

# The extent and nature of poverty in Australia

Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency

February 2023



**VACCA**  
Connected by culture

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VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL  
CHILD CARE AGENCY

## **Acknowledgment**

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands across Victoria that we work on, and pay our respects to their Elders, both past and present and to their children and young people, who are our future Elders and caretakers of this great land. We acknowledge the Stolen Generations, those who we have lost; those who generously share their stories with us; and those we are yet to bring home.

## **Note on Language**

We use the term 'Aboriginal' to describe the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Clans and Traditional Owner Groups whose traditional lands comprise what is now called Australia.

We use the term 'Indigenous' as it relates to Indigenous peoples globally as well as in the human rights context.

The terms 'First Peoples' and 'First Nations' are employed in the Australian context, by recognising that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the First Peoples/First Nations of this land, it directly relates to their inherent un-ceded sovereignty.

VACCA uses the term 'poverty' to describe the structural disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal people in realising their basic social, cultural, governance, environmental and economic rights.

## **Note on case stories shared**

The names used in each case story are not the real names of the community members we support, all case stories shared have been de-identified, to protect their identity of community we provide services to.

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## About VACCA

Established in 1976, the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) is the lead Aboriginal child and family support organisation in Australia and the largest provider of Aboriginal family violence, justice support and homelessness services in Victoria. We work holistically with children, young people, women, men, and families to ensure they have the necessary supports to heal and thrive. We do this by advocating for the rights of children and providing everyone who walks through our doors with services premised on human rights, self-determination, cultural respect and safety.

VACCA shows respect for observance of and compliance with Aboriginal cultural protocols, practice and ceremony. VACCA emerged from a long and determined Aboriginal Civil Rights movement in Victoria. Today, we continue to act, serve and lobby for the rights of Aboriginal Victorians, especially children, women and families.

We provide support services to over 4,500 children and young people, and their families and carers each year. VACCA provides support services for Stolen Generations through Link-Up Victoria, which has been in operation since 1990. Across our six regions, we deliver over 80 programs tailored to the needs of the communities we serve including child and family services, child protection, family violence and sexual assault supports, youth and adult justice supports, early years, education, homelessness, disability, alcohol and other drugs, cultural programs and supports for Stolen Generations. We employ over 1000 staff, making us one of Victoria's biggest employers of Aboriginal people. Our Aboriginality distinguishes us from mainstream services and enables us to deliver the positive outcomes we achieve for our people.

VACCA is guided by *Cultural Therapeutic Ways*, our whole-of-agency approach to our practice of healing for Aboriginal children, young people, families, community members and carers who use our services, and to ensure that VACCA is a safe and supportive workplace for staff. The framework acts at the intersection of cultural practice with trauma and self-determination theories. The aim of this practice is to integrate Aboriginal culture and healing practices across the organisation and guide our service delivery approach to be healing, protective and connective.

## Recommendations

VACCA makes the following recommendations for consideration:

1. Develop a financial reparation to Aboriginal communities in Victoria for all stolen wages, commensurate to the living wage today, specifically families of returned soldiers.
2. Increase the base rate of JobSeeker and related payments to at least \$69 per day to match the increased cost of living as well as rent assistance.
3. Review and reform mutual obligation requirements and related practices in consideration of their impact on Aboriginal children and families.
4. Immediately increase funding for Emergency Relief services across urban, regional, rural and remote areas to meet increased demand.
5. Continue national accountability function around the implementation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, particularly the prevention element as it pertains to addressing the causes of child protection intervention.
6. Ensure sustainable investment in *Safe and Supported: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023 – 2026* Actions related to prevention and addressing the factors that lead to child protection involvement.
7. Invest in ACCO sector and shift toward coordinated funding of Aboriginal led prevention and early help supports that are targeted and culturally safe for Aboriginal children and families.
8. Resource the ACCO sector to provide culturally safe and inclusive early education opportunities for Aboriginal children aged 0-8 years and meaningful transition supports for young people that includes mentors, cultural supports.
9. Provide dedicated funding for educational resources including financial planning and counselling available for families experiencing poverty.

10. Greater investment for Aboriginal-led accessible, good quality and culturally specific childcare.
11. Invest in targeted employment and workforce programs designed and led by ACCOs.
12. Expand the Indigenous Skills and Employment Program (ISEP).
13. Address the complex intersection between poverty, disadvantage and justice involvement by providing long-term funding to community-led approaches that address underlying drivers of offending and divert Aboriginal people away from the justice system at every possible opportunity.
14. Commit to the development and delivery of a national Aboriginal-specific integrated housing and homelessness agreement, that sits alongside the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement, developed by ACCOs, that is grounded in the principle of self-determination.
15. Commit to developing a new National Housing and Homelessness Plan and Agreement that includes performance and accountability mechanisms that will track outcomes and performance indicators for both Agreements.
16. Commit to reviewing the Commonwealth Rent Assistance Package in line with contemporary cost of living expense.
17. Implement a longitudinal study that looks at the correlation between family violence and economic insecurity, review and amend the Social Security Act to ensure that experience of family violence is considered where determining whether someone is in a couple for social security purposes and review and amend the Parenting Payment Single allowance to better support women who have experienced family violence as detailed in ANROW's *Economic security and intimate partner violence: Research synthesis (2022)*.
18. Invest in national ACCO-led Aboriginal-specific Healthy and Respectful Relationships programs and consent education.
19. Partner with State and Territory governments, ACCOs and Traditional Owner groups to develop a national Aboriginal plan for the management of emergencies and natural disasters as well as climate change adaptation.

20. Partner with State and Territory governments to introduce minimum energy efficiency standards in rental properties and urgently retrofit low-income rentals and social housing with energy efficiency upgrades.
21. Consider the intersectional impacts and experiences of poverty for Aboriginal women, children, carers and Elders and design targeted and preventative interventions led by the Aboriginal community.
22. Ensure the needs of carers for children in out-of-home care are taken into account to ensure assessments of income support levels are appropriate and relevant.
23. Provide long-term investment for implementing the Uluru Statement from the Heart in full and ensure there are adequate accountability mechanisms co-developed by the Aboriginal community to hold government accountable to implementing these important reforms.
24. Make meaningful and sustainable investment in the ACCO sector to provide families and individuals with culturally grounded and safe supports to prevent and respond to poverty and its associated impacts and causes
25. Coordinate with all jurisdictions to invest in Aboriginal-led, early help, family support and early intervention systems that support families in addressing the causes of poverty and are aligned to the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*.



## Introduction

VACCA welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs inquiry into the extent and nature of poverty in Australia. VACCA's feedback is based on our unique position as a Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) providing a suite of services across the state supporting children, young people, families and community members. VACCA believes that all children have a right to feel and be safe and live in an environment that is free from abuse, neglect and violence. We are committed to promoting and upholding the rights of Aboriginal children to maintain and celebrate their identity and culture, recognising that connection to culture is critical for children's emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing.

ACCOs, Client Service Organisations (CSOs), research institutions and community members have been speaking out about and documenting the causes, impact and solutions necessary to address poverty for many years. In light of this, all Australian governments should already be well aware of the extent and nature of poverty in Australia, this research is not new, but the voices of those impacted most are often not listened to, nor respected.

The Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs will receive many submissions to this inquiry, again highlighting the data, personal stories and recommended solutions to solve poverty in this country. VACCA hopes that this inquiry will not just produce yet another report that will lead to partial or surface-level reforms but will rather be a turning point in this country to change the ways our society looks after its most vulnerable members, and the way our governments take responsibility for the people they represent.

VACCA's submission takes a right-based approach to addressing and reducing poverty among Aboriginal peoples centered in self-determination, makes recommendations for reforms and investment necessary to achieve this. In doing so, our submission addresses all points under the inquiry Terms of Reference.



## Drivers of poverty for Aboriginal peoples

- This section of VACCA's submission addresses Terms of Reference points (a), (b), (e), and (f).

### Defining 'poverty' as multi-dimensional

To understand the drivers of poverty for Aboriginal peoples, it is vital to frame this discussion with a definition of 'poverty' and consider its interconnection with disadvantage, social exclusion, discrimination and inequality. As discussed in a previous Senate inquiry on poverty, many approaches to poverty define it terms of 'poverty lines' which represent a monetary threshold below which a person's minimum basic needs cannot be met.<sup>1</sup> While poverty is most commonly defined in monetary terms and material needs, 'social exclusion' takes a more holistic and multidimensional understanding and is defined by the United Nations as "a lack of participation in or exclusion from economic, political, cultural, civic and/or social life".<sup>2</sup> In that sense, poverty can be thought of as more of an outcome, while social exclusion as the process by which poverty is created. Such processes can include broad circumstances or conditions that limit capacity for people to thrive.

Disadvantage is another key concept which includes multi-layered and interrelated factors, including areas such as health, housing, income, family violence and education, as well as racism and discrimination. A multi-dimensional understanding that looks beyond poverty as material is key to VACCA's conceptualisation of poverty. While lacking a cultural lens, recent research into child poverty aims to broaden conceptions of poverty to also include notions of opportunity and relationships.<sup>3</sup> 'Opportunity poverty' refers to the barriers to participating in activities that promote learning and inclusion, while 'relational poverty' describes the presence of structural factors that undermine strong and supportive relationships.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Commonwealth of Australia (2004). A hand up not a hand out: Renewing the fight against poverty Report on poverty and financial hardship. The Senate's Community Affairs References Committee. Retrieved from [Weblink](#)

<sup>2</sup> Yang, W., Roig, M., Jimenez, M., Perry, J., & Shepherd, A. (2016). Leaving no one behind: the imperative of inclusive development Report on the World Social Situation. United Nations. New York. Retrieved from [Weblink](#)

<sup>3</sup> Sharon Bessell (2022) Rethinking Child Poverty, *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 23:4, 539-561, DOI: 10.1080/19452829.2021.1911969

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

In addition, VACCA highlights the nexus between poverty and climate change, not only in terms of destroying land, waterways, habitat and natural resources accessed by Indigenous Peoples across the globe but also in terms of compounding inequalities experienced by Aboriginal peoples. This is discussed in further detail below.

Importantly, VACCA's understanding of poverty includes barriers to exercising cultural rights. At the state-level, Victoria has the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act which provides a legal context for consideration of the rights of Aboriginal peoples in Victoria. Section 19 of the Charter recognises that Aboriginal peoples have "distinct cultural rights and must not be denied the right, with other members of their community:

- To enjoy their identity and culture; and
- To maintain and use their language; and
- To maintain their kinship ties; and
- To maintain their distinctive spiritual, material and economic relationship with the land and waters and other resources with which they have a connection under traditional laws and customs."<sup>5</sup>

If governments seek to understand the extent of poverty in Australia, they must be willing to also broaden their awareness of what poverty is, the many ways it can present, and the far-reaching implications it can have for people's lives, especially children. VACCA therefore seeks to highlight the systems, process and assumptions which perpetuate poverty for Aboriginal peoples. We take an inclusive view of poverty and understand it as a part of the structural disadvantage to people realising their basic social, cultural, environmental, governance and economic rights.

