

Indigenous research approaches

Research Summary



VACCA
VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL CHILD
AND COMMUNITY AGENCY
Connected by culture

Who decides what counts as evidence? Why Aboriginal-led research matters

An Aboriginal-led approach to evidence puts community voices and lived experience at the centre. This summary explores why that's important for ethical decision-making.

What is “evidence” and who gets to decide?

Research is often used to guide decisions about programs, policies, and services. But what counts as “good evidence” — and who gets to decide — is shaped by systems that prioritise certain voices over others.

In Australia, governments and universities have long relied on mainstream (Western) methods to define what counts as evidence. Research trials, especially *Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs)*, are often considered to be the “gold standard”. But these methods often don't fit Aboriginal contexts, and can overlook cultural knowledge and community priorities.

Evidence is not just about the type of data that is collected — it's about whose knowledge is valued. Research is stronger — and more ethical — when Aboriginal people are involved in its design, authorship, and governance.

This summary draws on two Australian research studies led by Aboriginal researcher Joanne Luke, and reflects VACCA's approach to evidence grounded in culture and community.

ONLY
4%

of research trials were led by an
Aboriginal researcher

Why mainstream research methods often don't fit with Aboriginal contexts

Many Aboriginal organisations, including VACCA, have raised concerns that mainstream research methods – such as Randomised Controlled Trials – often fail to reflect Aboriginal realities. Concerns include:

Western experts are prioritised:

External researchers are often seen as the experts.

Excluded voices:

Aboriginal people are left out of research design and decisions.

Not community-led:

Research is often done *with* communities not *by* them.

Limited involvement:

Aboriginal people are rarely involved in analysing findings.

Worldviews sidelined:

Aboriginal priorities and ways of knowing are missing.

Cultural safety overlooked:

Methods often ignore cultural protocols and ethics.

Funding misaligned:

Governments fund programs based on evidence from mainstream methods.

What is a randomised controlled trial?

An RCT is a type of study where people are randomly assigned to different groups to test what works best. For example, one group might receive a new program, while another doesn't. These trials are often used to guide decisions – but they can be:

