



**A submission to the targeted call for
research (TCR) for the NHMRC research
priorities in Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander health**

**THE NATIONAL HEALTH AND MEDICAL RESEARCH COUNCIL
(NHMRC)**

**Submission of the Community Restorative
Centre (CRC)**

30th September 2025



1. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

CRC acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we work and live. We recognise their continuing connection to land, water, and community. The offices of CRC stand on the lands of the Gadigal, Wangal, Bidjigal, Wiljkali, Baarkintji, Darug, Wiradjuri, Dharawal, Awabakal, and Worimi peoples. We recognise their continuing connection to land, water, and community, and pay respects to Elders, past and present.

The overrepresentation of Indigenous people in the criminal legal system¹ across this continent is a national shame. We recognise the harm caused by these systems and the tireless advocacy of Indigenous people to reduce the criminalisation of their communities. Ultimately, incarceration is not part of Indigenous cultures, and Indigenous people have had, and continue to have, systems of accountability outside of the colonial carceral system.

2. ACKNOWLEDGING PARLIAMENT AS PART OF COLONISATION

The Community Restorative Centre acknowledges that the establishment of Parliament is inseparable from the histories and structures of colonisation, and that the very processes underlying this inquiry reflect those colonial legacies. By engaging with this submission procedure, we remain mindful of how these frameworks may perpetuate inequitable power relations. Consequently, we approach this process with a critical awareness of its colonial

¹ We use the term ‘criminal legal system’, as opposed to ‘criminal justice system’ to reflect that the ‘justice system’ in Australia has been imposed on First Nations communities without their consent through settler colonialism. The term ‘criminal legal system’ also highlights the way the system-including police, courts and prisons- frequently fail to deliver justice. These failures are part of a broader, ongoing problem. This is evident in the fact that First Nations people in Australia have the highest imprisonment rate in the world, are racially targeted by police, and experience a lack of accountability from the ‘justice system’ when First Nations people die in custody. More broadly, the system criminalises people experiencing homelessness, poverty, mental illness, disability, alcohol and other drug dependency and trauma, and perpetuates cycles of marginalisation and disadvantage. In this way, the system does not deliver ‘just’ outcomes for individuals or communities. By using ‘criminal legal system’, we acknowledge the harmful effects of colonial systems and seek to validate people’s lived experiences. Changing language is one part of our effort to advocate for systems that are ‘just’ for all communities.



origins, striving to foster practices that centre Indigenous rights, experiences, and voices as we pursue meaningful healing.

Indigenous communities have championed alternative ways of knowing, being, and doing that often diverge from the structures and protocols underpinning current parliamentary processes. Central to these practices is yarning, a relational and community-embedded method of knowledge sharing that inherently challenges Western frameworks of governance and inquiry. Recognising the legitimacy and transformative potential of these Indigenous methodologies is essential for fostering meaningful and equitable engagement in all legislative and policy spaces.

3. ABOUT COMMUNITY RESTORATIVE CENTRE

Community Restorative Centre (CRC) is the lead NGO in New South Wales (NSW) providing specialist support to people affected by the criminal legal system, with a particular emphasis on the provision of post-release and reintegration programs for people with multiple and intersecting needs. Recognising First Nations communities are overrepresented in the prison system, CRC supports a large number of First Nations community members in our everyday work.

CRC has over 70 years of specialist experience supporting people involved with prison systems. All CRC programs aim to reduce recidivism, break entrenched cycles of criminal legal system involvement, and build pathways out of the criminal legal system. CRC works holistically to do this, addressing issues such as homelessness, drug and alcohol use, social isolation, physical and mental health, disability, employment, education, family relationships, financial hardship, and histories of trauma.

4. INTRODUCTION

The brief provided for this submission was as follows:

“NHMRC invites stakeholders and members of the public to submit research priorities in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, which may form the basis of a Targeted Call for Research (TCR).



A TCR is a one-time solicitation for grant applications to address a specific health issue. It is intended to stimulate or advance research in a particular area of health and medical science that will benefit the health of Australians. Information must be provided to substantiate the nominated priority and how the research could contribute to improved health outcomes.

Proposed TCRs must:

- Address a significant research knowledge gap or unmet need for which there is the potential to greatly advance our understanding of the issue; and/or
- Link to Australian Government Priorities, such as the Closing the Gap government strategy.

Topics that have recently been the subject of an NHMRC or Medical Research Future Fund grant opportunity are less likely to be funded through this process.

NHMRC's commitments

The NHMRC Corporate Plan 2024-25 identifies Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health as one of our four Health Priorities. NHMRC supports research that will provide better health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Furthermore, NHMRC is committed to allocating at least 5% of the Medical Research Endowment Account to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research and has set an additional target of 3.4% of grants led by Chief Investigators A of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent.

NHMRC's work has been guided by a strategic framework set out in Road Maps 1, 2 and 3 (current version [Road Map 3: A Strategic Framework for Improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Through Research \(2018\)](#)).

NHMRC has funded six previous research calls in response to public calls like this, one in 2016 and 2022."

The submission provided in response to the brief was through a 10 question survey form on the NHMRC website. The first 5 questions asked were about who wrote the submission, the answers to the following 5 questions are provided below.

This submission provides a numbered style of referencing only due to the limited character count on the survey form. Furthermore, the character count limited the depth of further exploration of this important topic and precluded the inclusion of any lived experience quotes or case studies.

