



AUSTRALIA COUNCIL FOR THE ARTS

SUBMISSION

Inquiry into Mental Health and Suicide Prevention

April 2021

Dear Secretary

The Australia Council is pleased to contribute to the Select Committee’s inquiry into mental health and suicide prevention. We welcome the examination of findings from strategic reviews of the mental health system in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and 2019 bushfires.

As the Australian Government’s arts funding and advisory body, we want all Australians to benefit from the social, cultural, and economic value of arts and creativity, including mental health benefits.

There is an emerging body of evidence – both in Australia and internationally – of the power of arts and creativity to address mental health challenges and prevent suicide. Engagement with arts and creativity promotes wellbeing in communities, builds resilience and can be used in treatment and recovery across the population.

For First Nations people, engagement with arts and culture can act as a protective factor against self-harm and suicide, especially for young people.

Our submission outlines:

- **the evidence base** for the role and benefits of arts and creativity
- **opportunities** for arts and creativity in mental health and suicide prevention
- **case studies** on impacts of arts and cultural activities in a First Nations context and among veterans.

Harnessing the potential of arts and creativity to support mental health and prevent suicide directly addresses the Productivity Commission’s recommendations to create a person-centred mental health system, integrated with other services to promote recovery.¹ It also aligns to the Prime Minister’s recent statement that we need to go beyond the health system to address the challenges of mental health and suicide prevention.²

There are many examples of arts and cultural programs and initiatives that deliver health benefits for individuals and communities. There are opportunities to build on these benefits at a time when the cultural and creative industries have demonstrated their value in supporting, connecting, and uplifting Australians through challenging events.

We continue to deliver work in this area. Later in 2021, we will convene a summit exploring the role of arts and creativity in supporting mental health and the potential for creative approaches to address government priorities.

¹ Recommendation 4, Productivity Commission 2020, [Mental Health, Inquiry Report](#). See also recommendations 5, 7, 15, 20, 21 and 22.

² Clun R 2020, “[“Big challenge”: Mental health reform needs to go beyond health system, Prime Minister says,](#)’ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 November 2020.

While our submission focusses on the wider community benefits of arts and creativity, it is also important to acknowledge the deep impact of COVID-19 on the wellbeing of Australia's artists and creative workers whose practice and employment have been significantly disrupted by the pandemic. It is crucial that we continue to support them so that all Australians can experience the benefits of arts and creativity.

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THE ROLE OF ARTS AND CREATIVITY IN MENTAL HEALTH AND SUICIDE PREVENTION

Arts and creativity have an increasingly important role to play in improving Australians' mental health. They make us happier, healthier, and more connected to one another.

Australians in their droves turned to creativity to get them through the recent lockdowns, including watching content, streaming podcasts, reading, creation and artplay for children. Supporting their wellbeing has been a key motivator for audiences participating in online arts and cultural activities during COVID-19, and audiences who engaged in online activities also report achieving a sense of connection during the pandemic.³ Australians have rediscovered how much arts and creativity help us connect and share with one another and stay mentally healthy.

The things we all need for healthy recovery – engagement in active life, autonomy, social identity, a positive sense of self, meaning and hope – are all embedded in arts and cultural participation. They are also the things that will drive our confidence and economic recovery.

An emerging and significant evidence base demonstrates the value of arts and creativity in supporting positive mental health, including:

- improving connection and wellbeing
- encouraging emotional resilience
- reducing stigma associated with mental health conditions and their treatment
- improving mental health outcomes for First Nations people
- supporting community and personal recovery following crises and traumatic events.

There is a wealth of Australian and international research about the benefits of arts and creativity to health and wellbeing

Arts and cultural activities have been shown to improve quality of life in a myriad of ways, including: increasing mental wellbeing;⁴ addressing loneliness, mental health and ageing;⁵ decreasing anxiety and depression; increasing wellbeing and social inclusion;⁶ positive wellbeing impacts for young people;⁷ and treating PTSD and helping communities recover from trauma.⁸

³ Patternmakers 2020, '[Fact Sheet: Online engagement](#),' COVID-19 Audience Outlook Monitor.

⁴ Davies et al. 2015, '[The art of being mentally healthy: a study to quantify the relationship between recreational arts engagement and mental well-being in the general population](#).' BMC Public Health (16)15.

