; *N* = 32). These surveys included quantitative items concerning a wide range of social issues and personal variables, but also contained open-ended qualitative text response items. Unless otherwise stated, survey results in this report refer to Aboriginal family members only.

- ▶ **One-on-one interviews:** During the 100 Families study, a subset of the original 400 family members were randomly selected for ongoing fortnightly interview sessions (*N* = 123). Here we focus on the interview material for the Aboriginal family members from that subset (*n* = 23).

Methods of Analysis

The dataset we draw on for the Ngalang Moort project is rich in qualitative and quantitative material, but it is also complex. In our analytical efforts to distil and explain this complexity, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal investigators worked collaboratively, discussing and developing analytical directions in an iterative fashion, coming finally to a consensus on the material that we wished to present. These analyses were not guided by a desire for an exhaustive coverage of the data, but instead followed the Noongar authors' goal of amplifying the voices of the Aboriginal family members. For this reason, we combined our commitment to a strengths-based approach with an early analysis of word frequency in responses to the open-ended survey questions:

Figure 1: Most frequently used words in survey responses.

2 Co-authors of this report, T.E. and G.K.

3 "Family member" is the term used in 100 Families publications to refer to a research participant.

The *Figure 1* word cloud depicts the most frequently mentioned words in Aboriginal family members' survey responses, and we have structured this report around these key themes: home (accommodation and homelessness), people/family (social connection, family, and culture), work (employment and education), food (and food security), and health (physical and social/emotional wellbeing). These themes also align with family members' responses when asked about "the one thing that would make the biggest positive difference" in their lives: responses most often referenced a house and financial stability, as well as a job, good health and wellbeing, food, family, and friends. In the 100 Families WA Report (Phillips, Seivwright, Young, et al., 2021), one central insight was that families in entrenched disadvantage need support; and we therefore also consider the relation of help via support and services to our key themes, aiming to make the voices of the Aboriginal family members heard, and ultimately supporting those voices to effect positive change.
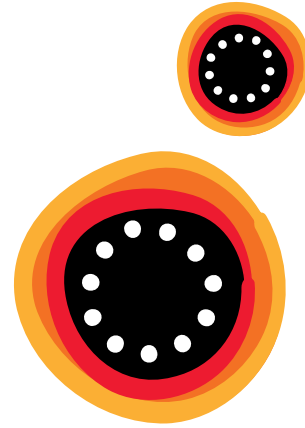
Glenda Kickett, leader of the Ngalang Moort Wangkiny Project

Reflecting on Aboriginal Leadership

It is worth noting that while the Ngalang Moort project was Aboriginal led, the overall 100 Families project design phase would have benefited from greater Aboriginal input in the early stages. For instance, Indigenous data sovereignty (Trudgett et al., 2022) is an important emerging issue that was not strongly considered at the outset, and the selection of items from the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey may have been implicitly guided by a deficit-model, leaving out modules that in hindsight would have been informative for a strengths-based analysis (e.g., Cultural Involvement/Education, Community Functioning, etc). As Noongar people, we value learning and growth, and we recognise these oversights and seek to address them in the future. Thus, in projects concerning Aboriginal people we stress the importance of involving Aboriginal leaders and community members actively from the outset, ensuring that their wisdom, lived experiences, cultural understanding, and priorities are integrated at each step (including research planning and design, data collection, analysis, and the dissemination of findings). For example, Whadjuk elder Lois May was included to help guide the discussions in a cultural manner. It is only through such inclusion that we can ensure our strengths, resilience, cultural practices, and the richness of our communities are rightfully acknowledged and celebrated.
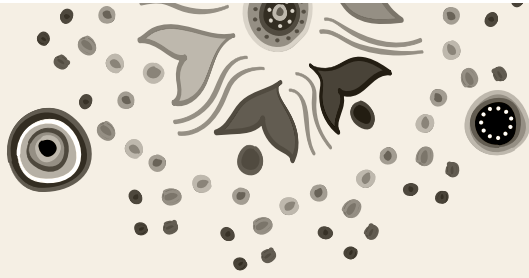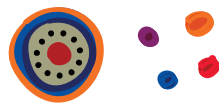
Chapter 1:

Family Members' Profile and Life Circumstances

Chapter 5 of the 100 Families WA Full Report (Phillips, Seivwright, Young, et al., 2021) outlines some of the "big picture" or macro-social developments that have disproportionate impacts on families living in entrenched disadvantage (i.e., hardship that is ongoing and difficult to break out of). These structural elements of life are not within the immediate control of individuals, and while they can be helpful (e.g., the existence of adequate social safety nets) they can also be harmful or present needless barriers (e.g., a "Work for the Dole" type scheme that enforces marginally meaningful work without imparting useful skills will feel punitive and demoralising). For Indigenous Australians, the structural situation is even more complex

when one considers the historical context of land invasion and colonisation (including violence and the inadvertent introduction of diseases), racism and policies of assimilation (including the forced removal of children from families) with associated intergenerational trauma, systemic discrimination, and the ongoing journey from political exclusion to inclusion (Host & Owen, 2009; Menzies, 2019; Oxenham et al., 2022; Reynolds, 2006).

While this bleak (although more recently hopeful) history is not the primary focus of this report, it is an important precursor to noting the overrepresentation of Aboriginal people (see Table 1) in the 100 Families sample—considered overall, 33% of family members at Baseline identified as Aboriginal, with just over 3% of the West Australian population identifying as Aboriginal (2021 Census; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). From an Aboriginal perspective, this overrepresentation is not surprising given that historical and ongoing injustices have led to significant disparities in health, education, employment, and housing for Indigenous peoples compared to non-Indigenous Australians. Despite this, Indigenous families have shown remarkable resilience and strength in the face of adversity, drawing on their cultural traditions, strong family and community connections, and deep spiritual connections to country.

Women were strongly overrepresented in the sample irrespective of Aboriginal status, possibly due to sampling bias as women are more likely to engage with services (Judd et al., 2008; Mursa et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2006), but also potentially due to the added burden of childcare that women often bear (Pressman, 2016), which would increase the need for service access in the first place. In support of this, Table 1 shows that family members with children were substantially more likely to be women (either single parents or partnered). Finally, Table 2 gives a sense of the difficulties often encountered for Aboriginal people in WA living in entrenched disadvantage: The number of Aboriginal people having ever experienced homelessness was disturbingly high, early home life issues (such as being in foster care or running away from home) were common, and incarceration rates were elevated. While family members did talk about these problems, their lives and families were not defined in terms of such issues; and as will be seen, there was a strong sense of community and strength that was particular to the Aboriginal family members. In Chapter 2 we explore these Aboriginal strengths more fully, but below we first give an overview of what family members' lives were like with respect to the key areas that they discussed (see *Figure 1*).

Table 1: Basic demographics for surveys.

	Baseline (N = 400)					
	Aboriginal (*n* = 133)			Non-Aboriginal (*n* = 267)		
	Female	*Male*	*Total*	*Female*	*Male*	*Total*[4]
N	99 (74%)	34 (26%)	133 (100%)	178 (67%)	87 (33%)	267 (100%)
Mean age	48	44	45	44	46	44
Household composition[5]						
Single adult	17 (13%)	15 (11%)	32 (24%)	33 (12%)	43 (16%)	76 (28%)
Two or more adults without children	19 (14%)	8 (6%)	27 (20%)	28 (10%)	21 (8%)	49 (18%)
Single adult with children	34 (26%)	3 (2%)	37 (28%)	63 (24%)	5 (2%)	68 (25%)
Two or more adults with children	28 (21%)	6 (5%)	34 (26%)	51 (19%)	14 (5%)	65 (24%)
	Wave 2 (N = 255)[6]					
	Aboriginal (*n* = 72)			Non-Aboriginal (*n* = 183)		
	Female	*Male*	*Total*	*Female*	*Male*	*Total*[7]
N	51 (71%)	21 (29%)	72 (100%)	133 (73%)	49 (27%)	183 (100%)
Mean age	44	50	46	45	49	46
	COVID (N = 158)					
	Aboriginal (*n* = 32)			Non-Aboriginal (*n* = 126)		
	Female	*Male*	*Total*	*Female*	*Male*	*Total*[8]
N	23 (72%)	9 (28%)	32 (100%)	91 (72%)	34 (27%)	126 (100%)
Mean age	59	49	54	49	45	47

Table 2: Frequency of adverse life experiences.

Adverse life experiences	Aboriginal Baseline (*n* = 133)	Non-Aboriginal Baseline (*n* = 267)
Had the family member ever...		
... been homeless.	78 (59%)	129 (48%)
... run away from home before turning 18.	59 (44%)	111 (42%)
... been in foster/out-of-home care.	56 (42%)	41 (15%)
... been in prison as an adult.	44 (33%)	47 (18%)
... been evicted from home.	41 (31%)	75 (28%)
... been in juvenile detention.	33 (25%)	15 (6%)
... had children removed from their care.	24 (18%)	49 (18%)

4   Additionally, there were two family members identifying as neither male nor female in the Baseline sample.

5   Some missing data means that total percentages for household composition fall just short of 100%.

6   Loss from Baseline to Wave 2 was 36%, making it difficult to draw longitudinal inferences sample-wide, as selection bias could be a strong factor in determining who took part in Wave 2 (i.e., those who were not doing well would be more likely to have dropped out of the study).

7   One family member identifying as neither male nor female was in the Wave 2 sample (but is not presented in a separate column in the table).

8   One family member identifying as neither male nor female was in the COVID sample (but is not presented in a separate column in the table).

Accommodation (Maya) and Homelessness (Maya-boort)

"Housing's the main issue, on our own land. On First Nation's land. Homelessness is the main thing."

