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Literature Review on Yarning Circles in a Criminal Justice Context

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We acknowledge and celebrate the First Australians on whose traditional lands we meet, and pay our respect to the Elders past, present and emerging.

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List of Acronyms

ACT	Australian Capital Territory
AMC	Alexander Maconochie Centre
ANU	Australian National University
CBIFVP	Cross Border Indigenous Family Violence Program
CIRCA	Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia
CJG	Community Justice Group
CSRM	Centre for Social Research and Methods
FCH	Family and Community Healing program
JACS	ACT Justice and Community Safety Directorate
KSVP	Kunga Stopping Violence Program
MHBC	Men's healing and behaviour change
NJP	Ngarra Jarranounith Place
NWQICSS	North West Queensland Indigenous Catholic Social Services
NSW	New South Wales
RR25by25	ACT Reducing Recidivism by 25% by 2025 Strategy
RRRC	Reducing Recidivism Research Collaboration
YCJ	Yarning Circles for Justice

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Finally, we would like to thank everyone who gave us advice about yarning programs across Australia.

In this report, we use the terms ‘Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander’ and ‘Indigenous’ interchangeably, although we acknowledge that some people consider that the term ‘Indigenous’ does not appropriately recognise the heterogeneity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia. We acknowledge and celebrate the differences amongst Australia’s many and diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

Executive Summary

This report presents a select literature review on yarning circles, to provide insight into the unique cultural elements of yarning practices and inform how yarning circles can best operate in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) justice system. The ACT Justice and Community Safety Directorate (JACS) has developed and is implementing the Yarning Circles for Justice (YCJ) program, which operates a post-prison program, as well an in-prison yarning circle program. As set out in the ACT Government's information paper about yarning circles and other relevant programs (JACS 2020), YCJ was designed, in partnership with the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, as a series of culturally informed programs for men and women. It seeks to engage participants in building capacity, to manage daily life outside prison, empower them to re-establish crucial links to community and culture, and restore positive relationships with friends, family and peers.

The program is part of the ACT Government's objective of reducing the rate of incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, to achieve parity with the non-Indigenous incarceration rate by 2031, and reducing recidivism by 25% by 2025, including for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults. This work falls under the Reducing Recidivism Research Collaboration, a research partnership between the Centre for Social Research and Methods (CSRM) at the Australian National University (ANU) and JACS.

This report provides a summary of:

- options for the use of yarning circles for adults, to reduce offending for those engaged in the justice system and support the aim of reduced incarceration and recidivism;
- options regarding the use of yarning circles as the delivery method, or key element, of criminogenic interventions;
- examples of yarning circles in the community and in prison; and
- recommendations regarding future evaluations of yarning circles in the ACT.

Yarning, by definition, is fluid and led by the interests and needs of participants and yarning circles are used in a variety and contexts and settings. Because of their fluidity and cultural specificity, they do not lend themselves readily to Western concepts, such as effectiveness and quantitative methods and evaluation tools. In addition, there is a relative lack of evaluation of Indigenous programs more generally. This review confirms these challenges as it identified only a handful of evaluations. We examine these evaluations and also consider other Indigenous justice programs which contain elements of yarning circles within them. The report is therefore structured as follows.

In the first section we introduce the background context for this research and outline our search strategy for conducting the literature review. We present an overview of YCJ, one of three pilot programs developed by the ACT Government, as part of its 'Building

Communities Not Prisons' BCNP initiative (ACT Government Justice and Community Safety (JACS) 2020a; 2020b).

In the second section, we present the findings of the literature review. In total, we located 18 relevant programs in NSW, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory. We organised our analysis around the following themes: yarning circles in the community; yarning circles in prison; other Indigenous-specific programs; and addressing the specific needs of women, as set out in Table 1. Through this analysis, we identified programs that have a number of elements that are similar to the ACT's YCJ. There are also some programs with aspects that do not appear to be a focus of the YCJ, or are at least not explicitly mentioned in its documentation.

Table 1: Summary of Evaluation Programs Examined

Program evaluation	**Location**	**Group**	**Authors**	**Indigenous research team[1]**
Yarning Circle in Murri Court	Queensland	Women	Radke, 2018; Radke and Douglas 2020	No
Marapai Ngartathati Murri Women's Group; Yurru Ngartathati Men's Group	Queensland	Men and women	O'Hara 2013	Yes
Ma'Ddaimba-Balas Indigenous Men's Group	Queensland	Men	McCalman et al 2006	Yes
Yaba Bimbi Indigenous Men's Support Group	Queensland	Men	McCalman et al 2005	Yes
Family and Community Healing (FCH)	South Australia	Men, women, young people	Kowanko and Power 2008; Kowanko et al 2009	Yes (Kowanko et al 2009)
Rekindling the Spirit	NSW	Men and women	Newell 2010; Rekindling the Spirit 2021	Yes (Rekindling the Spirit, 2021)
Wulgunggo Ngalu Learning Place (residential	Victoria	Men	Clear Horizon Consulting 2013	No
Ngarra Jarranounith Place (residential)	Victoria	Men	Deloitte and the Healing Foundation 2021	Yes

[1] This means that at least one member of the research team was Indigenous, to the extent we were able to determine this. We are aware that non-Indigenous research teams may have drawn on the expertise of Indigenous advisers.

Program evaluation	Location	Group	Authors	Indigenous research team
Prison programs				
Kunga Stopping Violence Program (KSVP)	Northern Territory	Women	Anderson 2021; Bevis et al 2020; Carnes 2015	Yes (Bevis et al 2020)
Brothers Inside	NSW	Men	Hammond 2011	Yes
Babiin-Miyagang	NSW	Men	Rossiter et al 2017	No
Marumali Program	Victoria	Men and women	CIRCA 2013	Yes
Other Indigenous-specific Programs				
Creating Futures	NSW	Men, women, young people (under 30)	Schwartz and Terare 2020	Yes
Cross Border Indigenous Family Violence Program (CBIFVP)	Central Australia	Men	Shaw and Brooks 2009; Willis and Holcombe 2014	No
We Al-Li program	Queensland	Men and women	McKendrick et al 2017	Yes
Our Men Our Healing	Northern Territory	Men	Healing Foundation 2015	Yes
Aboriginal Reconnect Program	Tasmania	Men	CIRCA 2013	Yes
Yarnabout Cards	Queensland	Women	Nickson et al 2011	No

We conclude with recommendations for future evaluations of Indigenous justice programs. We argue that, due to the potential disconnect between Western methodologies and Indigenous cultural practices, the utility of yarning circles, and indeed other Indigenous-specific justice programs, should not be measured purely against metrics, such as reduced reoffending. Rather secondary and more immediate outcomes should also be measured, when considering the success of a program. We outline a number of strategies for ensuring that evaluations adopt culturally appropriate research approaches.

Introduction

According to Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010: 38), '[a]cross Australia, Aboriginal people constantly refer to and use *yarning* in the telling and sharing of stories and information'. In particular, 'therapeutic yarning' 'can empower and support the participant to re-think their understanding of their experience in new and different ways' (2010: 40; emphasis added). Yunkaporta (2009: xiii, cited in Radke 2018: 55) has described a 'yarn' as 'a meeting, conversation, or dialogue that has particular protocols depending on the Indigenous community or relationship in which the yarn takes place'. Geia, Hayes and Usher (2013: 15) have observed that

> Aboriginal yarning is a fluid ongoing process, a moving dialogue interspersed with interjections, interpretations, and additions. The stories remain in our conscious state like a thread hanging, waiting to be picked up again, to be continued, reconstructed, reinforced and once again embedded in our ontology. Yarning almost always contains the threads of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island history as it moves into the present tense, its parameters within present time is filtered through the memories of the past as the two move simultaneously and at points collide and reveals fragments of the future. This type of Aboriginal storytelling or yarning enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to reconstruct their lives in new ways while at the same time keeping their cultural integrity intact. Further, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander yarns are rarely an individual construct; they carry within them the shared lived experience of their families, and communities.[2]

According to Dunleavy,

> In a yarning circle, all participants are provided with an opportunity to speak in a safe non-judgmental place and to share their strengths in an inclusive and collaborative learning environment. Yarning together is always focused on strengths not problem solving or criticism (2013: 2).

She went on to explain how yarning circles generally work, as follows:

- participants sit in a circle;
- the facilitator guides the circle;
- participants respect each other's' views and no voice is more importance than another;
- talk proceeds around the circle in a clockwise direction;
- participants talk in turn, although participants may sometimes wish to pass their turn;
- each participant speaks from their strengths;
- everyone listens to the speaker; and

[2] We recognise that there are distinct cultural differences between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and so yarning as a cultural practice will differ significantly across peoples, time and place.

- to question others, a participant's turn must come around again.

The Yarning Circle (2021a: np), created by Lee Townsend, an Aboriginal woman born and raised in Blacktown, describes the 'Yarning Circle® [a]s a place where stories and knowledge can be shared in a caring environment that's relaxed and comfortable' and as a traditional learning method that 'leads to inclusion, participation, value of the individual and access to contemporary outcomes in today's modern world' (2021b: np).

As discussed further below, the ACT Justice and Community Safety Directorate (JACS) has developed and is implementing the Yarning Circles for Justice (YCJ) program, which operates a post-prison program, as well an in-prison yarning circle program.

This report presents a select literature review on yarning circles, to provide insight into the unique cultural elements of yarning practices, and inform how yarning circles can best operate in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) justice system, with the intention of supporting the Government's objectives of reducing the rate of incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, to achieve parity with the non-Indigenous incarceration rate by 2031, and reducing recidivism by 25% by 2025, including for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults.

To the extent such information is available, the report also investigates:

- the research methods used to evaluate yarning circles;
- the evidence within academic literature and official government reports/evaluations, regarding the impact of yarning circles on reducing incarceration and recidivism, or other justice system-based outcomes;
- the evidence within the academic literature, regarding group-based criminogenic interventions that either share similarities with yarning circles or incorporate elements of yarning circles in program design/delivery;
- how the current design of JACS' yarning circles aligns with best practice and/or demonstrates innovation towards the aim of reduced incarceration and recidivism;
- specific issues, and how they contribute to the success/operation of yarning circles (e.g male, female or mixed-gender yarning circles/age-specific yarning circles; set cohort vs rolling entry, duration); and
- any potential issues or benefits arising from the possible inclusion of yarning circle processes in other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-focused programs within the ACT justice system.