## **Colonisation as a direct driver of poverty**

VACCA seeks to highlight that the complex poverty and disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal peoples and communities in Australia today must be understood as a direct result of the enduring process of colonisation. This is not unique to Australia with the legacy of

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<sup>5</sup> Parliament of Victoria. Legislation. 2006. Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006. Retrieved from [Weblink](#)

colonisation, inequality and direct exclusion driving rates of poverty among First Nations across the globe.<sup>6</sup>

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders peoples in Australia, one of the direct results of colonisation was the disruption and denial of the traditional economies and trade practices. Aboriginal peoples' access to economic security, land and culture were historically denied, wages were stolen, and economic freedoms and cultural norms and structures were interrupted. There is an evolving documented history of the stolen wages of Aboriginal people, from the early 1800s until at least the 1930s, with additional restrictions and barriers to accessing appropriate wages or income support extends that period until well into the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> While inaccuracies in record keeping make the level of stolen wages difficult to measure, there are records across this time documenting the myriad of ways that remuneration was withheld from Aboriginal people, including the use of trusts, rations and clothing in place of wages.<sup>8</sup> In addition to this, Aboriginal peoples who fought in international conflict for the Australian Army were discriminated against and denied supports on return, including the soldier settlements scheme,<sup>9</sup> further cutting these soldiers, their families and their descendants off from the economic livelihoods experienced by their non-Aboriginal counterparts.

While it is difficult to measure the exact financial and economic implications for Aboriginal people and communities as a result of disrupted economies, stolen wages and exclusion from benefits based on race, the economic disenfranchisement of Aboriginal communities, families and individuals continues to have an enduring impact. It is also important to note that these processes of exclusion continue today for Aboriginal communities given lack of formal recognition of traditional lands, ongoing dispossession from land and culture, marginalisation and racism. This has led to intergenerational cycles of trauma and disadvantage, entrenching social difficulties and barriers such as poverty, violence, and

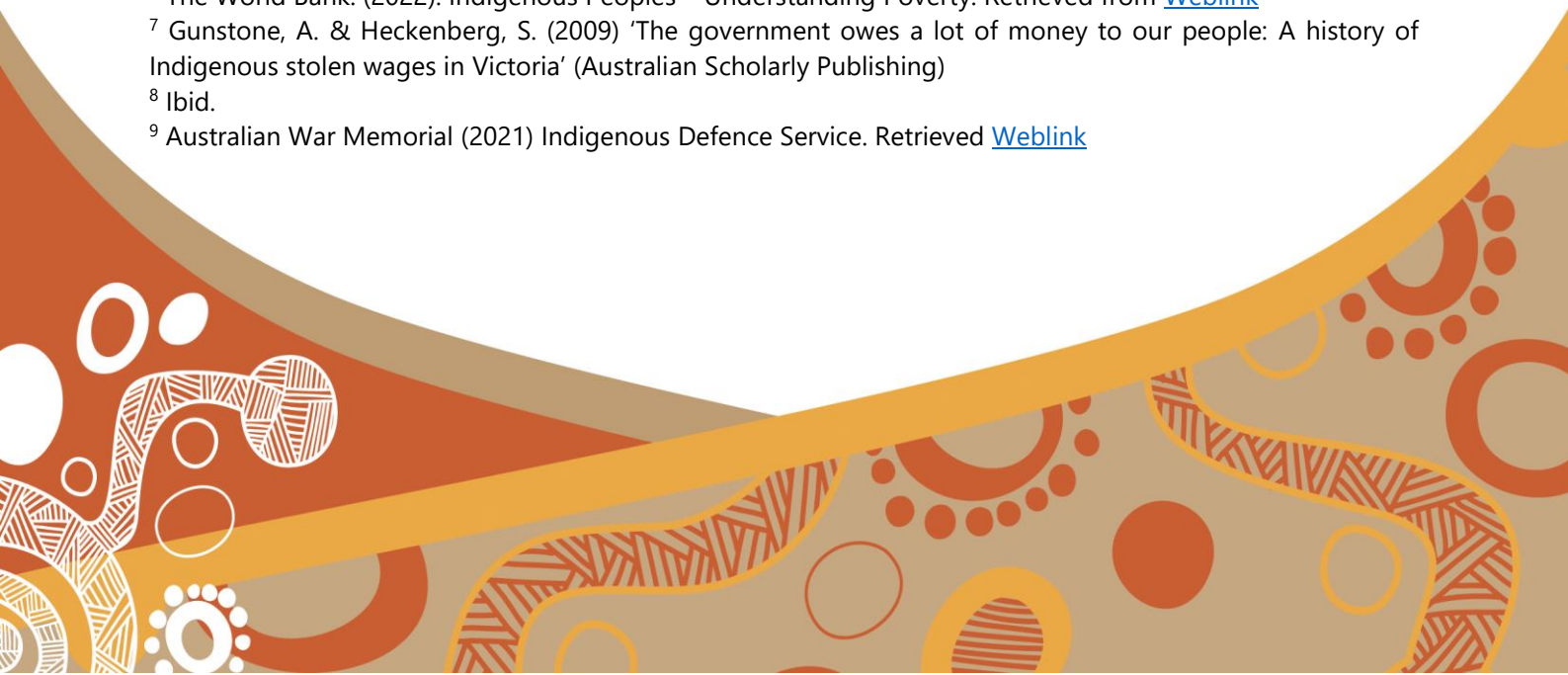
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<sup>6</sup> The World Bank. (2022). Indigenous Peoples – Understanding Poverty. Retrieved from [Weblink](#)

<sup>7</sup> Gunstone, A. & Heckenberg, S. (2009) 'The government owes a lot of money to our people: A history of Indigenous stolen wages in Victoria' (Australian Scholarly Publishing)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Australian War Memorial (2021) Indigenous Defence Service. Retrieved [Weblink](#)



individual, family and community dysfunction.<sup>10</sup> This should be further understood within the interconnected systems and injustice across the criminal justice, child protection, health and education systems. This will be further explored below in discussion on the impacts of poverty.

It is evident that enduring discrimination, social exclusion and systemic inequality and inequity drive the rates and experiences of poverty in Aboriginal families and communities to this day. The University of NSW's Centre for Social Impact found that severe financial stress is present for half the Aboriginal population in Australia, compared with one in ten in the broader Australian population.<sup>11</sup> In Victoria, an estimated 25.4 percent of Aboriginal families are currently experiencing poverty, approximately twice the rate of non-Aboriginal families.<sup>12</sup> Aboriginal people living in regional Victoria are also more likely to be living in poverty than those in Melbourne.<sup>13</sup> From our experience in the out-of-home care sector, VACCA understands that poverty is a significant issue within our families caring for Aboriginal children, with over half of our Kinship Carers living below the poverty line, and receiving the lowest rate of care allowance.

Analysis around the service demand projection for the Aboriginal services sector in Victoria shows that while currently the overall number of Aboriginal people living under the poverty line is decreasing, this is projected to increase in the future as the population growth rate is greater than the decreasing poverty rate.<sup>14</sup> These figures estimate an increase from 7,292 Aboriginal households in poverty in 2018, to 8,351 by 2028.<sup>15</sup> Such projected increases in addition to the acute economic conditions of recent years suggest a growing demand for

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<sup>10</sup> AIFS. (2020). Child protection and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. CFCA Resource Sheet. Retrieved from [Weblink](#)

<sup>11</sup> Weier, M., Dolan, K., Powell, A., Muir, K., & Young, A. (2019). Money Stories: Financial resilience among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Centre for Social Impact. University of NSW. Retrieved from [Weblink](#)

<sup>12</sup> Tanton, R., Peel, D., & Vidyattama, Y. (2018) Every suburb, Every town: Poverty in Victoria. NATSEM, Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis (IGPA), University of Canberra. Report commissioned by VCOSS. Retrieved from [Weblink](#)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> SVA Consulting., 2019. Service Demand Projection Report. Social Ventures Australia Consulting, Sydney.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

income support payments for Aboriginal families, placing further pressure on a system that is currently not meeting demand adequately and in the spirit of self-determination.

**VACCA recommends for the Federal Government to:**

1. Develop a financial reparation to Aboriginal communities in Victoria for all stolen wages, commensurate to the living wage today, specifically families of returned soldiers.

**Relationship between economic conditions, income support payments and poverty**

The economic downturn of recent years, triggered by crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, natural disasters and war, resulting in rising inflation has significantly affected the cost of living in Australia and will continue to do so for a number of years to come.<sup>16</sup> The recent Australian Community Sector Survey found that community services including homelessness, mental health and family violence organisations are facing soaring demand due to the cost-of-living crisis, ongoing disasters and the prolonged impacts of COVID-19.<sup>17</sup> Around 66 per cent of organisations reported increased demand in 2022, including 85 per cent of those delivering financial, legal and emergency support; and 80 per cent of those delivering domestic and family violence services.

VACCA's own family violence data saw a doubling of requests for support from women escaping family violence during COVID-19 which has been maintained, averaging around 400-600 requests for support every month in metropolitan Melbourne alone.

Recent economic conditions have had compounding effects for Aboriginal families, many of which are already experiencing financial stress. As discussed above, Aboriginal peoples today experience significant rates of poverty as a direct result of colonisation. In 2018-19, almost

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<sup>16</sup> Pueblos, M. & Tamer R. (2022). Australia's cost of living is soaring. Why is everything so expensive? SBS News. Retrieved from [Weblink](#); Reserve Bank of Australia. (2022). Statement on Monetary Policy – May 2022. Retrieved from [Weblink](#)

<sup>17</sup> Cortis, N. and Blaxland, M. (2022) Helping people in need during a cost-of-living crisis: findings from the Australian Community Sector Survey, Sydney: ACOSS. Retrieved from [Weblink](#)



two in five Aboriginal people in Australia reported that their household had days without money for basic living expenses in the last 12 months.<sup>18</sup>

Financial stress is further accentuated for Aboriginal families due to inadequate rates of income support payments to meet mounting cost of living and other expenses. Inadequate income support payments are widely regarded by the community sector as a key driver of rates of poverty in Australia.<sup>19</sup> This has also been reflected in multiple inquiries, with the 2020 *Adequacy of Newstart* inquiry finding that the income support system itself is forcing people into poverty.<sup>20</sup> It has also been found that changes to the Parenting Payments in 2009 have had a significant impact on sole parents which are often single mothers. This payment was excluded from an increase and was also exacerbated by the transfer of 80,000 sole parents from Parenting Payment to the lower Newstart Allowance (now JobSeeker) in 2013, and the freezing of Family Tax Benefits.<sup>21</sup>

Aboriginal families are already facing compound pressures and inequalities, the daily experience of getting by on inadequate income support payments can further cause distress and anxiety. As discussed later in the submission, financial hardship can also have flow on effects for Aboriginal children and families in increasing the risk of child poverty, child protection involvement, rates of family violence, as well as poor health, wellbeing and education.