Homelessness is a growing problem in Western Australia (and Australia more broadly; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021; Flatau et al., 2021), and it is no surprise that those with the least (materially) are often hit the hardest. Housing is such a basic need that it was a frequent response to questions like "What do you need to be safe and well?". Respondents identified shelter (a "roof", "house", or "home") as something that they needed for their families, for instance through the security afforded by home ownership: "I'd like to own my own home, so I'd know that we always have a roof over our heads". While the idea of home ownership on an open market has been largely internalised throughout society as necessary, it raises feasibility questions under conditions of growing inequality, spiralling housing prices, and thus a lack of affordable housing. Yet irrespective of the causes, a systemic failure to house significant portions of the population will carry substantial social costs (Berry et al., 2003; Box et al., 2022; Steen, 2018; Zaretzky and Flatau, 2013). In fact, the systemic nature of the problem was a discussion point in one of the yarning circles: "Excuse me, you've been to Melbourne, Sydney, and all that. Do you see people laying around the streets like Perth, the same? Same thing?", which prompted broad agreement that homelessness was indeed the same in the larger cities, or had already advanced to a worsened state: "They were like where we [Perth] are now 20, 30 years ago". Sadly, the ground-level realities of these failures were described by some family members when discussing negative changes that had occurred from Baseline (2018–2019) to Wave 2 (2019–2020):

" I went through hell and back, left without a home, my partner went back to [interstate], I'd been living on the street, it was awful. Me and my daughter always get bashed up on the street. "

" I was homeless. My daughter was raped. I had to move three times. I was attacked in January and was in and out of hospital for five months. I had a tracheotomy because of the attack. "

" To help keep a job I need a home to come and go to work from; so I have a routine. Currently my daughter is not staying with me in the park, she is living with her sister as that is far more stable for her as she needs to attend high school. However, I spend a lot of my time going from food supply places (like churches) to bring food for my daughter and son. It's all about having stability and having a place to have my family back as a one unit. This is heartbreaking. "

Aboriginal family members were often aware of the realities of homelessness, with over half having experienced it personally at some point in their lives (59%). In terms of accommodation the night before the survey (Baseline), 83% were stably housed, 10% were only marginally housed, and a further 7% had slept rough. However, between Baseline and Wave 2 there were also positive stories from those who had found stable housing:

"I got a new house from Homeswest, and I manage with food and struggle less with daily life. I have more support from other people."

"I'm coping better with my medication and mental condition; I've found stable accommodation close to my children's school and their friends. I've progressed in terms of my endeavours to seek meaningful employment."

"Have a roof over my head. Diabetes has become better. I feel better physically and mentally."

The difficulty of life without stable housing cannot be overstated, and instability or outright homelessness will affect many of areas of life, including individually, in families, and society more broadly. It is for these reasons that a family member could say that the one thing which would make the biggest difference in their life was simply *"having a place to call home and not having to stress out about where or when I can sleep"*.

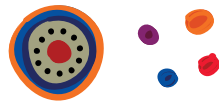# Family (Moort) and Social Connection (Moort yoodaniny)

Family (Moort)

The notion of family in Noongar culture is more expansive than its Western counterpart, as it connects with community and the broader natural world, being grounded in a deep respect for the interconnectedness of all living things and the importance of maintaining strong relationships and connections to the land and its resources. The Noongar perspective on the importance of community over family—and family over the individual—highlights the interconnected nature of these relationships. By prioritising the needs of the community and family, Noongar people foster a sense of belonging, resilience, and wellbeing. Indeed, when asked "What does a good day look like for you?", responses very frequently focused on the importance of time spent with family, coupled with a stable and nurturing environment:

"A good day for me is when the sun shines. Helping someone in some way or form. My children and grandchildren are well, and food and bills are sorted out in my home."

"A good day is every day lately for me. I'm happy because I've got a home and my grandchildren around me. And even though we struggle we survive."

"Sun is shining, kids are happy, and there are three meals plus snacks for the day, bus fare and money for a family outing to the park for a picnic or zoo or pools; something fun for us."

"When I wake up in the morning, I always thank God for another day. I am fortunate to have a roof over my head and family that I love and to be thankful for what I have."

Overall, Aboriginal family members tended to report a higher number of people in their families when compared with non-Aboriginal respondents. The resilience that this offers is linked to *moort yoodaniny* (social connection), which represents a multi-dimensional connection between past, present, and future generations, fostering unity, respect, and reciprocal responsibility. A good day in this context is marked not only by personal achievements but also by nurturing relationships, participating in community activities, and responsibly caring for country.

However, juxtaposed with the centrality of family were shockingly high rates of state intervention, with 81% reporting that a relative had ever been "removed from their family by welfare or the government or taken away to a mission or hostel". These responses were not necessarily referring to more distant past events (Dowling, 2014; Haebich, 2015), as grandparents/great grandparents accounted for only 15% of removals; moreover, 58% of Aboriginal family members had themselves experienced some form of removal (along with 44% having run away from home before turning 18, pointing to often unstable home conditions for those in entrenched disadvantage). Additionally, experiences of domestic violence were pervasive in the life histories of 100 Families family members (irrespective of Aboriginal status), with around 4 in 5 having experienced it at some point (either as a victim or perpetrator). The overrepresentation of women seems to be the key factor here, who are disproportionately the victims of domestic violence (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021-22).

Yet despite these difficulties and a history of damaging relations with the state since colonial occupation (Haebich, 2011, 2015; Host & Owen, 2009; Oxenham et al., 2022), family were very often described as a source of happiness:

" When my granddaughter is happy, I am happy. My children are older and are less of a burden, wake up with a smile and hear the birds singing. Happiness for myself and my grandson. "

"Getting up and having a good breakfast. Waking up with a smile on my face. Getting my kids off to school with a smiley face. Everyone happy. Happy to see them when they get home. "

"Grateful to be alive, taking niece to school, doing chores, having a beer and relaxing and having a laugh with family. "

"Seeing my children smiling is a good day for me. "

Supporting the necessities that family members talked about the most: housing, food, work, education, health, family—and the Aboriginal cultures which connect the community—will in turn support the conditions needed for a greater number of these "good days" with family.

Social Connection (Moort yoodaniny)

We want to touch on the importance of social connection more broadly, which has a unique character with respect to Aboriginal family members. In Noongar culture, social connection is a deeply valued concept that emphasises the importance of relationships, kinship ties, and mutual support within the community (Dudgeon et al., 2023). It is seen as essential to maintaining balance and harmony within the community, and is rooted in a deep respect for the land, its resources, and the spiritual and cultural traditions that have sustained Noongar people for thousands of years. Social connection is often expressed through ceremonies, storytelling, and other cultural practices that bring people together and reinforce a sense of community and belonging. Noongar kinship systems also express the centrality of social connection, as they govern social interactions, marriage, inheritance, and other important aspects of life within Noongar society.

Connection to Boodjar (Country)

For the Noongar people, resilience is deeply intertwined with their profound spiritual and cultural connection to their Boodjar. This relationship with the land is not merely physical but also encompasses a deep emotional and spiritual bond, which provides strength and sustenance in times of adversity.

In all their diversity and adaptation to changing circumstance, Noongar and Australian Aboriginal cultures more widely can not only claim the remarkable achievement of having thrived on the continent for tens of thousands of years (Malaspinas et al., 2016), but have also resisted comparatively more recent colonial attempts to extinguish or "assimilate" them completely (Oxenham et al., 2022). Indeed, family

members spoke positively about being strong in culture, and as previously mentioned, connection can be extended beyond people to include land: For example, 81% of respondents considered one or more areas to be their traditional country, and even though only 41% were currently living on it, almost all family members were allowed to visit their traditional country. Also frequently mentioned in connection to Noongar culture was an orientation towards helping and sharing in community, and some of the responses to questions about helping strangers were impressive considering the very limited means available to most family members:

"I gave money to a stranger in the city begging in a wheelchair with no legs to show my granddaughters that even if we shop at a food bank, we can still offer a little support to others in need."

"Helping with providing groceries to neighbours who couldn't afford it and decipher their bills, since they can't speak or read English very well, makes me feel happy. I think community is of utmost importance, we should be helpful to others. Everyone can do something for their community."

"I saw some homeless people in the park, in the street in Perth, I told them where I live and welcomed them to my place to have a cup of tea and have a chat."

Conversely, receiving help highlighted the need that exists for community and support, and responses indicated that even something small could be memorable and make a positive impact:

"A guy paid a checkout bill for me one day. I didn't have enough. It made me feel very good and I have done it for a young mum with children."

"I have lots of people who champion me in lots of ways. This has opened up amazing opportunities and is the reason my life continues to get better despite my financial situation remaining inadequate to meet my family's basic needs."

*"People who sit down and have a yarn with me. They ask me what my problems are and how they can help."*

"A stranger opened the door for me, I felt good.

"All the nurses look after me and help me, talk to me when I'm crying, and it makes me feel better."

"My neighbour gave me some cuttings from her frangipani. I was so excited like a child I kept checking to see if they were flowering."

When we consider Aboriginal strengths more fully in Chapter 2, it will be seen that social connection is embedded in the cultural practices and relations which in turn create strength and resilience.
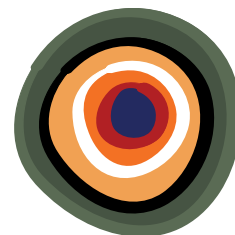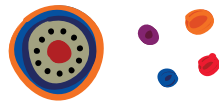
Work (Yaka)

Although most family members (at Baseline) were either out of the labour force (71%) or were unemployed and seeking work (20%), one of the insights from the 100 Families project was the extent to which people in entrenched disadvantage contribute to their communities in ways other than paid employment (e.g., through child-care and family support). Still, many family members expressed a desire for work, for instance in response to being asked what would help them "get their life to where they want it":

> "A home so I didn't need to live in the park and to live as a family again. I love my kids. Once I am stable and have a routine, I could get work. I like to work."

> "Getting work and securing work is challenging, I don't have the best work history, but I am keen to work and learn even though I have less experience than others."

> "I would like to work with people and give back what I have experienced in my life as an Aboriginal person to do the things that would make me feel happy and motivated, and to give those who haven't got the things that I have in my life. That would be a wonderful opportunity to make life a better place to be."

Others stressed the importance of *meaningful* work, and the empowerment that can come from that:

> "Voluntary work no longer meets job network requirements unless you are on Work for the Dole and placement is usually with an op-shop. This completely dictates what a person needs to grow their confidence and build skillsets in a meaningful way that is empowering and, in my experience, leads to building a better life for oneself."