Through this investigation, the report provides a summary of:

- options for the use of yarning circles, to reduce offending for those engaged in the justice system and support the aim of reduced incarceration and recidivism;

- options regarding the use of yarning circles as the delivery method, or key element, of criminogenic interventions;
- the differences (if any) between yarning circles in the general community and those run within justice systems (in particular, custody)/in connection to criminogenic interventions; and
- recommendations regarding future outcome evaluations of yarning circles in the ACT.

In order to ensure the report is appropriate for the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, it draws on literature and examples from across Australia.

Methodology

This research report was undertaken as part of the Reducing Recidivism Research Collaboration (RRRC), a partnership between the Centre for Social Research and Methods (CSRM) at the Australian National University (ANU) and the ACT Justice and Community Safety Directorate (JACS).

The RRRC examines the impact of initiatives central to the strategy to reduce recidivism (otherwise known as reoffending) by 25% by 2025 (RR25by25) (ACT Government 2020). The first pillar of this strategy is to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in custody. The RRRC is overseen by the Reducing Recidivism Advisory Committee, which includes Indigenous membership, and an Indigenous Governance Committee, which was established to provide oversight and governance of the projects that fall under the RRRC.

As a literature review, we sought to identify the key concepts, issues, and the extent of current research on the use of yarning circles in the justice space in Australia. To do this, we systematically searched online databases, using the following search terms:

- yarning circle*;
- talking circle*;
- healing circle*;
- men's group*;
- women's group*;
- Indigenous;
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander;
- justice;
- offen*; and
- crim*.

Studies were identified by deploying a series of Boolean search strings using the above terms across Google Scholar and government websites. We also conducted forwards and backwards citation searches of all relevant literature that we found. In total, we located 18 relevant

programs, eight of operating in the community and four in prison. We also identified six Indigenous-specific programs that have relevance for the present report.

In addition, we contacted and/or conducted informal consultations with 38 stakeholders, in every Australian state and territory, across a range or organisations, including academia, government, community groups and service agencies. Of these, 17 stakeholders were Indigenous and came from a range of government and non-government organisations. This included informal consultations with key members of the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

There are a number of limitations that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, given the tight timeframe in which the report was to be delivered to the ACT Government, we did not seek ethics approval to conduct formal consultations. Accordingly, we were unable to capture the views of key stakeholders in this report in a systematic fashion, including surveys and/or interview questions. We envisage that the next phase of the project, to begin in the first half of 2022, will include formal consultations with stakeholders, including the facilitators and participants of the ACT YCJ. Because of the time constraints, we also did not contact the stakeholders who deliver the programs discussed in the report, to determine if the programs are still operational, why or why not and, if they do still operate, more about how they are working and how effective they are perceived to be.

In addition, while not a limitation as such, it is important to note that we chose not to examine literature on the use of yarning circles or similar models employed in other countries, including New Zealand and Canada (see eg McGlade 2010; McKendrick et al 2017). This decision was made, based on feedback from members of the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, who impressed upon us that it was culturally appropriate to focus locally, as local issues require local solutions. Finally, given the scope of the literature review, we focused only on the use of yarning circles in the justice space and, specifically, on their use among adults. We acknowledge that yarning circles as a cultural practice are used with different groups of people, in a variety of different settings and contexts, including in primary schools, holiday camps and workplaces, and cover a range of topics including, but not limited to, friendship, mental and physical wellbeing, emotions, the environment, healing and health (see, for example, Deloitte 2021; Dunleavy 2013; Healing Foundation 2021; Koorie Youth Council 2015; McKendrick et al 2017; Radke and Douglas 2020; The Yarning Circle 2021a).

Yarning Circles for Justice

YCJ is one of three pilot programs developed by the Australian ACT Government, as part of its ‘Building Communities Not Prisons’ BCNP initiative (ACT Government Justice and Community Safety (JACS) 2020). YCJ is primarily aligned with Pillar 1 of the ACT Government’s Reducing Recidivism in the ACT by 25% by 2025 Plan (RR25by25):

'Reducing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in custody'. It is also aligned with:

- Pillar 5 – Supporting detainee reintegration,
- Pillar 6 – Developing community capacity, and
- Pillar 7 – Responding to women in the justice system (JACS 2020).

YCJ aims to reduce Indigenous recidivism rates by:

- enhancing participants' connection to culture;
- working with community, using a co-design approach, to create sustainable culturally appropriate programs run by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people;
- ensuring culturally responsive practices are embedded within the ACT justice system;
- creating a sense of community ownership of justice programs;
- assisting with grants, to provide assistance with business venture start-ups and employment opportunities for participants; and
- striving to contribute to a flow-on effect of positive cultural and social outcomes for the broader ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

As set out in the ACT Government's information paper about yarning circles and other relevant programs (JACS 2020), YCJ was designed, in partnership with the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, as a series of culturally informed programs for men and women. It seeks to engage participants in building capacity, to manage daily life outside prison, empower them to re-establish crucial links to community and culture, and restore positive relationships with friends, family and peers. The program is provided by an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander officer, whose role is to support participants to engage in other services as necessary, such as appointments for health or justice matters. Its focus is on empowering participants to live an engaged and law-abiding life, with active participation in topics that address:

- mental and physical health, and general well-being;
- healing from trauma and personal distress;
- alcohol and other drug support;
- regulating emotions and emotional intelligence (including the development of problem-solving and reasoning skills);
- social supports;
- cultural exchange days (e.g. Yuin, Wiradjuri, Ngunnawal) and Aboriginal languages;
- financial literacy and housing assistance and learning how to create and maintain a 'home';
- family history programs;
- Indigenous art;
- goal-setting; and

- leadership/mentoring, with Elders and community leaders involved throughout the program (JACS 2020).

We note that this model appropriately recognises the heterogeneity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. However, we were surprised not to see any reference in the materials to family violence, cognitive impairment or the Stolen Generations. This is not to say that these issues are not addressed as part of the program, but do not feature in the documentation about the program we received. Informal feedback from stakeholders suggests that some of the issues that do not feature in the program documentation are implicit and acknowledged during the course of the yarning circle.

YCJ is delivered by Yeddung Mura, an Aboriginal-run organisation. Yeddung Mura entered into a contract with the ACT Government, represented by JACS, to deliver YCJ and Throughcare Support in November 2019. The current contract runs until June 2022, with an optional extension to June 2023. Under the contract, Yeddung Mura is required to deliver a series of 26-week programs (two a year, for the life of the contract), focusing on enabling former detainees to stay in the community and rebuild their lives, rather than returning to prison. To do so, Yeddung Mura is required to:

- engage clients in a co-design process for the 26-week program;
- provide separate opportunities to men and women, both inside and outside of prison, and may include children or family members; and
- provide activities that will:
    - support the re-establishment of crucial links to community and culture;
    - restore relationships with friends, family and peers;
    - support and enable acclimatisation, to manage their own lives outside prison, in order to reduce recidivism and contribute to improving life outcomes (ACT Government 2019: 22).

The community yarning circle delivered by Yeddung Mura is a 26-week program that focuses on enabling former detainees 'to stay in the community and rebuild their lives—rather than returning to prison' (Yeddung Mura 2021: np). Most weeks, a guest presenter or facilitator with specific content expertise is invited to speak at the circle. According to the Yeddung Mura Yarning Circle Facilitator Guidelines, facilitation of the yarning circles is expected to run for 45 minutes, with the remaining 45 minutes allocated 'for reflection and for deeper discussions in gender specific smaller group setting' (Yeddung Mura nd: np). The guidelines set out a range of topics to be covered, including:

- self-awareness;
- identity;
- leadership;
- addiction;
- fear, control and worry;

- interpersonal relationships;
- managing two worlds;
- conflict management;
- empathy;
- creative thinking and critical thinking;
- motivational success stories;
- coping with emotions – anger;
- boundaries;
- understanding trauma;
- dealing with disappointments and loss and grief;
- problem-solving;
- 'everyone is a counsellor';
- change; and
- anxiety (Yeddung Mura nd).

The guidelines also state that '[c]ognitive behavioural talks will be facilitated to initiative lifestyle changes. Inspirational success stories from other Aboriginal men and women will be shared, to motivate clients' (Yeddung Mura nd: 1).

Activities incorporated into the yarning circles are designed to:

- draw on cultural knowledge;
- build cultural awareness;
- develop a positive sense of identity;
- develop pride in cultural identity;
- restore, reaffirm and renew connection to country; and
- increase participation in community (Yeddung Mura nd).

The yarning circle program for 2021 commenced on 19 February, with a social event at bowling alley. A yarning circle is held weekly over the 26 weeks and covers a range of topics, as set out above. Analysis of the monthly reports from January 2021 through July 2021 identified four key themes covered in the yarning circles: behaviour and emotions; work experience/training; dealing with trauma; and cultural activities (Yeddung Mura 2021). Yeddung Mura also run the SMART Recovery program, which is designed to help people manage substance abuse issues, embedded in their yarning circles.

In addition, Yeddung Mura run a yarning circle inside the ACT's only prison, the Alexander Maconochie Centre (AMC). The circle is held on a monthly basis. However, access to the AMC has been severely impacted throughout 2020 and 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions. This has meant that all cultural programs, including the yarning circles have been put on hold. It is anticipated that cultural programs will recommence in early 2022.

Literature Review

As set out above, we undertook a review of the literature on relevant community-based justice programs, to identify the types of programs offered and the evidence on their effectiveness. It emerged quickly that there are few evaluated programs, especially programs that have been evaluated quantitively, using measures such as reduced reoffending. On one level, this is hardly surprising, because yarning, by definition, is fluid and led by the interests and needs of participants, and therefore does not lend itself readily to Western concepts, such as effectiveness and quantitative methods and evaluation tools. In addition, there is a relative lack of evaluation of Indigenous programs more generally. For example, a review by the Centre for Independent Studies found that, of 1082 Indigenous programs identified, only 88 (8%) had been evaluated (Hudson 2017). Against this background, the present review brings together the available literature on yarning circles, variously defined, that operate in the justice context.