⁵ All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts 2017, '[Health and Wellbeing Inquiry Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing](#).'

⁶ First reported in: Slawson N 2017, '[It's time to recognise the contribution arts can make to health and wellbeing](#),' The Guardian, 11 October 2017.

⁷ Patternmakers 2017, '[ATYP Impact Evaluation](#).'

⁸ Baker et al. 2017, '[A systematic review of the efficacy of creative arts therapies in the treatment of adults with PTSD](#),' Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy, 10(6), 643–651, 2018.

The creative arts and health sectors have significant and growing connections, covering primary care, acute and chronic hospital care, rehabilitation, respite care and general wellbeing. Techniques are used across art practice, including visual arts, music, dance and drama.⁹

Arts and creativity can also save future expenditure across health services and social care. In the UK, doctors are literally prescribing arts and cultural experiences, providing up to £11 return on investment for every £1 invested, as well as employment and income for artists.¹⁰

[A review of evidence by the World Health Organisation](#) (WHO) identified a significant role for arts and creativity in the management and treatment of illness, including helping people experiencing mental illness. The research highlights that some arts interventions not only produce good results but can also be more cost-effective than more standard biomedical treatments; combine multiple health-promoting factors; and offer a route to engage minority and hard-to-reach groups.¹¹

The WHO report also identified how the arts can provide a holistic approach to health conditions that are often treated as solely physical: 'here, the arts hold promise in tackling difficult or complex problems for which there are not currently adequate solutions.'¹²

Australians increasingly recognise the value of arts and creativity to our health and wellbeing. The study [Creating our Future: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey](#) (2020) shows that the proportion of Australians who agree that arts and creativity have a 'big' or 'very big' impact on our sense of wellbeing and happiness increased 11 percentage points between 2016 and 2019 (up to 56%), as did the proportion of Australians who agree the arts help us deal with stress, anxiety or depression (also up to 56%).¹³

Engagement with arts and culture supports First Nations wellbeing

Analysis of the ABS National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey for [Living Culture: First Nations arts participation and wellbeing](#) (2017) shows First Nations art and cultural engagement supports empowerment, community connectedness and wellbeing among First Nations people in Australia.¹⁴ Culture provides foundations, resilience and strength and is the glue that holds communities together.

⁹ For example, see Putland C 2012, *Arts and Health – A guide to the evidence*, Background document prepared for the Institute for Creative Health Australia; Fenner P, Rumbold B, Rumbold J, Robinson P, Harpur S 2012, Is there compelling evidence for using the arts in healthcare? Health policy evidence brief, Deeble Institute, Australian Healthcare and Hospitals' Association; and the National Arts and Health Framework 2014, Commonwealth Government, available at www.coaghealthcouncil.gov.au

¹⁰ All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts 2017, [Health and Wellbeing Inquiry Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing](#).

¹¹ Fancourt D and Finn S 2019, [What is the Evidence on the Role of the Arts in Improving Health and Wellbeing? A Scoping Review](#), Health Evidence Network synthesis report 67, World Health Organization.

¹² Fancourt D and Finn S 2019, [What is the Evidence on the Role of the Arts in Improving Health and Wellbeing? A Scoping Review](#), Health Evidence Network synthesis report 67, World Health Organization, pp. 52-53.

¹³ Australia Council 2020, [Creating Our Future: Results from the National Arts Participation Survey](#).

¹⁴ Australia Council 2017, [Living Culture: First Nations arts participation and wellbeing](#).

Fostering a secure sense of cultural identity is a powerful protective factor against self-harm for young First Nations people¹⁵ and helps First Nations children and young people to navigate racism.¹⁶ Alarming, First Nations children and young people represent 28% of recorded suicide deaths of children and young people, despite comprising only 3% of Australia's population. This overrepresentation is even more alarming among children aged 13 years and under.¹⁷

[The Elders' Report into Preventing Indigenous Self-Harm and Youth Suicide](#) (2014) highlighted strong agreement among Elders and community representatives about the role that loss of cultural connection plays in making young people vulnerable to self-harm, and the role culture can play in healing and protecting young people.¹⁸ In introducing the report, Professor Pat Dudgeon, the Co-chair of the Aboriginal Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Advisory Group and National Mental Health Commissioner stated that: 'Culture has become life-giving medicine for our people, closing the wounds of the past and standing us strong to face the future.'¹⁹

