

Report 1–Focus Group findings: Monitoring of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health and wellbeing during the Voice to Parliament Referendum

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CONTENT WARNING

We acknowledge the deep and ongoing repercussions of settler-colonisation and associated trauma, including the potential impacts of public discourse and Referendum-related stress; this understanding underpins and drives our work.

This Report discusses concepts including experiences of discrimination, racism, psychological distress, mental health, and trauma. We understand that the findings presented in this paper, along with the underlying ideas and concepts discussed, may cause sadness or distress for some people. If you need to talk to someone, call 13YARN on 13 92 76 (24 hours/7 days) to talk with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Crisis Support worker, or see <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/who-does-it-affect/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people/helpful-contacts-and-websites> for mental health resources, or see <https://www.naccho.org.au/naccho-map/> for a map of Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations. Online resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing service providers, including websites, apps, podcasts, videos, helplines, social media and online programs with a focus on social and emotional wellbeing can be found at <https://wellmob.org.au/>.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on whose traditional lands we conduct our work and pay our respects to their continuing connection to culture, land, and seas.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ACCHO	Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
AEO	Aboriginal Education Officer
AMS	Aboriginal Medical Services
COVID	Coronavirus disease
DoCS	Department of Community Services
LGBTIQ	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer/questioning
MK-K5	The modified 5-item Kessler Psychological Distress Scale
NITV	National Indigenous Television
NSW	New South Wales
QLD	Queensland
VIC	Victoria
WA	Western Australia
13YARN	Crisis support line for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The National Centre for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing Research Australian National University was commissioned to undertake work to provide information about the mental health and wellbeing needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples during the Voice to Parliament Referendum period. This project is not about the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on the Referendum, and did not collect or analyse any data about voting intentions, and did not draw any conclusions about the Referendum outcome. This project aims to identify key concerns and services required to support the population, monitor levels of mental health and wellbeing during the Referendum period, and capture any changes to wellbeing over this period. The current project comprises two main components. The first component, which is the subject of this Report, involved conducting focus groups to gather input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth and adults (aged 16 years and over) on their concerns and needs in the lead up to the Referendum. These focus groups aimed to help identify what resources, services, and supports might be required, and what might help mitigate any negative impacts on people, families, and communities. Focus groups were held with a total of 84 participants across six sites in April 2023. The focus groups identified concerns around mental health and wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The impacts of discourses around the Referendum, and Referendum-related stress, were described as far-reaching, massive, and already occurring; they were expected to persist beyond the outcome of the Referendum vote. Findings are summarised under seven themes below, with illustrative quotations in *Table 1*.

1. **One more form of stress:** Referendum-related stress must be considered in the context of the pre-existing stresses Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were already managing and continue to manage through the Referendum period and beyond. Participants voiced concern around the ongoing and long-term impacts of Referendum-related stress.
2. **Uncertainty:** participants described information gaps and uncertainty that pervades the Referendum process. Participants also described pre-anxiety about life after the vote.
3. **Mental load:** participants described pressure to support and educate others about the Referendum – a task they feel ill-equipped for given information gaps and the burdens they are already carrying. Participants described a heavy, constant mental load resulting from interrogation by non-Indigenous people. They also described a desire to be able to support mob, but concern about their ability to adequately do so.
4. **Racism:** participants describe that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are experiencing an increase in frequency and intensity of experiences of racism – direct and vicarious – as a result of discourses around the Referendum.
5. **Division and conflict:** discussions around the Referendum are causing division both between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and non-Indigenous communities, as well as within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and families. Participants described negative consequences of this division for individual wellbeing, family wellbeing, and community wellbeing.
6. **Threat to identity:** the Referendum surrounds the rights and identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and, as such, conversations about the Referendum can inherently have deep impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – impacts that are not understood or respected in much of the commentary around the Referendum.
7. **Re-traumatising:** Participants expressed that discussions around the Referendum can bring up traumas Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have faced since colonisation, and cannot be separated from history, including a long history of ‘consultation’ processes and a perceived lack of tangible outcomes for community.

Across themes, participants identified a particular concern for youth and a need for tailored supports. This included concern around: the extent of social media exposure; impacts of racism and distress for those who may not have experience coping with these stressors, or who may not have support mechanisms in place; and, concerns about wellbeing of those in families affected by conflict.

Table 1: Mental health and wellbeing concerns described by participants

Theme	Example quotes
One more form of stress	<p><i>It is just one more thing to the mountain of worries</i></p> <p><i>And it's like, don't we have enough anxiety just existing, full stop, in a colonial world, much less existing and the fate of our Indigenous rights in government is at the hands of a predominantly non-Indigenous vote</i></p> <p><i>It's another load to carry. We always carry loads, for us and for family.</i></p>
Uncertainty	<p><i>I think there should have been more clarity around what the Referendum is actually about. I consider myself relatively politically aware, but even I don't know what the hell is going on. I just want the door open</i></p> <p><i>We want the truth.</i></p> <p><i>It's that pre-anxiety of what happens next. I'm already anxious for after the Referendum, whether it's a yes or a no.</i></p>
Mental load	<p><i>Just because I'm Aboriginal and just because I identify proudly and inform myself, doesn't mean it's my role to inform everyone else, unless I choose to.</i></p> <p><i>The cultural loading for people to look at you and just because you're Indigenous [they expect you] to know what you're talking about. It's too much. It's like, it's too much.</i></p> <p><i>Like we've got to lean on mob because they're the people who share all of the experiences, but you don't want to because you don't want to [add to] the burden.</i></p>
Racism	<p><i>What I've noticed since this Referendum is like I feel like it's given like non-Indigenous [people] more of a power, like "you don't have a voice, the government supports us", and it's kind of giving them that power trip, like "I can now say and do what whatever I want because you don't have a voice".</i></p> <p><i>It impacts me mentally because I think I go through those and I go through scenarios and how people are going to react and what am I going to do ... I've got to prepare myself because I'll go through what's going to happen if you hear this and hear that.</i></p>
Division and conflict	<p><i>There's so much community torn like both ways ... as soon as there's a tear, and obviously all our communities are diverse as it is anyway, and different clans within each of our mobs too, so one – like there's more fighting I think ... people are already affected massively.</i></p> <p><i>Anxiety makes people lash out; frustration makes people lash out. You might be lashing out on the wrong person. This misdirection of the anger and frustration of what's going on. For relationships, the home environments are really precarious, that extra level, it could just be that straw that breaks the camel's back.</i></p>
Threat to identity	<p><i>I go onto social media and I see people debating my right to exist in this country, my right to live a life free from racism and discrimination and that's really tough. It's like who I am inside is the debate. It almost feels like entertainment for other people ... It's a direct attack on who I am as a person and how I relate to my world and family which, I think, is the part that people don't really understand.</i></p>
Re-traumatising	<p><i>But it's those little things that trigger us. When you go to talk to people about it they go, "But yeah mate, just have a beer, just get over it bro, you're right." You don't understand how close it is to us ... It's that constant, people just brushing it off ... so that's the mental health stuff. It builds and builds and builds, and I can see why our old people still doing this one here, banging their head, because they've been telling the story their whole life.</i></p> <p><i>It's like they're constantly putting that Blackfella hat back on us in the sense of having to educate constantly, which then is traumatising ... it takes a toll. Massive toll. Burnout.</i></p>

If you think back, the letter that William Cooper wrote to Menzies in 1926, asking for a Voice to Parliament, and an Aboriginal representative on Parliament. It's nearly 100 years ago, and we're still talking about it. It's no wonder people are cynical.

Participants voiced the urgent need for supports to reduce the potential negative impacts on individual, family, and community wellbeing. Participants conveyed that these needs are ongoing and will extend beyond the period of the Referendum. There were three main themes in the identified supports and solutions:

1. **Education.** Participants voiced the need for education about: the Referendum and the process of voting, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, the impacts of Referendum-related stress and discourses around the Referendum on mental health and wellbeing of the community, ways to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples during the Referendum period, and social media literacy. This education needs to be delivered through multiple modes of delivery, not a one-size-fits all approach, to ensure that it is accessible and effective for all individuals.
2. **Support for individual, family, and community wellbeing.** Participants identified a range of needed supports required for individual, family, and community wellbeing during the Referendum period and beyond. There was a clearly identified need for further investment in and access to culturally safe and flexible counselling and mental health support (both preventive care and clinical care – not just for crises), holistic support services for individual and family wellbeing, and opportunities and safe spaces to connect with community and culture.
3. **Minimising misinformation and racism in the media.** Participants identified the need for measures to minimise misinformation and to reduce the impacts of exposure to racism in the media, including implementing processes to 'fact check' information on social and other media, redirecting to verified information sources, and implementing and enforcing trauma-informed guidelines for media reporting.

Figure 1 teases out these themes and builds on the focus group data to identify potential solutions.