> "I enjoy working, I'm thinking about going down to less days due to my age, but I really enjoy it. It's a really good environment here, I help the younger ones and the students, it doesn't matter what colour or background."

> "Working has helped me become sober and made me realise that I am a person who deserves a fair chance."

> "Doing this survey is a positive thing so that you can understand what we go through and me being able to talk about it. Getting a job has been good. It's been good to help and understand people like me."

Barriers to work (Nangin-ak yaka)

However, even when there is a desire to work, obtaining it is not always possible. In terms of perceived barriers, the most commonly reported were illness and disability, family or childcare responsibilities, and a lack of available jobs. Discrimination was also discussed, including direct experiences:

> "I was the only Aboriginal guy [at work], and all you heard from the people, you know you never heard it [racism] from the boss and the manager and that, just from the other ones [...] I felt I couldn't quit my job, and I had no Centrelink payment and needed some way to hold my income. [...] So, I took this [racism] for weeks on end, just listening to blah blah blah this, Aboriginals, blah blah blah that. I'm thinking well if I try and say something, it's me against all of them, you know what I mean?"

Education was also mentioned as a barrier (with around half of family members not having completed high school), sometimes in conjunction with negative racial stereotypes:

> "But sometimes wadjelas [white people] gotta look at it this way, but they don't: Hey, that Noongar person, I could see him go for a job a lot of times, but you're not educated, so you push back. [...] And you're pushed away because you're Noongar, 'Nah you don't know anything' and all this and that. But I can give credit to the people that have got a job and are working now, yeah."

These structural issues are often difficult to understand for those that have not experienced them personally, as they are rendered invisible through a lack of experience. Thus a rhetoric of personal choice and blame becomes easier to invoke, yet there were stories of barriers to work that were clearly imposed upon the individual:

"I was removed from home at 14 and a half and I'd just finished year 8, the native welfare guy promised my mother they'd let me finish school and get into an apprenticeship of my choice. They took me to a boys' hostel and on arrival there was no mention of me being enrolled in a local school. Instead, they found me a job in a sheet metal factory and put me to work. [...] When I spoke to [the foreman] about a formal apprenticeship he said I couldn't do it because I hadn't finished year 10. I've always resented not being able to finish my schooling and to get an apprenticeship— even though I was taught the skills I didn't have the paperwork. [...] Later I worked in community health for 8 and a half years, had good people in there who helped me. Did lots of courses including literacy and proper letter and report writing."

As in the above quote, the accessibility of effective training and education was highlighted by respondents with respect to support in finding work, and some positive stories emerged around this theme at Wave 2:

"A lot of positive changes in my life such as doing study about Indigenous foundation skills which help me to understand about life in general."

"I've completed an enabling course through the Centre for Aboriginal Studies which has allowed me to build the confidence to attempt a bachelor's degree. Money is still so very much a feature in the daily stress of my life but at 43 and possibly the first time in my life I feel excited, empowered, and hopeful for the future."

Aboriginal and intercultural work (Aboriginal kadadjiny-ak nyidiyang kaditj djinanginy)

Cultural Identity and Practices

Cultural traditions, language, and customs are integral to Noongar resilience. The transmission of knowledge across generations, the nurturing of a strong cultural identity, and the practice of cultural rituals enhance a sense of belonging, reinforce identity, and foster resilience.

One promising finding was the growth of work opportunities through Aboriginal-controlled organisations:

"Through talking to people I'm finding out that there are more Noongar and Aboriginal businesses starting up, and more keep coming; whether it's from mining, whether it's from Main Roads, health [...] there's more and more out there and I think that's a really good thing."

Related to this is the concept of intercultural work (such as cultural performance), which was seen by the same participant as presenting an opportunity:

"My thing I'm doing is going out and teaching, and don't necessarily have to be Noongars, because if you look here everybody is from different country [...] I teach them about who they are and what they are, and they can make a thing out of it, profit, market, or they can do that, because I said there's a lot of people crying out for an Aboriginal experience. I said you can do it, if you know your land, you can do a tour guide; if you know how to dance you can go out and dance; if you know to talk properly you can do a welcome to country."

Finally, there was concern expressed around exploitation in these contexts, which seems especially relevant when the cultural centrality of sharing and community interfaces with the bureaucratic and impersonal logic of the state and
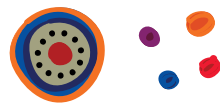
market. For instance, people were familiar with the idea that intercultural work (such as dancing) should be done for free because *"that's our culture, sharing and caring"*, but others argued that economic realities mean such work needs to be recognised and compensated:

> *"My boys dance, they got their own dance with their dad and older brother and that, and they said, 'Do it for your culture'. Well they're already doing that, but they've also got rent to contribute to, they're people that need food on the table, just like any other job. It's like, there's no shame in saying, 'Hey, we deserve to be paid what we're worth'."*

Income and financial pressure (Boya wer nyit boya)

Given the low rates of employment, the high cost of living, and the meagre income stream afforded by social benefits (Davidson et al., 2022; Services Australia, 2019), financial pressures were predictably high for family members. In the year prior to the Baseline survey, large percentages of family members had been unable to pay bills on time (71%), were forced to seek financial help from welfare organisations (72%) or family and friends (53%), had gone without meals (50%), or had needed to pawn or sell personal items (46%). Accordingly, family members suffer from a deprivation relative to many other Australians, where they often do not have access to things that are widely considered to be essential. For example, many family members did not have: (a) access to new school clothes each year (62%), (b) the ability to participate in school trips that cost money (64%), (c) the ability to pay for a regular leisure activity for children (51%), (d) yearly dental check-ups for children (52%) or dental treatment when needed (45%), or (e) Internet access at home (59%). Finally, as almost no family members had access to even $500 in savings for an emergency (just 7 people, or 5% had access to savings), it follows that most people reported having experienced negative effects due to debt worry, for example through an inability to sleep (74%), stress-related illness (69%), family fights (51%), or relationship breakdown (45%). Yet even though stress is often linked to substance abuse risk, family members were largely in the low-risk category,[9] with the exception of tobacco.

While there is a public perception that people on benefits either receive too much or waste their money, we found that family members on benefits were more concerned about simply surviving. At the time of the Baseline survey data collection (2018–2019), the average full-time adult weekly earnings in Australia were around $1,600. In contrast, unemployment benefits were closer to $278 (Services Australia, 2019).[10] When asked what they would buy if they were given $100, nearly all responses referred to essentials: food (80%), clothes (14%), fuel (10%), and bills (7%). An interesting test case was provided in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic (Callis, 2020; Davidson et al., 2023) when various benefit payments were temporarily raised above the relative poverty line for the first time in years,[11] providing an extra $550 per fortnight. Family members who received this often spoke of dramatic effects:

> *"It's helped out a lot to survive and pay bills and make sure I have enough food and clothes. It's going to affect my life more when it is gone."*

> *"It's made it better as I can get on top of food and paying bills I'm behind in; made life a lot more comfortable."*

> *"It just meant I had more income. I wasn't spending as much during the pandemic, so I was able to save more money. It's helped me be able to move house."*

> *"New furniture and stocking up on food and essentials. Assisting with bills and getting ahead and renew my car rego and licence."*

> *"It's been awesome. I've been able to buy to stuff that I usually can't get. First payment I spent just $400 on food; bought stuff I usually wouldn't get."*

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9   Measured using the World Health Organisation's Alcohol, Smoking and Substance Involvement Screening Test (ASSIST).

10   Newstart Allowance (renamed to JobSeeker Payment in 2020) in July 2019 was $555.70 per fortnight for a single unemployed person without dependent children, or $601.10 with dependent children.

11   Through the government's Coronavirus Supplement that began on the 27th of April 2020.

"It was a really big help because I could get more food and bills were paid. I now have Internet in the house."

"Helped out dramatically to buy food and essentials and more clothing."

It is notable that such changes, especially for essential items, were reported from what is effectively a slice of the average Australian weekly earnings.

Food (Mereny)

"To be safe and well I need a secure home, healthy relationships, and healthy meals."

It is difficult to think of needs much more basic than food, and a lack of access to adequate food is not a matter of relative poverty (the character of which will depend upon overall economic development), but rather absolute poverty. Yet we report extremely high rates of food insecurity among adult family members (84%) and to a lesser degree, but still far too high, children (55%). It is no wonder then that 80% of family members would buy food if given just $100. Even ignoring food quality, 12% of family members reported not having access to a single substantial meal at least once a day. The importance of food is so immediately obvious that there is little need to outline the negative individual and social consequences of food insecurity and an ongoing lack of access to healthy food.

Health and Wellbeing (Wangen)

"To have good health. It is the most important thing in life."

It is easy to see that the prominent themes for family members thus far—accommodation, family and social connection, work and income, and food—are all interrelated and bear directly on health, whether considered at the individual, family, community, or national levels. Despite a relatively young average age (45 years; *SD* = 13), family members at baseline suffered from an average of four chronic health conditions (*SD* = 3), with the most prominent being dental (67%), vision (56%), and back problems (53%); followed by asthma (47%), hypertension (43%), diabetes (39%), and arthritis (36%). The rate of diabetes at 39% was particularly high for Aboriginal family members, with 12% of non-Aboriginal family members in comparison reporting a diabetes diagnosis. Overall, the prevalence of chronic health conditions for family members was very high compared to Australian population averages (2020–2021), with back problems (16%), arthritis (12%), asthma (11%), and diabetes (5%) all being considerably lower at the national level (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020–21).

In terms of emotional wellbeing, family members' average scores on a screening instrument for depression, anxiety, and stress[12] were in the normal to mild range, although a substantial percentage (28%) could be classified as suffering from severe or extremely severe anxiety, which was more common than similarly categorised stress (10%), or depression (14%). Given the hardships often described for family members—including significant chronic health burdens—these scores are lower than expected. Notably, emotional wellbeing scores were generally better for the Aboriginal family members in comparison to non-Aboriginal family members. Particularly interesting were results on a brief quality of life measure,[13] which indicated poor wellbeing for 38% of Aboriginal family members, versus poor wellbeing for 65% of non-Aboriginal family members. While 38% of a sample having poor wellbeing is in one sense high, it is also remarkable when considered in the context of 100 Families, and it pointed to Aboriginal strengths that we sought to further explain in Chapter 2.