[Learning from the Message Stick](#) reported on the 2016 Inquiry into Aboriginal Youth Suicide in Remote Areas – initiated following the suicide of a ten year old girl in the Kimberley. The Inquiry found that previous reports and inquiries had made recommendations to address the suicide crisis in remote Western Australian communities through cultural renewal and empowerment – primarily through First Nation-led culturally based programs – but that the importance of culturally based programs continues to be overlooked.²⁰ The report states that governments have failed to act on recommendations calling for culturally based solutions.²¹

In Australia, 40% of the health gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people can be attributed to social and cultural determinants. A proposed antidote to this is 'the adoption of a whole-of-life view that encompasses regeneration and renewal, health and wellbeing, and an acknowledgment of the vitality that culture provides Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.'²²

¹⁵ Dudgeon P, Cox K, D'Anna D, Dunkley C, Hams K, Kelly K, Scrine C & Walker R 2012, [Hear Our Voices: Community consultations for the development of an empowerment, healing and leadership program for Aboriginal people living in the Kimberly](#), WA, Telethon Institute of Child Health Research WA.

¹⁶ Department of Education and Early childhood Development 2010, [The State of Victoria's Children 2009: Aboriginal children and young people in Victoria](#), State Government of Victoria, Melbourne.

¹⁷ Education and Health Standing Committee 2016, [Learning from the Message Stick: The Report of the Inquiry into Aboriginal Youth Suicide in Remote Areas](#), Legislative Assembly Parliament of WA, Report No.11, Nov 2016, p.i.

¹⁸ People Culture Environment 2014, [The Elders' Report into Preventing Indigenous Self-Harm and Youth Suicide](#), p.8.

¹⁹ As above, p.6.

²⁰ Education and Health Standing Committee 2016, [Learning from the Message Stick: The Report of the Inquiry into Aboriginal Youth Suicide in Remote Areas](#), Legislative Assembly Parliament of WA, Report No.11, Nov 2016, p.2.

²¹ As above, p.i.

²² Lowitja Institute 2020, ['...Country Can't Hear English...'](#) A Guide supporting the implementation of cultural determinants of health and wellbeing with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, p. 5.

The evidence is clear that First Nations arts and cultural participation can support:

- the development of strong and resilient First Nations children
- improved school attendance and engagement
- higher levels of educational attainment
- improved physical and mental health
- greater social inclusion and cohesion
- more employment, economic opportunities and meaningful work
- safer communities with reductions in crime and improved rehabilitation
- the prevention of suicide
- empowerment, community connectedness and wellbeing.²³

During the trauma, anxiety and distress caused by the early days of COVID-19, the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Cultural Centre (KALACC) stated: 'now more than ever communities need culturally based wellbeing.'²⁴

Arts and creativity can address government priorities

Investment in arts and creativity can support Australia's recovery from events such as the 2019 bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as contributing to long term mental health and wellbeing across our nation. Commonwealth, state and territory governments are investing in mental health as part of the COVID-19 response.

'Cultures and languages are strong, supported and flourishing' is a priority outcome of the new Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap.²⁵

Mental health is a priority area of the Creative Economy Taskforce established by the Minister for the Arts as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Australia Council CEO Adrian Collette is a member of the Creative Economy Taskforce. In mid-2021, the Australia Council will convene a summit exploring the role of arts and creativity in supporting mental

²³ See pages 13–18 of the [Australia Council submission to the Closing the Gap Refresh](#). Key references include: Australia Council 2017, *Living Culture: First Nations arts participation and wellbeing*. Dudgeon P et al. 2012, *Hear Our Voices: Community consultations for the development of an empowerment, healing and leadership program for Aboriginal people living in the Kimberly, WA*, Telethon Institute of Child Health Research WA. Ware V 2014, *Supporting Healthy communities Through Arts Programs*, AIHW. Office for the Arts 2012, *Culture and Closing the Gap*, Commonwealth of Australia. ABS 2011, *Speaking an Indigenous language linked to youth wellbeing*, (Cat. No. 4725.0). Dockery AM 2011, 'Traditional Culture and the Wellbeing of Indigenous Australians: An analysis of the 2008 NATS ISS,' in *Social Science Perspectives on the 2008 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey*, 11–12 April 2011, CAEPR, ANU, Canberra.