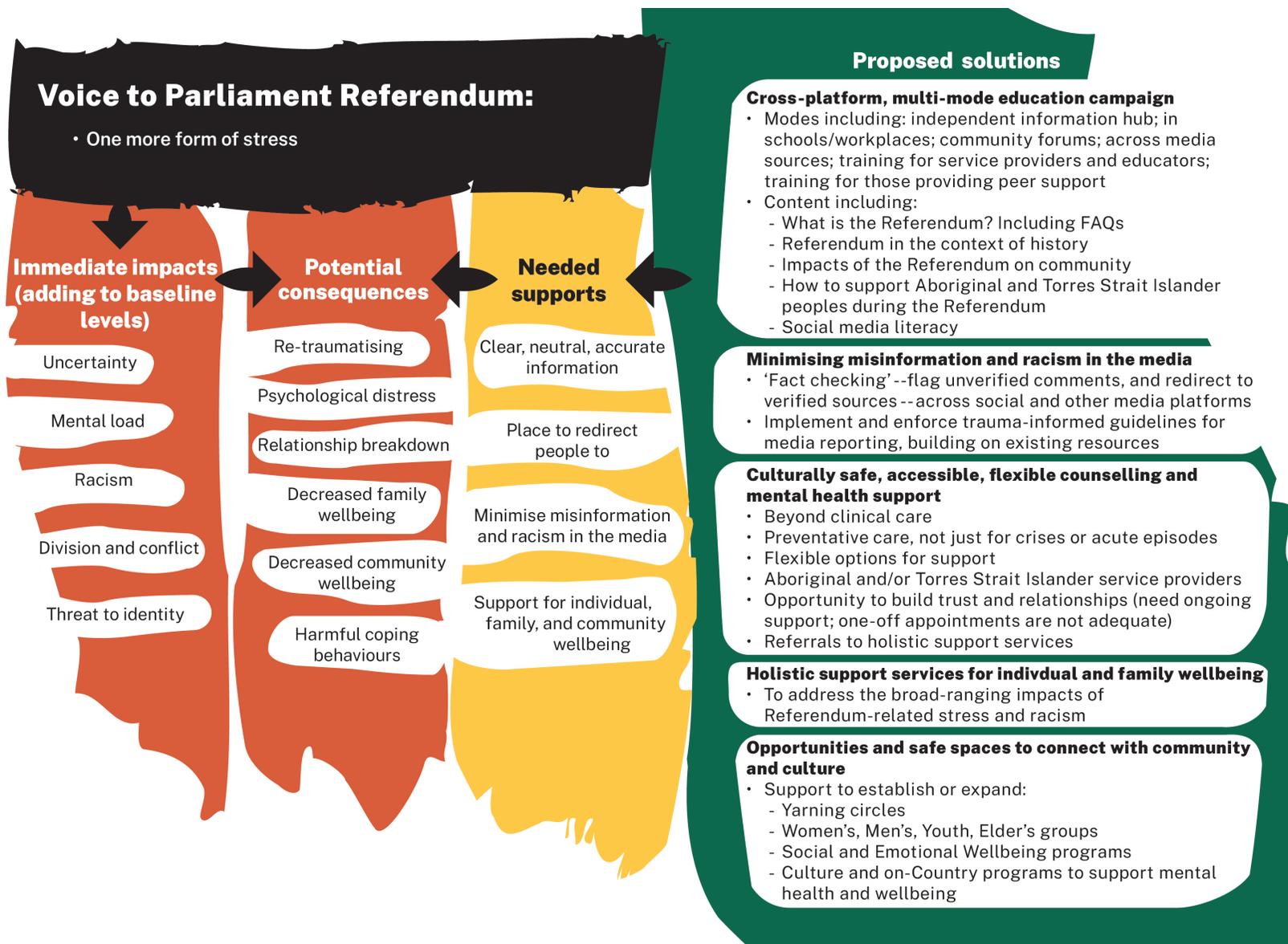


Figure 1: Diagram of key themes and proposed solutions

BACKGROUND

A referendum will be held between October and December 2023 to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Constitution by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice. This referendum is being put forward as a part of the Australian Government's commitment to implementing the Uluru Statement from the Heart. It is intended to provide recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of Australia, and to ensure that the Australian Parliament and Government consult with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about related matters.

Public debates, including referendums, are often employed by governments to obtain a public directive for a specific policy or issue. While they can be an important component of democracy, they can also carry risks for the psychological wellbeing of individuals and communities.

Community members, peak organisations, and service providers have raised concerns about the health and wellbeing, particularly mental health, of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples during the Voice to Parliament Referendum (Referendum) period. Two key potential risks to wellbeing during this period have been identified. First, it is likely that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will experience Referendum-related stress, and increased exposure to racism, which would likely have negative impacts including increased psychological distress. Second, factors that are protective of wellbeing, such as family and community cohesion, and sense of belonging, agency, and identity, are likely to be eroded during this period. Any impacts are likely to include short-term and the long-term consequences.

We can look to previous historical events in Australia to understand the potential for the Referendum to cause harm, such as harms from non-Indigenous commentary in the decade following publication of the *Bringing Them Home Report* before the Apology,¹⁻⁴ and harms from stress and discrimination during the 2017 Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey process. For example, previous research found that exposure to negative media messaging and debate-related stress was linked to increases in psychological distress for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer/questioning (LGBTIQ) adults and allies.^{5,6} There are similar examples in international contexts, which demonstrate the potential for long-lasting impacts.⁷⁻¹¹ For example, research has shown that population-level mental health in the United Kingdom was significantly poorer two years following the Brexit referendum, compared to before the referendum.¹²

These potential harms can be mitigated. Therefore, it is crucial to take a proactive approach to minimising the potential negative short- and long-term impacts of the Referendum on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing. There is a need to understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' concerns, to identify and implement supports, and to monitor wellbeing outcomes over the Referendum period.

What we know

Stress and racism

The upcoming Referendum in Australia, and discussions around the Referendum, have been recognised as possible sources of stress for and racism against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Discussions about the Referendum have the potential to subject people to harmful, racist discourses about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities, and cultures. It is well established that racism and discrimination have negative consequences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' health and wellbeing, across a breadth of outcomes.^{13, 14} This includes a strong link between experiences of discrimination and psychological distress. Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander adults experiencing any everyday discrimination are almost three times as likely to experience high or very high psychological distress as those not experiencing discrimination.¹⁵

An estimated 41.7% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults aged 18 years and over experienced high/very high psychological distress in 2018–2022,¹⁵ according to a culturally-adapted, validated tool (the MK-K5).¹⁶ This means that there were over 200,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults nationally experiencing high/very high levels of psychological distress before the Referendum period. For up to half of these adults, experiences of everyday discrimination were a cause of their psychological distress.¹⁵ These 200,000 adults with high/very high psychological distress are at risk of negative wellbeing outcomes, including needing time off work or additional visits to health providers,¹¹ mental health conditions (such as anxiety and depression),^{16, 17} and an increased risk of death.¹⁸ The risk of these negative outcomes could be further elevated among these adults already experiencing high/very high psychological distress, if the Referendum causes further increases in distress.

In addition, any added Referendum-related stress could contribute to more adults, who had lower levels of psychological distress at baseline, shifting across the threshold to high/very high levels of psychological distress. The extent to which the Referendum could cause an increase in prevalence of high/very high psychological distress is unknown. Research identified a 9-12% increase in the prevalence of psychological distress in the Australian total population during the COVID-19 period.¹⁹ If, without effective mitigations, there was a similar prevalence increase, with an additional ten percent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults reaching high/very high levels of psychological distress during the Referendum period (bringing prevalence up to 51.7%), there would be nearly 50,000 additional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults at risk. Although it is difficult to forecast the impact of Referendum-related stress, these estimates emphasise the importance of measuring and understanding any impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and responding by implementing preventative strategies, and ensuring appropriate services and supports are in place.

We also acknowledge that the negative impacts of psychological distress are not limited to those on the extreme end of the spectrum (high/very high levels); there can be negative impacts of having low or moderate levels of psychological distress.

Factors protective of wellbeing

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are central to wellbeing.²⁰ Domains of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture include connection to Country; beliefs and knowledge systems; language; family, kinship and community; expression and continuity; and self-determination and leadership.²¹ There is growing evidence on the positive links between culture and good health and wellbeing outcomes (including mental health) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.²² These protective factors support wellbeing in general, and they may also buffer against the negative impacts of racism. However, these assets may be at risk during the Referendum period.

For example, strong family and community relationships are key to protecting mental health and wellbeing during the Referendum period; this is supported by research from the Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey showing that support from social networks could buffer the impacts of negative media messages on psychological distress,⁶ noting this evidence is not specific to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. However, discussions around the Referendum are likely causing fractures within families and communities, which could undermine this important source of support.

Further, it is possible that exposure to negative messages and debate during the Referendum could be a risk to other key protective cultural factors, including sense of identity and self-determination, and could contribute to increased disconnection from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures or tension with non-Indigenous cultures.

What do we do about it?

Any potential increase in exposure to stressors (including racism) or any potential decrease in exposure to protective cultural factors poses a concern for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing. It is essential to understand concerns and monitor wellbeing outcomes during the Referendum period, so that services, supports, and resources can be developed and implemented to minimise any harms related to exposure to stress and racism, and to maximise the protective benefits of culture. It is crucial to prioritise the mental health and wellbeing needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples during this period and take steps to minimise any potential harm.