Unethical

if they exclude community voices or deny services to some groups

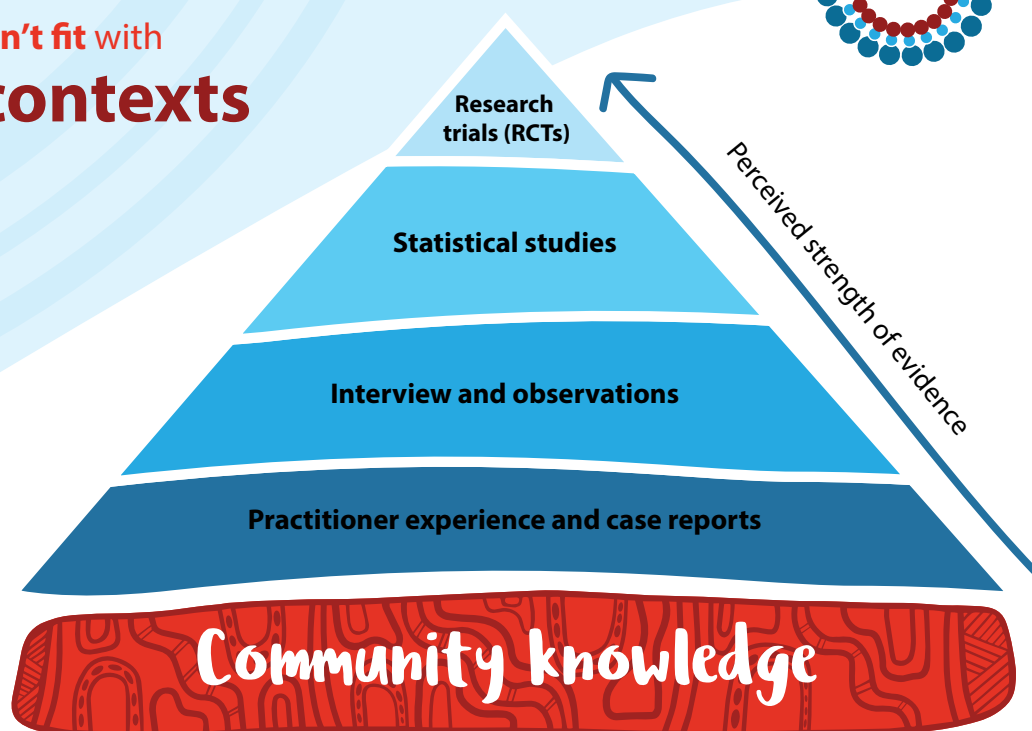
Biased

if they don't reflect cultural or real-world contexts

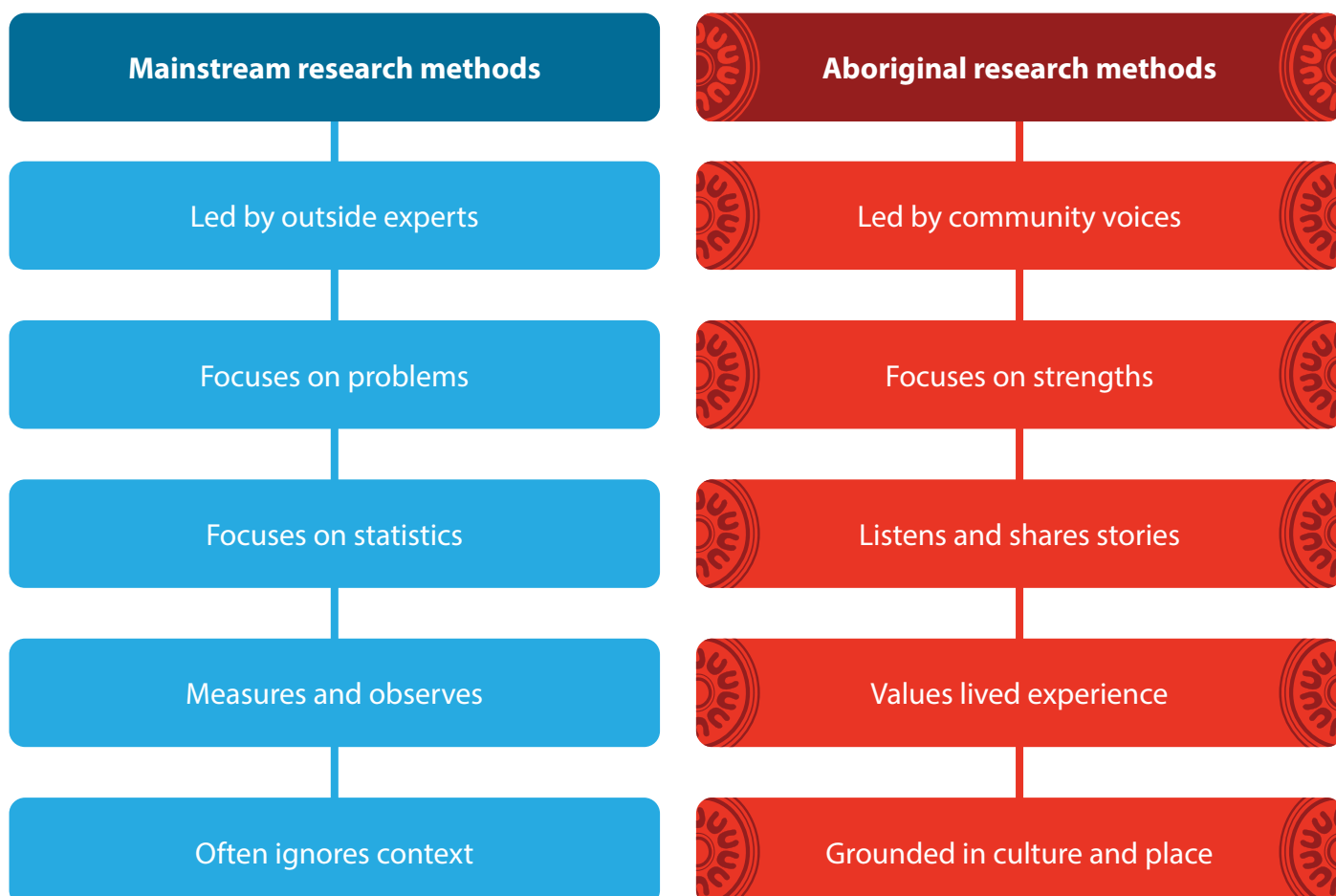
Inappropriate

for complex social issues and small community settings

This is how
evidence is often **ranked**
— but it **doesn't fit** with
Aboriginal contexts



Aboriginal-led approaches to evidence differ from mainstream approaches in important ways



What does Aboriginal-led evidence look like?



Find out more

To read the journal articles:

[\[Article 1 - Read online\]](#)

[\[Article 2 - Read online\]](#)

For questions or more information, please contact us redteam@vacca.org

About this research

This summary draws on two journal articles co-authored by VACCA's Research and Evidence Development Team and researchers from the University of Melbourne. It also reflects VACCA's internal work to develop a culturally grounded approach to evidence.

About VACCA

The Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency is a statewide Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation servicing children, young people, families, and community.