Yarning Circles in the Community

Radke (2018) undertook ethnographic research on a women's yarning circle affiliated with the Murri Court in Queensland, a court 'which aim[s] to create an Indigenous-centred space where defendants and Community Justice Group [CJG] members of the same gender could build a rapport' (2018: 55; see also Radke and Douglas 2020). Radke found that the topics discussed included childcare, welfare, foster care, racism, colonisation, religion, and connections to the Stolen Generations. In addition, CJG members helped participants with finding housing and provided participants with food, both during the session and in the form of leftovers.

One of the Elders interviewed by Radke described the circle's role as follows:

> It gave the defendants an opportunity to talk to people and Elders that were on their side. Basically, they could open up, ask questions and after a little while, they eventually open up quite a lot. Some of them really purged a lot of information that had been held back or withheld for a long time because they had compassionate ears that were listening and through that process, it helps to find out what their needs might be and how you can assist, appropriately, with things that they might need. But a very good opportunity for bonding and [a] good opportunity to share culture, and experiences, and services (interviewee, cited in Radke 2018: 54).

There are both men's and women's yarning circles operating in the Queensland Murri Court, although Radke only observed the women's circle. One of the CJG members described the differences between the two: 'for the males, that is a lot more formal than the females where they have the yarning stick, and they need to wait before they touch the food…So even

though the women's are less formal, it's still not as formal as [the] court' (2018: 63). Another CJG member said:

> The Yarning Circles, I can't speak for the ladies, but the Men's Yarning Circles is a resounding success. Because the change in those fellas' attitudes is good, between one another they dress blokes down, which is interesting to say, 'listen, brother, you don't want to start doing that you'll end up, you will put us all in a bad light, we are trying to straighten things out' (interviewee, cited in Radke 2018: 63).

A different CJG member explained their role as follows:

> It's necessary to have the Yarning Circles to encourage them and to keep them within the boundary we tell them about boundaries, you [are] being watched and don't step outside the boundaries. You're on parole you've got a hearing coming up soon, you don't want to go in there with a record, another record, a criminal record or charges you know you don't want to go in with other charges, tell them to keep clean, so it's a good thing cause some of these guys can drop their guard or the bundle and just go off the track (interviewee, cited in Radke 2018: 63).

Collectively, these insights led Radke to conclude that yarning circles seek to create 'a culturally appropriate space where Indigenous defendants can build a rapport with [CJG] members…[which] allow for a more nuanced understanding of the underlying reasons for a defendant's offending behaviour' (2018: 64). She found that this was particularly the case with crimes of poverty and that

> Elders and respected persons are perceptive about how class and social hierarchies within the defendant's communities can be a potential reason for re-offending and continuously coming before the criminal justice system (2018: 64).

Radke also noted that the circles 'allow Indigenous women to gain support from other Indigenous women in the Murri Court' (2018: 66). In other words, a key component of circles is their group dynamic and that members of the same gender support each other through similar issues. This emerged from other literature we examined, for example, Cavanagh, Shaw and Bartram's discussion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men's learning through men's sheds:

> As a group, or [community of practice], the men shared a common understanding of issues they have all experienced. The men yarned about trying to solve issues on their own and how they failed — 'couldn't get off the drugs on me own' (George, remote member) — but after joining the group 'and yarnin with black fella mates I got some help'. The men talked about how yarning among themselves supported each man to see more clearly and build hope that they could make changes to their lives. As a CoP the men provided evidence through shared stories about the social determinants that impacted their lives, how being in the group created the opportunity to share

> experiences through story-telling and how collectively they learn about how to overcome social issues (2016: 61).

In concluding, Radke summarised the key features of the yarning circles she observed:

> [they] create a space outside of the (white) legal system, where Indigenous women can discuss their experiences and gain support from Elders and respected persons of the same gender. This gender-specific bail program allows defendants and Community Justice Group members of the same gender to build a rapport. In Yarning Circles, Elders and respected persons deal with the compounding effects of individual problems, systemic issues, and intergenerational trauma, while recognising a person's intersectional identity. Yarning Circles aim to create a space where Murri Court defendants can start to grapple with the underlying reasons for their offending behaviour, along with connecting defendants with culturally relevant service providers. By emphasising the experiences of Indigenous women, Women's Yarning Circles acknowledge a defendant's intersectional identity, their vulnerability to intersectional discrimination, and their experience of potentially being both a victim and an offender in the criminal justice system (2018: 66-67).

Many of these features are likely to be equally apposite in the ACT context.

The North West Queensland Indigenous Catholic Social Services (NWQICSS) run a justice program known as the Marapai Ngartathati Murri Women's Group and the Yurru Ngartathati Men's Group. With funding support from the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, this program seeks to address Indigenous offending in Mount Isa, by providing an alternative to incarceration, in the form of a diversionary rehabilitative bail program (O'Hara 2013). Clients are referred to the program through the Indigenous Sentencing List or through probation and parole services. Through interviews with staff and stakeholders, and employing a yarning methodology with Indigenous clients, O'Hara (2013) undertook an evaluation of the program, identifying several key elements that were found to be beneficial to clients, in relation to addressing their offending behaviour. Firstly, the men's and women's groups are built on a strong cultural foundation, with a clear focus on reconnecting clients with culture, as strengthening cultural identity was seen to be an important component in implementing lasting change. This was achieved through ensuring that community Elders were part of the process at every stage, as well as providing clients with the opportunity to experience bush healing. Community Elders are present at the group meetings and promote cultural identity and educate younger generations. A staff member expressed the importance of Elders through the process:

> the Men's Group is based on our Aboriginal culture where we did have a men's place with older men…and is a place where old men used to gather and if men had problems they'd go and sit down with the Elders and talk about it, what's bothering them, and get that support and what the Men's Group is doing is giving that service back traditional way, where no shame (quoted in O'Hara 2013: 38).

The centrality of the group was identified by O'Hara as being key to the success of the program and, in particular, the process of sharing and support that occurs within the groups. A staff member interviewed commented on the Men's group, stating:

> Because you see – you see the men sitting down there. The men are talking about themself, and all the other men around them are other men that supports them when someone talks here. There are all other men around them. And – and that circle in the middle is they're dealing with this thing inside of them. And after that you see those lines in the brown means they're going back – that's the community circle. And the line is that they're come from the meeting, they've talked about themself and they feel good about them. So they go back into the community feeling good about what they've done (quoted in O'Hara 2013: 40).

A client from the women's group commented that taking part helped her to tell her story and made her feel less burdened: 'every time when I [am] coming out of woman's group I always come out light, as you know my heart feel really light' (quoted in O'Hara 2013: 41). The feeling of having a weight lifted was echoed by a male client, who stated that, 'you get to know everybody and, you know, once you sort of bring all that – relieve all that bloody weight that you're carrying all the problem, and you start talking to them and they—you know, they don't judge you, doubt you' (quoted in O'Hara 2021: 41).

O'Hara's (2013) evaluation also found that key to the success of the men's and women's groups was the establishment of group rules, developed in collaboration with the facilitators and clients. The rules included respect, trust, confidentiality, being sober and one person speaking at a time. Topics discussed in both the men's and women's groups included:

- keeping calm;
- staying out of trouble;
- stopping domestic violence;
- communication;
- positive relationships;
- anger management;
- taking responsibility;
- addressing shame;
- getting a licence;
- healthy lifestyles;
- drug and alcohol issues (facilitated by alcohol and drug counsellors/health providers);
- health issues, including blood pressure, diabetes, sexual health and disease (facilitated by health providers);
- finding employment (facilitated by local employment agencies);
- court processes and role-play (facilitated by social services staff and justice stakeholders); and

- other topical issues that may arise in the community.

The evaluation also revealed that a core component of the justice program was the provision of practical support, including linking clients to services/programs and assisting clients to navigate systems and with transport (O'Hara 2013). Where possible, it would be constructive for this to also be a feature of the YCJ, so that participants are supported to address practical issues, such as getting a driver's licence or access to medical treatment.

Several recommendations were put forward from the evaluation that are relevant for this report. Firstly, O'Hara (2013) identified that one of the key issues facing the NWQICSS in implementing the justice program was the difficulty to obtain long-term funding. This affected the organisation's ability to create a solid foundation for the program. In light of this, the evaluation recommended that funding bodies 'consider a justice reinvestment approach', providing *at least* three years of to provide program and organisational stability (2013: iv). Secondly was the importance of fostering a holistic approach that focuses not only on criminal justice outcomes, but also on the context of broader family and community concerns. It was recommended that programs of this nature incorporate 'empowerment, self-determination, strengthening cultural norms, traditions and seek to reconnect Indigenous people to their cultural and spiritual origins' (2013: 15). Thirdly, there should be further emphasis on promoting employment and education activities for clients, including linking them with formal education providers and local employment services and industry. Fourthly, the evaluation called for the creation of a similar justice program suitable for young people. Finally, implicit in several of the recommendations is the need for adequate staff training, as well as ensuring positions for both male and female justice workers. This is crucial to the success of many Indigenous justice programs, as there is often a cultural requirement for gender-specific group work. The importance of appropriate staff was also raised during the informal consultations for this evaluation. All of these recommendations are equally applicable in the context of YCJ.

McKendrick et al (2017: 66) noted that [m]en's support groups are seen as important strategies within Indigenous communities for improving health and wellbeing. It is estimated there are over 100 Aboriginal men's support groups operating throughout Australia; however, very few are well documented'. Although not all of these groups would explicitly involve yarning circles, it is likely that many would do so. It is not clear how many are designed for Indigenous men who are involved in the justice system.

McKendrick et al identified two such groups, which they described as 'well documented and evaluated' (2017: 66). One of these was the Ma'Ddaimba-Balas Indigenous Men's Group in Innisfail, Queensland, which was evaluated by McCalman et al (2006). However, data limitations preclude comprehensive conclusions being drawn about the program's impact. The group met monthly (with attendance ranging from seven to 26 participants), facilitated social and sporting events, provided health support and supported members through court processes. The group also undertook 'preventive work, such as night patrol and mediation to keep men out of the criminal justice system' (2006: 12), delivered substance abuse, anger

management and domestic violence programs, as well as helping the men obtain their driver's licenses. McCalman et al found that the '[e]vidence suggests that Men's Group may be effective in creating some reduction in breaches of domestic violence orders' (2006: 15). McCalman et al (2006) made a number of recommendations, including in relation to data collection.

The authors also identified that

> The statistics do lend some support to the claims by Men's Group leaders that their programs have reduced the number of men being incarcerated, and in recent months, show evidence of shorter sentences. Micro-level evaluation could confirm the effectiveness of court support and determine the cost effectiveness of Men's Groups as a diversionary strategy (2006: 16).

