



CULTURE AND CLOSING THE GAP

AS STRONG CULTURAL IDENTITY CONTRIBUTES TO INDIGENOUS HEALTH AND WELLBEING, AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES THAT STRENGTHEN INDIGENOUS CULTURE ARE IMPORTANT TO THE *CLOSING THE GAP* AGENDA.

The rich cultural practices, knowledge systems and cultural expressions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are a source of great strength, resilience and pride.

Strong cultural identity is fundamental to Indigenous health and social and emotional wellbeing.

Initiatives that strengthen Indigenous culture are therefore important to the *Closing the Gap* agenda, which is a commitment by all Australian governments to work together to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and in particular, to provide a better future for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Initiatives that strengthen culture also contribute to other government objectives such as social inclusion.

Indigenous culture and the ‘building blocks’

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) recognises that improving the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will require a sustained commitment from all levels of government, with major effort directed to seven action areas or ‘building blocks’:

- early childhood
- schooling
- health
- economic participation
- healthy homes
- safe communities
- governance and leadership.

The *Prime Minister’s Closing the Gap Report 2011* acknowledges the importance of promoting strong Indigenous cultures, heritages and languages under the ‘governance and leadership’ building block.

Australian Government programs that support Indigenous culture are also linked with the ‘safe communities’ building block. Support for the Indigenous visual arts industry and jobs

in the arts and culture sectors make a strong contribution under ‘economic participation’.

However, the fundamental role of culture in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing means that initiatives that support Indigenous culture are also a foundation stone producing outcomes *across* the COAG building blocks.

‘Efforts to Close the Gap in Indigenous disadvantage must recognise and build on the strength of Indigenous cultures and identities.’
(*National Indigenous Reform Agreement* ^[1])

The impact of interrupted culture

The interruption of culture in causing Indigenous disadvantage cannot be understated:

‘The destruction of Indigenous Australian culture has resulted in ongoing grief, despair and confusion including the disruption of traditional gender roles (especially for men), cultural values and pride, disruption of kinship networks and support systems, and confusion of people forced to balance between two, often irreconcilable cultures.’^[2]

The *Bringing them Home* and *Deaths in Custody* reports demonstrated the devastating impact that fractured culture has had, and the importance of valuing culture in healing this damage.

Culture as a strategy to support strength, combat disadvantage and promote positive futures

Culture is an important factor to consider in policies and programs to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Moreover, the strengthening of Indigenous culture is a strategy to reduce disadvantage in itself, holding enormous potential for contributing to *Closing the Gap* outcomes. Keeping Indigenous culture strong is a necessary part of the solution to Indigenous disadvantage in Australia and to providing a positive future for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.



CULTURE AND *CLOSING THE GAP*— WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities know and articulate the many benefits of keeping culture strong.

The empirical evidence base lags behind community voices and experiences as the effect of culture is difficult to measure. Current research relies heavily on qualitative and international studies, and cross-sectional surveys which should be interpreted with care.*

However, there is a growing body of research supporting the community view that positive outcomes stem from keeping culture strong.

Early childhood

- Traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures contain natural protective and wellbeing factors such as kinship networks; and language, culture and cultural identity have been found to be key protective factors that predict resilience in children.^[3]
- According to the Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association and the Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association, connection to land, family, culture and spirituality can protect against ill health and serious psychological distress.^[4-5]
- Identifying, participating in and engaging with culture are essential to the development of strong and resilient Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.^[6]

Schooling

- International research has shown that early childhood Aboriginal language and cultural programs lead to increased self-esteem, improved academic performance, improved school attendance, reduced drop-out rates and better proficiency in reading skills in both the Indigenous language and English.^[7]
- Loss of language in Australia has been found to have negative impacts on directly affected generations and high levels of acculturative stress have been found in children living in regional centres where language loss is occurring.^[8-9]
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 13–17 year olds in urban and regional areas are more likely to attend school if they speak an Indigenous language than those who do not.^[10]
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with strong cultural identity or high participation in cultural activities are more likely to complete secondary school than those with moderate or weak identification and participation.^[11]
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that participate in cultural events, ceremonies or organisations; or speak, understand or learn an Indigenous language are also more likely to gain a post-school qualification.^[12]



Celebration of Indigenous culture at the NRL All Stars Game, February 2010. Supported by *Indigenous Languages Support*. © National Rugby League, Col Whelan.