Experiences from VACCA staff reveal that the income support payment amount received by the Aboriginal families we support to be insufficient to meet basic daily needs. This was predominantly due to housing costs and bills absorbing most of the payment.

The temporary increase to JobSeeker during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that “poverty is a policy choice, and inequality is effectively set at the level the government is content

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<sup>18</sup> AIHW. (2021). Indigenous income and finance – Snapshot. Retrieved from [Weblink](#)

<sup>19</sup> Davidson, P; Bradbury, B; and Wong, M (2022) Poverty in Australia 2022: A snapshot Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) and UNSW Sydney.

<sup>20</sup> Commonwealth of Australia (2020) Adequacy of Newstart and related payments and alternative mechanisms to determine the level of income support payments in Australia, Senate Community Affairs References Committee, Parliament House, Canberra.

<sup>21</sup> ACOSS. (2022). Poverty and Inequality definition. [Weblink](#)

with".<sup>22</sup> Significantly, ACOSS' 2022 Poverty Snapshot found that the increase to payments introduced at the outset of COVID-19 lifted people on JobSeeker above the poverty line and brought those on pensions to just below the poverty line.<sup>23</sup>

Research shows that when the Federal Government cut payments in early 2021, income inequality and poverty increased above pre-pandemic levels.<sup>24</sup> VACCA staff also reported that many of the Aboriginal families we support experienced heightened financial hardship following the payment cuts. While the rate of JobSeeker increased from the pre-pandemic \$150 to \$200 per fortnight in April 2021, this remains a grossly inadequate amount and completely unrealistic for people to survive on.

Not only is the JobSeeker allowance inadequate, but often mutual obligations to receive payments are paternalistic, impractical or unattainable. In addition, payment suspensions as a consequence of not meeting requirements can further drive Aboriginal families into poverty. The *Adequacy of Newstart* inquiry found that instead of supporting people to find work, the social security system has increasingly become punitive with the expectations that it will incentivise people to find work, irrespective of personal individual circumstances nor local and regional labour-market conditions.<sup>25</sup>

In 2020, VACCA collected anecdotal evidence from a range of client services staff working in programs from early years to homelessness services. We found that a significant number of VACCA clients struggled in one form or another as a consequence of social security policy. Estimates from our Family Services programs found that 60-70 families were being adversely affected. Some of the key problems highlighted were difficulties with accessing and navigating Centrelink, poor experiences and racial discrimination, onerous mutual obligation

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<sup>22</sup> Jericho, G. (2022) The pandemic showed us that poverty is a policy choice – we must do better. The Guardian. Retrieved from [Weblink](#)

<sup>23</sup> Davidson, P; Bradbury, B; and Wong, M (2022) Poverty in Australia 2022: A snapshot Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) and UNSW Sydney.

<sup>24</sup> Davidson, P., (2022) A tale of two pandemics: COVID, inequality and poverty in 2020 and 2021 ACOSS/UNSW Sydney Poverty and Inequality Partnership, Build Back Fairer Series, Report No. 3, Sydney

<sup>25</sup> Commonwealth of Australia (2020) Adequacy of Newstart and related payments and alternative mechanisms to determine the level of income support payments in Australia, Senate Community Affairs References Committee, Parliament House, Canberra.



requirements, everyday struggles with insufficient payment amount and consequences of payment suspensions.

VACCA staff identified many long-term adverse effects on families and children due to the pressures of mutual obligation requirements placed on parents, particularly for families experiencing complex circumstances as detailed in case study below.

### **A case study**

*Our Family Services Program supports Sarah who suffers from complex mental health. With the support of her mum, Sarah is also caring for her daughter Nelly. Sarah is eligible and has applied for the Disability Support Pension but is still on the waitlist and currently receiving the Newstart Allowance. Due to her mental health, Sarah has been struggling to manage some of the requirements around her Newstart. This has meant that her payments have been cut off several times. Sarah's Case Worker has had to call Centrelink on a number of occasions to explain the situation and get the payments reinstated, but this has also been a challenge. The impacts of payment suspensions are significant for Sarah's mental health, in addition to the financial strain on her and Nelly. Times when her payments have been cut, Sarah has fallen behind on rent and can't afford basic household items.*

Given the significant flow on impacts of financial hardship due to inadequate income support payments on risk of child protection involvement, rates of family violence, homelessness, as well as poor health, wellbeing and education, VACCA advocates for a child-centered, rights-based and equitable reform to social security policy so that Aboriginal families are able to receive the support they need and are able to thrive, rather than just survive.

VACCA welcome's the Albanese Government's announcement that it will establish an independent statutory body to review and publicly report on the adequacy of income



support before every federal budget.<sup>26</sup> VACCA hopes that this will strengthen accountability around the adequacy of income support payments and improve the social security system in the long term. While this is an important step forward, many Aboriginal families are currently missing out and in hardship due to inadequate social security payments. More needs to be done immediately to improve the lives of Aboriginal families. We therefore support the Australian Council for Social Service's (ACOSS) '*Raise the Rate For Good*' campaign to increase the base rate of JobSeeker and related payments from \$44 per day to at least \$69<sup>27</sup> and call for rights-based reform to mutual obligations practices.

**VACCA recommends for the Federal Government to:**

2. Increase the base rate of JobSeeker and related payments to at least \$69 per day to match the increased cost of living as well as rent assistance.
3. Review and reform mutual obligation requirements and related practices in consideration of their impact on Aboriginal children and families.

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<sup>26</sup> Commonwealth of Australia. (2022). Expert committee to advise on tackling disadvantage and boosting economic inclusion. Treasury. Retrieved from [Weblink](#)

<sup>27</sup> ACOSS. (2022). Raise the Rate Campaign. Retrieved from [Weblink](#)

## The experience of poverty for Aboriginal people and measures to address it

- *This section of VACCA's submission addresses Terms of Reference points (c)(i), (c)(ii), (c)(iii), (c)(iv), (d), (f) and (g)*

### Financial stress

As discussed above, a range of factors including increased cost of living and inadequate social security payments have contributed to significant financial stress experienced in recent years by Aboriginal families. VACCA staff have reported that a significant number of families have sought assistance over recent years for support with basic living expenses, rent and utilities and public transport.

In responding to this need, VACCA's Emergency Relief program covers a wide variety of essential items supporting Aboriginal people living in Victoria. It gives vital food relief, personal care items, utility bill support, public transport, travel costs to get to work or visit family in crisis, material aid and other supports. Offered as an additional support to many families already participating in VACCA programs – Kinship Care, Playgroup, Family Services or those experiencing family violence – Emergency Relief plays an important role in offering holistic, wrap around support. Providing food relief is often a gateway to facilitate further conversations around care and access to ongoing services. Helping families at a critical time, in a safe and culturally sensitive way, encourages trust between VACCA staff and community members who may be new to VACCA's services. Once trust has been developed, further assistance, healing and preventative programs can be offered as per the case study below.

## **A case study**

*Early one evening a staff member from VACCA's Ovens Murray office noticed James was sleeping rough in a local park. James was not local and had no family or friends living nearby. With no available crisis accommodation, the staff provided James with some camping equipment and provision to see through the night.*

*Early the next morning two VACCA staff went out to look for James and spent time with him learning more about his situation. James had recently separated from his family due to an incident. He had been left stranded, without any means of contacting family. James is a resilient Aboriginal man proud of his culture and people. James spoke of his previous struggles with addiction but had been 14 years sober. Staff were able to bring James back to the VACCA office where he had a meal, charged his phone and provided phone credit. VACCA staff spent the day with James and organised crisis accommodation and support through our Emergency Relief program. The next day James felt more rested, safe and able to travel by train so he could be with family. He thanked our staff for their help and staff have kept in touch with James. He was surprised, but grateful to come across multiple people he'd never met that were willing to help him out.*

*Staff reflected that community recognition of VACCA is vast and as an ACCO we're recognised as a safe place for Aboriginal people. The small things we do like wear our uniforms or lanyards that is culturally identifiable is important and makes our people feel safe to approach us and maybe even ask for help. Emergency Relief is a small program, but it can make a big impact in a time of need. We all face challenges in life, sometimes it might make us question who we are and what we believe. But we should never be ashamed of our culture and keep walking tall and proud.*



With increased cost of living and recent natural disasters, all VACCA offices have seen a significant increase in families seeking assistance through our Emergency Relief programs. This has need been challenging to meet given the reduction in federal funding for Emergency Relief programs. Further, any funds that VACCA has been allocated for Emergency Relief is not enough to meet increased demand. Given this reduced federal funding, VACCA has been seeking additional philanthropic funding to continue this essential support service for our families.

The Federal Government has a responsibility to all Aboriginal people regardless of where they live. Therefore, additional funding for Emergency Relief is needed to ensure that Aboriginal families experiencing hardship across urban, regional, rural, and remote areas can afford basic living expenses and support their immediate and extended families.

**VACCA recommends for the Federal Government to:**

4. Immediately increase funding for Emergency Relief services across urban, regional, rural and remote areas to meet increased demand.

## **Child protection**

It is well regarded that experiences of poverty increase the risk of family involvement with child protection and the removal of children from their families. However, VACCA seeks to highlight that race plays a critical role in how poverty is viewed by child protection systems, and therefore, dictates how child removal decisions are made. Historically and currently, poverty is viewed as neglect in Aboriginal communities, whereas it is viewed as lack of access to material goods for non-Aboriginal people. This speaks to the 'removal first' policies that remain today under different guises and serve to only entrench intergenerational poverty.