Holistic Wellbeing

The Noongar perspective sees resilience as part of a broader, holistic concept of wellbeing, encompassing the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of life. These elements are seen as interconnected, each contributing to the overall resilience and wellbeing of the individual and the community.

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12 The Depression Anxiety and Stress Scales (DASS; 21-item version).

13 The World Health Organisation Five Well-Being Index (WHO-5).

resilience scores closer to Australian general community scores, whereas non-Aboriginal scores were similar to those seen in Australian refugee samples (Ziaian et al., 2012).
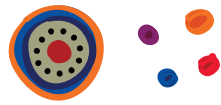
Strength

Strength in Noongar culture could be understood as the ability to overcome adversity, maintain cultural heritage, support the community, and sustain a strong connection to country. It is often seen as a collective rather than an individual characteristic, embodied in community resilience and cultural preservation.

Resilience

Noongar resilience could be understood as a holistic, collective, and dynamic process that goes beyond the individual's ability to bounce back from adversity. It is grounded in the community, the land (*boodjar*), and spiritual and cultural practices.

Chapter 2:

Aboriginal Strengths and Resilience

Combined with the disturbingly high rates of family removal and the often difficult life circumstances and pressures outlined in the previous chapter, the relatively higher rates of social and emotional wellbeing that we also found may appear puzzling—particularly if a deficit model were to dominate the analytical process. Yet in accord with a strengths-based approach, we examined scores on a measure of resilience and found that Aboriginal family members had higher scores on average (72) than non-Aboriginal family members (62).[14] Put qualitatively, this is a medium-sized difference. Using available population data for further comparison, the Aboriginal family members had

Despite being exposed to (a) the high incidence of adversity that was common across nearly all 100 Families family members; and (b) certain adverse experiences that were even higher for Aboriginal family members (e.g., family removals, incarceration, and health issues such as diabetes), we found evidence for a base of strength and resilience that was reflected in various measures of social and emotional wellbeing, as well as in resilience scores directly.[15] These differences are notable and support the value of a strengths-based approach, but the more important point is in explaining how these differences are brought about socially, which is a basic prerequisite in developing services and social relations that can better support and foster Aboriginal strengths (Askew et al., 2020). The yarning circles were crucial in developing our perspectives, and a co-investigator summed up their unique value during one of the sessions:

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14   The Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC) is a measure of psychological resilience, but it could be improved upon for use with Australian Indigenous peoples (Gorman et al., 2021). We used the 25-item CD-RISC, but also compared with Gorman et al.'s 6-item CD-RISC scale, finding that the significant differences remained. Notably, the CD-RISC takes an individualistic perspective on resilience, and instruments which acknowledge socio-cultural resilience may be more appropriate (see Robinson et al., 2022).

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15   We explored these relationships using regression modelling (not reported here) to control for the influence of other plausible explanatory variables such as age, gender, and income: We found that the positive and significant relationship between Indigenous identity and resilience (as well social and emotional wellbeing scores) still held after taking these other factors into account.

" *We have stories that are sad stories, but there's a lot of strength in our stories, and you just demonstrated that again for me today. There are so many strengths in our families and our culture and, you know, there's something for us to be really proud of; we're still here, we're still strong, we're surviving—we get up every day, we send our kids to school, and we look after our grannies, and that's part of our culture, to look after each other and care for each other. And I just love hearing everybody's story, and that you opened your hearts up and shared your story with us too.* "

In thinking about resilience and strength, there are two pitfalls that we wanted to avoid: The first is presenting Aboriginal people as a homogenised group, which summaries of survey and statistical data tend towards, and which can be damaging even when intentions are good (Fogarty et al.,

2018). In reality there is a great deal of cultural and linguistic diversity amongst Aboriginal Australians, keeping in mind that culture is something living which is constantly being created and recreated, even as it is shaped by the past (Colbung, 1980). The second pitfall is conceptualising resilience as an individual factor free of historical or social context. Considered as a purely cognitive factor, resilience becomes a mental attribute which individuals either do or do not possess, and it can paradoxically fuel a deficit discourse where a lack of resilience or self-discipline is blamed for the problems which currently affect Aboriginal Australians disproportionately. In contrast, we took a socio-cultural perspective on resilience where the focus is less about individual attributes, and more about social practices, shared identity, and relations (Bryant et al., 2021; Kickett, 2011). The benefit of such a focus was immediately apparent from engaging with the yarning circle discussions, and to structure our reporting in this chapter we developed a simple conceptual model (*Figure 2*) which outlines the key aspects of Aboriginal strength and resilience, as we understand it.
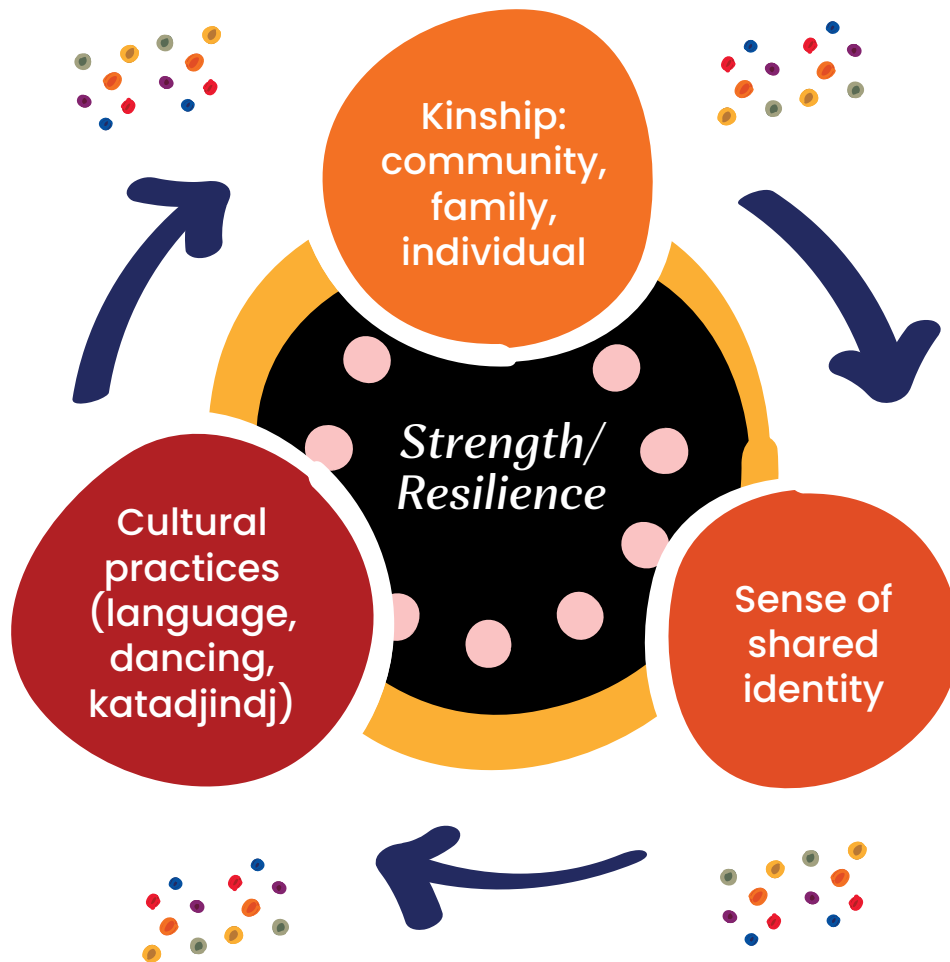

Figure 2: Key aspects of Aboriginal strength and resilience (katadjindj is "deep listening").

The Noongar Historical Context (Noongar kwedjang kaditj)

"[We] have discovered there is very limited knowledge on Aboriginal Australia and the Aboriginal history that we have in this State. So, for the momentum of positive change to continue, we must first acknowledge and understand the history and life experiences of those that have come before us."
(Oxenham et al., 2022)

Prior to discussing each aspect of Aboriginal strength and resilience in *Figure 2*, we first situate that strength historically. The focus is on Noongar history, given that data for the project was collected in Perth (i.e., on Whadjuk Noongar lands).

Since the Swan River Colony was established on Noongar lands in 1829, Aboriginal people in Western Australia have had their relationship to land and culture altered by force. This occurred through complex histories of exploitation, dispossession, violence, disease, and the intentional disruption of traditional life through racist assimilation policies enabling the physical removal of children from families—with openly stated eugenicist goals in the 1930s of erasing the Aboriginal population over a series of generations (Haebich, 2015; Oxenham et al., 2022). Yet throughout these pressures and assaults (of particular intensity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries), Noongar people have adapted and maintained their culture and its diversity despite popular notions of cultural loss (Birdsall, 1990; Collard, 1996). Indeed, when stakeholder interests are potentially threatened (e.g., native title claims), it is narratives of total cultural loss (perversely implying a cultural genocide) that have been mobilised by the state and interested capital (Host & Owen, 2009). Yet on close examination, Host and Owen (2009) found that:

From 1829 onwards, Noongar people demonstrated a remarkable capacity for adaptation and a fierce determination to maintain the fundamentals of traditional law and custom: kinship, attachment to country and the principle of sharing. (p. 234)

While we found that these elements all play a role in Aboriginal strength and resilience, we provided the very brief outline above to anchor the discussion historically: both the overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in 100 Families WA and Aboriginal resilience occur within a structural set of conditions that are unavoidably marked by a settler-colonial process imposed some 200 years ago (Colbung, 1980; Haebich & Kickett, 2018). Detailed knowledge of the negative consequences of the colonial process has generally not been widely dispersed in Australia (Haebich, 2011), but such aspects were mentioned by family members, either through direct family experience:

The reason why we're in Perth of course, my mum's Stolen Generation, um, she was taken when she was 6, so were her brothers and sisters. For no good reason obviously, just because they had a wadjela [white] dad, so, assimilation.