The other program discussed by McKendrick et al (2017) was the Yaba Bimbi Indigenous Men's Support Group, also in Queensland, which was established following a series of suicides by young men, some of which took place in custody. The group's main activities involved weekly discussion sessions, including in relation to family violence; counselling; men's health clinics, provided by an Aboriginal doctor; and activities to promote social skills and bonding (hunting, fishing, camping, and visits to the cinema). Local magistrates began referring men to the program and funding was secured to develop a program for young men at risk of becoming involved with the adult criminal justice system and their families, although it was also noted that '[t]here was a perception that some men were using Men's group to escape the criminal justice system' (McCalman et al 2005: 6). There was some evidence that participants reduced their alcohol use and that the program was helping to reduce family violence. In addition,

> The men identified lack of cultural identity, spirituality and values as a root cause of Yarrabah men's problems. They also realised that these underlying factors needed to be addressed if issues such as suicidal ideation, domestic violence, alcoholism, relationship problems and other traumas were to be eliminated from their lives (McKendrick et al 2017: 68; citing McCalman et al 2005).

The Family and Community Healing (FCH) program is delivered by the Central Northern Adelaide Health Service. The aim of the program is to address family violence in Aboriginal families in a North-West metropolitan region of Adelaide and focuses on capacity-building and early intervention. The program uses a holistic approach, with services provided for all individuals in the family, with participants separated out into groups for men, women, young people, and community. An evaluation of the FCH program was undertaken by researchers from Flinders University (Kowanko and Power 2008; see also Kowanko et al 2009; McKendrick et al 2017). One of the key objectives of the program is to 'equip Aboriginal people with the skills for effective communication and conflict resolution' (2008: 28). The evaluation found that talking circles are a central component of group activities used to meet this objective. For instance, women's group activities include a weekly talking circle. A

facilitator of the women's group commented on how the group work supported the development of participants' skills and confidence in resolving conflict: 'Coming to the Group is like having a shot of vitamin B that keeps her going for the week and [she] is much more positive about her life and is making an assertive stand for herself' (quoted in Kowanko and Power 2008: 29). Talking circles have also become a regular part of the men's group and, according to Kowanko and Power (2008: 30) 'have proved beneficial in men's healing journey'. Kowanko and Power found that the group provides a forum for the men to talk about issues and problems that they would not feel comfortable to talk about elsewhere. In focus groups with the men, several commented that the talking circles had 'taught them to "go home and listen"' and that '[a]ttendance at the group is significant in reducing social isolation, developing identity and confidence, learning new skills, building cultural awareness and connecting to the younger generations to pass on stories, skills and knowledge' (Kowanko and Power 2008: 29-30).

Rekindling the Spirit operates in Lismore and was originally developed for local men wanting to address their issues with violence (Newell 2010). It was founded by Greg Telford, an Aboriginal and Islander man from Minjungbal Country in the Tweed Valley.[3] Reducing reoffending was the most common support need identified by male clients (52%), while most female clients wanted support with training and job-seeking instead (56%) (Newell 2010). As part of the service, a men's healing group is run once a week and involves:

> a yarning circle, free of judgement, to support positive connection, empower change, to build resilience and awareness of self, identify concerns around violence, Mental Health and Alcohol and other Drug use, family/relationship concerns, and so much more. This is a space where we come together to share and exchange our own experiences through story in a safe and supported environment, this process allows for guided solution finding and direction (Rekindling the Spirit 2021: np).

Rekindling the Spirit, while originally developed to address men's violence and other issues, now includes services for both men and women. The topics covered include:

- alcohol and drug abuse;
- child abuse and neglect;
- family relationships;
- family violence;
- personal and individual development;
- parenting skills; and
- relationship development (O'Hara 2013).

Again, there is clearly significant overlap between the topics covered in this program and the YCJ program, which suggests that YCJ covers the issues that are commonly experienced by

[3] See Rekindling the Spirit (2021) for further information.

many Aboriginal and Torres Strait people with similar life circumstances. As noted above, however, YCJ does not currently make any explicit reference to family violence, although this is implied, through reference to anger, family relationships etc.

Wulgunggo Ngalu Learning Place (WNLP) is a residential program for up to 18 men in Victoria. An independent evaluation by Clear Horizon Consulting (2013) found that participants who completed this program completed their community correction orders at higher rates than Aboriginal offenders in the community. Of relevance for the present purposes, the program focuses on four key areas:

- health and wellbeing: the program include activities that promote living skills, good nutrition and physical activity. It also addresses primary health care (dental, medical, and nutrition), mental health (grief, loss and trauma) and spirituality. It has also established relationships with the local and Aboriginal health services;
- life skills: participants learn basic living skills, such as planning a budget, planning for meals, shopping, cooking, cleaning and laundry. Where appropriate, participants can access literacy and numeracy courses;
- education, vocational training and work readiness programs: ties are established with Vocational Education and Training, to deliver a range of education and training programs for participants. Topics can include horticulture, cultural art, concreting, construction and first aid; and
- community work: Participants can undertake community work, as part of their community correction orders, where applicable, which provides the opportunity to gain skills, develop a sense of pride in helping the community and learn more about Koori culture.

The WNLP also uses weekly men's circles between staff and participants around a purpose-built fire pit, to encourage sharing and discussion of experiences and issues. A past participant of the WNLP provided insight into the importance of the circles, which was captured in the evaluation:

> Young black men these days, we've all run off the tracks, but if we can all meet up at places like [WNLP] and share all our different experiences, we all learn from each other and each other's mistakes...A lot of people hold [it all] inside and don't really tell anyone but when men get together like that we all share our stories, it's a stress reliever...You all get to know one another and share your experience and where you are from and that, it was good…it was like we were all brothers' (Clear Horizon Consulting 2013: 24).

It is acknowledged that some of the aspects that make WNLP effective may be due to its residential component or aspects that are not readily transferrable to the ACT, let alone replicable in a yarning circle context. Nevertheless, given the dearth of empirical evidence pointing to improved criminal justice outcomes (which was measured here in the form

increased completion of community correction orders), it is promising that some of the features of WNLP, especially the health and wellbeing aspects, are already part of YCJ. It may be worth reviewing the scope to consider other aspects, to the extent they can be adopted in the context of a yarning circle.

Deloitte and the Healing Foundation (2021) recently evaluated the men's healing programs delivered by Dardi Munwurro in Victoria. One of these, the residential men's program Ngarra Jarranounith Place (NJP), meaning 'Men's Healing Place' in Woi Wurung language), is thought to be the first Indigenous men's residential family violence healing program in the world and won the gold award at the 2021 Australian Crime and Violence Prevention Awards (Australian Institute of Criminology 2021). The program offers a 16-week intensive, culturally safe residential program for Aboriginal men who use, or are at risk of using, family violence. During the program, participants live independently in a residential property, while receiving holistic support to strengthen their culture, adopt positive behaviours and nurture healthy relationships. The participants engage in one-on-one case management and

> structured weekly development programs that include a vocational program with Parks Victoria, music, writing (to support men to acknowledge their emotions), art, and other cultural programs, including smoking ceremonies, yarning circles, and meditation (Deloitte and the Healing Foundation 2021: 2).

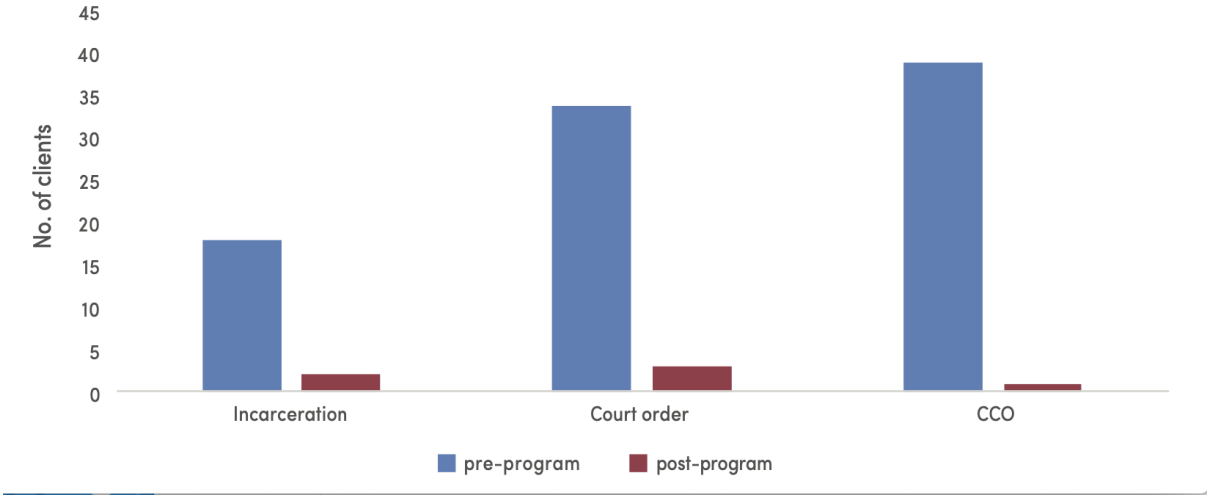
In addition, participants receive follow-up support for up to 18 months after completing the program and are encouraged to maintain connection with their local men's groups.