The aims of this project

The current project comprises two main components. The first component, which is the subject of this Report, involved conducting focus groups to gather input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth (aged 16 years and over) and adults on their concerns and needs around the Referendum. These focus groups aimed to help identify what resources, services, and supports might be required, and what might help mitigate any negative impacts on people, families, and communities. The project's second component is to monitor wellbeing outcomes before and during the Referendum period, through analysis of data from *Mayi Kuwayu: the National Study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing*. This Aboriginal-led and governed study comprises over 10,000 adults across the country and is conducted in partnership with peak Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, adhering to principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty.²³

Overall, this project aims to provide critical information about the mental health and wellbeing needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples during the Voice to Parliament Referendum period. It seeks to identify key concerns and services required to support the population, to monitor levels of mental health and wellbeing during the Referendum period, and to capture any changes to wellbeing over this period.

This project is not about the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on the Referendum, and did not collect or analyse any data about voting intentions, and did not draw any conclusions about the Referendum outcome.

METHODS

The purpose of this component of the project was to identify any concerns of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults relating to the Referendum and to identify the services and resources that would be needed to mitigate any potential harm to themselves, their families, and their communities. The focus groups were not about views on the Referendum vote; participants were not asked to talk about how they would vote on the Referendum or why – the conversations were focused on concerns about mental health and wellbeing and needed supports.

Nomination of sites and recruitment of participants

Community organisations were funded to host focus groups. The selection of sites was based on interest of community organisations, with the aim of capturing geographic diversity. Focus groups were held at six sites across Australia: Canberra, ACT; Melbourne, VIC; Newcastle, NSW; Worimi, NSW; Perth, WA; and Thursday Island, QLD. All focus groups were held in April 2023.

The nominated community organisation(s) at each site recruited participants through their networks. Each site could hold up to four focus groups, as dictated for the community organisation: for men, for women, for youth (aged 16 years and over), and/or for Elders. The aim in recruiting participants was to ensure diversity in both gender and age.

Focus group procedure

One to two members of the project team facilitated the focus groups. Prior to the discussion, participants completed and submitted their consent forms. Each focus group ran for up to two hours. During this time, project team members took notes, and the discussions were audio-recorded if all participants provided consent.

The questions for the focus group discussions explored participants' feelings, information needs, concerns, where they would seek support if required, what resources would help mitigate any potential harms, and what would help them support others. Discussion questions included:

- Do you think the discussions around the Voice to Parliament Referendum will affect the health and wellbeing of yourself, your family, and/or your broader community?
- If yes, what ways do you think the discussions around the Referendum will affect your, your family's, and/or your community's health and wellbeing?
- What information about the Referendum do you need?
- What worries do you have about the Referendum process?
- Where would you go for support if you experienced any worries during the Referendum? This might be a service, an individual, or other.
- What do you think would reduce any negative impacts on you/your family/your community?
- What would help you to support others if they come to you for support during the Referendum?

The focus group process was iterative, with participants invited to provide their ideas and respond to the ideas developed at previous sites.

Ethics considerations

The focus groups are conducted for provide information directly to the Department of Health and Aged Care and its partners for service and resource planning. The findings are shared through this Report. Data from these focus groups will not appear in any research publications and will not be used

for any research or other purposes. This means that these focus groups do not fall under the jurisdiction of Research Ethics committees. However, the project team adheres to principles of ethical conduct for working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at all stages of this project.

Participation in the focus groups was voluntary. The information sheet and consent process were discussed with all participants prior to commencing the focus group. All participants provided written, informed consent before commencing the focus group. A distress protocol was in place, noting the sensitive nature of the topic, and participants were welcome to step out of the conversation or cease participation at any stage of the discussion. All participants are kept anonymous in the storage of data and reporting of data. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were involved in all stages of the research.

Transcription and analysis of data

Where audio recording occurred, the audio recording from the focus group discussions were transcribed using a professional, secure transcription service. The transcribed data, and notes from the focus groups, where audio recording did not occur, were reviewed to identify themes relating to the impacts of the Referendum on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the information and supports needed.

Participants

In total, there were 84 participants across the 11 focus groups held (*Table 2*).

Table 2: Focus groups sites and participants

City, State	Remoteness	Number of focus groups held	Total number of participants
Canberra, ACT	Capital city	2	21
Melbourne, VIC	Capital city	1	1
Newcastle, NSW	Urban	2	16
Worimi, NSW	Inner Regional	3	26
Perth, WA	Urban	1	6
Thursday Island, Qld	Very Remote/Island	2	14
Total	--	11	84

Among these participants, 19 participants were aged between 16 and 25 years (22.6%), 42 were aged between 26 and 59 years (50.0%), 18 were aged 60 years and above (21.4%). Five participants were missing data on age, accounting for 6.0% of all participants (*Table 3*).

In terms of gender, 34 were men (40.5%) while 45 were women (53.6%). Five participants were missing data on gender, accounting for 6.0% of all participants.

Among the participants, 67 were Aboriginal people (79.8%), nine were Torres Strait Islander people (10.7%), and six identified as both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (7.1%). Two participants were missing data on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identification, accounting for 2.4% of all participants.

Table 3: Demographic characteristics of focus groups participants

Demographic characteristics	Number	Percentage
Age group		
16–25 years	19	22.6%
26–59 years	42	50.0%
60 years and older	18	21.4%
Prefer not to say, or missing	5	6.0%
Gender		
Man	34	40.5%
Woman	45	53.6%
Non-binary	0	0.0%
Transgender	0	0.0%
I identify another way	0	0.0%
Prefer not to say, or missing	5	6.0%
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identification		
Aboriginal	67	79.8%
Torres Strait Islander	9	10.7%
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	6	7.1%
Prefer not to say, or missing	2	2.4%

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS

The key findings from the focus groups have been grouped into two sections. The first section discusses what participants identified as immediate impacts experienced during the Referendum period. The second section discusses what supports people described needing and what those supports could look like.

Immediate impacts experienced during the Referendum period

An additional stress adding to baseline levels

Participants described the Referendum as one part of a bigger landscape of issues affecting mob. The stresses relating to the Referendum were described as another stress on top of many others, as one participant describes: 'it is just one more thing to the mountain of worries.' Participants shared that this additional stress contributed to feelings of helplessness and a lack of control. One participant described the added anxiety within the context of the anxiety of living in a colonial world:

And it's like, don't we have enough anxiety just existing, full stop, in a colonial world, much less existing and the fate of our Indigenous rights in government is at the hands of a predominantly non-Indigenous vote.

Some participants described that, in the current climate with so many stressors, the Referendum-related stress appeared to be an unmanageable addition to the burdens, or became 'the last thing on their mind' as communities prioritise facing other immediate challenges such as managing the rising cost of living. Participants placed the Referendum in the context of other stressors:

And we've inherited – we've inherited trauma from our mothers, fathers, grandmothers, grandfathers, even though it's their trauma. And we're growing up in our period of time – we're adults in a period of time that is incredibly difficult to navigate anyway. We've had pandemics, we've had global climate disaster, we've had thousands and thousands and thousands of our people left homeless. The people in general are left homeless due to floods, fires, other catastrophes. We see things happening overseas, the earthquakes in Turkey. It's not a nice place to be alive in now ... you then get all of that confusion and stress, and uncomfortable people, and vulnerable people can often react in anger, and how do the people that are closest to them – and so you have this political distress is almost superfluous to everything else we've got going on. Why do we need this on top of everything else that we're dealing with?

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We are stressing on the border, on the front and you are stressing from the climate change, yes. We'd have been supposed to have this rain with the rain season finished but we're still getting rain up here so it's all these little things.

Participants stated that Referendum-related stress was already impacting many aspects of their lives: 'It's going to affect how I go to school and how I go to work and how my siblings grow up. I just can't imagine this feeling going on for another eight months. It's crazy.' Participants worried that the impacts would persist over the long-term, not just for themselves, but for their children and future generations.

It's scary for me, and it's like what kind of future do my children hold? That's my biggest concern. Because they're – they're innocent, you know.

This theme highlights that the added stresses related to the Referendum must be considered in the context of the stresses Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were already managing and continue to manage through the Referendum period. Participants voiced concern regarding the ongoing and long-term impacts of Referendum-related stress.

Uncertainty

A key challenge faced by the participants was the issue of uncertainty. Participants generally felt that there was a lack of easily accessible and detailed information regarding the Referendum, at the time the focus groups were held in April 2023. Participants also identified confusion about when the Referendum would be held, and how the proposed Voice was intended to be composed and to function. One participant stated: 'we don't know what the fuck's going on.' Another expressed:

it's not clear what the actual Voice or Referendum is. And a lot of our mob – well, tell me if I'm wrong – doesn't fully understand the constitution and what's in the constitution and what part of the constitution that the referendum is, the amendments or whatever, you know, that marry up with that to change and to have that voice.

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I think there should have been more clarity around what the Referendum is actually about. I consider myself relatively politically aware, but even I don't know what the hell is going on. I just want the door open ...

In the context of a perceived lack of reliable information, participants voiced concern about misinformation (particularly on social media) and the proliferation of the opinions rather than factual information:

We don't want any sugar-coating stuff. We want the truth. I think that that's the important thing and be transparent, but I don't want to hear or listen to the media have these little snippets anymore because it just makes me angry because, you know, on the outside, especially when you turn it over all the years or the 7:30 report or whatever, you have these people with their opinions and it's not the truth.