Or through documentary sources:

Another video I saw, they were on a beach, and they had them all in a line, with chains there, they had them like animals, pulling them along. No. I don't like seeing stuff like that, it can affect you really bad. And people always say, 'Oh but you were taken away as a baby', I said 'No, you know what, I don't even want to talk about that', because we were lucky, my mum kept us all alone. What I saw at TAFE, I, I just, don't even want to talk about that.

And at other times, anger was expressed at the injustice of invasion:

I'm not in that person's yard, I'm not harming you, I'm talking my own Noongar way, and we're told to shut up and not disrupt [...] You're on First Nations land. I want to live the way I want; I don't think the government can understand that—you come and invaded our country, we didn't go over there!

Yet an acknowledgement of such harms did not preclude hope or the recognition of positive change that has occurred (Oxenham et al., 2022), as one yarning circle participant noted:

> "One good thing, today, right, we all have a voice. Whereas years ago, we never were able to speak up for ourselves. So now, speak your mind, whatever you want to do."

Considered broadly, this ability to speak (and be heard) has enabled an ongoing revalorisation and recognition of the importance of Aboriginal forms of knowledge, seen for example in health (Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council Aboriginal Corporation, 2022; Panzironi, 2013), land care (Steffensen, 2020), and Aboriginal ways of knowing more broadly (Yunkaporta, 2019). In terms of the Ngalang Moort project, family members noted positive developments with respect to an increasing interest in Aboriginal culture, and below we discuss some of the practices and relations that maintain culture, and accordingly contribute to a uniquely Aboriginal source of strength and resilience (Verbunt et al., 2021).

Shared Identity (Walak-walak kaditj yang)

> "Noongars survived as a people by holding on to what they could: their traditions, their principles and each other."
> (Host & Owen, 2009)

Through telling their stories and yarning, Aboriginal family members displayed a strong sense of shared identity. This shared identity was multifaceted, and at different turns was expressed in terms of place, history, skin colour, or family. For example, sometimes a sense of shared identity was expressed directly as an attribute of ethnicity: "We mob don't care where you come from, but we're all mob. Black. We all black. That's what I think", or through an appreciation of an Aboriginal and shared emotional intelligence and understanding, "See that's what I love about black fellas, you know? We feel what each other feels, lovely". Because the yarning circles were Aboriginal led and provided a culturally appropriate research setting, they allowed Aboriginal ways of being and relating
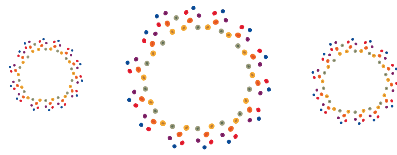
Community and Moort (Family)

Resilience is embedded within the collective ethos of the Noongar people. The strength and resilience of the community are emphasised, where the wellbeing of the Moort is seen as integral to individual resilience. Strong kinship ties, community support, and collective responsibility often serve as a cushion during times of stress or hardship.

to arise naturally. It was evident then from the various personal introductions that the self was a social concept; in fact, as a personal introduction one family member spoke at length about family relations, geographical histories, and movements, and ended their introduction with "So that's me"—with barely any talk of the "self" as it might usually be conceived of in a wadjela context. One family member talked about this explicitly:

"This is how our people—like we meet total strangers, but then we communicate in a way that we find out who's who, and find out that they're linked-in to a family."

Of course, as we have noted, culture is not static and there are complexities and contested notions, including that of identity and place:

"I was born in Perth, so what does that make me? No, well I'm a Noongar from Perth. That's it. You know? They're like, 'Oh you come from down south that's your country all that there', but I was born here. So I think that this is my country too. But then you get a lot of Noongars that disagree. [...] But I'm a Perth girl, as far as I'm concerned. So I'm both, I'm from here and I'm from there [her mother's country].*"*

Kinship, Community, and Family (Moranga wer boola-moort)

As outlined in the previous chapter, a healthy and supportive family was often anchored to family members' expressions of happiness and contentment:

"A good day is when I get to see my family, being reunited with them. Having support from my mother and my sisters. Knowing that I'm on top of things."

"Waking up to my children, knowing that they are healthy and happy. Having family helping and people being happy."

But Aboriginal notions of family are more expansive than the nuclear family concept (Dodson, 1994). Birdsall (1990) for example noted that the Noongar

use of the word "family" had a variety of meanings, ranging from the children of the speaker through to much larger kin groups (where the word "mob" might also be employed), and further that the language of kinship could be extended to include land and even animals. Oxenham et al. (2022) describe Noongar kinship as an "extended matrix of family relationships and responsibilities" (p. 33) which establish one's identity and relationship to land, as well as being an important vehicle for cultural strength. Maintaining this centrality of family resists the kinds of social atomisation that lead to isolation and loneliness, and we found in our survey data that Aboriginal family members were less likely than non-Aboriginal family members to feel that they were lacking companionship, isolated from others, or "left out". In a similar vein, Table 3 shows that Aboriginal family members were significantly more likely to have someone to call on for support during a crisis.

Table 3: Crisis support outside of the home (at baseline).

Question	Percentage of "yes" responses	
If you needed to, could you ask someone who does not live with you for any of these types of support in a time of crisis?	Aboriginal (*n* = 123)	Non-Aboriginal (*n* = 239)
Help out when you have a serious illness or injury?	88%	66%
Help in maintaining family or work responsibilities?	75%	51%
Provide emergency money?	60%	42%
Provide emergency accommodation?	72%	57%
Provide emergency food?	82%	71%
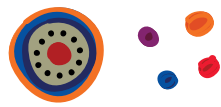
Elders are a crucial part of Aboriginal family structures, and they are relied upon as leaders and important transmitters of culture (Scott & Brown, 2013).[16] One yarning circle participant related a story from a young age where "elders, proper old fellas" (from Noongar Outreach) provided her transport and made her feel safe in a difficult situation. Another participant described the joy of seeing the younger generation grow in culture through the knowledge of elders:

> " [A good thing for me] *is actually watching the younger men and the boys start to learn language, start to learn culture, start to embrace it. […] So watching them do that, and then asking other elders like* [lists prominent elders] *and whoever else it might be, and them having that knowledge and being able to pass it on. There's a whole bunch that I talked to; they're all from different country, but they're all from Noongar country. And they're all leaders in their own right. And it's just*

> *talking to them and being able to pass that down, and say, 'No, you're here. You're here'* [i.e., which country you are on]. *And it's just like, 'oh wow'. It's kind of like going to an army and you're not a private anymore, you're a sergeant, you're moving up and moving up.* "

Finally, it is worth reiterating the importance of family when thinking about elders, as Host and Owen (2009) make clear:

> "*In the media one or two Noongar individuals are often seen to represent the Noongar community, although this is not the case. Each family – often interconnected to numerous others – has representative elders who pass knowledge down to younger generations. The resilience of Noongar people with their strong familial networks coupled with their traditions, laws and customs is responsible for their strength.* " (p. xx)

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16   Hence the devastating cultural impact of the child removal assimilation policies, as the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and culture is interrupted.

Practices (Warniny)

Here we consider some examples of practices that family members talked about, and which likely contribute to reinforcing culture and strength. One commonly discussed practice was the use of Noongar language. Language functions as an important marker of culture generally, as well as encoding culturally unique ways of thinking and relating to the world. Historically, the transmission of Aboriginal languages was interrupted through the physical removal of children from families, but also through general prohibitions and taboos against Aboriginal ways of life (e.g., applications for citizenship in the 1940s required Aboriginal people to formally affirm that they had broken ties with traditional ways of life; Host & Owen, 2009; p. xxviii). For this reason, there are widely varying degrees of language ability, and one family member raised this during a discussion about language differences within Noongar dialects: "*We never grew up with language. They took it away from us, so I don't know any words*". This reference to colonial harms reflects negative aspects of Australia's history that have affected lives right through to the present, but responses highlighted hope and the capacity for change:

"*Yeah I know, I know. And it's our job now, our job now is to bring it back.*"

"*Yes, and that's what's starting to happen. You know, for so long, Australia's been colonised, right. You could put inside less than 50 [years] that things have started progressing for our people. The last 15 to 20 years at most? That we're getting this freedom, to say who we are and where we come from, otherwise we just get all put into the same box and stereotyped as one people one language—we know we're not. And we have that freedom, and that chance now to be proud of our heritage and where we belong, and to be able to speak out about it now.*"

Alongside this theme of cultural renewal and pride were expressions of ways that language can be supported and facilitated, either informally through family and social connections:

"*Not only from living down on Noongar country I've learnt a lot of language, you know from lots of Noongar friends and that, and*

also I learn a lot through them [her sons] *too, they come home telling me stories and that.*"

Or via the integration of Noongar language into formal education settings:

"*But having that culture* [in schools] *seems* [to be happening] *more and more, and I think that really needs to keep on going. A lot of it's probably government funding as well, but I think that's really important and it's really good to see more happening. You know, mob going to school. Also learning the Noongar language in primary school, I just hope that keeps going.*"

Another practice mentioned was dancing, which in the following quote was talked about in the context of cultural performance, but it also demonstrates the fluidity of culture and again the importance of family:

"*To me you gotta bring a story to it. That's how I work, like with me I dance with my kids, my boys, my grandchildren. And I say, 'Some people don't know this, but when the* [emu] *egg is hatched, who sits on the egg?' The male, right? So the male shows the baby where's the food, water, how to protect it, and comes at night-time. I said, 'I'm here dancing with my boys today, so we do a dance like that, in emu'. That's why it's significant to me; so I make it a story.*"

Finally, yarning itself was a cultural practice that highlighted the importance of Aboriginal led and appropriate forms of communication, and which allowed for Aboriginal ways of relating to emerge along with an open exchange of ideas, emotions, and experiences:

"*Ok, today was good, it was good to see some familiar faces that I used to see there in* [place] *and it was good. I think this is, this is deadly, yeah.*"

"*But it was good to yarn with ya's, honestly it was good to have a good yarn, true as.*"
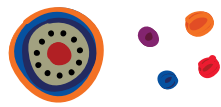
" I'm just happy to sit amongst you guys, and you know, I was meant to come here and see you all, because it was something we shared today, and it's deadly. "

" Well, I think this is a start, having a yarning circle where you're free to come and not only meet other people and have a good feed, but yarn about some issues that are concerning to our community. [...] Any voice that can be added to hopefully reach the ears of people who can create change, would be the way go in the future. "


Connection (Yoodaniny)

Notably, each of the elements in *Figure* 2 are *social* in their nature: a sense of identity that is shared, broad family and kinship networks that are often conduits for learning about and engaging in cultural practices, and by extension the community and resilience that is constituted by these networks, identities, and practices. When these elements are strong, there is a natural connection that can extend out to not just people, but to place and the wider natural world. Although there are burdens of the past to acknowledge in Australia, family members spoke positively about culture and the future, and one hope is that Aboriginal culture will continue to grow and be embraced. Indeed, one family member saw this possibility as the only way to overcome discrimination and racism:

" I reckon the only thing that can [reduce racism] is people of all different nationalities to get involved with Aboriginal culture—to see more of it, get involved with dancing, sharing cultural food, entertainment, sharing with Aboriginal music, language—all these sorts of things. "

A similar sentiment is echoed in the Uluru Statement From the Heart (Referendum Council, 2017), which succinctly sums up the strengths of Aboriginal culture as something which is distinct in Australia, but ultimately able to be shared.