Dardi Munwurro runs several other programs, including a men's healing and behaviour change (MHBC) program and men's healing camps and week-long MHBC program programs in prison, as well as a diversionary program for young men aged 10-17. These three programs were evaluated together by Deloitte and the Healing Foundation (2021), with some of the data pooled across all three programs. Accordingly, it is at times difficult to determine which outcomes can be linked specifically to the NJP, the only program that explicitly includes a yarning circle component. The evaluation revealed that:

- most respondents who had completed the program felt they had a stronger cultural identity and cultural knowledge, as well as increased community connections and positive identity;
- NJP participants significantly reduced their substance use, although this was less dramatic than for participants in the men's MHBC program;
- across all three programs, the number of people experiencing homelessness reduced by 100%, as did the number of clients who returned to a substance abuse clinic;
- there was a 45% increase across all programs in the number of people returning to family/kinship homes or securing their own accommodation;
- before the program, only one NJP participant was in employment, compared with nine post-program;

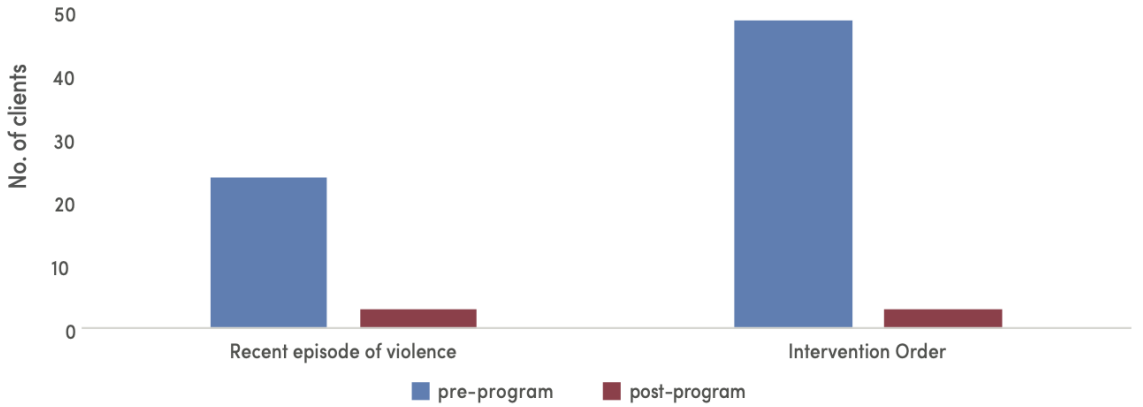
- there were noticeable improvements in NJP participants' ability to take responsibility for their violent actions; and
- NJP and MHBC participants' involvement with the justice system was dramatically reduced and self-reported violence outcomes were also improved, although the limitations of self-report data were acknowledged (these data were pooled; see Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1: Justice Outcomes for NJP and MHBC Participants



Source: Deloitte and the Healing Foundation (2021: 16)

Figure 2: Self-reported Violence Outcomes for NJP and MHBC Participants



Source: Deloitte and the Healing Foundation (2021: 17)

The evaluation also found that, across the three programs:

- each dollar invested into Dardi Munwurro was estimated to provide a return on investment of 50%-190%;
- the rate of incarceration decreased from 13% pre-program to 4% post-program; and
- each avoided case of incarceration represents a saving to government of more than $90,000 per year.

We recognise that it is not possible, on the basis of this evaluation, to determine the specific impact of the yarning circle component of the NJP, separate from its other components or, in some instances, separate from the other programs run by Dardi Munwurro. Nevertheless, the following comments from the Chair of the Healing Foundation, in the introduction to the report, are salient:

> This report builds the evidence base of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men's healing programs, and thus promotes the benefits of men and boys to reconnecting with cultural values, the restoration of identity, and the building of positive family and community relationships…This report shows that change happens when we work with Aboriginal men to create a place of safety, providing an environment for them to speak for themselves, tell their own stories, and be in charge of their own healing (2021: iii).

Yarning Circles in Prison

In-prison cultural programs, which include yarning circles, are run in several jurisdictions, including the ACT. As mentioned earlier, Yeddung Mura usually run a yarning circle on a monthly basis in the AMC, however due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, these have been put on hold. Because of this, we were unable to review any reporting on how they operate. However, according to an ACT Closing the Gap report (ACT Government 2016), yarning circles run inside the AMC 'created a sense of belonging and pride to assist rehabilitation, and encouraged detainees to engage with services to assist with community reintegration' (2016: 60). As the report explains, in 2015, this program was expanded into the Indigenous Traditional Culture Healing Arts Program, with up to 14 to 18 male detainees attending the sessions and 'organisers and participants providing positive feedback' (2016: 60).

The Kunga Stopping Violence Program (KSVP) is a throughcare program in Alice Springs that works to support Aboriginal women who have been incarcerated for alleged violent offences (see NAAJA 2021).[4] The KSVP provides pre-release support to Aboriginal women in prison, including a four-week violence-prevention, trauma-specific course, which is run twice a year. When the women are released from prison, the KSVP continues to provide support to the women for 12 months post-release. For some women, the period of support continues past the 12-month period. Relevantly for the purposes of this research, the four-week violence-prevention course runs in a communal format, with three core components: the Circle of Wellbeing; Anger, Violence, Boundaries, Safety; and Loss and Grief. As Bevis et al (2020: 48) explained, the course opens with the use of *Dadirri*, 'a reflective meditative practice' intended to 'not just create feelings of safety in individuals within the group, but also to open an awareness of listening to others, and being listened to, as a process of ceremonial cultural healing'. The concept of *Dadirri* has been shared by Ungunmerr-

[4] The word 'kunga' means 'adult woman' in Anangu languages (Carnes 2015).

Baumann (1988). The concept and spiritual practice comes from the Ngan'gikurunggurr and Ngen'giwumirri languages of the Aboriginal peoples of the Daly River region in the Northern Territory and means 'inner deep listening and quiet still awareness'.

Through the use of ethnographic research methods, Bevis et al observed the women participating in the KSVP. Their observations of the program over this period are instructive:

> The women's stories were told with such simplicity; however, in discussion, the women began to unpack the complexity of their lived experiences. Their individual stories interlinked with their collective narratives…Working with stories is meaning making—transformative, political, healing action (2020: 49).

While the KSVP is a voluntary program inside the prison, Bevis et al (2020) contend that the KSVP could also be used by the courts as a diversionary option.

Incorporating a mixed-methods approach, Carnes (2015) conducted a preliminary evaluation of the KSVP. Carnes makes the following observation of the Circle of Wellbeing:

> Though the women may not be loud and interactive and talkative in a group situation, it does not mean they are not actively participating by listening and learning. Listening (Dadirri) is an important part of understanding. Often they would seek out a facilitator after group work or when someone had said something [that provoked a feeling] (Carnes 2015: 13).

While the Circle of Wellbeing, which incorporates a yarning circle, is only one of three components of the program, the findings of the evaluation point to its importance in providing a holistic behavior change program. As Carnes (2015: 2) explained, healing is at the core of the KSVP, as intergenerational trauma underlies the experiences of intergenerational violence for many of the women. Because of this, evaluations of these programs need to look further than simplistic statistics, such as re-offending rates, getting a job or completing training. Rather, Carnes argued, these programs need to incorporate the priorities of the individual's understanding of their cultural obligations, including caring for family members, staying strong in culture, practising culture and spirituality, and balancing these cultural commitments with the ability to also 'live in the western world' (2015: 4). In this way, Carnes (2015) identified several commonalities across the women's experiences of the program and the insights or goals that they set themselves, on completion of the program and in preparation for release from prison. These include:

- practising *Dadirri* and going on Country;
- further study that leads to work aligned with their family and cultural commitments;
- staying away from alcohol and/or family who misuse substances;
- being able to identify ways of staying safe and having clear boundaries; and
- knowing other Kunga women are there to support them upon release (2015: 12).

A more recent evaluation of the KSVP found evidence that the program is well-regarded in the Mparntwe/Alice Springs community and provides invaluable support to the women and families it works alongside (Anderson 2021). Anderson's evaluation identified several key themes that added to the program's success. This included:

- staff as a significant strength to the program;
- local staff are valued more than professional qualifications;
- an emphasis on a flexible client-focused and compassionate approach;
- effective trauma-informed training inside prison;
- having systems in place to support staff mental health and wellbeing;
- the employment of a range of effective techniques by staff to communicate with clients;
- the low-profile of the organisation works to its benefit; and
- the ability of KSVP to be resilient throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, by continuing its services remotely.

In particular, the value of listening was identified as crucial to the development of strong, trusting relationships between staff and clients of the KSVP program (Anderson 2021). Anderson (2021) also made mention of *Dadirri*, suggesting that, while not explicitly referred to by participants, the program promotes 'a deep listening process'. Staff interviewed as part of the evaluation commented on the importance of listening: 'We listen. A lot of women don't have that opportunity… for someone to listen to them'. These sentiments were echoed by participants, who emphasised the value of being listened to and heard, saying: 'They talk to us, we talk to them, just makes me feel good, talking to someone about my problems' (Anderson 2021: 22).

Through the four-week course, Kunga women are able to explore and work through complex trauma and are supported to find their voice, to express their emotions associated with their lived experiences. As one client commented:

> I feel like the course really gives people a chance to think about their actions, their feelings, what, the things that they've done wrong, good things that have happened in their life, the bad things that have really triggered stuff that's gone on in their lives. The trauma that people have been through, and we work through that in a 'therapeutic feelings' way. Getting them to open up and to let go of bad stuff. And them understanding their feelings as well, what they're feeling, they can actually put a name to it (Anderson 2021: 24-25).

The importance of listening to women in prison was also highlighted by Bevis et al (2020). A client of the KSVP commented that:

> My story never changed. What did change is I had someone to listen to me. That in itself was a little bit of justice. I know that it's not the justice system, but in my consciousness it was that little bit of justice (quoted in Bevis et al 2020: 48).

Participating in the four-week prison course was likened to being 'on country' and associated with feelings of family and community. One client commented:

> It's like being…out bush…and it makes everyone to talk to each other and have a yarn and make jokes and all that. Sort of bring us all together and make it like a family sort of thing. It's pretty good. Yeah, that's what I like about the Kungas program (Anderson 2021: 25).

Yarning circles have also been used as a delivery approach in the Brothers Inside program in New South Wales (NSW). These yarning circles were facilitated by Aboriginal men, with one facilitator noting that the circle created a relaxed and comfortable environment, where the men could discuss topics openly, safely and without judgement (Hammond 2011). Describing the yarning circles, Hammond (2011: 376) commented:

> It's a more relaxed setting – they have the same upbringing, the same issues growing up and lots of the same issues with their partners, kids and families. Because this was an environment where they could talk openly without being judged about being an Aboriginal man in prison, after being put down all their lives inside and outside prison, they felt comfortable talking in this way.

The positive experience of having the opportunity to spend time yarning with other Aboriginal men was described by a program participant as follows:

> I found it very interesting speaking amongst other Brothers that are in the same position as me, in gaol away from our kids. I really like talking about our role as Dads and our strengths – strengths that I didn't even know I had (quoted in Hammond 2011: 377).

A similar program for incarcerated Indigenous fathers is called Babiin-Miyagang, meaning 'Dad' and 'Family' in the Wiradjuri Aboriginal language from Central-Western NSW. Babiin-Miyagang was first funded by NSW Corrective Services in 2011, as a way to help strengthen and promote the fathering roles and leadership skills of Indigenous men in prison. Up until 2014, 363 men had participated in the program (Rossiter et al 2017).