²⁴ Australia Council 2020, [Impacts of Covid-19 on First Nations Arts and Culture](#).

²⁵ Target 16. The National Agreement on Closing the Gap (August 2020) is a formal agreement between Commonwealth, state and territory governments, the National Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations, and the Australian Local Government Association.

health and the potential for creative approaches to address government priorities. It will be a collaboration with partners across the university and mental health sectors. The summit will draw on the latest research and practice to highlight opportunities for new investment, and approaches that can be delivered through pilot programs, collaborations or partnerships.

OPPORTUNITIES

- Leverage the Australia Council’s mental health and wellbeing summit to identify opportunities for arts and creativity in mental health and suicide prevention strategies.
- Invest in targeted arts and cultural activities that connect communities, support resilience and directly address mental health challenges.
- Increase mental health benefits by scaling up existing programs and strategies that support wellbeing through arts and creativity.
- Prioritise investment in First Nations-led arts and cultural activities that support wellbeing, and culturally based solutions to suicide prevention.
- Recognise the value of outdoor festivals and activities for meaningful and safe community building post-COVID.
- Incorporate arts and creativity in public health campaigns or messages, such as Arts Council England’s ‘Be creative, be well’ message,²⁶ or a ‘Find 15’ campaign about arts and creativity for wellbeing.
- Trial arts and cultural activities on prescription, which is providing a strong return on investment in the UK.
- Integrate arts and creativity within a whole of government approach to mental health and wellbeing and recovery from the pandemic.

²⁶ Ings R, Crane N and Cameron M 2012, [*Be Creative, Be Well: Arts, wellbeing and local communities: An evaluation*](#), Arts Council England.

CASE STUDIES

Strengthening cultural identity and resilience – helping protect against suicide in the Kimberley

The Kimberley has Australia’s highest rates of suicide, and the tragic death of a child by suicide is an all too frequent reality.²⁷ Directors at the Kimberly Aboriginal Law and Cultural Centre (KALACC) have endorsed cultural solutions for healing their communities’ past trauma and building a future for their young people.²⁸

‘To heal our people, we must heal our families. To heal our families, we must heal our communities. Culture is the key.’²⁹



Image: Culture camp participants.
Credit: KALACC
Bunuba Yirimbirri
Junba Project –
Nulungu Evaluation
Key Findings
presentation.

[The Australia Council’s Chosen program](#) invested \$40,000 in KALACC to deliver intergenerational culture camps with four communities between 2016 and 2017. The camps brought together Elders, emerging leaders (middle-aged men and women), young people and children. Together they explored cultural traditions, building cultural identity and resilience.

The camps engaged youth through positive reinforcement of their capacity to become cultural and community leaders, resulting in their enthusiastic participation in the Mowanjum festival. The camps have also resulted in positive shifts in family relationships and community governance; strengthening the social fabric of communities and promoting positive social norms (as determined by the community).

²⁷ Education and Health Standing Committee 2016, [Learning from the Message Stick: The Report of the Inquiry into Aboriginal Youth Suicide in Remote Areas](#), Legislative Assembly Parliament of WA, Report No.11, Nov 2016, p.i.

²⁸ KALACC, *Cultural Solutions: Shared Pathways for Engagement in the Kimberley*, Position Paper–Sept 2017.

²⁹ KALACC Director’s Statement, p.6 of above reference.

‘There is a desperate need to build resilience of young people in the Kimberley. Culture camps, such as those supported by this Chosen grant, are one vital ingredient in building and fostering pride and developing awareness of one’s cultural identity.’³⁰

The Australia Council’s Chosen program is an example of a culturally based program and self-determination in program design and delivery. Chosen empowers First Nations communities to take control and plan for how they will nurture younger people from their community in arts and/or culture. The unmet demand for culturally based programs is immense, as is their potential to address Indigenous disadvantage through a strengths-based approach.