Chapter 3:

Support and Services
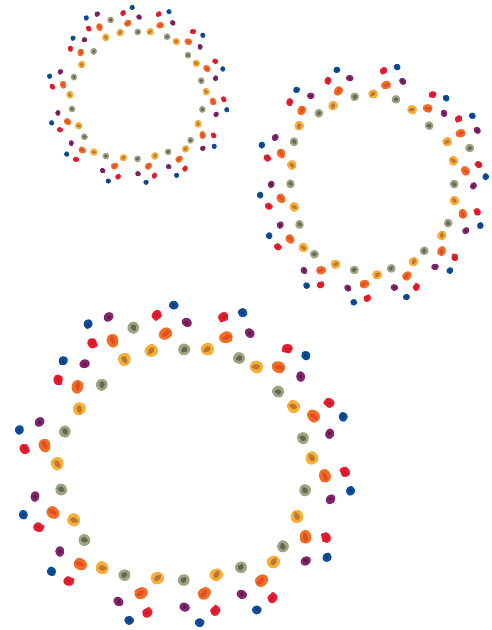
While the Aboriginal strengths that we reported on in the previous chapter can increase resilience in the face of adversity as well as reinforce informal support networks, they do not negate the necessity of formal supports and services where there is need. Moreover, as outlined in Phillips, Seivwright, Young, et al. (2021), people in entrenched disadvantage cannot exit hardship without support. Unfortunately, it was more common for 100 Families family members to be focused on just getting by, rather than developing their capacities to thrive. It is telling that in the 12 months prior to baseline, food services were the most accessed type of service (3 in 4 people, or 74% of family members), pointing to the precarity of daily life in entrenched disadvantage. Health services were also commonly accessed (65%), followed by financial (49%), employment (41%), and housing pathway/support services (42%). Services for mental health (35%), homelessness/emergency accommodation (34%), and legal (32%) were also frequently accessed at around 1 in 3 people. Less frequent but still substantial were family and parenting services (18%), and alcohol and drug support (17%). It should also be noted that Aboriginal family members did not access services any differently in comparison to non-Aboriginal family members, either in terms of service types or frequency of use (except for slightly more frequent use of drug and alcohol services by non-Aboriginal family members, along with a greater proportion of the non-Aboriginal sample having accessed mental health services).
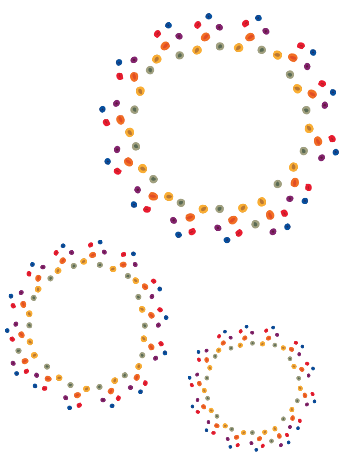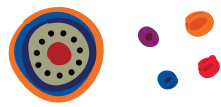
Barriers (Nangin)

Despite the lack of difference in service access, some family members noted a perception that they were receiving a disproportionate amount of support:

"A lot of government agencies are unhelpful and uninformative. It's hard to get a straight answer. They are not approachable at all. It seems because of my Indigenous background, it's harder for me access things and a lot of the outlook I get is that Aboriginal people get free housing and things."

Overall, in the year prior to baseline around a quarter of family members had experienced not being able to access a service when they needed to. The primary barriers were logistical (difficulty making an appointment, 57%; or transport issues, 47%) or simply service inadequacy (33%). Access and eligibility restrictions were also raised as barriers, which are likely tied to funding limitations. In terms of specific service types, the most accessible for family members were health, parenting/family, employment, and legal services, all of which had high rates of access when required. Services less likely to be accessed when they were needed (either by choice or inability) were emergency accommodation (29% of those that needed the service did not access it), mental health (24%), financial services (20%), and drug and alcohol support (17%). Worryingly, 21% of those that needed access to food services had at some point either chosen not to (10%), or had not been able to access the service (11%). Reasons for choosing not to access a service can be complex, and perhaps unexpected for those unacquainted with the various support systems:

"Too scared—don't know who you're going to get, don't know if you're going to go to a service and leave worse off. For example, I caught two buses to go to the Salvos to get a food package only to be told that I'd already had two so was not allowed to get another one (I'd only had one), and then I had accessing food packages as a reason for DCP [former Department for Child Protection] keeping my children from me."

Other reasons discussed included embarrassment or shame, *"Just trying to manage it but it's getting on top of me, also a bit embarrassed as I have sought* [help] *in the past and I don't want* [the service provider] *to think I didn't learn anything"*; overloaded services that were effectively inaccessible, *"It can take days. You keep ringing* [Centrelink] *and then you just give up"*; or being personally overwhelmed, *"Too much on my mind, all felt too much at the time. Too much other stuff going on, forgetful. All too tiring keeping up with appointments"*.

Service Complexity, Education, and Resourcing (Boola banga kadidjiny)

The macro-social landscape of policy and services in Australia is complex (for an overview, see Phillips, Seivwright, Young, et al., 2021; pp. 44–71), and this complexity functions as a systemic barrier unto itself, to the point that family members might not even be able to articulate some of the problems that exist (e.g., if they do not have sufficient knowledge about the services and options available to them). One approach to tackling this complexity is to increase service education, and the following yarning circle quote suggests that knowledge gaps can exist both with clients and within systems:

> *What we need is more education and understanding of how those* [health] *services work. [...] They say to you, 'You can get this, this, this, and this'. But they will do all that once you've been properly allocated a coordinator, but what a lot of our people wouldn't understand is you've still got to go to your local GP and get that care plan drawn up by the doctor. And your doctor needs to understand how this works as well, so if they don't have this knowledge, they have to get in touch with* [the health service] *and educate themselves too. Because then you have to get them to send those care plans back to* [the health service]*; this still takes a bit of time for your coordinator to get them processed and approved. [...] But a lot of our people don't understand this process, and are just sitting, waiting, sometimes they wait so long unfortunately their life overtakes them.*

Coming to understand the available options was listed as a positive change that had occurred at Wave 2 for one family member: *"Learnt how the system works, became aware of the services that are available to help and I'm able to share and help others"*. The failure to obtain this knowledge was sometimes described as a matter of personal responsibility:

> *Yeah but like my mate, the one that sits at home. She's never known about anything that I've told her. I said, 'Look, there's help out there for you, but it's not going to come to you, you've got to go to them'.*

One response to this pointed to a widespread lack of knowledge, and the need for increased education and awareness:

> *But a lot of people don't know how to go about that process, so we need forums where there is more of that kind of education, on a ground level, you know, meeting the basic needs for our people.*

On the other hand, even when education and knowledge is in place, the complexity or under-resourced nature of a service can mean delays with extremely serious consequences:

> *My sister she died last year, purely because she needed a new sleep machine,* [she] *never got it in time. When they finally suddenly ended up buying one and getting it to her, she never used it, she died in hospital before she got a chance to use it. It's not a good story... to tell you the truth, when you put this kind of forum together, it's very hard for us to focus on the good when our experiences are so much in that other bracket.*

Thus from the sentiments that family members have expressed, there are a number of targets for improving the situation: (a) reducing service complexity and administrative burden, (b) increasing education about services, and (c) providing sufficient resources and funding.
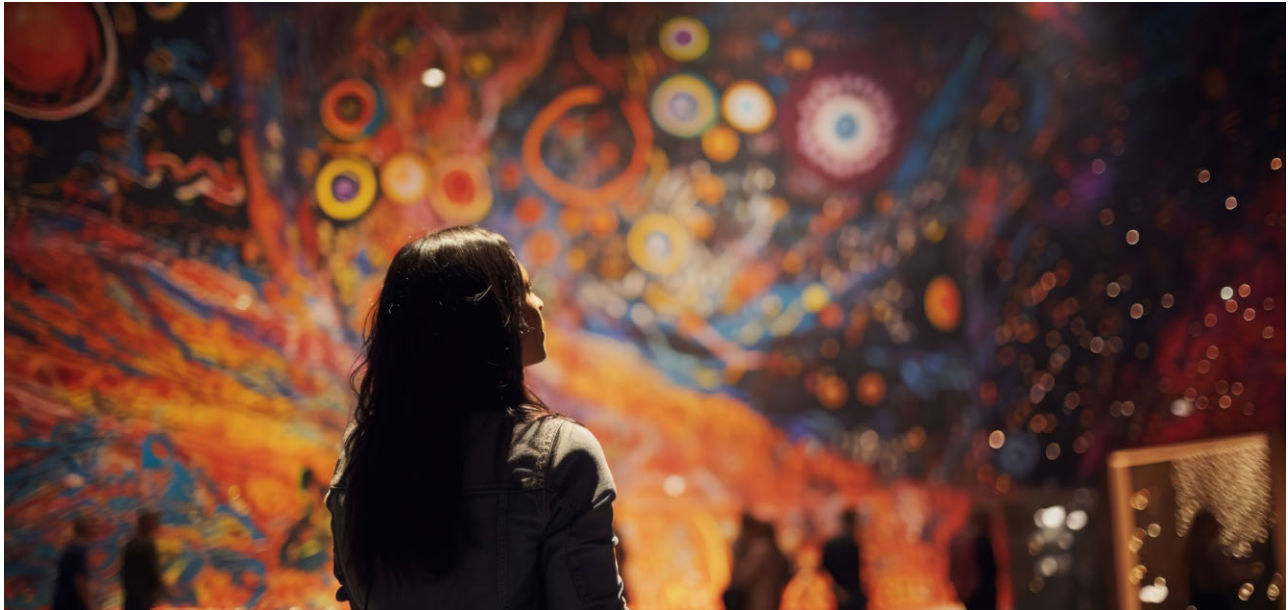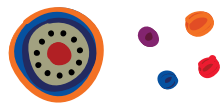
Ideas for Services (Kaditj)