The importance of having an Indigenous Elder facilitate the sessions was emphasised by many of the program participants. One commented:

> I hope that he [facilitator] knows that he's turned a man around in five little sessions… He had the gumption to sit here, on our level and explain what being a man and what being a Dad was all about. I can't thank him enough. He is a beautiful

> man – he drives a long way. He does hundreds of thousands of kilometres every year (quoted in Rossiter et al 2017: 20).

Another participant reflected that hearing the Elder speak about their childhood helped him to understand himself and his parents more:

> I learned a lot about myself as an Indigenous person, how my ancestors and Elders raised their kids. Stories from when [facilitator] was a kid, and his parents. That gave me an insight into how our parents grew up (quoted in Rossiter et al 2017: 20).

As the authors noted, however, in isolation, such programs cannot sustain behaviour change. Rather, additional support and strategies are required to help individuals transition into life outside prison, including 'appropriate emotional support, employment and housing environments suitable for children' (Rossiter et al 2017: 27).

In 2013, the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department commissioned the Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia (CIRCA) to evaluate eight Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander offender support and reintegration programs. One of these programs was the Marumali Program, a prison program delivering a culturally sensitive and culturally appropriate model of healing within correctional facilities ('Marumali' is a Kamilaroi word meaning 'put back together': McKendrick et al 2017). The program has several aims for Indigenous participants:

- to provide a culturally appropriate program delivered by Aboriginal people for Aboriginal people, in the area of healing and self-determination;
- to contribute to participants' rehabilitation;
- to affirm and strengthen participants' identity;
- to provide a culturally appropriate forum for participants to discuss colonisation, grief, loss, identity and other issues of a sensitive nature;
- to provide participants with strategies to deal with issues of trauma associated with the Stolen Generations; and
- to create an environment that is comfortable, friendly and supportive and encourages participation (CIRCA 2013).

Participants complete a five-day voluntary program, focused on healing long-standing trauma associated with the Stolen Generations. Like the Aboriginal Reconnect Program, the Marumali Program is focused on preparing Indigenous offenders for post-release programs.

Feedback from participants and stakeholders was positive, suggesting that the program was successful in providing appropriate cultural support contributing 'to feelings of empowerment, instilling cultural pride, improving cultural identity, promoting respect, and enhancing a sense of community responsibility' (CIRCA 2013: 125). The findings also revealed that Aboriginal facilitators are key to the success of the program, as 'participants

feel safe and supported in the group environment with their Aboriginal peers and Aboriginal facilitators, and this encourages participation and engagement' (2013: 146). Analysis of data collected in relation to the program supported the qualitative findings, finding evidence of high completion rates, which suggested that participants were very engaged with the program. The evaluation noted, however, that the data management system operated by Corrections Victoria did not track individuals' program participation in a way that could accurately measure the program's success in achieving the central program outcome. This issue of access to appropriate data is not limited to this particular program and is likely to be an issue across a range of programs run for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the justice system.

Some sources commented on the need for continuity from prison to the community. For example, in Cavanagh, Shaw and Bartram's paper on men's sheds, they spoke to a coordinator, who wanted to establish learning programs in prison and then have the men continue their programs in the Men's Shed on release: 'Start an in-reach program for men in prison and an out-reach program for men recently released from prison...teach them skills...get them jobs through the Shed' (quoted in 2016: 62).

Other Indigenous-specific Programs

Given the paucity of specific research on yarning circles, the research team also examined other Indigenous-specific criminal justice programs that may have relevance in the present context. Jones (2019) undertook a report on the obstacles to parole and community-based sentencing alternatives for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander offenders, on behalf of the Australasian Institute of Judicial Administration. The only specific reference to yarning was to the Indigenous Yarning Program in the AMC, referenced briefly above. More broadly, Jones noted that 'culturally appropriate community-based alternatives and culturally competent parole programs around Australia…[a]rguably…have a greater impact on reducing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander incarceration rates' (2019: iv). He also noted the scarcity of evidence-based research, regarding the rehabilitation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia's criminal justice system, but found that:

> The best information suggests that rehabilitation efforts should combine cognitive behavioural therapy with culturally sensitive content and delivery modes. Research also demonstrates that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander offender criminogenic programs should be high in frequency and duration. Some researchers have been critical of applying the cognitive behavioural therapy approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander offenders, as it might contravene Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mores and can be seen to be associated with shaming. Other researchers have indicated that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rehabilitation interventions need to be holistic in approach and attend, not only to criminogenic needs, but the multilayered issues faced by these Australians… Studies have highlighted the need for more knowledge on the role of culture and cultural content in prison-based and

> community-based programming, as well as more knowledge concerning the specific criminogenic needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander offenders. The studies also emphasised the need to address alcohol and substance use, particularly through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific approaches (2019: 6).

There are several aspects identified here that align with YCJ. Firstly, the aspiration that programs be high in both frequency and duration is met. Secondly, YCJ is holistic, addressing a number of criminogenic needs, including substance use, as well as broader issues faced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Thirdly is the emphasis on support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in their transition back into the community and, relatedly, the involvement of family and community members.

Jones identified several other issues that are relevant in the present context. He noted the tendency in Western culture 'to view Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures from the perspective of the individualistic values that dominate Western culture, rather than their perspective which is typically organised around collectivist values' (2019: 13). By operating in a group setting, YCJ eschews the individual, in favour of the collective. In addition, Jones suggested that '[e]ffective interventions need to factor in the unique socio-historical experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and incorporate elements that address acculturation stress, separation from culture and family, loss of identity and racial discrimination' (2019: 13; references omitted). The description of the YCJ above suggests an engagement with these issues (see eg 'healing from trauma'); however, there may be scope to enhance this and in particular more explicitly recognise the impact of participants' separation from culture and family. This is especially important, given that members of the Stolen Generation and their descendants are more likely to be involved with crime (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2018).

Citing Morley (2015), Jones (2019) suggested that the following factors promote effective programs for Indigenous participants in the justice system:

- establishing trusted partnerships;
- facilitating community ownership and control;
- embedding culture;
- employing local Indigenous staff;
- harnessing existing community capacity and its leaders;
- implementing good governance;
- keeping the implementation timelines flexible; and
- using community development approaches

We are unable to comment on whether the final two points have been implemented in YCJ, but the other elements would appear to be in place. Jones and Morley both reinforced the need for community ownership, which is also a key feature in the present context.

Jones canvassed the range of programs available across Australia (based on both a literature review and surveys with correctional agencies in some jurisdictions). As noted above, his report was not specifically focused on yarning circles and it does not appear that most of programs he examined were explicitly designed to include this, although they may have been a feature of some or most of the programs. Some aspects that emerge, however, are worth considering, in the context of YCJ:

- the Yarning Circle Facilitator Guidelines (Yeddung Mura nd) commence with the statement that 'Yeddung Mura focuses for a positive journey for all our clients' (nd: 1), but YCJ is not specifically framed as a 'strengths-based' program (unlike, for example, the Positive Futures Program delivered by Queensland Corrective Services). It may be of value to make it more explicit in the public documentation underpinning YCJ that it adopts a strengths-based approach;
- it is not clear whether YCJ adopts a cognitive behaviour change model, which is a feature of several of the programs examined by Jones, including the Positive Futures Program and Ending Family Violence, another program delivered by Queensland Corrective Services;
- like YCJ, some other programs also engage Elders; as Jones (2019: 29) noted, Elders 'use their cultural authority to help strengthen family kinship ties and remind prisoners of their cultural and family responsibilities within their communities';
- although YCJ addresses issues such as trauma, regulating emotions and creating a 'home', as discussed above, it does not explicitly acknowledge issues in relation to family violence (whether participants are either perpetrators or victims of such violence);
- some programs have an explicit focus on parenting, which YCJ does not;
- the reference in YCJ to 'Indigenous art' is broad and may depend on participants' particular interests. Some of the programs examined by Jones include music programs, such as the Drumbeat program delivered in some South Australian prisons and the 'One Mob, Different Country' dance troupe in the Northern Territory;
- some programs (eg, the Vocational Education and Training Fresh Start Program in Western Australia and WNLP, discussed above) address issues with literacy and numeracy; and
- a number of the barriers to participation, such as lack of access to transport, limited financial resources, loss of personal belongings, may also apply in the present context.

Jones (2019) made 12 recommendations. The following are relevant to this report:

- more carefully targeted effort (and funding) is required to develop and implement a range of new, innovative and culturally sensitive alternatives to reduce imprisonment rates (Recommendation 2);
- there is a need for a greater involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the criminal justice system in the development and implementation of reintegration strategies (Recommendation 4);

- more research on the role of culture and cultural content in prison-based and community-based programming is required, as well as a greater understanding of the specific criminogenic needs of Indigenous offenders (Recommendation 6); and
- there is a need to achieve a better transition between custodial and community corrections and linking offenders with appropriate community-led programs so that ongoing support can be provided to offenders after release (Recommendation 7).

Creating Futures is an intensive support program delivered by Weave to Indigenous young people (mostly aged 18-30, although some participants were aged under 18) leaving custody or on community-based orders in NSW. Its objectives are to:

- reduce client contact with the criminal justice system;
- support clients to meet their goals and increase their sense of purpose, self-worth, social inclusion and dignity via the use of an Aboriginal Healing Framework; and
- use processes which represent good practice in post-release support and align with the program's theory of change (Schwartz and Terare 2020).

It also aims to address the specific criminogenic risk factors associated with the Risk-Needs-Responsivity model, with a recent evaluation noting that the program's 'strengths-based approach addresses criminogenic needs by focusing on client capacity to improve their circumstances' (Schwartz and Terare 2020: 1). It should be noted that the program involves wrap-around case management for at least a year and case-workers generally have a caseload of 15 clients. The program also includes '*Yarn Tea Tucker*, a weekly drop-in program held on the Weave rooftop, aimed especially at people for whom it is the first time coming into the service' (2020: 7).

The evaluation revealed impressive results, with only 4% of participants reoffending, compared with 55-57% of Aboriginal people of a similar age (18-30) across NSW. Furthermore, the clients who did reoffend usually had more minor offences, compared with their previous history of contact with the criminal justice system. However, it is likely that the impressive results achieved by this program are due in large part to the intensive support provided to clients, rather than the group components of the program.