Through our work supporting Aboriginal families that have had contact with the child protection system, we know that issues of insecure employment, housing stress and homelessness, experiences of racism, including systemic racism, isolation and cultural disconnection, intergenerational trauma and poor social and emotional wellbeing erode the capacity of families to provide all that their children need. In their consultations with Aboriginal communities across the country, SNAICC also found that the "failure to address

poverty and drivers of the child protection system's involvement was seen as one of the largest systemic failures."<sup>28</sup>

Although family poverty does not immediately warrant involvement from child protection or the removal of children, studies have identified poverty to be a key indicator for involvement from child protection, and can be attributed by child protection as a form of neglect.<sup>29</sup> This was confirmed in SNAICC's consultation report where community widely believed that child protection services associated child risk concerns, such as neglect, with what were poverty issues – thereby reprimanding families for their experience of material poverty rather than supporting them.<sup>30</sup>

Whilst experiences poverty contribute to the likelihood of a child experiencing adverse events such as family violence, maternal distress and reduced parental responsiveness, a child's access to learning opportunities and their quality of care are all factors correlated with poverty and could be reduced through support to overcome disadvantage.<sup>31</sup> This is extremely problematic, as after being removed from their families and placed in out-of-home care, young people then become highly vulnerable to continued complex disadvantage when leaving care.

The 2022 SNAICC Family Matters Report also highlights that barriers such as poverty and homelessness reduce the likelihood of timely family reunification,<sup>32</sup> and given the higher rates of these factors for Aboriginal families, has significant implications for reconnecting families and preventing further disconnection from family and culture for Aboriginal children and young people in care.

VACCA considers that too often the main response of the State to the intergenerational impoverishment of Aboriginal families is a punitive child protection system that is orientated

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<sup>28</sup> SNAICC - National Voice for Our Children. (2021) National Framework for Protecting. Australia's Children 2021–2031 – Successor Pan Consultation Report. Page 9. Retrieved from [Weblink](#)

<sup>29</sup> Fong, K. (2017). Child welfare involvement and contexts of poverty: The role of parental adversities, social networks, and social services. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 72, 5-13.

<sup>30</sup> SNAICC - National Voice for Our Children. (2021) National Framework for Protecting. Australia's Children 2021–2031 – Successor Pan Consultation Report. Retrieved from [Weblink](#)

<sup>31</sup> Blackstock, C., & Trocmé, N. (2005). Community based child welfare for Aboriginal children. *Handbook for working with children and youth: Pathways to resilience across cultures and contexts*, 105-120.

<sup>32</sup> Family Matters (2022) The Family Matters Report 2022. SNAICC. Retrieved from [Weblink](#)



towards the removal of children rather than the resourcing and support of families. We therefore advocate for child-centred, holistic responses to reduce poverty that connect families to wrap around supports early to prevent child protection involvement. Such responses must honour a child's right to be with their family and amongst their culture and community.

VACCA calls for an integrated model approach to poverty that address social determinants of health, wellbeing, housing access as well as other risk factors for child protection involvement with the aim to prevent child protection notifications in the first place. We welcome commitment from the Federal Government to address the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in child protection systems in their recently released *Safe and Supported: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023 – 2026*. Specifically, Action 5 around embedding the five elements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle — Prevention, Partnership, Placement, Participation and Connection as has been committed by all jurisdictions.<sup>33</sup> SNAICC defines the 'prevention' element as "protecting children's rights to grow up in family, community and culture by redressing causes of child protection intervention".<sup>34</sup>

Further, Action 8 involving work across portfolios impacting Aboriginal children and families to address the social determinants of child safety and wellbeing is tightly linked to the prevention of poverty. Investing in the ACCO sector and shifting toward coordinated funding of early, targeted and culturally safe supports for Aboriginal children and families is crucial. This must also include a specific focus on prevention efforts that are Aboriginal-led. Addressing the structural drivers of poverty for Aboriginal families at all levels of government and services is key to keeping Aboriginal families together, safe and connected in culture.

**VACCA recommends for the Federal Government to:**

5. Continue national accountability function around the implementation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, particularly the

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<sup>33</sup> Commonwealth of Australia. (2021). *Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031*. Department of Social Services. Commonwealth of Australia. Retrieved from [Weblink](#)

<sup>34</sup> SNAICC – National Voice for Our Children *Understanding and Applying the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle: A Resource for Legislation, Policy and Program Development* (2017), p. 3 Retrieved from [Weblink](#)

prevention element as it pertains to addressing the causes of child protection intervention.

6. Ensure sustainable investment in *Safe and Supported: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Action Plan 2023 – 2026* Actions related to prevention and addressing the factors that lead to child protection involvement.
7. Invest in ACCO sector and shift toward coordinated funding of Aboriginal led prevention and early help supports that are targeted and culturally safe for Aboriginal children and families.

## Education

It is crucial note that the process of colonisation historically denied access education to Aboriginal people unless they acculturated. Initially 'Protection' measures sought to deny education all together, then the 'Assimilation' era used access to (a very limited offering) of education to quash Aboriginal culture and identity.<sup>35</sup>

Research indicates that in particular a mother's level of education achieved is a predictor of their child's future success<sup>36</sup>. Given the insufficient investment in early years education and childcare supports, this predominately impacts the mother's ability to work or progress higher education and in doing so limits the family's ability to create generational wealth and stability<sup>37</sup>.

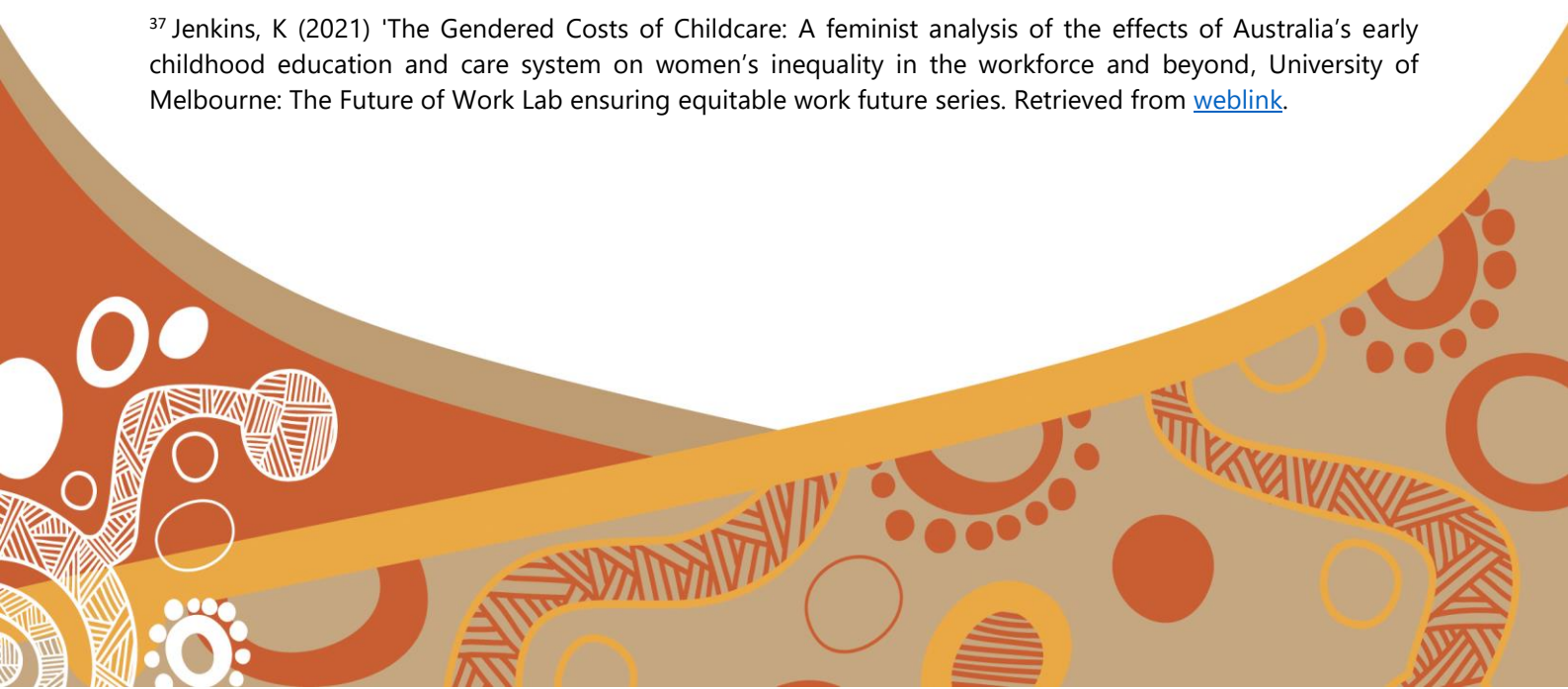
Poverty is both a contributing factor to and also an outcome of a lack of access to quality, culturally appropriate educational opportunities. The National education curriculum today

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<sup>35</sup> Stone, A., Walter, M., & Peacock, H. (2017). Educational outcomes for aboriginal school students In Tasmania: is The achievement Gap closing?. Australian and International Journal of Rural Education, 27(3), 90-110.

<sup>36</sup> Crosnoe R, Johnston C, Cavanagh S. Maternal Education and Early Childhood Education across Affluent English-Speaking Countries. Int J Behav Dev. 2021 May 1;45(3):226-237.

<sup>37</sup> Jenkins, K (2021) 'The Gendered Costs of Childcare: A feminist analysis of the effects of Australia's early childhood education and care system on women's inequality in the workforce and beyond, University of Melbourne: The Future of Work Lab ensuring equitable work future series. Retrieved from [weblink](#).



still does not have adequate Aboriginal content across all areas of learning, rather than embedding an understanding about Aboriginal ways of knowing and being, and ensuring that education provides a culturally safe and inclusive space. Educational institutions that seek to improve their practice are having to turn to external resources like Reconciliation Australia's *Narragunnawali* Reconciliation Action Plan resource to retrofit what is an inherently racist system.

Education is one of the key areas impacted by poverty and disadvantage, with disadvantaged children and young people experiencing poorer educational outcomes, social exclusion, lower school completion rates and lower levels of life satisfaction.<sup>38</sup>

Target six of The National Agreement on Closing the Gap commits to increasing the proportion of Aboriginal people aged 25-34 years who have completed a tertiary qualification (Certificate III and above to 70 per cent). As a country, we are still celebrating when an Aboriginal person achieves a tertiary education, which only speaks to the low expectations held for Aboriginal peoples, rather than embedding an educational system where Aboriginal history, cultures, languages and ways of knowing and being are celebrated and in turn supports all Australians to achieve their educational aspirations.

Every year in Victoria approximately 600 young people aged between 16 and 18 exit out of home care.<sup>39</sup> Transition from high school often corresponds to the period in which young people are also preparing to or already transitioning from care, making it a potentially highly volatile period of change. Without adequate planning and support during this transition period, care leavers face poorer outcomes in a number of areas, in particular access to tertiary education and vocational pathways. Aboriginal care leavers, who make up around one quarter of all care leavers in Victoria<sup>40</sup> face additional challenges of racism, disconnect from culture and the impact of intergenerational trauma.