Theatre workshops transforming lives by addressing trauma among veterans

Theatre projects can provide a safe and supportive space in which the stigma of mental health can be addressed among veterans.³¹ In 2014, the Australian Defence Force and Sydney Theatre Company collaborated on *The Long Way Home*, a play created from firsthand accounts of defence force members’ experiences. *The Long Way Home* toured Australia, featuring military personnel recovering from physical and psychological injuries, performing alongside professional actors.

Building on the impact of the play, the Australian Defence Force established an arts-based program ([ADF Arts for Recovery, Resilience, Teamwork and Skills – ARRTS](#)) to assist wounded, injured or ill ADF service personnel. Evaluations of the first two ARRTS programs reported significant wellbeing benefits for participants, including improved self-esteem social functioning levels and a new sense of purpose.³² **Anecdotal evidence shows these kinds of programs literally save lives with service personnel reporting they would have committed suicide had it not been for their understanding and use of the creative arts in their recovery.**³³

Theatre for Change is a new South Australian program that supports returned armed service veterans and emergency service personnel to cope with their experiences through theatre workshops with lived experience peers. The program was held in late 2019 at the Repat Health Site in Adelaide, led by two of the state’s most experienced performers, Jo Stone and Paulo Castro.

The workshops targeted veterans no longer able to work in their chosen field due to injury or illness or those experiencing isolation, depression and anxiety. The program encourages

³⁰ Nulungu Research Institute of the University of Notre Dame Australia 2017, *Interim Nulungu Report*, cited in KALACC acquittal report.

³¹ ‘[The difficult return: The arts and social health of returning military personnel](#)’, *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, Volume 62, February 2019, Pages 61–67

³² ADF Arts for Recovery, Resilience, Teamwork and Skills’, [Department of Defence, Annual Report 2015–16](#)

³³ Ian Drayton, Churchill Fellow, Deputy Director of Innovation and Business Development at the University of Canberra and former serving member of the Australian Defence Force in [Australia Council webinar Creating Our Future: Spotlight on health and wellbeing](#), 7 October 2020.

creative expression within a safe and supported environment with the aim of increasing social connectedness, fostering an interest in theatre and improving and transforming lives.

Theatre for Change is an initiative of the State Theatre Company South Australia and The Road Home, a veterans and emergency services charity of The Hospital Research Foundation, with support from the SA Health Office for Ageing Well.

These programs demonstrate the opportunity, value and impact of cross-portfolio investment in arts and creativity.

APPENDIX A: ABOUT THE AUSTRALIA COUNCIL

The Australia Council is the Australian Government's principal arts funding and advisory body. We champion and invest in Australian arts and creativity. We support all facets of the creative process and are committed to ensuring all Australians can experience the benefits of arts and creativity and feel part of the cultural life of this nation.

For over half a century, the Australia Council has invested in activity that directly and powerfully contributes to Australia's cultural and creative industries. Australia's arts and creativity are among our nation's most powerful assets, delivering substantial public value across portfolios. Investing in the cultural and creative industries is investing in the economic, social and cultural success of our nation.

Our vision [*Creativity Connects Us*](#) is underpinned by five strategic objectives:

- Australians are transformed by arts experiences
- Our arts reflect us
- First Nations arts and culture are cherished
- Arts and creativity are thriving
- Arts and creativity are valued.

As a funding, advisory and development agency, we work strategically and in partnership with others to grow and develop our cultural and creative industries. We leverage our networks and expertise to broker connections, provide strategic advice, increase co-investment and build the profile of Australian arts. Through our research, our deep sector knowledge and evidence-based advice we seek to inform and influence policy development, investment, arts activity and public debate.

We deliver responsive grants programs and invest in evidence-based strategic activity. Our programs and strategic initiatives are designed to be integrated and complementary, supporting artists throughout their careers, increasing access to arts, culture and creativity, and building the capacity and vibrancy of our national cultural and creative industries – vital contributors to Australia's economy, culture, identity and wellbeing.

As a core priority, the Australia Council supports the artistic and cultural expressions of Australia's First Nations peoples, underpinned by First Nations decision-making. Our First Nations strategy panel comprising senior arts leaders provides us with expert advice. Our dedicated funding to First Nations people, groups and organisations through our grants program is assessed wholly by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peer assessors.

This forms part of our commitment to support and advocate for a proud and distinctive Australian creative sector that reflects and celebrates Australia's diversity, the benefits of which are experienced by all Australians.