The Cross Border Indigenous Family Violence Program (CBIFVP) was evaluated by Willis and Holcombe (2014). The CBIFV offers a group-based culturally appropriate four-week program, to address issues of family violence, specifically spousal violence, in the Pitjantjatjara, Yankunytjatjara, Ngaanyatjarra, Pintupi and Pintupi-Luritja speaking communities of Central Australia. The program focuses on male offenders, referred to the program primarily by the courts and parole boards, with most participants being ordered to attend as part of their sentencing outcome (Willis and Holcombe 2014). Willis and Holcombe employed a mixed-methods approach, through the use of survey questionnaires with clients (n=25), face-to-face interviews, examination of program materials and analysis of administrative data obtained from police and corrective service agencies in the Northern

Territory, South Australian and Western Australia. Willis and Holcombe (2014) also analysed completion rates of the program between 2007 and 2014. They found that, in each community where the program had been delivered five or more times, the completion rate was between 70 and 80%.[5] This is a significant improvement over time, as an earlier evaluation of the program by Shaw and Brooks (2009) identified a completion rate of only 58%. Willis and Holcombe reflected on the how impressive these figures were, given the circumstances in which many of the participants live:

> CBIFVP participants typically live in circumstances of disadvantage, often including family dysfunction, generally have histories of violent and other offending and may have alcohol or other substance use problems. While most are mandated to attend the Program, others attend voluntarily. Most participants will have limited experience of employment and limited formal education and the Program is conducted in a much more structured way than most participants will be used to. Many participants have poor English language skills and may have competing priorities such as family or cultural commitments. In these circumstances, having close to three-quarters of participants complete the Program is an impressive achievement that points to a high level of appropriate engagement by the Program facilitators and cultural brokers (Willis and Holcombe 2014: 11).

Surveys to gather perceptions of the CBIFVP asked the men which aspects of the program they liked the most. The majority of respondents cited 'talking', which includes talking about family, telling stories, talking with other men, and talking about 'Indigenous things'. Two participants stated that they did not like having to talk, while one commented that there was 'not enough Indigenous talk' (Willis and Holcombe 2014: 18).

A primary aim of the CBIFVP is to reduce the incidence of violent offending, particularly in the context of spousal violence. To this end, Willis and Holcombe sought administrative data from police and corrective services in the Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia. Analyses of the available data (data for Western Australia was not reported in the findings) indicated that many of the men who had undertaken the CBIFVP did commit further spousal violence offences, typically acts of aggravated assault. Data for the program run in a Northern Territory community revealed that 70% of men who completed the program reoffended, committing further violent offences. Data analysed in relation to program participants in South Australia showed that 20% of program participants went on to commit further violent offences. Willis and Holcombe provided some context for these findings:

> High rates of further offending should not be unexpected as the men are coming to the Program from circumstances that give rise to many factors that can contribute to violent behaviour and achieving lasting behaviour change in this situation would be challenging (2014: 20).

[5] Completion was defined as having attended at least 13 of the 15 sessions within each program: Willis and Holcombe 2014.

It is clear from these mixed findings that the program was perceived to be of benefit for the participants who, on the whole, found it useful, especially the talking elements. However, the broader circumstances of disadvantage experienced by participants and their families need to be addressed, for any meaningful change in behaviour.

Healing is an important aspect of many yarning circles, whether explicit or implicit (see discussion above, in the context of NJP). As Cox, Young and Bairnsfather-Scott explained,

> To heal, a person must be able to come to a place that is safe and allows them to deal with the pain of the past, process this and begin their healing journey. If people don't heal, they will not be able to change their behaviours and will continue to be victims and perpetrators of violence. Aboriginal people must be able to govern their own path of healing, to deal with past injustices, such as colonisation and its effects, in order to move into a future which will sustain their livelihood and foster a just society (2009, cited in Deloitte and Healing Foundation 2021: 1).

The Healing Foundation reviewed the Australian and international literature on healing programs and found that:

> to be successful, a healing program needs to be created within the local context; respond to needs identified by local community members and be supported by the local community. Sustainability needs to be multi-level and include development and transfer of knowledge and resources. This includes strong evaluation frameworks that are consistent with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander world view (McKendrick et al 2017: 2).

In addition, they suggested that effective healing programs are those that:

- are developed to address issues in their local community;
- are driven by local leadership;
- are based upon well-developed evidence and theory base;
- combine both Western methodologies and traditional healing in their treatment theory base;
- are informed about and understand the impact of colonisation and intergenerational trauma and grief;
- build on individual, family and community capacity through the acquisition of knowledge and skills;
- incorporate strong evaluation frameworks; and
- have a proactive, rather than reactive, focus (2017: 2).

McKendrick et al (2017) adapted the framework Cripps (2007) developed in relation to responding to family violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, to apply to healing programs more generally, as follows:

1. acknowledgment of family and kinship relations;
2. definition of the problem to be addressed;
3. community leadership in initiating and sustaining the program;
4. assessment of the capacity of the community to response to the specific problem being addressed;
5. development of responsive projects in consultation with the community;
6. negotiation of partnerships and development of strategic plans;
7. implementation in partnership with the community; and
8. evaluation of the response (Cripps 2007, cited in McKendrick et al 2017: 48).

In their review of innovative responses to violence against Indigenous women, Blagg, Bluett-Boyd and Williams described the use of 'healing circles', which acknowledge the impacts of the violence on all members of the relevant community, 'as well as the effects of other factors – such as intergenerational grief and loss – on the perpetrator…[which] harnesses the power and strength within Indigenous Australian communities to address harm' (2015: 19; references omitted). One example of a healing circle is the We Al-Li program, developed by Judy Atkinson in responses to calls by Aboriginal leaders in Rockhampton to address family violence. The program is underpinned by Dadirri and, although it has not been formally evaluated, it is seen as a promising practice model (McKendrick et al 2017).

An emphasis on healing is also demonstrated through the Our Men Our Healing projects run in the remote Northern Territory communities of Maningrida, Ngukurr and Wurrumiyanga. The projects are designed to empower Aboriginal men and overcome issues such as family and domestic violence, alcohol and other drug use, self-harm, incarceration and poor health and social and emotional wellbeing (Healing Foundation 2015). In particular, the program

> allows the men to tackle the problems that are in their heads before they grow like a tumour. They can come and in a comfortable way talk about things with other men… It keeps them occupied and they are yarning about what's in their heads and they might not know it but they are healing (2015: 40).

An evaluation was undertaken by the Healing Foundation (2015: 5). It is worth noting that, at the time of the evaluation, nearly 40% of the program participants had been under the age of 18. The evaluation identified several key program achievements, including:

- a reported decrease in the incidence of family and domestic violence and less violence generally in the communities;
- reduced observable rates of self-harm and suicide, during the life of the program in two of the communities;

- at Wurrumiyanga, where the program had been running the longest, a reported 50% reduction in the number of men registered with the Department of Correctional Services and a significant reduction in the rates of recidivism and reoffending over the life of the program;
- women reported feeling safer and more supported by the men in their families and communities;
- increased health and emotional wellbeing among men in the communities and increased leadership, as men took responsibility for their past, present and future; and
- an increased re-emergence of cultural celebrations and ceremonies, some of which had not occurred in the communities for decades.

The fact that the program was co-designed with the men was seen as the most significant factor that contributed to its success, as this meant there was community ownership of the program and a continued commitment to local needs, culture and knowledge systems, as well as helping the men become agents of change (Healing Foundation 2015). Other key factors were:

- connection to country, culture and identity;
- a focus on holistic wellbeing, taking into account the men's social, spiritual and emotional needs;
- a safe men's space for healing, meetings and activities;
- the support of an auspicing organisation in each community; and
- extensive community engagement and consultation before the projects were implemented, to assess local needs, gaps in existing healing efforts and how the community wanted the men's healing project to run.

Again, it is clear that there are aspects of this that are already in operation in YCJ, although there may be scope to expand on other dimensions, such as empowering participants to become active participants in designing how the circles operate.

CIRCA evaluated the Aboriginal Reconnect Program, which ran in Tasmania between 2006 and 2011 and focussed on building a range of protective factors – namely health and wellbeing – to support successful reintegration of Aboriginal men exiting prison through outdoor recreational activities and wilderness therapy sessions (CIRCA 2013). Importantly, the program was designed by Aboriginal people with expertise in both offender support and wilderness therapy. Feedback from program facilitators and Tasmanian Prison Service staff suggested that the cultural framework around which the program was built was 'conducive to young men opening up about personal issues, often for the first time' (CIRCA 2013: 182). Facilitators and prison staff also commented on the importance of being outside in a natural environment, rather than in the prison setting, for participants to discuss issues with greater ease. Cultural mentors were embedded in the program design and attended all sessions, building trust among participants. By promoting mutual trust between participants, the program was also seen as a gateway to other Indigenous-specific reintegration programs

(CIRCA 2013). In total, 32 incarcerated Aboriginal men participated in nine camps between 2006 and 2011. Assessing a reduction in recidivism was found to be problematic, however, given that the Aboriginal Reconnect Program did not directly focus on offending behaviour. Rather, the evaluation found that the indicators of success included:

- preparedness for group therapy;
- enhanced capacity to participate in available Aboriginal-specific prison aftercare programs; and
- measures of self-esteem and wellbeing (CIRCA 2013: 180).

This finding is important and is crucial to consider, in the context of other similar programs, including YCJ. While it may not be possible to directly assess a reduction in recidivism, this is certainly not the only indicator of success. As the evaluation concluded, in these cases, it may be 'more appropriate to consider the program in terms of its capacity to contribute to change, rather than attempting to attribute change directly to it' (CIRCA 2013: 180). Accordingly, they should be seen as a providing a culturally safe environment to support people and engage with them, while also addressing practical issues, such as obtaining a driver's licence or securing employment. In a similar vein, a men's shed coordinator commented: 'We got a mob here and invited Medicare…80 men walked out of here knowing they'd get Medicare cards…had a yarning circle about health' (quoted in Cavanagh, Shaw and Bartram 2016: 63).