VACCA also notes a significant barrier to education for children and young people living in out-of-home care with carers living in significant financial stress. The COVID-19 pandemic

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<sup>38</sup> Redmond, G. (2022) 'I just go to school with no food' – why Australia must tackle child poverty to improve educational outcomes. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from [weblink](#).

<sup>39</sup> DHHS (2021) Better Futures factsheet for providers. Retrieved from [weblink](#)

<sup>40</sup> Mendes et al. 2020



highlighted that many families did not have access to the technology required for remote learning. The impact of financial strain on these families is far-reaching, including generalised family pressure, inability to provide school required items or pay for school activities, and difficulty providing consistent digital and internet access. Recent research has confirmed that the rising cost of living crisis is adding a significant burden to families, making it harder to afford school essentials and leaving children without access to educational needs.<sup>41</sup>

Early learning and school readiness opportunities for Aboriginal children are also impacted by rising costs. SNAICC recently reported that 79% of parents in regional Australia said much cheaper access to good quality childcare would help their families, and 73% support the adoption of universal childcare, an increase from 69% in 2021.<sup>42</sup>

Aboriginal children also experience the compounding impact of the lack of culturally safe or appropriate early childhood, school environments and curriculums.<sup>43</sup> When schools cultivate a space that is experienced as culturally safe and representative of Aboriginal people and culture, young people report feeling safe and comfortable to engage in education. VACCA families have reported that unsafe experiences for children in their care have contributed to a feeling of a lack of safety at school and a reluctance to attend.

**VACCA recommends for the Federal Government to:**

8. Resource the ACCO sector to provide culturally safe and inclusive early education opportunities for Aboriginal children aged 0-8 years and meaningful transition supports for young people that includes mentors, cultural supports.
9. Provide dedicated funding for educational resources including financial planning and counselling available for families experiencing poverty.
10. Greater investment for Aboriginal-led accessible, good quality and culturally specific childcare.

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<sup>41</sup> The Smith Family (2022) The Smith Family Pulse Survey. Retrieved from [weblink](#).

<sup>42</sup> SNAICC (2023) More action needed to Close the Gap on early learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Retrieved from [weblink](#).

<sup>43</sup> Productivity Commission (2022) Review of the National School Reform Agreement. Study Report, Canberra.

## Employment and economic development

Achieving strong economic participation and development for Aboriginal communities which can reduce rates of poverty requires achieving commitments around employment outlined in Closing the Gap. Target 8 aims to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25-64 who are employed to 62 per cent by 2031. Baseline data from 2016, showed that then 51.0 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25–64 years were employed.<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately, there is no new data since the baseline year of 2016, and without this, it is unclear how the Federal Government will progress against this target.

We welcome recent investments to establish a trial of a New Jobs Program in remote and very remote locations that will replace the discriminatory Community Development Program. However, given the lack of progress against Target 8, much greater investment is needed, particularly in targeted employment and workforce programs designed and led by community across metro, regional and rural/remote areas in all jurisdictions. The Federal Government should also expand the Indigenous Skills and Employment Program (ISEP) which connects Aboriginal people to jobs, career advancement opportunities, and to new training and job-ready activities, across Victoria. Currently there are only a handful of organisations which offer this program in Victoria.<sup>45</sup>

VACCA has invested significant resources into the development of a number of employment initiatives that support community who are starting out in their careers, to enter the workforce through a range of pathways including traineeships, internships and student placements.

**Traineeships:** VACCA's traineeship program provides an entry level opportunity for ten Aboriginal people each year to gain 12 months practical work experience, structured on-the-job training and a Certificate IV in Community Services. Upon successful completion of the 12-month traineeship, trainees are assisted to find ongoing employment at VACCA.

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<sup>44</sup> Australian Government. (2022). Socioeconomic outcome area 8 Strong economic participation and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities. [Weblink](#)

<sup>45</sup> NIAA. (2023) . Indigenous Skills and Employment Program (ISEP). [Weblink](#)

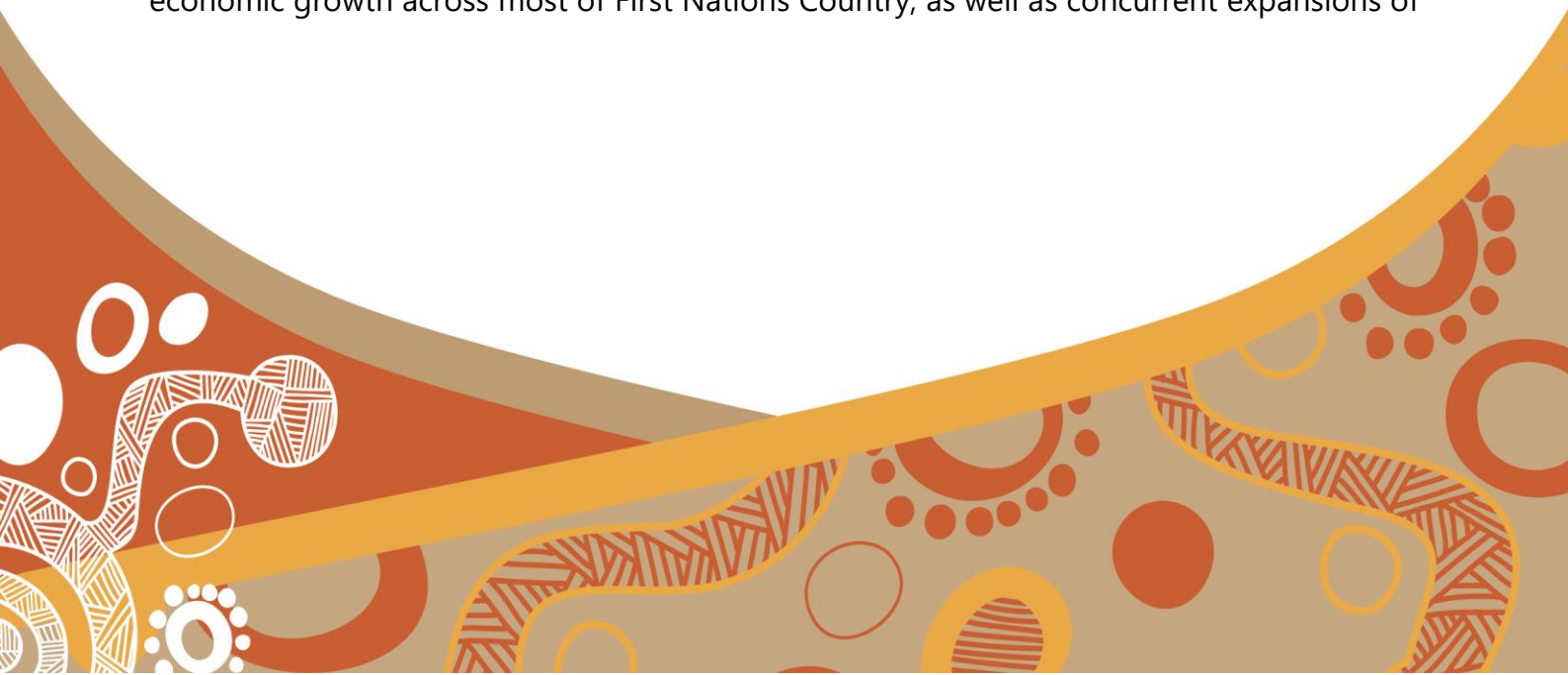
Student Internships and Placements: VACCA also has a student internship program which sees partnerships with education providers to provide a short-term opportunity to Aboriginal students undertake paid internship with VACCA.

Since 2017 VACCA has supported 27 Aboriginal trainees complete a twelve-month traineeship, 21 of them have been offered ongoing employment. During this period we have also had 15 Aboriginal university students complete internships through Career Trackers and provided 75 student placements, 28 of these resulted in employment at VACCA and 12 of those who were successfully employed were Aboriginal students.

Barreng Moorop Work Ready Program: In partnership with Bridge Darebin VACCA has run a number of work ready program over the past couple of years for 14–18-year-olds. The program was designed to support Aboriginal young people learn skills and information to acquire a part time job. Skills and training included developing your CV and cover letter and preparing for interviews. Aboriginal employment officers from Coles, Bunnings and Bakers Delight come and speak with the young people as well as one of VACCA's Organisational Development team to discuss VACCA's trainee and internship programs. The program runs over six weeks including one week of undertaking a food handling course and work experience at the social enterprise café run by Bridge Darebin 'Moon Rabbit'. The feedback for this course has been overwhelmingly positive, and this model shows a flexible, local partnership between an ACCO and an employer.

VACCA calls for greater federal investment and support of ACCO designed and led, culturally appropriate employment and workforce programs, given their significant positive contribution to both employment outcomes and community.

It is evident more systemic reforms such as formally recognising the right of Aboriginal people to self-determination and self-governance and implementing this in policy and legislation also has implications for economic development. Internationally, a recent report from the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development has found that federal US policies around tribal self-determination and self-governance have resulted in significant economic growth across most of First Nations Country, as well as concurrent expansions of



the responsibilities and capacities of tribal governments.<sup>46</sup> The research found that legislation unique to the state of Maine allows the state government to block the full application of the federal policy, and as a consequence, the Wabanaki Nations of Maine have not experienced the same level of economic development relative to the tribes in other states.<sup>47</sup>

**VACCA recommends for the Federal Government to:**

11. Invest in targeted employment and workforce programs designed and led by ACCOs.
12. Expand the Indigenous Skills and Employment Program (ISEP).

## **Criminal justice**

The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC) confirmed that the most significant contributing factor in the overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in the criminal justice system was disadvantage and their unequal position in wider society.<sup>48</sup> The Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework and the Aboriginal Justice Agreement both recognise that current social and economic disadvantage of Aboriginal people and communities, as well as their overrepresentation in criminal justice, are strongly linked to the ongoing impacts of colonisation and dispossession.<sup>49</sup> PwC's *Indigenous incarceration: Unlock the facts* research also shows strong links between intergenerational disadvantage, poverty and incarceration.<sup>50</sup> Unemployment and housing insecurity are strongly connected with increased criminal justice involvement.

While experiences of poverty and disadvantage contribute to justice involvement for Aboriginal people, those who leave custody also often do so into poverty and financial stress.

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<sup>46</sup> Kalt, J., Medford, A. B., & Taylor, J. (2022). Economic and Social Impacts of Restrictions on the Applicability of Federal Indian Policies to the Wabanaki Nations in Maine. Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development Research Report.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Department of Justice and Regulation (2005) Victorian Implementation Review of the Recommendations from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. Victoria State Government.