In terms of family members' wishes for service improvements, one common theme was a desire for services that are more agile or easier to access, which ties in to the first point above regarding service complexity and administrative burden. For example, the inability to walk in without an appointment was identified as a barrier for some:

"Oh they're all good [at the Aboriginal medical service]. *The only thing is you've got to wait too long for the doctors. Sometimes you sit there, you'll be sitting all day. But lucky with me it's good because I make an appointment and they take me in within half an hour. Like a lot of people get really impatient, and it's like, you can't just, walk in."*

This inability to walk into services was also discussed regarding over the phone assessment for service eligibility, specifically in response to being questioned about what "doesn't work" or makes things more difficult:

"Access to quality mental health services— you can't just walk in and ask for help. You're assessed over the phone, then they decide whether they want to help you or not. There need to be more walk-in services."

The requirement for over the phone assessment is linked not only to administrative control (e.g.,

managing a realistic number of clients to be seen on a given day), but service eligibility criteria which are in turn constrained by funding and resource availability. Family members were sometimes frustrated with a "lack of availability" and fitting with a service's "model and criteria", again pointing to a desire for services that are easier to access at the time when support is needed. When many family members are struggling to get by on relatively little and facing pressures across a variety of life domains, making services easier to access seems to be a crucial component of their practical utility.

In the context of specific service types, a desire for training or employment support was frequently raised. Family members talked about support for both gaining and keeping employment, for example through training or refresher courses, or the availability of jobs that could accommodate those with caring responsibilities or health issues. Often there was a focus on Aboriginal youth with respect to employment, as discussed by one of the younger members in a yarning circle:

"That's what I reckon, they should have more things going for the younger generation, even to start work, helping them get into work, work skills and stuff. Keeping them out of trouble from violence and going into prison, that's what I learnt, you know, the younger generation of Aboriginal kids that are going in cuffs, they should have things for work, so they can try and get a job."

This focus on youth was also raised by another family member in the same yarning circle, but with a push towards flexible services that genuinely connect with the individual:

"They should enhance their employment. Have more people work for these foundations, because eventually, a lot of people need mentors. There are a lot of Aboriginal people going down the wrong path, not all are, but for those that are and having trouble in their lives, they need someone to talk to, someone to guide them along the way, ask them how they're feeling; not how they're doing on that day—how they are actually feeling."

T.E. *"Like a life coach you mean?"*

"Yeah like a life coach, like I had when we had the training course [...] Let's sit down and have a talk, let's see how I can help you, and if you can't do this I'll help you. I'll help you get where you need to be."

To have the capacity to make these kinds of connections with young people and foster their potential, it is imperative that services are working from strengths-based perspectives. Indeed, Aboriginal community workers know this already, and they demonstrate nuanced understandings which place people and relations at the centre of their practice (Askew et al., 2020). As we have attempted to show in our model of Aboriginal strength (*Figure 2*), resilience comes not from a sole individual's cognitive resources, but a network of community-connected understandings, relations, and practices. It makes sense then that services for Aboriginal people ought to be Aboriginal led and community directed, and we close off the report by highlighting some positive and hopeful developments towards that end in Australia.

Positive Developments and the Future for Aboriginal Services (Boordakan-ak kwop korangan)

In July 2020, the National Agreement on Closing the Gap[17] came into effect with four priority reform areas. The second priority reform has direct relevance to services, as it aims to strengthen and build the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled Organisation (ACCO) sector, with special focus on early childhood care, housing, health, and disability (Coalition of Peaks, 2022). Growing national support and investment in the ACCO sector are representative of momentum that has been slowly gathering over a period of decades, and although Aboriginal led programs have been widespread in health for some time, the model has only recently been expanding into other community service areas. In Western Australia, these developments can be seen through some representative examples which we briefly discuss, such as Wungening,[18] the Langford Aboriginal Association (LAA),[19] and Noongar Mia Mia;[20] although there are many others.

Wungening (the Noongar word for "healing") is an ACCO which started in 1988 as the Noongar Alcohol and Substance Abuse Service but became the Aboriginal Alcohol and Drug Service in 2005 to reflect its developing service user base. This growth continued and by 2017 services had expanded

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17 The National Agreement on Closing the Gap (https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/national-agreement-closing-the-gap) was made between all Australian governments, the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (Coalition of Peaks), and the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA).

18 https://www.wungening.com.au/

19 https://laalangford.com.au/

20 https://noongarmiamia.com.au/
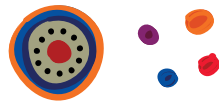
beyond substance abuse, and this was formally recognised with the renaming to the Wungening Aboriginal Corporation. Since 2020, Wungening has been providing services to over 150,000 people across a wide range of sectors including alcohol and drug, child protection, family support and domestic violence, emergency relief, and justice.

The LAA is another example of a multi-service ACCO with a long history, having been incorporated since November 2000. Their mission is to provide culturally appropriate support, services, and opportunities for the Aboriginal community in their local area (Langford, Perth, Western Australia). The LAA promotes Aboriginal strengths through its services, for example by providing a safe and welcoming environment for learning and cultural expression (e.g., teaching Noongar language), thus strengthening cultural identity and increasing a sense of belonging in community. Additionally, the LAA offers tailored support in areas based on identified needs, such as in family support, health and wellbeing programs, employment assistance, and grief and loss support.

Finally, in the homelessness and community housing support sector there are organisations like Noongar Mia Mia, which has also been incorporated since 2000 and has grown steadily to manage 91 housing assets for Aboriginal people as of 2021. As with Wungening and LAA, Noongar Mia Mia takes a strengths-based and cultural approach (Noongar Mia Mia, 2021), providing culturally appropriate, safe, and affordable housing solutions for Aboriginal people in Western Australia. Their initiatives not only provide essential housing support but also contribute to the development of sustainable communities, fostering social and economic empowerment for Noongar people.

The examples above highlight not only the positive impact that community and Aboriginal-led organisations can have, but the importance and promise of the political recognition which has been formally established in the 2020 National Agreement on Closing the Gap, especially in the commitment to expand the ACCO sector under Priority Reform two (in partnership with the Coalition of Peaks). The value of this political commitment for the Ngalang Moort family members cannot be overstated, especially since the distance between government and people in entrenched disadvantage can make change seem out of reach. For instance, one family member in a yarning circle stressed the necessity of medical subsidies:

"I'm no spring chicken anymore and I've got to take tablets now for this and that, and some of them without the CTG [Close the Gap subsidy] are like $82, I can't afford that! With two kids and that. So, a lot of these things are on Close the Gap, I just hope that doesn't change, you know? I mean that's a government thing, there's not much we can do about it talking here, but that's just something that I think is so important, because some of those things that you get in the pharmacy are imperative. Like, I've got seizure medication that I have to have and it's expensive—but it's on the CTG."

At the same time as noting the benefit, the family member expressed a resignation that talking about it would contribute little towards ensuring that the needed support was kept in place, since it was a "government thing". The hope then is that by empowering the ACCO sector and Aboriginal communities, not only will the stability of necessary services be increased, but ideally lead to the empowerment and strengthening of Aboriginal communities across Australia. For the Ngalang Moort project family members, we hope that this report can help their voices to be heard by all those with the capacity to bring about positive change. Just as one family member described a positive change that had occurred for them over the course of the project as *"feeling that there is someone who can understand"*, we hope that such understanding can be propagated wider still. The good news is that there is positive evidence towards this occurring in Australia.
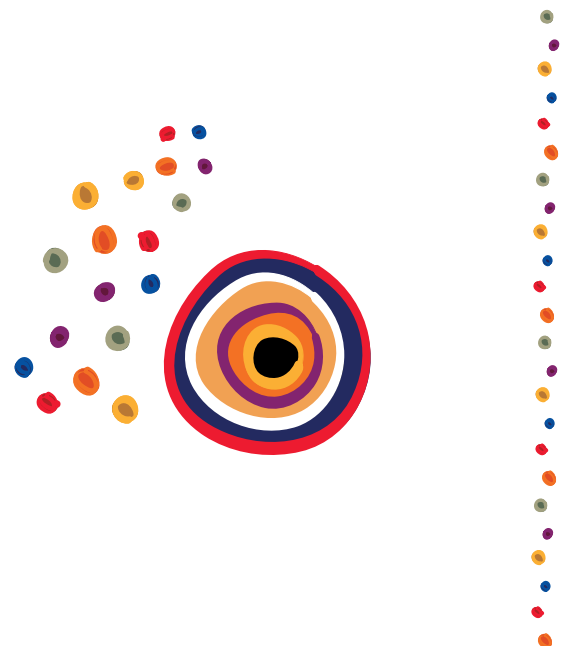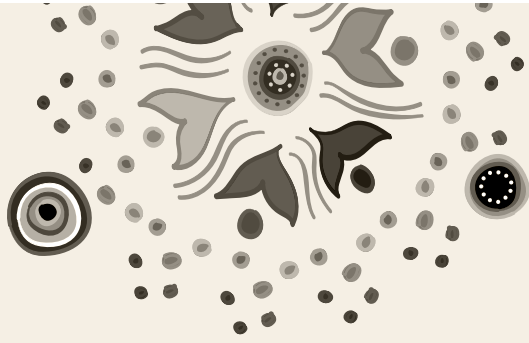
Chapter 4:
# Recommendations and Conclusion
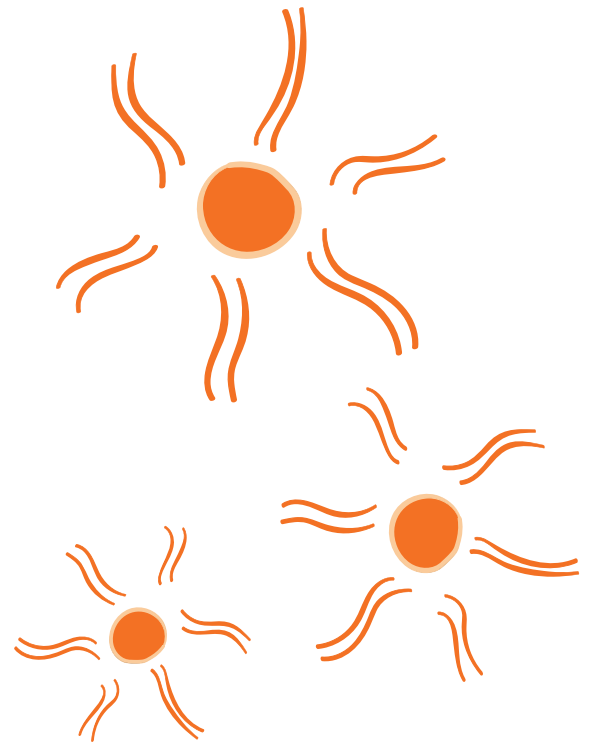
Recommendations (Barnakwarang)