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I'm still trying to grasp at myself like, who are you going and sit with and have that inner peace too and know that that person that you're talking to is giving you the right information and not have that mixed up from the outside. You know, it's all factual stuff. It's not hearsay stuff. That's the biggest thing, is having the confidence and the trust in that person that you go and talk back to each.

People also expressed concern that some voices were given platforms while others went unheard – that 'the squeaky wheel gets the oil.' One participant described it: 'With these kinds of things, it's always the people with the biggest agendas that have the loudest voice, and get press coverage.' This can lead to a fear of the influence of media over people's decisions, as one participant stated: 'That's the fear. You're right, is it going to be an educated decision, or just who's influenced me the most through the campaign process?'

In addition, participants described uncertainty or 'pre-anxiety' around 'what happens next.' Participants described already facing stress due to the uncertainty surrounding the future post-Referendum, regardless of the outcome.

and I feel like not everyone gets it but it's that pre-anxiety of what happens next. I'm already anxious for after the Referendum, whether it's a yes or a no ... It's like, yes, you're just sitting in an anxious wait until October, which is also not great.



In terms of you asking me, mental health and emotional wellbeing, in fact, this build-up and then you get slapped in the face and you fall again, oh well – what do we do?

Contributing to the uncertainty, participants voiced concern that the process is being rushed and that the appropriate time is not being given to ensure that it is done in the right way.

But from my point of view, if we're going to get this right, there should be no such thing as time. There should be no such thing as time. The government's spared income [in rushing the process] and those political people that are trying to talk on behalf of our Aboriginal communities, they've spared income. And we talk about the culture, Aboriginal culture time. It's how we get it right.

This theme highlights that participants found it difficult to access factual information regarding the Referendum, and described pre-anxiety about life after the vote, regardless of the outcome. These experiences contribute to feelings of uncertainty, which adds to levels of stress.

Mental load

A pervasive impact described by participants was the mental load and emotional labour placed upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to share their opinions on the Referendum and to educate non-Indigenous people about the Referendum.

Participants across focus groups described being constantly asked about the Referendum by non-Indigenous people. They described being approached often by people and feeling cornered. One participant said: 'I can't go to the gym without someone wanting a piece of me.' Non-Indigenous people: 'want to know which way they should vote.' Participants said that they were made to feel responsible for the Voice by non-Indigenous people:

the thing that really struck me was that she was saying all of this like I was personally responsible for the Voice. It was almost like she was chastising me ... because I'm probably one of the only Indigenous people she knows.

Participants felt a pressure to know about the Referendum in order to educate others; in some cases, this led to shame if they did not feel like they had the answers. The expectation that participants would educate non-Indigenous people about the Referendum led to stress and concerns about how their identity would be judged based on their knowledge. Multiple participants described this pressure:

that adds pressure to who I think, or what my views should be, or the fact that I don't know because I am working, studying, doing lots of other things, I haven't actually had the time to look into what that means for us. So then

I feel like am I not good enough. Like, am I not Black enough because I don't know about this stuff.

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And me, myself, I'm not fully educated on the topic, and I call myself quite an activist, and the fact that I don't know all this stuff, I feel like that is something that should change. I've had at least three different friends come up to me and ask me because I'm one of the only Indigenous people in my friend group, and they say, do you know what the Referendum is, and stuff. I feel like it's my responsibility to tell them.

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Because Black people, we're supposed to know everything about politics and culture. We're supposed to like be the encyclopaedia's and everything ...

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Because me personally, I don't want to be the education that – just because I'm Aboriginal and just because I identify proudly and inform myself, doesn't mean it's my role to inform everyone else, unless I choose to.

The pressure to educate others was increased by the pressure to 'get it right' as one participant put it:

And I think the biggest thing for me is like the burden. Like this is a referendum we had 55 years ago that affects generations. It's not just affecting today and tomorrow or 10 years, this could affect the next 55 years, which is my children and their children and their children's children. So the bigger picture, that pressure that it puts on you to make that right decision, to get it right, to have that voice is a lot. The cultural loading for people to look at you and just because you're Indigenous to know what you're talking about. It's too much. It's like, it's too much.

One participant described their approach to managing the constant demands on their emotional labour:

I think one thing that I've gotten better at as I've gotten older is putting a personal value on my emotional labour and knowing where I find that valuable and giving it only to people who I think are worthy, who value me and value myself and my space. Just knowing when it's too much to engage, and I'm just going to tire myself out for no benefit really, and these conversations can be so tough that sometimes, it's easier to just be like, 'Oh, I don't want to talk about that, let's move on,' which is emotional labour in itself but it's definitely not as heavy as sitting there.

Alongside feeling forced into educating non-Indigenous people about the Referendum, participants expressed a strong desire to support and to be supported by other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. However, participants described this as a challenge due to the already large demands on them and the lack of information or resources to assist them in providing this support to others.

the stress for me is in my role – so I'm connected socially and family, through blood, and a lot of mobs in the [place], and everyone ringing me, asking me, what do you think [name]? What's your stand and what's your position? And that's stressful because I don't want to give them wrong information when

I'm really not that clear on it. So it is very stressful. I don't want to be caught with my pants down. And I don't know it clear enough ... I guess who I am personally, everyone is coming to me going, 'what do you think? What do you think?' Whatever you say ... And I'm just going, man, the pressure.

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If mob came [to me for support], I don't know where how to support them without adding to the load I'm carrying around.

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I want to support mob but I don't know what to tell them ... I'm not Elder.

Participants also worried that seeking support for themselves would add to the burdens of others.

Wouldn't go anywhere, keep it to myself – they are my worries, I don't want to burden anyone else.

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Like we've got to lean on mob because they're the people who share all of the experiences, but you don't want to because you don't want to [add to] the burden.

This theme highlights the pressure that participants face to support and educate others about the Referendum – a task they felt ill-equipped for given the lack of clear information about the Referendum and the burdens they already were carrying. Participants described a heavy, constant mental load resulting from interrogation by non-Indigenous people. They also expressed a desire to be able to support mob, but were concerned about their ability to do so adequately.

Racism

Participants reported an increase in experiences of racism, both direct (i.e. between persons) and vicarious (i.e. overhearing comments; media). There were perceptions that the 'racism will become worse the closer it [the Referendum] gets.' Participants described experiences of racism as more intensified and 'more in my face' in the lead up to the Referendum.

One participant stated that the content of the Referendum seems to have emboldened people to be racist:

What I've noticed since this Referendum is like I feel like it's given like non-Indigenous more of a power, like "you don't have a voice, the government supports us," and it's kind of giving them that power trip, like "I can now say and do what whatever I want because you don't have a voice." That's the kind of attitude that I got hit with yesterday, so it's like – like I thought it, and then I was like – and then that those incidents just kind of like reinforced what I thought.

Participants said that some of the racism they were experiencing is rehashing old stereotypes, such as that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples receive benefits that others do not. A participant described this experience:

One is, there is this urban myth that we get a free house, a free car and a free job. It's all bullshit. We do get more; we get more regulation. They just tore down the barbed wire fence from mission reserves, and gave us policy,

procedure and legislation and corporate governance, but it clashes with our cultural governance, and so we're stuck in the grey space, that manner of jumping between two worlds. But the white fellow say, "shut up and get over it, that happened years ago." No, it didn't, it happened to my parents, it happened to my grandfather. This is fresh and it's young, and it's new. It wasn't a long time ago. And the lie of "just get over it, you get everything for free" ...

Participants described the burden of having to constantly think about and prepare for racism, as well as having to monitor and control their responses to such experiences. One participant describes the impact of having to be prepared for experiences of racism:

It impacts me mentally because I think I go through those and I go through scenarios and how people are going to react and what am I going to do ... I've got to prepare myself because I'll go through what's going to happen if you hear this and hear that ... about. How am I going to react when I hear this? If there's something that's going to impact me negatively, do I just walk away? But then again, there's an element of me, if I don't say anything, am I just appeasing to what could be racism or discrimination? ... Do I want to be thinking about that all the time? No.

The impacts were described as cumulative, 'there's only so many times you can walk [away].'

Participants described experiencing tension in how to respond to racism, noting pressures to keep a level head, risking playing into stereotypes or causing interpersonal conflict (verbal and/or physical) if they react, but also not wanting to ignore the racism or internalise it. Both responses have potential negative implications for wellbeing.

Because either way, I'm damned if I do, damned if I don't [react or respond] ... I'm like, yeah – no, you thought I was just going to just like take your comments? No, I don't think so.

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it's that whole thing where you don't want to get noticed, like an angry Black – like you don't want to get known as that angry Black person that's just – that just reacts and goes off, but then how much do you sit there and just swallow, and just sit there and like, yeah – no, it's alright, it's alright.

In addition to increases in direct experiences of racism, participants described an increase in vicarious forms of racism, such as overhearing racist comments, and being exposed to racism in the media and social media. Participants conveyed perceptions that an increase in racism inevitably ensues whenever issues about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are in the public forum:

Whenever the word Aboriginal Indigenous people are put in the news it's mostly bad, always reporting on the bad side of us, and so when we are in the spotlight a lot of us just think oh here we are again and cop it, and like I said the social – like the mainstream of Australia are just like earbashing.

Participants also highlighted concerns about racism in reporting, and concerns that reporting was skewed by different agendas, with some reporting used as a way to highlight negative stories about community. This was described as leading to mistrust in the media.