CRC would like to acknowledge the hard work of all the authors, researchers and people with lived experience who worked on the 10 listed references for this submission as well as all the other research that has been conducted in this area that wasn't referenced. Particularly Synapse for their ADNIP report (10.) that does an excellent job at summarising and identifying a range of challenges and issues faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability and making solid recommendations, whilst also calling for more targeted research. Synapse also drew attention to the need for culturally validated and disability identification tools.

The work of those at UNSW (6.,7.) and the Human Rights Watch (9.) should also be highlighted as these reports shed light on the abuses and mistreatment of people living with disability in NSW prisons.



5. RESPONSES TO THE TERMS OF REFERENCE (TOR)

6. What is the research priority (a significant research knowledge gap or unmet need) you are nominating? How would a TCR (targeted call for research) in this area greatly advance our understanding of this issue? (1000 characters)

This submission calls for a TCR to address the significant gap in our understanding of the needs and experiences of First Nations people who are incarcerated in Australian prisons and living with disability, as well as the ways in which we can better support this cohort of people. Research should consider how we can better support people with disability whilst they are incarcerated, post-incarceration to reintegrate back into community and preventative programs that aim at reducing incarceration of people with disability. This research should be First Nations led and codesigned with people who are living with disability and have a lived experience of incarceration.

This is of great concern for First Nations health due to the overrepresentation of First Nations people incarcerated nationwide. First Nations people accounted for 37% of people in custody across Australia in the first quarter of 2025 (1.ABS, 2025), despite only representing 3.8% of the Australian population (2.ABS, 2021).

7. What are the relevant Australian Government priorities, and/or Ministerially-agreed State and Territory health research priorities linked to your nominated priority? (1000 characters)

Target 10 (3.) of the Closing The Gap framework aims to reduce the rate of First Nations people held in incarceration by 15% by 2031. However, despite this target the incarceration of First Nations people has only increased, and this target is not on track to be met. In order to meet this target, it would be beneficial for the government to consider how the intersection of incarceration and poor treatment of people with disabilities is driving higher number of First Nations people to be incarcerated.

The Australian Law Reform Commission has identified cognitive and other disabilities as one of the social determinants of incarceration.

Australia also has an obligation under article 24 (4.) of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) as stated “Indigenous individuals have an equal right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. States shall take the necessary steps with a view to achieving progressively the full realization of this right.”

8. How would a TCR in this area contribute to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and improve health outcomes for the individual and/or community? (1000 characters)

25.3% of First Nations people are living with a disability (5.ABS, 2022). Furthermore, The Australian Centre for Disability Law estimated in 2020 that 95% of First Nations people



charged with criminal offences who appear in court have an intellectual disability, a cognitive impairment or a mental illness, which shows how prevalent and important this research is to First Nations communities.

Identifying the current needs and experiences of First Nations people living with disability and incarcerated in Australian prisons and identifying better ways to support them through a TCR would have direct benefits on the emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing of this cohort. It would also have flow-on effects to the friends and family of this cohort, who are often worried about the safety of their loved ones who are incarcerated and living with disability.

A 2024 report (6.) by UNSW reveals that “people with disability are subjected to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment in incarceration.”

9. How will the TCR reduce the burden of disease on the health system and Australian economy? (1000 characters)

A 2022 report (7.) by UNSW suggests that when people with disability don't get the support they need, they are more likely to reoffend. Better support for people living with disability in Australian prisons would lead to lower rates of recidivism, and help the Government to achieve its Closing The Gap target to reduce the overrepresentation of First Nations people incarcerated.

By investing in preventative and diversionary programs that aim to keep First Nations people living with disability out of prison, the cost savings benefit to the Government by a reduced number of incarcerated people would be substantial. According to Justice Reform Initiative, urgent reform is required as “total net operating and capital costs for Australian prisons rose to \$6.8 billion per year, up 30% from 2019-2020” (8.)

Whilst there is mounting evidence showing First Nations people with disability are mistreated in Australian prisons, there's little research into the ways in which this issue can be resolved.

10. Are there any reports or findings that support your nomination for the suggested topic? (1000 characters)

A 2018 report (9.) by the Human Rights Watch recommended that Australia should “Find out what life is like for all people with disabilities in prison. For example, find out how many people in prison have a disability and what support they need.”

A 2022 report (10.) by Synapse (Australia's Brain Injury Organisation) Assessing the Disability Needs of Indigenous Prisoners (ADNIP) Report made key findings that: “There is a general lack of research into disability identification tools and processes in prisons (both for Indigenous and non-Indigenous prisoners), and no evidence was found that cultural



relevance of assessment tools is considered in prison, which is exacerbated by the general lack of culturally validated tools.”

For a full list of references pertaining to this submission please see this document

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vRehjxMuKzKNmvPBNwHF6OPZ6F0LR1Ju2fshARH6veRa6-cZdatFVXyyIcQMG8AGmXMSnV9FJQD3-4N/pub>

6. REFERENCES

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2. Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples>
3. Closing the Gap, target 10 Closing the Gap targets and outcomes <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/targets>
4. United Nations Declaration on The Rights of Indigenous People, signed by Australia in 2009 https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf
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7. University of New South Wales, 2022 Incarcerated people with disability don't get the support they need – that makes them more likely to reoffend <https://www.unsw.edu.au/newsroom/news/2022/07/incarcerated-people-with-disability-dont-get-the-support-they-ne>
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