<sup>49</sup> State of Victoria

<sup>50</sup> PwC's Indigenous Consulting. (2017). Indigenous incarceration: Unlock the facts. PwC. Retrieved from [Weblink](#)

This has implications for greater risk of reoffending and entrenching the intergenerational cycle of poverty.<sup>51</sup> It is also well documented that systemic racism in the justice system is driving Aboriginal overrepresentation and we can make the argument that systemic racism is also therefore driving disadvantage and poverty. Addressing this cycle requires system-wide reform that acknowledges the complex intersection between dispossession, poverty, disadvantage and justice involvement.

In its October 2022 budget, the Albanese Government announced funding for community justice reinvestment programs over the next four years, including for local community initiatives to address the causes of incarceration, for culturally appropriate legal assistance, and for family violence legal services.<sup>52</sup> While VACCA welcomes this funding, the Federal Government must provide funding on a long term basis to community-led approaches that address underlying drivers of offending and divert Aboriginal people away from the justice system at every possible opportunity. This is crucial in fulfilling commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap Justice Policy Partnership.

**VACCA recommends for the Federal Government to:**

13. Address the complex intersection between poverty, disadvantage and justice involvement by providing long-term funding to community-led approaches that address underlying drivers of offending and divert Aboriginal people away from the justice system at every possible opportunity.

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<sup>51</sup> PwC's Indigenous Consulting. (2017). Indigenous incarceration: Unlock the facts. PwC. Retrieved from [Weblink](#)

<sup>52</sup> Parliament of Australia. (2022). Media Release. Albanese Government delivers landmark first nations justice investment. Retrieved from [Weblink](#).



## Homelessness and housing insecurity

*“The contemporary housing experience of Aboriginal people cannot be decoupled from the historical experience of Aboriginal dispossession and dislocation. Deprived of our land, excluded from the fruits of the economy and our traditional authority, lore and customs undermined, Aboriginal people have been homeless in our own land for the past two centuries.”*

*- Mana-Na Woorn-Tyeen Maar-Takoort Every Aboriginal Person Has A Home - Victoria’s Aboriginal Housing And Homelessness Framework*

Dispossession from land and social exclusion are direct contributors to cycles of intergenerational poverty and homelessness for Aboriginal peoples. In Victoria today, Aboriginal people are 13 times more likely than non-Aboriginal people to access homelessness services.<sup>53</sup> In 2020-21, 17 percent of Aboriginal people in Victoria sought homelessness support, a figure which is unchanged from the previous year.

Across Australia, Aboriginal households are half as likely to own their own home (with or without a mortgage).<sup>54</sup> For Aboriginal people in Victoria, securing home ownership rates are 25 percentage points lower than other Victorians.<sup>55</sup> For Aboriginal families with a mortgage, recent increases to interest rates, coupled with the rise the rate of inflation are contributing to significant financial stress as reported by VACCA staff.

Research has found several circumstances associated with poverty are directly correlated with homelessness.<sup>56</sup> Circumstances such as limited opportunities for education, disability, financial stress, debt, reliance on public housing, social exclusion and living in sub-standard accommodation all make sustaining stable housing extremely difficult. These experiences

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<sup>53</sup> Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework. (2022). 2022 Annual Report Card, p. 13. Retrieved from Weblink

<sup>54</sup> Productivity Commission (2022) In need of Repair: The National Housing and Homelessness Agreement – Study Report

<sup>55</sup> Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework. (2022). 2022 Annual Report Card, p. 13. Retrieved from Weblink

<sup>56</sup> McCaughey, J. (1992). Where now? Homeless families in the 1990’s (Policy Background Paper No. 8). Australian Institute of Family Studies. Melbourne; Homelessness Australia. (2016). Homelessness and poverty. Homelessness Australia

flow through generations of family, creating an intergenerational impact and a cycle of homelessness amongst Aboriginal families and communities.<sup>57</sup>

Aboriginal people leaving care are a particularly vulnerable group to homelessness and housing stress. This is evident in data showing that more than half of Aboriginal people in contact with homeless services in Australia are under 25 years of age.<sup>58</sup> Further, Aboriginal young people are overrepresented in the homeless population within a year of leaving care (at a rate of more than one in three).<sup>59</sup> Inadequate income support payments not only play a significant role in financial hardship but the *Adequacy of Newstart* report also found that lower payment rates for young people under 22 years of age contributed to the rise of youth homelessness.<sup>60</sup>

As discussed above, while poverty is a contributing factor to child removal, with the provision of affordable housing, adequate income support payments and the right culturally safe support targeting specific needs, many Aboriginal families can stay together. This can also help prevent the damaging cycle of Aboriginal young people leaving care into homelessness.

VACCA notes the Productivity Commission's 2022 report 'In need of repair' which reviews the *National Housing and Homelessness Agreement*, finding it to be ineffective.<sup>61</sup> It recommended the next Agreement should focus on affordability of the private rental market and the targeting of housing assistance, especially the Commonwealth Rent Assistance package.<sup>62</sup>

VACCA supports the findings of the Productivity Commission, particularly their recommendation to develop a new approach to support Aboriginal housing and

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<sup>57</sup> Tilbury, C. (2015). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in Australia: Poverty and child welfare involvement. In *Theoretical and empirical insights into child and family poverty* (pp. 273-284). Springer, Cham.

<sup>58</sup> Campo, M., & Commerford, J. (2016). Supporting young people leaving out-of-home care (CFCA Paper No. 41). Canberra: Australian Institute of Family Studies

<sup>59</sup> Campo, M., & Commerford, J. (2016). Supporting young people leaving out-of-home care (CFCA Paper No. 41). Canberra: Australian Institute of Family Studies

<sup>60</sup> Commonwealth of Australia (2020) *Adequacy of Newstart and related payments and alternative mechanisms to determine the level of income support payments in Australia*, Senate Community Affairs References Committee, Parliament House, Canberra.

<sup>61</sup> Productivity Commission (2022) *In need of Repair: The National Housing and Homelessness Agreement – Study Report*

<sup>62</sup> Ibid



homelessness services that aligns with the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* as currently the *National Housing and Homelessness Agreement* does not articulate specific objectives, outcomes, actions or targets for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing.<sup>63</sup> This must also include a focus on increasing Aboriginal home ownership.

VACCA has previously advocated for a number of policy responses that can alleviate experiences of poverty and improve the housing outcomes and rates of homelessness amongst Aboriginal communities.<sup>64</sup> We also recommend that the federal government look at Victoria's *Mana-Na Woorn-Tyeen Maar-Takoort Every Aboriginal Person Has A Home - The Victorian Aboriginal Housing And Homelessness Framework* and commit to developing an Aboriginal specific agreement at the national level.

**VACCA recommends for the Federal Government to:**

14. Commit to the development and delivery of a national Aboriginal-specific integrated housing and homelessness agreement, that sits alongside the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement, developed by ACCOs, that is grounded in the principle of self-determination.
15. Commit to developing a new National Housing and Homelessness Plan and Agreement that includes performance and accountability mechanisms that will track outcomes and performance indicators for both Agreements.
16. Commit to reviewing the Commonwealth Rent Assistance Package in line with contemporary cost of living expense.

## Family violence

Economic exclusion and poverty because of colonisation and systemic discrimination also both contribute to the high rates of family violence among Aboriginal communities. It is difficult to accurately determine the prevalence of family violence across society due to underreporting, culturally inappropriate assessment tools, the poor identification of

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid p 430

<sup>64</sup> See VACCA's [submission](#) to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs: Inquiry into Homelessness in Australia. June 2020.



Aboriginal status at the point of police involvement including misidentification of the affected family member, as well as a fear of involving state authorities, such as criminal justice and child protection systems.<sup>65</sup>

The Victorian Health Population Survey found that in 2017, Aboriginal women were 2.5 times more likely to report experiencing family violence than their non-Aboriginal peers.<sup>66</sup> It is important to note, however, that Aboriginal respondents were twice as likely than non-Aboriginal participants to refuse to answer questions about family violence, indicating a potential underreporting in these figures.

While poverty can be a contributing factor for family violence, experiences of family violence can also increase the risk of housing stress and homelessness and therefore poverty. Unaffordable or insecure housing means that those fleeing violence, in particular women and children, are often economically dependent on perpetrators. In addition, financial abuse is a highly prevalent issue in Australia with severe impacts on women and children<sup>67</sup> yet is often not given the adequate weight it deserves in family violence prevention and response.

Anne Summer's report 'The Choice: Violence or Poverty' articulates what is so often the experience of Aboriginal women, that they are faced with living with family violence or entering policy induced poverty,<sup>68</sup> identifying the insufficient social security payments contribute to the experience of financial hardship.<sup>69</sup> This is why the provision of Aboriginal-specific, culturally safe, affordable and accessible housing is key to addressing the cycle of poverty, family violence and homelessness. This must also be combined with ACCO-led, wrap-around, trauma informed responses that support the specific needs of Aboriginal families affected by family violence.

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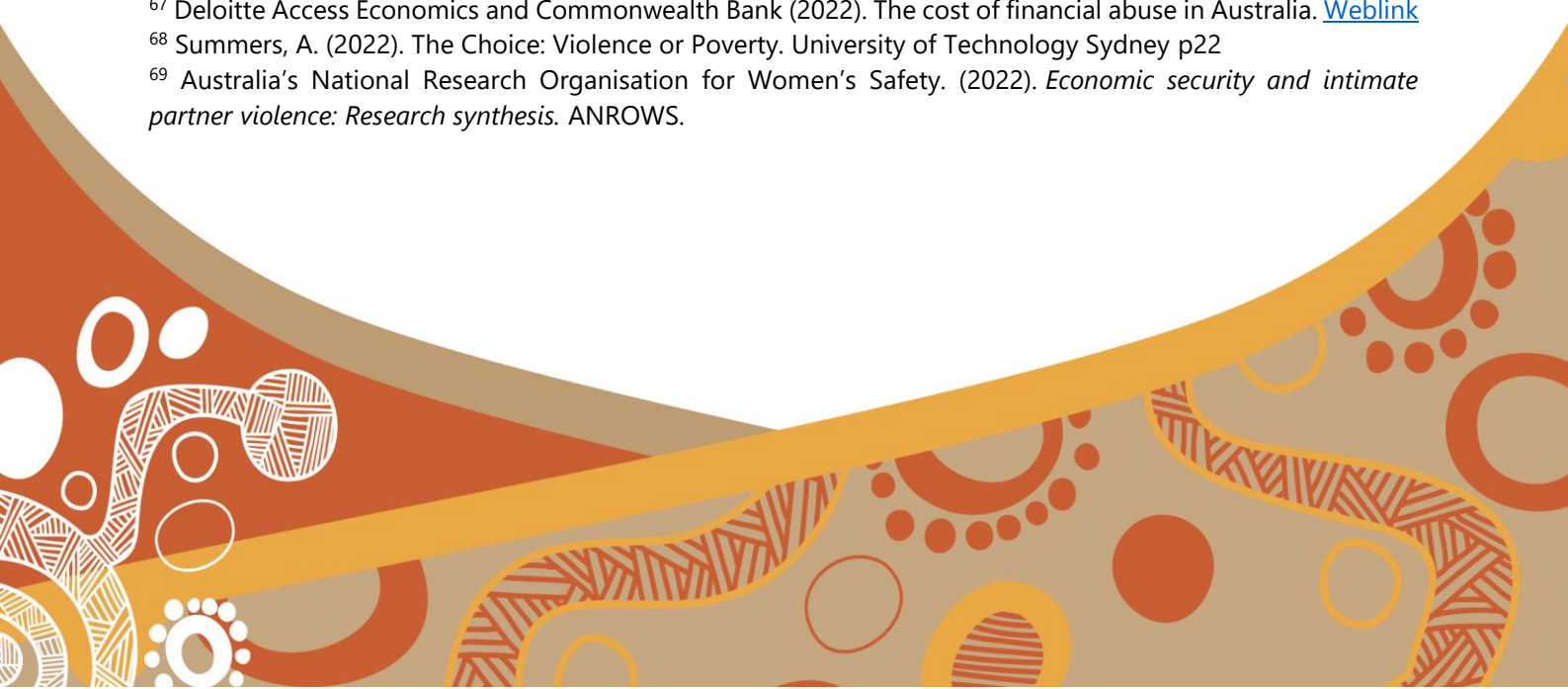
<sup>65</sup> Willis, M. (2011). Non-disclosure of family violence in Australian Indigenous communities. Canberra, ACT: Australian Institute of Criminology. [Weblink](#)