Participants voiced particular concern about the potential impacts of an increased pervasiveness of racism for youth, and for those already 'on the edge'. Participants felt that, with age, they had 'desensitised' or 'hardened' themselves to experiences of racism, or had developed support mechanisms, including a sense of belonging and strong community connection.

There is an importance around mental health, especially for the young people ... my generation [older] where we've desensitised ourselves a bit to it all ... how are those kids going to deal with it?

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I can imagine if this had happened to me five years ago, before I'd grown up and gotten a hold on life and things like that, I couldn't imagine how shit it would make me feel if this was happening to me, even 2 or 3 years ago. That's the beauty of getting a little bit older, is knowing that work, knowing things that make you feel good and things that don't and how to put boundaries in place.

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And I think that a big trouble is if young mob don't have that sense of belonging, what recentres them, what grounds them?

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I suppose we've been able to get ourselves in a position where we can defend ourselves or we have built enough armour around us where comments like that we can just go – well I mean when I hear stuff like that or see stuff like that it doesn't really affect me because I think I'm above that, but then I think about a lot of communities that are not like that or haven't been able to get themselves in a position.

This theme highlights that participants perceived that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are experiencing an increase in frequency and intensity of experiences of racism – both direct and vicarious – arising from discussions about the Referendum.

Division and conflict

Participants raised concerns that discussions about the Referendum were contributing to division and conflict between the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and the non-Indigenous community, as well as within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities. Participants stated that public debates are inherently confrontational and divisive, 'dividing us all.' Participants explained that discussions relating to the Referendum 'can get really heated', leading to conflict; 'it just creates more rows, fights and arguments and stuff.'

Just kind of on the back end of COVID too, COVID divided whole communities and whole families on vaccines ... and then we've sort of come off the back of that, and now we've got the referendum, which is again dividing our communities. So even people's feelings about the referendum could be more ingrained – that ingrained stuff even from COVID or these other times when we've had these big divides.

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there's so much community torn like both ways ... as there's a tear, and obviously all our communities are diverse as it is anyway, and different clans within each of our mobs too, so one – like there's more fighting I think ... people are already affected massively.

Participants described that the conflicts could bring up emotions that may have been laying hidden, and could potentially trigger harmful behaviours towards individuals, families, or relationships. One participant described the challenge of not alienating others, stating: 'It's very much between two worlds ... You've got to navigate. I've always found that I've got to navigate my own views without alienating my family and my friends, so just knowing when to tow that line and keep things to myself.'

Even in your own household. Because not all people think the same. That's where my worry lies only about that everybody has their own opinions, but in your own household or family groups, this is where it can cause segregation and to be segregation, breakdown relationships ...

Some participants avoided discussing the Referendum to prevent conflicts that may arise a result of differing opinions. Others mentioned that they planned to vote in accordance with their Elders' view, regardless of their personal thoughts, to maintain respect and avoid any potential conflicts.

Participants described flow-on effects, wherein divisive discussions around the Referendum could contribute to increased stress and disconnection, which in turn could contribute to breakdown of interpersonal relationships and a decrease in family wellbeing and community wellbeing. One participant stated: 'there's that disconnection and we all know where that leads.' Regardless of the source of Referendum-related stress (i.e. from non-Indigenous people, the media, or family or community members), participants considered that the added stress had the potential to negatively impact on close family and community relationships; participants described this as the 'misdirection of anger.' Some participants described discussions around the Referendum as driving a wedge between family members.

Anxiety makes people lash out; frustration makes people lash out. You might be lashing out on the wrong person. This misdirection of the anger and frustration of what's going on. For relationships, the home environments are really precarious, that extra level, it could just be that straw that breaks the camel's back.

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And that's where the angst and the aggression – I know I get aggressive when, you know, people in my community talk and, you know, ask stupid – well, I say stupid questions, probably very, you know, relevant to them because they haven't got it up here what it's about. I said, I can't answer to that because I'm not fully understanding about the Referendum or the Voice itself and what part of the constitution is. I said, but I can assure you [non-Indigenous people] that we're not here to, you know, take whatever's yours. I said, that's not about what we are. And then I could feel my blood boil because I get – and I just got to walk away before I punch him or say something that I'll regret because I can't hold, and I don't tolerate BS anymore because I'm tired of, you know, being there or you Blackfellas get everything. That's when I get cranky, you know? And my aggression and my anger gets just – and I do. And there's a lot of people in our community that think that.

On two occasions, participants mentioned that alcohol could be used as a coping mechanism to deal with additional stresses relating to the Referendum, and identified a need for additional supports. One participant stated: 'Some mob drink so they don't have to think or talk. Where is their help?'; another one joked that they would turn to 'Uncle Dan's' (Dan Murphy's) for help when confronted by racism or arguments about the Referendum.

Participants expressed a desire to bring people together and work together rather than against each other, both within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and within Australia as a whole. Participants stated that discussions around the Referendum provide an opportunity for non-Indigenous people to get a better understanding of history.

This theme highlights the potential for discussions about the Referendum to cause division, both between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and non-Indigenous communities and within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and families. Participants described that this division could have negative consequences for individual wellbeing, family wellbeing, and community wellbeing.

Threat to identity

Participants highlighted how discussions around the Referendum could pose a threat to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' identity. Participants described how the 'debate' about the Referendum could be experienced as calling into question Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' right to exist:

I definitely think it impacts me and most Indigenous people when these topics come up. I think why that is and what I think non-Indigenous people don't really grasp is that being Indigenous is directly related to who I am as a person. It's my sense of self, my sense of being, it's something that I feel way down in my bones. It's not a shirt that I get to take off at the end of the day. But then, I go onto social media and I see people debating my right to exist in this country, my right to live a life free from racism and discrimination and that's really tough. It's like who I am inside is the debate. It almost feels like entertainment for other people ... And it's not a harmless comment. It's a direct attack on who I am as a person and how I relate to my world and family which, I think, is the part that people don't really understand.

Participants described how many non-Indigenous people don't understand how conversations around the Referendum may be linked to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity: 'But then on the flip side of that coin is this is me somehow having to justify my existence and my rights and my Indigeneity. They just don't get it. People don't get that side of it, that while they get to just sit there and leave that conversation and all's well and done, that baggage lives with us.'

This theme highlights that the Referendum relates to the rights and identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and, as such, conversations about the Referendum can inherently have deep impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – impacts that aren't understood or respected in much of the commentary around the Referendum.

Re-traumatizing

Participants identified that discussions around the Referendum, and having to educate non-Indigenous people on the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the Referendum,

can be re-traumatising. Participants described how traumas and triggers can accumulate, reiterating the need to invest in mental health supports:

And I was up there, because I was in Youth Justice, I'd go to court and support the little Blackfellas in court, and every time I'm standing up there, because you had to dress up, because you're going into court, all the lawyers would come over, "You here for domestic violence court mate?" Get off the fuck off me bro ... So I started wearing my work badge around, and them looking at it, and I'm going visiting families, and doing home visits, and I'm looking at my badge and it's triggering me, because of Department of Community Services, and I'm looking at it and I'm like why is this triggering me? Then light switch moment was DoCS. Oh my God, chuck that thing in the drawer, let the bro come and ask me if I was there for domestic violence court. Because DoCS took my Nan and Pop away, took my aunties and uncles away. Then I'm driving down here and I see on somebody's number plate "the first state." Fuck, these cheeky dogs. Come here and claim a country that they never even own and got the right to put on your number place "the first state." It's real little things that just trigger you ... But it's those little things that trigger us. When you go to talk to people about it they go, "But yeah mate, just have a beer, just get over it bro, you're right." You don't understand how close it is to us ... It's that constant, people just brushing it off ... so that's the mental health stuff. It builds and builds and builds, and I can see why our old people still doing this one here, banging their head, because they've been telling the story their whole life.

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we're now seeing non-Indigenous people ... come to us to ask us our opinion or wanting to have a conversation. But then it re-triggers and traumatises other Blackfellas when you have non-Indigenous people talk about, "Oh, well it happened so long ago" or all that uneducated – like that lack of education that happened in the school system, we're now facing more questions from people that we now have to re-educate. And then you've constantly got to – it's like they're constantly putting that Blackfella hat back on us in the sense of having to educate constantly, which then is traumatising. And that's not good for community to be in a constant education role to non-Indigenous people because it takes a toll. Massive toll. Burnout. And especially when we're already in community dealing with it, but then professionally dealing with it, it puts you in bad spots.

This theme highlights participants' perspectives that discussions around the Referendum can bring up traumas Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have faced since colonisation, and cannot be separated from history, including a long history of 'consultation' processes and a perceived lack of tangible outcomes for community.

What supports are needed, and what could they look like?

Education

This theme highlights the need for education around the Referendum and the process of voting, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, the impacts of the current Referendum process on mental

health and wellbeing, how to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples during the Referendum, and social media literacy. It also provides guidance on how this information needs to be delivered: through multiple modes of delivery, not a one-size-fits all approach.

Clear, neutral, and accurate information

A key need identified was clear, neutral, factual information about the Referendum. This was identified as necessary to help manage the overwhelming sense of uncertainty many participants felt about the Referendum, the pressures placed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to educate others about the Referendum, and the desire to be able to support families and communities through the Referendum period.