"As we head towards Western Australia's bicentennial commemorations in 2029, we wish to create a future that is not bound by the legacies of our colonial past, but one that shifts the narrative towards a positive social movement for all." (Oxenham et al., 2022)

The development of this report occurred through an Aboriginal led process, which was the primary driver for the incorporation of analyses that were strengths-based, culturally rooted, and historically informed. Although Aboriginal overrepresentation in the 100 Families group points to hardship which disproportionately affects Aboriginal people in Western Australia (and Australia more broadly), this fact presented on its own overlooks the various forms of Aboriginal strength and resilience that we report on here. Indeed, it is these more positive elements that are the key to overcoming the entrenched disparities fundamentally rooted in

Australia's colonial past. For that reason, Aboriginal strength and resilience must be understood as intimately tied to culture and community, both of which ought to be prioritised in research, policy, and practice. Based on this position, we outline below some brief recommendations for those engaged in policy making or service delivery where Aboriginal people are concerned.

Convergence of policy on key areas (Kwop kaditj dandjoo koorliny)

Across state and federal levels, there is evidence of a policy convergence on areas of critical importance, and this includes a focus on culture and community building. The 2020 National Agreement on Closing the Gap recognises the need for a transfer of power to Aboriginal communities, and the priority reform of building the community-controlled sector has already made an impact, with strong growth in the Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisation (ACCO) sector (which was
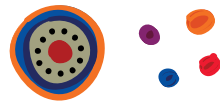
also noted by one of the yarning circle participants). Another example of positive policy development is the Western Australian state government's commitment to focusing on culture and Aboriginal led solutions through the Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy (Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 2019)—a policy framework that notably references the New Noongar Dreaming Dialogue, a 2010 collaboration between representatives of the 14 Noongar clans which determined 10 outcome areas of priority interest to Noongar people.

These policy shifts are promising, but the fact that four of the six key themes from Aboriginal voices in this report map onto seven of the ten Noongar dreaming priorities[21] from 2010 suggests progress has been slow. Nonetheless, momentum for change is building and our recommendation is that current high-level policy directions continue, especially where the aim is for genuine partnerships and community control (Department of Communities, 2022).

Effective policy is necessary to drive systemic change, but policy change is merely symbolic if it does not translate into changing relations and practices. In the context of this report, this means that family members see, experience, and collaborate in developing new ways of interacting with government and services. Unfortunately, early indications from the Productivity Commission are that governments are on the whole failing to meet the National Agreement's commitments (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2023), and possibly have not grasped the scale of the necessary transformations away from "business as usual". Given the scope of the required change, strong bi-partisan commitment will be necessary, as consistently applied effort and well directed funding will be needed to yield the outcomes that Aboriginal people want to see.

Strengths-based services (Moorditja-k banga)

The results of this report identify a clear demand and need for services, but it would be presumptuous to recommend to all services that they need to work from a strengths-based model. As Askew et al. (2020) write regarding (largely Indigenous) community workers in an urban Queensland Aboriginal community:

"Participants did not consider strengths-based approaches to be new or novel, rather it provided the foundation and framework from which people and programs operated every day and, typically, as an assumed, taken-for-granted 'common sense' practice. As such, participants had difficulty articulating a strengths-based approach as a method. For them, it was the only way of working within an Indigenous community and they were taken aback by the prospect of doing things any other way." (p. 104)

Thus, while the need for strengths-based services is a sound recommendation in principle, it is important to note that strengths-based practice is about relational understanding and what actually happens, and not about rhetoric or what is professed to happen. From our perspective, the best way to ensure that services for Aboriginal people are strengths-based in practice is to ensure that these services are community controlled and Aboriginal led. The positive here is that relevant policy in Australia already has good momentum in this direction.

Promoting community and culture (Boola-moort wer Noongar kadidjiny maladjiny)

Our final recommendation is that Aboriginal communities and cultures need to be promoted and strengthened. As our model suggests (*Figure 2*), Aboriginal resilience and strength are largely driven by cultural factors which are shared (i.e., kinship, shared identity, and cultural practices). In practice, success here is likely to require a level of creativity, flexibility, and a commitment to ongoing learning and relationship building. For example, services tend to adopt the lens of the service itself, being informed by bureaucratic requirements and institutional norms. Yet for family members there is a completely different perspective—their life does not revolve around services, but rather their own agency, family, and community engagement.

One central issue then is that aspects of Aboriginal culture will often be in tension with bureaucratic demands. For example, family members spoke of wanting more agile services that were not bound to pre-arranged appointment times, and this meshes with Aboriginal experiences and conceptions of time, such as "rubber" or "circular" time (Stevens Zur, 2007). Effective solutions may require an allowance for new ways of working, and in some

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21 From this report the themes of *home, people/family, work*, and *health* connect with the New Noongar Dreaming priorities of *housing & home ownership, strong families, culture & heritage, job readiness & regional economic development, education & training,* and *health & wellbeing*.

cases an acceptance of risk. In one example, a yarning circle participant described council actions regarding socialising around an open fire:

"*The old people were used to sitting around their open fire at night, you know, for warmth and just sitting around yarning and it's what they're used to back home, but the local shire stopped it. Removed it. Wouldn't let them have it. You only have to go down the road to Alfred's Kitchen* [in Guildford], *and everyone's sitting around an open fire there. Every day of the week now, you know? It's not right, that kind of thing. If I could get up on a soapbox, I would.*"

In other cases, risk levels can be quite low, such as in the free sharing of food, which is a practice that an elder from a yarning circle mentioned she would like to see return to a particular medical service. Thus for services to promote Aboriginal culture in practice, it will require not only community connection to understand needs, but likely an ability to de-bureaucratise certain elements of service delivery.
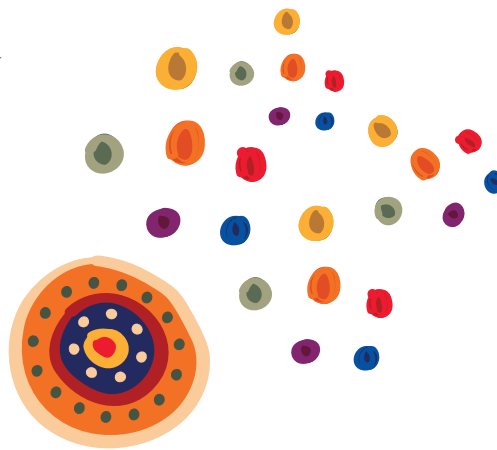
Conclusion (Yoodook kaditj)

In thinking about the pressures exerted on Aboriginal cultures in Australia from early colonisation to the present (Dodson, 1994; McGlade, 2017; Scott & Brown, 2013), it is a testament to Aboriginal strength that there has been such a cultural continuity (of course alongside adaptation), even if this has not always been apparent to non-Aboriginal observers (see e.g., Birdsall, 1990). As we have stressed, the strengths inherent in these cultures are relational and interconnected—being neither anthropocentric nor individualistic. Indeed, culturally encoding the connections between lifesystems, lands, waters, animals, plants, and humans is very common throughout Indigenous societies globally, even though the connections may be understood and expressed in different ways. We suggest the reason they are so common is that they express a fundamental truth about the interconnectedness of the ecosystem which is only recently being more fully grasped by Western science and systems thinking, and a failure to understand or respect this interconnectedness is leading to increasingly extreme survival pressures (i.e., anthropogenic climate change).

In much of the world, the colonial "re-education" of Indigenous peoples regarding nature has nearly universally occurred through the lens of state-capitalist relations, that is, that nature consists of a bundle of resources for human exploitation, which can be converted into monetary value and profit at any scale without consequence. From this perspective, meaningfully engaging with the Aboriginal strengths and culture that we describe here takes on an importance that goes beyond the Ngalang Moort family members themselves, and which can instead be considered as a national benefit, as reflected in the commitments of the National Agreement and the Aboriginal Voice to Parliament. While the Ngalang Moort Wangkiny project shows that there is much work to be done, it also highlights positive movement towards the hope expressed in the Uluru Statement (Referendum Council, 2017): "*When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country*".

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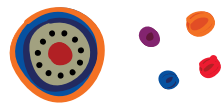
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