


BMJ Open Identifying success factors and impacts of social and emotional well-being programmes for First Nations youth in Australia: a scoping review protocol

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ABSTRACT

Introduction Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth hold central roles in the preservation and transmission of cultural knowledge, community leadership and Australia's social and political future. Fostering youth well-being is essential in the context of historical, social and political impacts of colonisation. Social and emotional well-being (SEWB) is a holistic concept grounded in First Nations worldviews, encompassing connections to country, culture, spirituality, family, community, body and mind. Many programmes aim to support SEWB among First Nations youth; however, evidence describing programme success factors outcomes remains fragmented and is often shaped by Western-centric methodologies. This protocol outlines a culturally responsive scoping review that will map success factors and SEWB impacts of programmes delivered in Australia for First Nations youth aged 10–18 years that is designed to be undertaken collaboratively with First Nations people and non-Indigenous allies.

Identity In recognition of the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their right to self-identify using preferred terminologies, in this protocol, we respectfully use 'First Nations peoples' to refer to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia and 'First Nations youth' to refer to those aged 10–18 years. We further acknowledge that this use of this terminology may not capture the many and varied First Nations identities within Australia.

Methods and analysis This scoping review protocol outlines a revised, culturally responsive version of the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) methodology for scoping reviews and will be conducted using an Indigenous-informed, decolonising approach. Peer-reviewed and grey literature reporting on Australian SEWB programmes delivered to First Nations youth between 2000 and 2025 will be included. Databases to be searched include MEDLINE/PubMed, PsycINFO, ProQuest and EBSCOhost. Targeted Indigenous sources will be searched, including Informit Indigenous Collection, Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet, National Aboriginal Controlled Community Health Organisation and Lowitja Institute repositories, along with relevant organisational and government websites. Three reviewers will independently screen records and extract data. Articles requiring cultural responsiveness assessment will be reviewed by First Nations researchers. Data will be analysed using inductive content

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

- ⇒ This review protocol uses a culturally responsive, Indigenous-informed methodology that integrates First Nations research principles throughout the review process.
- ⇒ Inclusion of targeted Indigenous databases and grey literature aims to capture community-led and practice-based evidence not indexed in conventional databases.
- ⇒ The review will apply inductive content analysis to systematically identify programme success factors and social and emotional well-being outcomes.
- ⇒ Limiting the review to studies from 2000 to 2025 and to the Australian context may exclude relevant earlier or international work.
- ⇒ Grey literature searching may not identify all programmes, particularly those documented only orally or in community-held records.

analysis to identify programme success factors and reported SEWB outcomes, with interpretation guided by First Nations members of the research team.

Ethics and dissemination The protocol is guided by Australian Indigenous research ethics frameworks including the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research and the Lowitja Institute's guidance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research. Findings will be disseminated through culturally appropriate channels to communities and stakeholders.

Registration Protocol registration will be made available online via the Open Science Framework (osf.io/yq6sv).

INTRODUCTION

Background and research rationale

Well-being of First Nations youth in Australia

First Nations youth represent a growing population in Australia's social landscape and reflect diverse cultural, demographic and socioeconomic identities within Australia.^{1 2} First Nations youth are essential



in maintaining and strengthening traditional knowledge, connections and ways of being across future generations. These young people should be empowered to pursue and achieve life, work and educational aspirations in the manner that aligns with their cultural worldviews and experiences.^{3 4} Moreover, First Nations youth are the future leaders in communities and essential to intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge and practice, and of significant value to the social, political and economic functioning of communities and more broadly, to Australian society.^{2 5-7}

Social, political and academic narratives often focus on deficits between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth in areas such as mental and physical health, education and incarceration rates.^{3 8-12} While such narratives draw attention to the significant, intergenerational challenges faced by First Nations youth stemming from ongoing impacts of colonisation and systemic inequities, they risk framing youth predominantly through a deficiency, problem-orientated lens. This lens can perpetuate negative stereotypes and often overshadows the success, resilience, cultural strengths and potential of First Nations peoples and the programmes they engage with to promote well-being.^{2 13 14}