This information could be used for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to inform themselves about the Referendum. Importantly, it could also serve as a resource to redirect other people to reduce the burden on individuals to provide this education. The proposed intention was that having an independent, 'trusted' source to refer Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or non-Indigenous people that could help alleviate the mental load on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and reduce the risk of re-traumatisation through educating non-Indigenous people about history.

Participants described the need for an information hub that was easily accessible, that could be easily on hand to redirect requests for education and information:

Like if you had general information, for instance if there was some new access on your phone that gave you all the information about The Voice and what's exactly happening. Because I think the definition of what is exactly happening is like if you had an app on your phone or something there or you are getting asked questions here, refer to that. Look yourself, find out for yourself.

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I think a good thing is having educational resources on hand or knowing where they are and just saying, "I don't want to talk about this right now," or even just saying, "Here's where you can go to find more information," and just sort of removing yourself from that conversation is a good one for me.

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It would be really good to have like the resource centre where we can get stuff ... to be able to go somewhere and be like here's a response that I can send, and I don't have to use the mental capacity to shape up, but here's a bunch of responses that can give a balance ... I think go make up your own mind, I'm not here to change people's ... But what would be great is if there was kind of a hub, an online hub that had the information, had the links ... just to be able to go "Here, do the reading, here's some resources."

Participants conveyed that information needs to be trusted as neutral and independent in order for people to be willing to access it. Information coming through the media and social media, in particular, was considered to be biased and skewed; participants conveyed that government sources of information were often not considered impartial, and that the same might be true for some community organisations. A standalone information source was considered necessary.

Yeah, probably not government [host/creator of information content]. But then I don't know that I could say to align it with a community control either. So maybe it's just a standalone.

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I don't think you want it to be associated with the community because then it puts community in more divides ... you don't even want it to come from peak bodies or anything like that because there's again peak bodies verse grassroots.

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our communities, people are now becoming more vocal about which way they're voting, ... they're going to come with certain opinions, and that will remove from it being about the impact on it as mental health rather than, you know, whose particular people that are working in that service and what they feel.

Participants identified that information needs to be clear, in plain English, and 'not government speak' to ensure that it is understandable for a wide audience. One participant said:

Sit there and put down the stuff that is in real big fancy terms – don't dumb it down but just make it straightforward for anybody to take forward and just make it for Black people, because at the end of the day it's – like it's going to affect – like it will affect non-Indigenous people as much as the let them affect themselves, but it don't matter about them at the end of the day. This is our time. This is our choice. Like this is our own movement, so let us do it.

Participants described five key required education components, as outlined below.

[1] [Education about the Referendum and the process of voting](#)

Participants asked for education about the Referendum and the process of voting.

In saying that, they probably should give better education on the referendum that's not government speak, for especially our youth and new voters, you know, 18, 19, 20 [years].

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How can you expect a citizen of a country to participate wholly and knowledgeably in the system of government when they don't understand the system of government, and how to operate within it?

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ultimately if they can actually have information and then that can help influence their decision, that actually implements more positive and influential decisions for us. But I feel like right now the lack of education isn't helping in the long run.

Participants also stated that they required information about what the Referendum was really about, and what it would mean for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and for non-Indigenous

people if the Voice was implemented. For example, participants wanted clarity about how the Voice would affect youth, education, housing, jobs and health.

[2] Education about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history

Participants raised the importance of providing information about the Referendum in context. That is, information needs to include the 'real' history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; participants suggested that this understanding would help with relationship building and bring people together.

I don't think all Australians really know what it means anyway. Even as Aboriginal people – I lived this stuff every day, I don't even – I'm slowly making myself more alert to the idea how it started, where it came from, the history, all of the different challenges and the oppression and dispossession, people like that, early activists ... My theory is this is just another layer. It's just another layer of – whichever way it goes, it's going to have a profound effect on Aboriginal people.

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I think going back to what we said already, having not just for Aboriginal community, a wider community as well. Having information days with the Uluru Statement from the Heart to explain them, but then have the Constitution of 1901, what this entails and what has stated back then, because back then we're only [flora and fauna], unfortunately. We weren't even recognised as people. Well, I believe we are. We're still here, we're still fighting and fighting. But really unpacking that to make the wider community, the non-Aboriginal community, understand why we're trying to do this referendum, why we're trying to do this treaty in relation to the Constitution ... Because the government, for too many years, over the past, since 1788, to now has hidden the truth of us as Aboriginal people.

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And if we get a good understanding of that, then we'll have the non-Aboriginal people walking alongside us to make the change. And we can call it our place of home. It's already there for us as Aboriginal people, but it's welcoming the non-Aboriginal people to understand the history, that really did happen.

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And I think it will help them to have some empathy towards us as a people, to grasp all that instead of, you know, taking on board our angst and, you know, sadness and all this other stuff that comes with it. I think it's important that they have an understanding on where we are, you know?

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I think it's about changing people's perception of who we are and how we can ... and a lot of people have been saying and talking about building those relationships and rapports.

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I think what we're trying to do is captivate the non-Aboriginal people out there to understand our culture and who we are as Aboriginal people back before 1788, to recognise us as human beings to them.

[3] Education about the impacts of the current Referendum process on mental health and wellbeing

Participants also stated that it was important to educate the whole population about the impacts of Referendum-related stress, and the impacts of discussions about the Referendum on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Participants identified that this was an important message for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to hear, to validate what people are experiencing. It was also considered that acknowledgement of the impacts could support normalisation of talking about the concerns, which in turn could help people access support.

And that's whereas well normalising talking about feelings, normalising talking about mental health, and are you okay, all of that kind of stuff within mob because our old people, they're very closed off, and they don't like to talk about the old days. And they don't like to talk about their weaknesses because their weaknesses were exploited.

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our mob too find it hard to find the words to say. And we can say we need help, like mental health, but no one's going to understand exactly what you need because finding the actual words to put it in concept to say yeah, I actually do need help, I'm not feeling the best in certain situations, we can't find the words sometimes. No matter how much we can talk on a good day, but those days we just become blank.

It was also considered critical for non-Indigenous people and governments to acknowledge that these impacts are real and happening. There was the hope that understanding of the impacts might assist in reducing the harms of the discourse around the Referendum.

Awareness. Pump it out in the media about awareness, about the impacts.

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As parents, our kids, our relationships with our partners, our family, just to – I think we need people to have some compassion for what this is like for us, and the fear that comes with it. And the only thing I can pin it to is COVID. Because people were fearful, people were divided. We had restrictions. We didn't have all the information to make decisions, and it feels very similar to that.

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That is the point, like we're actual human beings with feelings. Why are we getting made out that we're not? Yeah, that's the thing. That's what upsets me I think.

[4] Education about how to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples during the Referendum

Participants identified the need to provide education around how to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples during the Referendum period. This included information targeted at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (i.e. better equipping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be able to be able to support each other), and information targeted at non-Indigenous people (i.e. supporting non-Indigenous people to minimise the burden and harms on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples).

One key information source requested was a directory of services. Participants wanted somewhere they could go to identify relevant services, which might include mental health, counselling, wellbeing services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Individuals could use this directory to identify the services they wanted to access themselves, and/or could direct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to this directory if they were in need of support.

There was also a need identified for training for individuals who are providing peer support. While there was concern about not wanting mob to carry the burden of supporting people (further adding to the existing load), it was also identified that in many cases, only other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people could really understand the experience and were in the best position to support.

You can read all the text books, but until you live racism ...

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Just having that mutual understanding I think more than anything. You feel like as if you're opinion's being heard and you're not having to constantly explain yourself to someone, or someone else.

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No one else understands.

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is our AEO [Aboriginal Education Officer], they're the only support that I find in the school ... they're the only space that I have support.

Therefore, there was a need to better equip Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be able to provide this support. This includes through peer-to-peer relationships, within workplaces, and within schools.

But you spend most of your days at work, it's important to be surrounded by safe people, and in a safe environment where you feel supported, and you can have a vent to whoever you need to every now and then, and know that it's going to be met with support and gentleness, rather than the other.

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Even getting all of the AEOs [Aboriginal Education Officers] together, and any Aboriginal staff, in to have just some counselling around how to deal with those things because most of us probably don't, and most of us probably are feeling like we want to help.

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all we want to do is help. To feel conflicted in wanting to help people improve their education, but also knowing that there are going to be two sides, and trying to keep that neutral ground. That's going to be pretty hard for us to

achieve. So, I think having counselling, that support around actually how to manage those conversations would be really helpful. And I think if it is community based, so, like [place] schools get together with the Aboriginal staff, AEOs included, go in, get together, have a talk, have a yarn, share our feelings, so that we're not isolated, and that we've got a plan moving forward, that would be extremely helpful. At the moment, it would just be me, [name] and kids leaning on each other, with not much more support or guidance as to how to move forward in that space.

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They need to know how can they help. And that's that support mechanism there. So they need something else to support them. We need someone to support our youth.

Another support identified was pathways and accountability for calling out racism. This was identified as something non-Indigenous people could educate themselves about, and something that needed to be embedded within workplaces. Participants also mentioned the need for safe, appropriate Employee Assistance Programs within workplaces.

[5] Education around social media literacy

Participants spoke about the need for education around social media literacy, to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to minimise exposure to racist and harmful messages. This was considered particularly important for youth, given their high engagement with social media.