Health

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with strong attachment to culture have significantly better self-assessed health.^[13]
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who speak Indigenous languages and participate in cultural activities have markedly better physical and mental health.^[12]
- 'Aboriginal health' means not just the physical wellbeing of an individual but refers to the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole community.^[14]
- The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework identified culture and identity as a functioning which if improved would improve the potential for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to achieve better health, and would increase their capacity to be well.^[15]
- The National Mental Health Policy 2008 also acknowledges that cultural identity is fundamental to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.^[16]
- Research has found Indigenous cultural maintenance to be a determinant of Indigenous health.^[17]
- A ten year study in Central Australia found that connectedness to culture, family and land are contributors to significantly lower morbidity and mortality in outstation communities.^[18]
- The study found that residents of communities where traditional languages and cultural practices are valued and maintained are less likely to be obese, less likely to have diabetes and less prone to cardiovascular disease than Aboriginal people across the rest of the Northern Territory.^[18]
- Land is essential to Indigenous culture. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples assert that maintaining close connections with ancestral country is a prerequisite for good health. Significant and substantial health benefits are associated with greater participation in caring for country^[19] and with accessing homelands.^[20]



Danny Hume and Kenny Griffiths—arts workers on the job at Waringarri Aboriginal Arts, 2011. Supported by the *Indigenous Employment Initiative and Indigenous Visual Arts Industry Support*.

Economic participation

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with strong cultural attachment are significantly more likely to be in employment than those with moderate or minimal cultural attachment.^[13]
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who participate in cultural activities and who speak Indigenous languages are significantly and substantially more likely to be employed than those who do not.^[11, 13]
- Indigenous cultural industries provide economic opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, e.g. the practice and production of Indigenous visual arts and the employment it generates is a multi-million dollar industry.^[21]
- In 2002, 12 percent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote areas received payment for making arts or crafts; performing theatre, music, or dance; or writing or telling stories.^[22]

Safe communities

- Culture provides a framework for recognising risks and challenges and how to overcome them, and can provide meaning in adversity.^[23]
- Strengthening culture is a strategy to promote resilience in the face of racism, disadvantage and the ongoing impacts of colonisation. A positive cultural identity assists Aboriginal children and young people to navigate being a minority group in their own country.^[6]
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who speak Indigenous languages, participate in cultural activities and have strong cultural attachment are less likely to abuse alcohol or be charged by the police.^[11, 13]
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth in remote areas who speak an Indigenous language are less likely to engage in high risk alcohol consumption and illicit substance use, and to have been a victim of physical or threatened violence.^[24]

- Social, cultural, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing are building blocks toward overall mental wellbeing and are crucial in reducing suicide in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.^[2]
- A qualitative health study found that Indigenous ceremonies (kanyirninpa/holding) prevent self harm and suicide in desert communities in the southeast Kimberley region of Western Australia because they embed the participant in multiple supporting relationships across and within generations, preventing or ending social isolation.^[25]
- The 2008 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey found that in remote areas, feeling happy was associated with cultural activities such as making or performing Indigenous arts.^[26]
- An evaluation of the Indigenous festivals Croc Fest, the Dreaming Festival and Garma, found benefits for participants included empowerment, capacity building, social capital, exposure to positive role models, cultural security, cultural confidence, local leadership, economic opportunities and pride in Indigenous identity.^[27]

‘Indigenous Australians’ participation in artistic and cultural activities helps to reinforce and preserve living culture, and maintains connection to family and traditional country which, in turn, develops identity, sense of place and self esteem in the building of strong cultural foundations. These attributes can contribute to a decrease in abuse, neglect, prison population, juvenile justice numbers and overall displacement from Australian society.’

(2010 Indigenous Expenditure Report^[30])

Governance and leadership

- For good governance in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities there must be a cultural ‘match’, as legitimacy is grounded in culturally based standards, values and systems of authority.^[28]
- Leadership includes strong vision and direction from Elders in family and community (both male and female) and strong role models who have time to listen and advise. The 2008 *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey* found that for one in five children in secondary school (22%), encouragement from Elders and Council was considered to be a type of assistance that would help them complete Year 12.^[15]
- To create strong and smart Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, acknowledging, embracing and developing a strong sense of Indigenous cultural identity is vital.^[29]

The Office for the Arts within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet administers five funding streams that help to strengthen Indigenous culture, contributing towards *Closing the Gap*:

- Indigenous Culture Support (ICS)
- Indigenous Languages Support (ILS)
- Indigenous Visual Arts Industry Support (IVAIS)
- Indigenous Repatriation Program (IRP)
- Indigenous Employment Initiative (IEI) in the Indigenous arts and cultural sectors.



Change Media Ngarrindjeri youth team interviews Ngarrindjeri Elder Tom Trevorrow. Supported by Indigenous Culture Support. Photographer: Carl Kuddell.

*Note on research cited: International research may not always be readily extrapolated to Australia. The effect of culture is difficult to measure and to isolate from the effects of other interrelated factors, such as regional differences between remote and non-remote locations. Analyses of cross-sectional data do not directly support arguments about causation, but identify positive associations between cultural attachment, cultural participation, language use and socio-economic outcomes after controlling for many other factors in the model. These findings need to be strengthened by more robust evidence on the direct effects of culture and the pathways through which these effects operate.

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