An alternate, empowerment lens supports and builds on the recognised cultural strengths and factors associated with positive well-being among First Nations youth, including cultural, family, spirituality and community connections that not only build empowerment but also protect against stressors such as intergenerational colonisation trauma.^{3 11 15 16} This strength-based approach seeks to support positive functioning through strength-based initiatives and opportunities that amplify the inherent capabilities of youth as they transition into adulthood.^{2 17-20} Strength-based approaches lie in parallel to deficit perspectives where treatment or intervention initiatives look to redress, change or improve deficits in young people and their well-being functioning.¹⁷

There is a critical need to establish how success factors are defined and measured in First Nations youth programmes from a strength-based, culturally informed perspective. This will ensure communities and service providers are able to capture programme effectiveness and reflect Indigenous worldviews, values and community priorities as they engage in programme development, delivery and evaluation activities. Identifying and documenting ways in which programmes foster well-being in First Nations youth (specifically through evaluation frameworks) can reinforce First Nations approaches to well-being and contribute to their empowerment and strength-based service provision. From this standpoint, well-being is defined and addressed holistically as a state of wellness, rather than as the absence of mental and physical distress or dysfunction.²¹

Broader project context

This scoping review protocol forms part of a broader programme of work focused on supporting the social and

emotional well-being (SEWB) of First Nations children and young people in regional Queensland. The broader project was initially designed as an evaluation of a grassroots after-school youth programme delivered on Friday evenings by a faith-based non-government organisation. As the project progressed, it became evident that the programme was informal in nature and did not have an existing evaluation framework. The project, therefore, evolved into a community-led visioning process in which local Elders, families, young people and service providers were engaged to reflect on the meaning, impacts and future directions of the programme.

Through these discussions, it became clear that any evaluation approach needed to be culturally responsive, contextually grounded and reflective of the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities participating in the programme. The absence of culturally relevant evaluation tools, combined with strong community interest in documenting strengths and impacts in ways meaningful to them, highlighted the need for a broader understanding of how success and impact are conceptualised across SEWB programmes for First Nations youth in Australia. This recognition provided the impetus for the proposed scoping review that aims to map success factors and SEWB impacts of youth programmes and to inform the development of culturally responsive and community-informed evaluation approaches through collaboration between First Nations researchers, communities and non-Indigenous allies.

In developing this work, it also became evident that there were few published search protocols that moved beyond conventional scoping review frameworks to explicitly embed culturally responsive and decolonising approaches throughout the review process. Existing methodological guidance such as Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) provides essential structure but does not, in itself, ensure that Indigenous knowledges, priorities and governance are centred or protected from tokenistic inclusion. For this reason, a dedicated scoping review protocol was developed alongside the review. The protocol establishes safeguards within the review to ensure that each stage remains grounded in First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing. It also provides a reflexive framework through which the research team can identify where decolonising intent is not being realised in practice, where additional First Nations leadership or guidance is required, and where processes may inadvertently reproduce Western-centric assumptions. In this way, the protocol functions not only as a methodological roadmap but also as an ethical commitment to culturally accountable research practice, undertaken with and alongside First Nations researchers and communities.

SEWB: a first nations perspective on mental health and well-being

For the purposes of establishing a culturally responsive scoping review protocol, it is imperative that well-being is understood from Indigenous perspectives. This



Figure 1 The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander domain model of social and emotional well-being. Source: Dudgeon *et al*, 2025.²¹

protocol and ensuing research therefore defines well-being through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander domain model of SEWB, reflecting a state of wellness that encompasses social, emotional, spiritual and cultural well-being (see figure 1).^{21 22} This understanding views SEWB as a state of wellness reflected through strong, positive interconnections between country, culture, spirituality, community, kin and physical and mental health.^{22 23} Furthermore, this protocol and the scoping review aim to identify success factors and impacts of programmes as they have been understood through this First Nations SEWB lens in the Australian context.

How individuals and communities experience each of the SEWB domains is dependent on their unique circumstances and how each well-being domain is expressed within their experiences.²¹ Schultz²⁴ describes this model akin to a wheel—that is, when all the spokes are connected, the wheel turns and moves in the right direction. Conversely, if the spokes are weak or connection is broken, then the wheel is compromised and may not function optimally. Hence, on a programme level, programmes that have potential to promote SEWB need to ensure that each domain is operating at its best and is interconnecting with the other domains in a manner that enables the expression and experience of all programme participants.