Social media literacy, like knowing how to create a social media platform ... How to block people, how to create a social media feed that makes you happy, how to validate information that you see online, making sure that you're not falling into that clique ...

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But at the same time, while that's in the case, they should be educating the kids on how to use the things like social media and all that properly, not just in a bad or in a negative way.

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Social media's going to be a part of their life for a long time, and we can't just shut it out of the kids lives, as much as we wish to. But kids having more awareness and knowledge on it, especially in the schools, would be a lot easier for them and for the children, parents, and everyone else in between to be able to sort out any frigten problems they have, really.

Participants explained that, with knowledge around social media, it was possible to curate a positive social media environment that is validating and builds an online sense of community. Blocking certain users, and following Black and Indigenous creators was seen to improve experiences engaging with social media.

social media is a tool that you can use for your own good. I don't have to follow things that make me feel bad and I can choose to surround myself with things and people that support me and who I am.

curated social media feeds that fit within my views ... I follow predominantly Black creators and Indigenous people. All my friends are pretty much on the same level as me.

You get to build those networks and you can post things and people get it. It's an online sense of community like when I had my family over for Christmas.

Modes of information delivery

Education would need to be designed and delivered to reach diverse audiences. Participants identified that a one-size-fits all approach would not be adequate in terms of the type of information or the mode of delivery. Participants considered that information needed to be: hosted on a central repository (i.e. website); accessible via phone (i.e. a call line); disseminated broadly through all forms of media ('flooding' media sources); provided through schools; provided through workplaces; and shared through community-based, face-to-face information sessions. Participants also suggested that information could be communicated through various forms including music, poem, and other artistic mediums. Many participants identified the value of having local community members – supported by training – provide education.

Have it easily accessible and it's friendly and it's welcoming for our people. And the language is simple, not trying to use jargons.

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And with an aging population, I think it's important to take an account that most of our elders here don't have computers. So how are they supposed to access that website? And when we are thinking about marketing and advertising, it's okay to say NITV or ABC, but some people here might watch Skype news and mainstream TV and read mainstream news. Is there advertising that can go across all of those with just factual things about where to go for information and who to call to get that. And I know advertising costs money, but it has to go across all channels and it can't just be one specific place that, because not everybody watches those things.

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I think the way that we need to do is it needs to be forums like this – big forums, small forums and debates and we need to provide our community with the questions they should be asking because people are so disengaged with this process that they don't even know what question to ask ... And they are scared of it because they don't understand it.

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Get them off their arse and bring them out and do their consultation with communities. And at the same time, in consulting with our communities will make sure that they're armed with locals to help break that information down and don't forget to take their concerns and worries away with them.

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Training for community people, in community. Get them to be able to get in their own community for the people instead of bringing external agencies in. They come and they do the training and they fund community to go and

promote this and have these conversations. Constant conversation has to be consistent.

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It's more like we run programs and we go out and we service, whereas we can actually get people on ground to service and do their own affairs. Give that ownership and that's what we talk about, I think, is ownership and recognition. They feel that they belong and they're a part of something, a part of the conversation all the way. It's not just for the particular leaders or the people that host that in the region, but it's community-focused. It's about people, the grassroots.

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Using their own radio stations, their community noticeboard. It's just giving it back to the people to run it.

Support for individual, family, and community wellbeing

This theme highlights a range of supports required for individual, family, and community wellbeing during this period. There was an identified need for further investment in and access to counselling, holistic support services, and opportunities and places to come together.

Family and community were identified as key sources of support and strength for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – but extra support for family and community wellbeing was identified as a key need, given the potential risks to family and community cohesion posed by division and conflict.

I found if I had a problem and I was really upset about something, I usually talk to my family. I talk to my uncles, they would tell me what I should do or what I could do ... I didn't fix it in over the long term, but on the short-term basis, down through your family that could actually understand what you were going through.

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It's good to have these conversations even amongst ourselves because it's made us now aware that we need to keep an eye on each other and our families.

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we have strength together that we don't have alone.

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We're all different and we all have different roles ... That's the important thing for us. We've got a whole history of heroes and heroines in our past that need to be celebrated and held up. That's where you get your inspiration from and that's where you get your strength from. You've got a strong family and a proud history. So, you only have to look within that stuff.

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I think one of the biggest things that's contributed to that feeling of knowing what to do is having a strong sense of belonging, a strong sense of belonging

to the community that I live in and also, the community that I've built for myself.

To support wellbeing during the Referendum, participants spoke about three main types of wellbeing supports they needed: counselling and mental health support; holistic, wrap-around support services; and opportunities and safe spaces to come together and connect with community and culture.

Counselling and mental health support

Participants described a lack of available counselling and mental health supports. Existing supports were described inadequate to meet demand, even before any potential added demand during the Referendum period.

we don't have the support services, family support services, disability support services, psychiatric support services to cover us on our best days ... Let alone on our worst.

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But there isn't any support systems out there.

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So I got a phone call, because I lost my mum last year, got a phone call a few months later, "Would you like counselling?" I said, "I need counselling." Because the roll on effect of it. Haven't heard from them. Oh, but they sent me a card to go, oh, your one year anniversaries coming up. I want to screw it up. I'm going to ring them up, I can't email them because there's no email to give it to them, so I was like, shove your thing up your arse, because where were you when I needed you. Yeah, so they'll touch base, oh yeah, okay, but then there's nothing else.

Some participants explained that the support was not available unless physical harm was involved, highlighting a gap in services.

If you've got mental health awareness, you're domestic violence, or anything like that, there's nothing for you to be able to turn to unless you're physically being harmed, and then there's something they can do.

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So until you have actually harmed yourself, harmed someone else, or harmed the community, you're nothing for anyone to be able to care about. That's the hardest part. Before it gets to that stage and helping people find anything to be able to help them, there's really not much.

Many participants voiced that Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) or Aboriginal Medical Services (AMSs) might not be the right fit for addressing concerns related to the Referendum. For some participants, this reflected concern that ACCHOs were overburdened, underfunded, and difficult to access in some cases; there was a perception that ACCHOs did not have time to address mental health-related concerns. For others, the impacts of the Referendum were not seen as a health issue, but more to do with experiences of racism – which they didn't feel ACCHOs were able to address. There was a sense that additional supports were required and that this could not be added to existing loads within ACCHOs: 'And it's not fair to put this on our Aboriginal medical services ... [general agreement] ... They're already squeezed.'

The key type of support frequently identified was counselling by mob – by people with lived experience. Counselling by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was viewed as a safe space where deep conversations could be held to address the real issues, in a context of mutual understanding.

There's not enough funding in general for Blackfellas ... I tried for years just to go talk to somebody. And like it's that whole thing where – how much do you continually go back and ask for help? And then this stuff happens, where it's like, no, I needed help just for basic core things. You [ACCHO] couldn't help with that. Why am I going to sit there and talk to you about my feelings about a referendum at the end of the day? Like that relationship's kind of already severed.

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So I myself have dealt with mental health issues for a number of years. So anxiety, stress, and have been depressed at times, but on this topic, I wouldn't go via [AMS] looking for help. It's not that I don't like my AMS, they do really well, but when it comes to one-on-one mental health, I don't feel as they have the capacity to really hone in and help me with understanding this. I think for me it would be better sitting with people that know a bit more than me, having the opportunity to have a discussion. Then I wouldn't want to be put into a room with a psychiatrist or something to try and explain one more thing that I'd prefer to be on Country. Being able to have robust conversations and really dive deeper into what that is. Like I said, my AMS is not good, but I just couldn't be looking for them for my mental health.

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It's like, as you were saying, actually sitting there and listening to you. Not, okay, I've got another client in 15 minutes, yep, you've got 15 minutes.

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But it's also not a mental health thing. Like you're not going to a health service because it's a mental health thing. It's a racism thing.

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There is no support system I guess for those kind of things ... there is nowhere to go because who is going to stop it [racist comments].

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Like it's not even the right fit or the right – they're not providing a service to us because we're unhealthy or we need a mental health plan or a psychologist, because a psychologist isn't going to understand you if they're – that's why we need more Black psychologists, because you can't just go to a standard psychologist and talk about the impacts of this.

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having that mutual understanding I think more than anything. You feel like as if your opinion's being heard and you're not having to constantly explain yourself to someone, or someone else.

Consistency and long-term support were described as key to positive outcomes, by allowing for the development of trust and rapport. Participants also identified a critical need for the provision of ongoing support for people experiencing long-term and cumulative exposure to stress. Participants flagged that one-off appointments are insufficient, given that worries happen all the time; worries are not one-off. Some participants flagged that support is needed for a broad range of worries, not just Referendum-related concerns in isolation.

it could be an app that just doesn't only cover this, it covers all, anything because you're dealing with the same stuff. You're dealing with prejudice, you're dealing with racism, you're dealing with people's opinions.

Accessibility of supports was a clear concern among participants. Some participants noted a desire for anonymity – for support to come from someone independent so that they could be more open. For example, one participant said, 'Confidentiality is a big thing with some people. They don't want to use services because getting labelled something's wrong.' Participants identified the need for flexible options for accessing support – including phone-based support, app-based supports, and in-person support. Providing a range of options, such as the ability to call in or text in, or arrange a time for a phone call, could help reduce barriers to accessing support. In addition, this enabled control and empowerment of service users in the process.