Addressing the Specific Needs of Women

Several yarning programs for women have already been discussed in this report and the discussion in relation to family violence is obviously relevant to both men and women. In its report, *Pathways to Justice—An Inquiry into the Incarceration Rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, the Australian Law Reform Commission (2017), perhaps surprisingly, did not mention yarning. However, the Commission called strongly for a broad range of community-based and Indigenous-led responses, with a focus on justice reinvestment. In addition, the Commission recommended that programs and services delivered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in the justice system, including post-incarceration

> should take into account their particular needs so as to improve their chances of rehabilitation, reduce their likelihood of reoffending and decrease their involvement with the criminal justice system…[and] must be:
> - developed with and delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women; and
> - trauma-informed and culturally appropriate (2017: Recommendation 11-1).

YCJ is consistent with this recommendation.

Robertson, Demosthenous and Demosthenous made the following evocative observations about women's yarning circles: 'quite often, when Aboriginal women come together to share, they disclose experiences and knowledges that speak to, and of, the secret, the spiritual, and the sacred' (2005: 35). The women's yarning circles that Radke observed are discussed above. She suggested that this model recognises Indigenous women's intersectional identities, that is, their experiences as both women and Indigenous people, in ways that programs for non-Indigenous women and/or Indigenous men could not. However, Radke also noted that programs that distinguish between male and female participants may exclude gender-fluid participants. In the Queensland context, CJG members advised that they would attend the circle that aligned with their gender identity or could engage with one-on-one yarning with an Elder if they preferred. Further consideration should therefore be given to ensuring that the ACT YCJ are responsive to and supportive of the needs of gender-diverse participants.

Anthony, Sentence and Behrendt yarned with over 160 women in prison in NSW. One of the findings from these discussions was that the women wanted to receive support from Indigenous-owned and -run organisations, especially services and programs geared towards Indigenous women. As one woman put it: 'take us back to the bush or to the sea to do more black women stuff, back to the land our old ways' (2021: 15). We also note that women's yarning circles may play a particularly important role in addressing the trauma of child removal, with the intersections between the criminal justice and care and protection systems or particular significance for women (see eg Radke and Douglas 2020).

In the context of targeting Indigenous family violence, Nickson et al (2011) examined the use of the Yarnabout Cards developed by the Nungeena Aboriginal Corporation for Women's Business on the Sunshine Coast. The Yarnabout Cards feature photography and artwork significant to the Indigenous community and are used as a tool for therapeutic work. As they explained, 'Yarnabout Cards provide opportunities for people of all ages to explore meaning, reflect on their experiences, and build on conversation. The cards be used as tools in reflection, counselling, group work, learning, and yarning' (Nickson et al 2011: 90). This highlights the broad range of ways in which yarning can be used throughout the justice system and the scope to embed yarning into daily activities, to make the justice system more culturally appropriate. As Blagg, Bluett-Boyd and Williams (2015) noted, the cards have also become a resource for the local Indigenous community, are potentially an income-generating and capacity-building resource for the organisation that makes them and their use by mainstream services may also encourage Indigenous women to seek support.

Conclusion and Future Directions

This literature review has examined the available research we were able to locate on yarning circles that operate in Australia in the justice context, both in the community and in prison, as well as Indigenous justice programs more generally that may be of relevance, and addressing the specific needs of women.

We were able to identify programs that have a number of elements that are similar to the ACT's YCJ. There were also some programs with aspects that do not appear to be a focus of the YCJ, or are at least not explicitly mentioned in its documentation, including adopting a strengths-based model, an explicit emphasis on family violence, Stolen Generations, and the impacts of colonisation, the role of Elders and being on Country, and helping clients to address practical issues, such as literacy and obtaining a driver's licence. To some extent, we recognise that this may be beyond the scope of a yarning circle. It may also have been a feature of programs that were broader in their scope than the YCJ, for example, programs with a residential component, which also included yarning circles. Nevertheless, we would urge Yeddung Mura and the ACT Government to consider the scope of the issues explored within the yarning circles, in light of the findings of this report, to ensure that the key issues likely to be of relevance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are able to be appropriately identified and explored, within the context of a culturally safe space. The need for long-term funding also emerged as a common theme amongst many of the programs examined.

There was generally a paucity of research explicitly demonstrating the impact of yarning programs and the reasons for this were examined. This suggests that further research is required to evaluate programs of this nature. It is vital that such research be undertaken by and designed in collaboration with the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, to ensure its methodology is appropriate and consistent with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldview (see eg McKendrick et al 2017; although written in the Māori context, see also Tuhiwai Smith 2012 on decolonising research methodologies). It is axiomatic that any evaluation of yarning circles should itself include yarning as part of its methodology (see eg Blagg et al 2021; Munro et al 2017; Shay 2019). In addition, the findings must be relevant to the local context.

It should be noted that the lack of research on the impact of yarning circles is unsurprising, given there are relatively few robust evaluations of Indigenous justice programs generally (see eg Blagg, Bluett-Boyd and Williams 2015; Hudson 2017). In the context of evaluating Indigenous programs (including, but not limited to justice-related programs), Hudson (2017) suggested that evaluations should adopt the following features:

- mixed-method design, with triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data and economic components of the program, such as the cost-effectiveness and/or meta-analysis;
- local input into the program's design and implementation, to ensure program objectives match community needs;
- clear and measurable objectives; and
- pre- and post-program data, to measure impact.

Hudson's suggestions for policy-makers and program-funders are also instructive. Specifically, she called for embedding evaluation into program design and practice and developing an evidence base, through an accountability framework, with regular feedback loops via an online data management system. In addition, Hudson called on program providers to embed evaluation into program practice, noting that 'evaluation should not be viewed as a negative process, but as an opportunity to learn' (2017: 2). As a corollary of the obligation on program-funders, Hudson noted the need for program providers to regularly collect data, via an online data management system, to improve service delivery, ensure client satisfaction with the program and assist in ensuring ongoing funding. On the other hand, Blagg, Bluett-Boyd and Williams (2015) called for evaluation of Indigenous-specific programs to be based on community needs, rather than funding priorities or other standards as set by funding bodies.

We suggest that any future evaluation of the YCJ adopt the framework developed by CIRCA (2013; see Table 2), which sets out the following good practice themes for Indigenous justice programs. This would capture a broad range of parameters and includes qualitative understandings of how and why a program works (or does not), for whom it works (or does not), and the circumstances in which it does (or does not) work.

Table 2: Good Practice Themes for Evaluating Indigenous Justice Programs

Theme	**Evaluation focus**
What is a good intervention?	
1: Focusing on crime prevention and aiming to reduce over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the criminal justice system	Does the program provide an evidence- based response to intervention and/or is it based on research about what does or does not work, for whom and under what circumstances?
What is a good model?	
2: Meeting needs and addressing a service	Does the program fill a service gap and meet gap needs which otherwise may be inadequately met or neglected in the service system?
3: Culturally appropriate program design	Is the program culturally appropriate based and implementation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander empowerment, self-determination and community ownership?
4: Achieving outcomes in line with program intent	Does the program meet its stated aims and objectives?
5: Promoting inclusive community	Does the program sufficiently engage participation and engagement Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in all stages/aspects and is its model responsive to local needs?
6: Effective service coordination and collaboration	Does the program provide an integrated response to the needs of participants?

7: Advocating for systems reform and improving relationships among key stakeholders	Does the program contribute to advocacy and systems reform and raise the profile of the unique needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within the justice system?
What is a well-managed and -delivered program?	
8: Effective governance and management processes	Does the program have well-defined and effective structures of management and governance with: • Results-based management, linking planning functions with monitoring and evaluation and outcomes-focused • Stability and continuity of funding and appropriate resourcing levels • Strong leadership and skilled, committed and stable personnel?
9: Clear articulation of program intent	Is the program model clear about the program's aims and objectives, and realistic in scope?
10: Sustainability of the program/s over time	Is there evidence of ongoing support and resourcing for the program?

Source: CIRCA 2013

Crucially, there needs to be acknowledgment that yarning may not lend itself readily to evaluation, using traditional Western paradigms, and should not be measured purely against metrics such as reduced reoffending. Commenting in relation to Indigenous men's behavioural change programs, Putt and Yamaguchi (2015: 4) suggested that:

> Irrespective of the type of program being evaluated, a constant refrain in the evaluation reports is the lack of data that can help answer the question as to whether they have made a difference to the key outcomes of reduced offending and victimisation. This means that what might be assessed as effective implementation is dependent on the realisation of secondary and more immediate outcomes.

These secondary outcomes may include better engagement from participants; increased knowledge and skills; strengthened cultural identity; and improved cultural competence among practitioners and service agencies, to name but a few (Putt and Yamaguchi 2015).

Blagg, Bluett-Boyd and Williams (2015) observed that a realist approach to evaluation is also required, as this

> does not ask simply 'what works?' but 'how or why does this work, for whom, in what circumstances?' (Pawson & Tilley, 1997, p. 17). Realist approaches are particularly useful in Indigenous communities where initiatives may be generated by a host of factors often 'invisible' to mainstream methodologies, such as the input of elders, culture and spirituality. Further, this approach validates a 'yarning' style and 'strengths based' approach to research, in which participants are viewed as motivated by a desire to improve conditions (2015: 3).

The following insightful observations by McKendrick et al (2017: 45), made in the context of Indigenous healing programs generally, are also relevant:

> Efficacy is an elusive concept because:
> - healing practices are diverse
> - the goals of healing are diverse
> - clients have diverse reasons for seeking healing
> - success can occur at different levels – individual, community, environment, cosmos
> - healing is ongoing and long term by nature.

Kendrick et al (2017) therefore recommended that evaluations adopt a range of definitions of and sensitive measures of efficacy and use a range of methodological and new approaches to measure efficacy.

Finally, it is important to recognise the value of yarning circles may lie in their ability to contribute to change, rather than being able to directly attribute changes to such programs (CIRCA 2013). Furthermore, a range of additional supports and measures are required to bring about and sustain change, including in relation to education, employment, housing, mental health, substance abuse, sexual and family violence and child protection and removal and, as well as recognising that these issues occur within a broader context of ongoing systemic racism and the enduring intergenerational trauma of colonisation (see McKendrick et al 2017). Any evaluation therefore needs to be realistic about what yarning circles can – and cannot – achieve and not judge them against unreasonable expectations. This sentiment was echoed in our consultations with an Aboriginal person working in the ACT justice space, who emphasised that programs like YCJ are not principally about reducing recidivism, but about connecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to culture and thereby providing an environment conducive to facilitating change.

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