<sup>66</sup> Victorian Agency for Health Information. (2020). Family violence in Victoria: Findings from the Victorian Population Health Survey. Melbourne, VIC: Author

<sup>67</sup> Deloitte Access Economics and Commonwealth Bank (2022). The cost of financial abuse in Australia. [Weblink](#)

<sup>68</sup> Summers, A. (2022). The Choice: Violence or Poverty. University of Technology Sydney p22

<sup>69</sup> Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety. (2022). *Economic security and intimate partner violence: Research synthesis*. ANROWS.



Given experiences of family violence can also increase the risk of poverty, efforts must also focus on primary prevention to address the driving factors of family violence such as attitudes, beliefs and behaviours so that families can stay safe and together. VACCA welcomes the Federal Government's commitment to addressing family violence amongst Aboriginal communities through a dedicated First Nations Action Plan in the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-32*, as well as the standalone First Nations National Plan to come.

ACCO-led primary prevention is key to addressing the root causes of family violence and must be prioritised in the National Plan. Victoria is the only state that offers a Respectful Relationships curriculum – a primary prevention approach aiming to support schools and early childhood settings to promote and model respect, positive attitudes, behaviours and healthy relationships.<sup>70</sup>

VACCA calls for the expansion of Respectful Relationships curriculum nationally, and for ACCO-led and delivered culturally appropriate Aboriginal-specific Healthy and Respectful Relationships programs as well as consent education to be a key component of the curriculum. Learning environments cannot be the only facilitators of such programs given that many vulnerable Aboriginal young people are disengaged from school. Therefore, respectful relationships education must also be delivered in Aboriginal community settings and by ACCOs in addition to learning environments and be targeted to specific groups such as Aboriginal young men.

**VACCA recommends for the Federal Government to:**

17. Implement a longitudinal study that looks at the correlation between family violence and economic insecurity, review and amend the Social Security Act to ensure that experience of family violence is considered where determining whether someone is in a couple for social security purposes and review and amend the Parenting Payment Single allowance to better support women who have experienced family violence as detailed in ANROW's *Economic security and intimate partner violence: Research synthesis (2022)*.

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<sup>70</sup> State of Victoria. (2022) Respectful Relationships Website. Retrieved from [Weblink](#)

18. Invest in national ACCO-led Aboriginal-specific Healthy and Respectful Relationships programs and consent education.

## **Health and wellbeing**

As discussed above, the impact of colonisation and consequent dispossession from land, denial of culture, removal of children and exclusion of Aboriginal people from society is recognised as having a fundamental impact on the disadvantage and poverty experienced by Aboriginal people today. It is well documented that these experiences cause health disparities within the Aboriginal community resulting in greater disease burden, significant implications for health behaviours and access to health services.<sup>71</sup> Poverty stems from the inequitable access of social determinants of health which derive from the social and economic structures in current society.

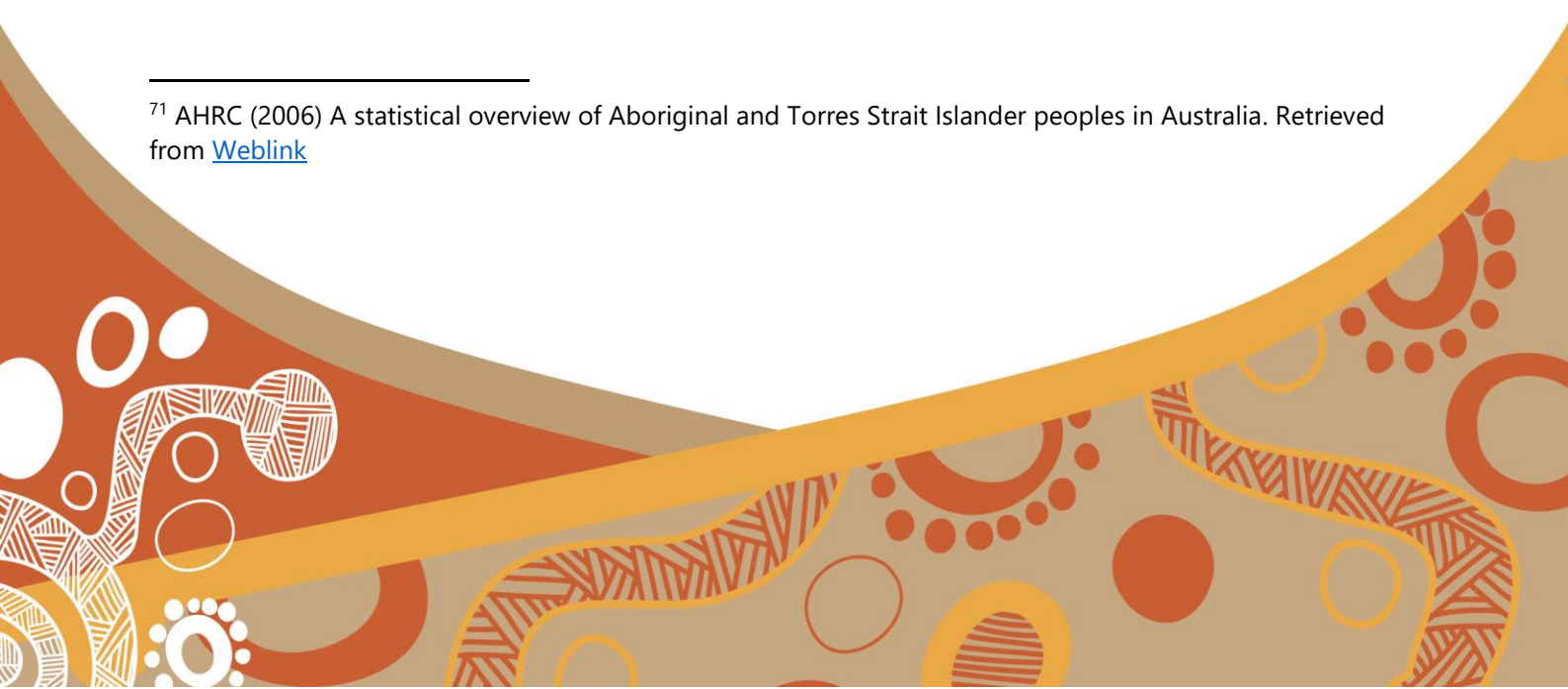
As discussed above, experiences of financial hardship and poverty can have significant detrimental flow on effects for the wellbeing of Aboriginal families. Limited access to income resulting in financial stress is a key social determinant of health and wellbeing.

VACCA staff have reported that to their knowledge, nearly all VACCA clients have experienced income support payment suspensions, with a high percentage of families experiencing this recurrently. This has severe impacts on the family's physical, emotional and mental wellbeing with reoccurring feelings of shame, hopelessness and poor self-esteem as well as lack of financial security for children and families.

The implications of financial hardship for health and wellbeing as discussed in this section further support VACCA's recommendations around increased rates of income support payments, reform to mutual obligations and funding for Emergency Relief.

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<sup>71</sup> AHRC (2006) A statistical overview of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia. Retrieved from [Weblink](#)



## Intersection between climate change and poverty

In discussing poverty, it is crucial to address the impact of climate change in driving inequalities. In February 2022, the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) identified Australia as enduring much greater impacts from climate change than any other advanced economy.<sup>72</sup>

It is evident that communities already experiencing disadvantage and poverty are much more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change than the general population. The latest edition of Jesuit Social Services' research into mapping disadvantage across Australia by location included environmental indicators alongside social, economic, education and health measures. The research found that communities undergoing persistent disadvantage often also experience disproportionate environmental injustice, represented through such factors as higher levels of air pollution, exposure to heat stress, and poorer access to green open spaces.<sup>73</sup>

We have already seen the compounding impacts of natural disasters on communities living in areas that have pre-existing inequalities in terms of access to services, housing, supports, education, and employment opportunities. In Victoria, catastrophic fires and flooding in recent years has resulted in the loss of life, homes and business all of which significantly affect the communities we work with. The fires of summer 2019/20 had a devastating impact on the north-eastern parts of Victoria. In response, VACCA partnered with Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Cooperative Ltd (GEGAC) to provide a Bushfire Recovery Program consisting of state-wide case management to support Aboriginal community members impacted by the fires. Flooding in central and northern Victoria in 2022 also meant that VACCA families in our Ovens Murray region were particularly affected. While VACCA established a flood response, the floods had a compounding impact on demand for our Emergency Relief program.

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<sup>72</sup> IPCC, 2022: Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [H.-O. Pörtner, D.C. Roberts, M. Tignor, E.S. Poloczanska, K. Mintenbeck, A. Alegria, M. Craig, S. Langsdorf, S. Loschke, V. Möller, A. Okem, B. Rama (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press. In Press.

<sup>73</sup> Tanton, R., Dare, L., Miranti, R., Vidyattama, Y., Yule, A. and McCabe, M. (2021), Dropping Off the Edge 2021: Persistent and multilayered disadvantage in Australia, Jesuit Social Services: Melbourne.