Can't they bring back Telehealth?

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and you know what, they [Telehealth appointments] actually ran on time. And you got it all out and they ran on time.

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So if you're sick either driving 50 minutes to a hospital, or the ambulance will take at least two to three hours to come out and see you, even though the ambulances are just there. But it's got to come from another place.

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like when COVID happened and we had the 13YARN hotline and stuff, where I think the barriers of going to a service, trying to eliminate some of those is probably really important too

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I don't know much about 13YARN but like if there was more investment in a service people already know they can use, to say we're also here for this can be useful. I mean not everyone has what we have [strong community].

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But for me, it's easier to just go on my phone. I'm not going to go and go to some centre and debrief or even probably ring up. I'm probably not going to do that.

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And people really liked that, that they didn't have to leave their home or, you know, go speak to someone face-to-face or ... Yeah, and it can be private.

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So giving people that full control ... people not feeling judged and feeling like they have control, and they felt really empowered over the process

Another suggestion was to allow the service user to select characteristics of their support person (e.g. gender), and to be able to re-contact the same support person, to assist with developing trust and rapport.

we know how important that relationality and that connection is.

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Building that rapport with the person on the other side of the phone is a big thing.

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giving people choice who they're talking to is useful.

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Because a one-off call ain't going to do anything, is it? ... it's that constant support.

Participants reiterated the need for any services – including a call-line or app – to be run by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Just to add on to that though, you'd want to make sure that the app has actually been run or led by an Aboriginal [person].

Can you ensure that when those services ... we are not just told to go to something that's run by someone else. It needs to be ... Definitely is our mob together

Some ideas that participants had about additional supports for the Referendum included: adding staff to ACCHOs that were specifically there for support relating to the Referendum, opening up options for telehealth (video calls or voice calls), home visits from doctors (Doctor to the door), and enhancing/expanding call line services such as 13YARN. For any of these providers, there was an identified need for specific training about the Referendum, and impacts and support needs linked to the Referendum.

Holistic support services

In addition to counselling support, participants highlighted a need for a broad range of supports, given the potential flow on impacts of Referendum-related stress and racism on family wellbeing, community wellbeing, and potential coping behaviours. Specific service types mentioned included: counselling services; family and relationship support services (e.g. Relationships Australia); support around anger and potential for violence; support for alcohol, tobacco, and other drug issues. One participant described this as a need for 'normal case management stuff'. There was an identified need to ensure effective referral pathways to these services (including through a call line/app or a directory of services, and awareness among service providers), and to ensure that these services had adequate capacity.

Connecting with community and culture

Participants highlighted connection with community and culture as key supports through the Referendum period.

we talked about the way that we did things culturally, how simple cultural wellbeing is, and that's just literally togetherness – it's going on these weekend camps. It's just having space to have a yarn and have a cuppa and talk about something. It's supporting, there are so many ways that we can give holistic wellbeing support. It doesn't cost a lot of money. It doesn't cost a lot of resources. It's not too complex. It's literally putting people in a room together and getting our kids out to camp where they can just be together. I think that's the last time I talked about mental health and wellbeing in this process. The connectivity and our togetherness is what's the key to support.

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I think I will go out bush soon in my car, tent on wheels. I go away from people. Stops me going crazy, I get away from all the rubbish.

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We need the elders and people stop, like starting with the young ones, is get back on Country and practice culture, we've always been doing. You know, get away from the technology and get back to basics.

Participants identified the value of yarning, as a form of peer support and debriefing. There was a need for safe spaces and opportunities for people to come together to yarn. Local Aboriginal Land Councils, youth organisations, men's and women's groups, Elders groups, and cultural and on-Country programs, churches, and social and emotional wellbeing groups were mentioned as safe places people could come together.

Yes, I think sometimes there needs to be [yarning groups] – especially in spaces like in times like this, spaces where you don't have to talk about it, where you just come together and be together. And the gathering as mob and not talking about it is powerful in itself.

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Yes, just sit around with mob and paint or weave or do something completely unrelated and it's just about being present with the other mob. It's always really good.

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where is my space, where do I go? I think that's the most important thing. Social media is great but it's not the same as having those physical spaces. It's not the same as having conversations like these and the ones you have with your mates. I think that's always good. And having completely separate spaces and rest is resistance, kind of thing.

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There needs to be safe space. We have put up with it all our lives and we need to be able to have our community safe and our communities honoured.

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When we speak about mental health here, I think that this place here [local Land Council] is a vital place for our community and others we mentioned. There's about 25 Elders, is that about right? About 25 of us Elders in our community, and we just love spending time here because when the young

people are here, man, it's great to see you Elders here with us today. That's a response that we get. So it works both ways, not only for the elderly people to be here, but it's for the younger generation to want to sit down and yarn and tell stories and all these ... And this is the real place where it could help the mental health to sit down and yarn and have our own seminars and meet together as the Elders and talk about different things. So this place here is vital to this community here.

Minimising misinformation and racism in the media

This theme highlights the need for measures to reduce misinformation and to reduce the impacts of exposure to racism in the media. Participants identified a need for processes to 'fact check' information on social and other media, redirecting to verified information sources, and to implement and enforce trauma-informed guidelines for media reporting.

Easily accessible, verified information about the Referendum would also support the need to minimise misinformation and racism in the media. Participants suggested that measures used to remove misinformation during COVID-19 could be used for the Referendum too:

They should be doing that with this too because that protects us from those conversations.

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Yes, they need some protections in place for us, particularly on social media.

This could involve flagging misinformation on social media and redirecting to the verified information sources.

Participants also called for media guidelines for reporting on the Referendum, acknowledging that there needed to be measures in place to enforce use of these guidelines. It was suggested that this should incorporate trauma-informed reporting guidelines.

Findings for specific groups

Youth

Participants raised particular concerns around mental health for youth, identifying a need for additional supports. This included concern for children in households that might be affected by conflict.

Our kids are having big problems now, they are getting into trouble, no one is helping them.

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But they [children] are still having troubles. They have a lot of mental troubles, but there isn't much help. They get told they are trouble makers and to go away. That doesn't help them.

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the younger generations, they're the ones that are going to struggle, like with the mental health side.

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Yeah I agree and I also think that we have a responsibility within our own families, within our own kinship that we need to be empowering our younger kids ... they have quite a strong voice. We are raising our grandchildren to have a strong voice, and I think we need to share that to our wider community, our wider family networks, our young fellas you have a voice here you have to learn how to use it because it's important.

Social media was identified as a key contributor to stress for youth: 'Oh, it's hard though, because the young ones at the moment, when you look, that phone is just an attachment/extension of their body. They've always got it.' Accordingly, education around social media literacy was viewed as particularly important for youth (see [5] *Education around social media literacy*).

Focus group participants in the Torres Strait

While there were broad similarities between the concerns raised by focus group participants in the Torres Strait and participants on the 'mainland', there were unique experiences specific to the Torres Strait context.

In addition to general uncertainty about the Referendum process, Torres Strait Islander participants expressed uncertainty about how the Torres Strait was included in the process. This suggests there is an additional information gap.

And we've still got media stuff that's going on, the news and that. I think the one or two, the thinking behind it is it's for the mainland, that it's not going to really affect us up here. Because there are not a lot of talks around it or [feedback].

Participants in the Torres Strait Islands also described a different experience of racism, noting that, as the majority group on the Islands, they felt that there was less direct racism experienced. Torres Strait Islander peoples living on the mainland, if they are a minority in their community, were seen as more likely to experience racism as a result of the Referendum. However, participants in the Torres Strait Islander focus groups still voiced concern about the likelihood of increasing racism exposure as the Referendum get closer.

I think the concern was around ... family members living down south [mainland] so external south, the ones living down south and the kids going to school and we have to – walking around in racism.

And people down south, they're more aware of what it is with the Referendum with the Voice. They can have the conversation or have that discussion and it's thrown in their face. Sometimes, it's just best to walk away because you can't talk to an idiot.

Participants in the Torres Strait focus groups proposed holding frequent yarning circles, particularly on the outer Islands. This was described as speaking 'on the mat', and that these should be led by Traditional Owners, Land Councils, or peak community organisations.

Strengths and limitations

This project is not about the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on the Referendum, and did not collect or analyse any data about voting intentions, and did not draw any conclusions about the Referendum outcome.

The data we present is based on participants' interpretations of their own lived experience. Participants demonstrated openness and trust in sharing their stories with us, which has brought strength and meaning to the report. The robustness of findings is reinforced by the reoccurring nature of themes between participants and across focus groups. However, we note that the data presented are not intended to provide evidence of any causal impacts.

We acknowledge that the conduct of the focus groups, the selection of participants quotes for inclusion, and the interpretations of participants' stories are shaped by project team members' worldviews and positionality. The project team has attempted to privilege participants' voices, and to minimise over-interpretation in the reporting and grouping of participants' statements.

The aim in selecting focus group sites and participants was to support diversity of participants, including with respect to geography, age, gender, and identification as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. However, our participant sample is not intended to represent all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, or to represent the complete diversity of views and experienced by the population.

Focus groups were held early in 2023 to maximise the ability to inform action during the Referendum period; it is possible that views and experiences have changed throughout the Referendum period.

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