Aboriginal people have distinct set of cultural and legal rights around traditional land use. Such rights are stipulated in international and Victorian human rights documents. Article 26 in the UNDRIP emphasises the right for Indigenous people to “own, use, develop and control the lands, territories and resources that they possess by reason of traditional ownership or other traditional occupation or use, as well as those which they have otherwise acquired.”<sup>74</sup> The Victorian Charter also includes the right of Aboriginal people “to maintain their distinctive spiritual, material and economic relationship with the land and waters and other resources with which they have a connection under traditional laws and customs.”<sup>75</sup> A key aspect of the Treaty process in Victoria will be enshrining the rights and strengthening capacities of Traditional Owners groups through self-determination around nation building, natural resource management and building cultural heritage.<sup>76</sup>

Traditional Owners have been managing land for over 60,000 years. Their knowledge and holistic traditional land practices are embedded in cultural ways that have been passed down through generations. The Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations notes the deep relationship between the health of Country and community and highlights the great contributions that Traditional Owners can make to climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts across the board.<sup>77</sup> VACCA therefore calls for the Federal Government to partner with State and Territory governments, ACCOs and Traditional Owner groups to develop a national Aboriginal plan for the management of emergencies and natural disasters as well as climate change adaptation.

The Aboriginal families we work with are at an increased risk of experiencing the current and long-term effects of climate change due to existing disparities around income, health, wellbeing and access to traditional lands and ways of living. The Lowitja Institute’s research on climate change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health found that climate

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<sup>74</sup> Newman, D.G. (2006). Theorizing collective Indigenous rights. *American Indian Law Review*, 31(2), 273-289.

<sup>75</sup> Parliament of Victoria. Legislation. 2006. Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006. Retrieved from [Weblink](#)

<sup>76</sup> The Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations. (2022). Victorian Budget Submission 2022. [Weblink](#)

<sup>77</sup> The Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations. (2018). A Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation Strategy. Submission to the Independent Expert Panel on Interim Targets. [Weblink](#); The Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations. (2022). Victorian Budget Submission 2022. [Weblink](#)



change is compounding historical injustices and is disrupting cultural and spiritual connections to Country that are central to health and wellbeing.<sup>78</sup> Investing in Traditional Owner groups and ACCOs to drive place-based adaptation and mitigation planning as well as rights-based housing and access to Country and its resources is crucial in building the adaptive capacity of community.

In addition to health disparities, Aboriginal families on low incomes and living in rental properties are much more vulnerable and disproportionately experience heat and cooling stress. Research has identified that energy poverty is a key contributor limiting Aboriginal people's capacity to adapt to hot weather.<sup>79</sup> In Victoria, the proportion of Aboriginal people who received mainstream community housing units in 2019-20 was round 6 per cent, increasing by 2 per cent from 2018-19.<sup>80</sup> The proportion of Aboriginal people engaged in the private rental market in Victoria has also increased by around six percentage points from 2006 to 2016.<sup>81</sup>

While there are minimum energy efficiency standards for newly built rental and social housing properties, there are no minimum standards for existing housing stock. This means that families living in the older properties are much more vulnerable to the fluctuations in weather attributed to climate change and as well as also being faced with increased utility cost. VACCA therefore supports ACOSS's call for the Federal Government to retrofit low-income homes and introduce minimum energy efficiency standards in rental properties. This is crucial in ensuring everyone is able to live in a healthy, energy efficient home.

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<sup>78</sup> HEAL Network & CRE-STRIDE (2021), Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, Discussion Paper, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne, DOI: 10.48455/bthg-aj15

<sup>79</sup> Race, D., Mathew, S., Campbell, M. & Hampton, K. (2016), Are Australian Aboriginal communities adapting to a warmer climate? A study of communities living in semiarid Australia, *Journal of Sustainable Development*, vol. 9(3).

<sup>80</sup> Australian Government. (2020). Productivity Commission Tables 18A.7 ROGS 2020 Retrieved from [Weblink](#)

<sup>81</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006, 2011 and 2016 Census of Population and Housing. Retrieved from [Weblink](#)

## **VACCA recommends for the Federal Government to:**

19. Partner with State and Territory governments, ACCOs and Traditional Owner groups to develop a national Aboriginal plan for the management of emergencies and natural disasters as well as climate change adaptation.
20. Partner with State and Territory governments to introduce minimum energy efficiency standards in rental properties and urgently retrofit low-income rentals and social housing with energy efficiency upgrades.

## **Impacts amongst different demographics and communities**

As discussed above, the impacts of poverty and disadvantage on Aboriginal people are many and varied, but we must also consider the compounding impact across people's intersecting identities and experiences. Aboriginal women, carers, Elders, community members living with a disability and those who identify as LGBTQIA+ all have complex and intersecting needs based on marginalised identities. All of these groups have the right to access equitable supports and services that are culturally safe and targeted to address the intersection of their needs.

Aboriginal women are disproportionately impacted at the "employment, social security and care nexus",<sup>82</sup> meaning Aboriginal women are more likely to be in circumstances where employment, care and social security have the combined effect of reducing their economic security and wellbeing. Women generally take on a disproportionate amount of reproductive labour and childcare work, but Aboriginal women in particular do more diverse care work, leaving them more likely to exit employment to manage multiple roles,<sup>83</sup> leading to more likelihood of experiencing poverty. VACCA is greatly concerned not only about the high rates of Aboriginal women impacted by poverty, but also the flow on impact of this to Aboriginal children and families. While we welcome the Albanese Government's reform to childcare

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<sup>82</sup> Staines, Z. (2022) Tackling gender-based inequality at the nexus of employment, social security, and care: what next for women? Power to Persuade. Retrieved from [Weblink](#)

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

benefits and expansion of paid parental leave, more needs to be done to support Aboriginal families and children.

Carers of Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care are often living in significant financial stress. Over 50 per cent of VACCA's kinship carers are living below the poverty line. The recent VAGO report into Kinship Care in Victoria indicated that 96 per cent of kinship carers receive the lowest level of care allowance, compared to 32 per cent of foster carers.<sup>84</sup>

Our Elders have a wealth of knowledge in cultural practices, protocols and lore, they are the connection between our ancestors that have come before us, to impart cultural knowledge to the next generation. However, Elders have an important caring role in Aboriginal communities therefore experiences of financial hardship by Elders can have flow on effects on children and young people as well as the wider family group. Further, experiences of poverty diminish the capacity of Aboriginal Elders to live the life of dignity and respect as is their cultural right.

**VACCA recommends for the Federal Government to:**

21. Consider the intersectional impacts and experiences of poverty for Aboriginal women, children, carers and Elders and design targeted and preventative interventions led by the Aboriginal community.
22. Ensure the needs of carers for children in out-of-home care are taken into account to ensure assessments of income support levels are appropriate and relevant.

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<sup>84</sup> VAGO (2022) Kinship Care. Retrieved from [Weblink](#)



## Cross cutting measures to address poverty

- *This section of VACCA's submission addresses Terms of Reference points (f) and (g)*

Given the significant and often interconnected impacts of poverty on Aboriginal communities, all mechanisms developed by governments to address and reduce poverty must be intersectional. This approach should be driven by sustainable and targeted solutions that consider the interlinked needs of different groups of Aboriginal people and how a range of factors contribute to their experience of poverty. It is also crucial for measures to be preventative and address the root causes of poverty rather than all too often focusing on responding to poverty through tertiary interventions. Policy and legislative reforms must be child-centred and include a specific focus on the needs of Aboriginal families, centering their rights to connection to their family, culture, identity and Country.

Addressing the entrenched systemic racism and the structures that perpetuate poverty and disadvantage for Aboriginal peoples requires systemic reform to the 'business as usual approach'. This also involves taking a rights-based approach and recognising the collective rights of Aboriginal people. As per international law, including UNDRIP, Indigenous rights are recognised as collective rights that are derived from the unique legal status of Indigenous peoples as distinct communities and their right to self-determination.<sup>85</sup>

In addition to recognising the collective rights of Aboriginal people, treaty, truth-telling and constitutional recognition processes are all crucial in making amends for the past and moving towards more equal governance relations between Aboriginal people and Australian governments. VACCA welcomes the Albanese Government's commitment to the Uluru Statement from the Heart in full as well as the referendum process to enshrine a First Nations Voice to Parliament. While 'The Voice' is an important element of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, establishing an independent Makarrata Commission to support treaty and truth-telling is also essential.

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<sup>85</sup> Newman, D.G. (2006). Theorizing collective Indigenous rights. *American Indian Law Review*, 31(2), 273-289.

## **VACCA recommends for the Federal Government to:**

23. Provide long-term investment for implementing the Uluru Statement from the Heart in full and ensure there are adequate accountability mechanisms co-developed by the Aboriginal community to hold government accountable to implementing these important reforms.

## **Connection to culture, Country and community**

As discussed throughout our submission, connection to culture, Country, community and culturally safe services are central factors to addressing poverty for Aboriginal people and communities. VACCA is committed to promoting and upholding the rights of Aboriginal children to maintain and celebrate their identity and culture, recognising that connection to culture is critical for children's emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing.

For Aboriginal people and communities, connection to culture is a protective factor which helps to alleviate the risk factors that contribute to poverty and its impact on their lives. Connection to land and the ability to implement cultural land management is integral to mitigate environmental poverty and address climate change. Connection to culture and community is fundamental for our children and young people's wellbeing; being strong in their identity and knowing who their mob and who their family is.

Measures to address poverty for Aboriginal communities must include a cultural safety lens and be designed by Aboriginal people. The federal government should look to Victoria's Cultural Safety Framework as a guide for developing strategies, policies, practices and structural and societal reforms that address unconscious bias, discrimination and racism.<sup>86</sup>

Governments need to make meaningful and sustainable investment in the ACCO sector to provide families and individuals with culturally grounded and safe supports to prevent and respond to poverty and its associated impacts and causes. ACCOs need to be sustainably funded to provide culturally safe services across family violence, justice, housing, child protection, education and family support. Federal and state governments need to invest in

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<sup>86</sup> Victorian Government (2021) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural safety framework. State of Victoria. Retrieved from [weblink](#).

Aboriginal-led, early help, family support and early intervention systems that support families in addressing the causes of poverty, before they can lead to the devastating consequences outlined in this submission.

**VACCA recommends for the Federal Government to:**

24. Make meaningful and sustainable investment in the ACCO sector to provide families and individuals with culturally grounded and safe supports to prevent and respond to poverty and its associated impacts and causes
25. Coordinate with all jurisdictions to invest in Aboriginal-led, early help, family support and early intervention systems that support families in addressing the causes of poverty and are aligned to the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*.