The domain model demonstrates how social, cultural, political and historical determinants influence each domain and well-being outcomes.²¹ Historical determinants include the ongoing effects of colonisation and dispossession. Political determinants relate to sovereignty and self-determination, access to resources and country and the continuity of cultural authority and practices.

Cultural determinants refer to the ways cultural contexts can either marginalise Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples or act as powerful sources of identity, resilience and strength. Social determinants encompass persistent social inequities that produce unequal health outcomes. These determinants interact across the life course, shaping well-being from before birth through to older age, and can operate both as protective influences and as sources of risk for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. Recent work by Dudgeon and colleagues further synthesises this model and its determinants, highlighting relationality and strength-based perspectives central to Indigenous SEWB.²¹

Research context and knowledge gaps: adopting a decolonising research approach

Identifying and documenting programme impacts on SEWB: the need for culturally responsive research and evaluation

Recent research highlights the significant contributions of First Nations programmes in fostering positive SEWB outcomes for First Nations Australians.^{17 25–29} Williamson *et al*'s²⁸ quantitative assessment of a family well-being programme identified positive associations between programme participation and well-being factors including community empowerment, addressing health risk factors (eg, smoking cessation and physical activity), reducing stress and increasing secondary and tertiary educational attainment. Tsey²⁹ and Canuto *et al*³⁰ noted positive impacts on mental and physical well-being of men and their families who participate in male health and well-being programmes. Collectively, this body of research amplifies the importance of incorporating Indigenous understandings of SEWB, Indigenous governance and Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing when documenting and interpreting programme impacts.^{30–33} A recent scoping review by Gupta and colleagues³² found that successful programmes were guided by the principles of the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional well-being 2017–2023 and were characterised by opportunities for cultural expression, holistic approaches to SEWB and collaborative, community-led delivery.

Despite these promising findings, important gaps remain. Researchers continue to call for more rigorous evaluation methods, greater integration of Indigenous-led and culturally grounded evaluation methods and increased empirical examination of cultural interventions to uncover mechanisms of change.^{29 34} There is limited understanding of how programmes, particularly those operating outside of clinical or highly structured contexts, support SEWB among First Nations youth.^{14 35 36} Existing evaluation frameworks often privilege deficit-based criteria aligned with non-Indigenous definitions of success, constraining recognition of First Nations conceptualisations of success and well-being—illustrated in part through the Australian governments 'Closing the Gap' targets for First Nations youth.^{2 37 38} 'Closing the Gap' is a



national policy framework that seeks to reduce disparities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians using a set of government-defined targets across health, education, employment and justice. These targets, however, have been widely critiqued for reflecting deficit-based and Western-centric externally defined notions of success. Deficit framings can also imply that change is required because First Nations youth themselves need to 'improve'.¹⁴

Measures of programme success that reflect non-Indigenous perspectives are frequently tied to short-term government funding cycles and emphasise quantifiable indicators such as attendance rates, programme duration or broad justice and education outcomes, often for the purpose of direct comparison with non-Indigenous populations.^{14 29 39} These indicators are difficult for small programmes to report against and do not adequately capture community voice or lived experience. First Nations youth well-being programmes also remain under-represented in the evaluation literature in Australia.^{35 40 41} Limited and insecure funding, combined with commissioning models that require service providers to evaluate their own programmes with constrained resources, further compound these challenges.^{14 29 42}

Developing strong evaluation frameworks that identify success factors for First Nations youth programmes is, therefore, critical to programme sustainability and to accessing future funding. Given the paucity of literature on non-clinical and informal programmes, understanding success in smaller, informal initiatives delivered by non-government organisations is particularly important. These programmes are often governed by religious, non-Indigenous or school-based organisations and operate within multiple competing demands, which can complicate culturally safe and responsive delivery. Examining how success is conceptualised within these contexts, and comparing these programmes led by First Nations organisations or grassroots community groups, is a key priority for future research.

Adopting a decolonising research approach for scoping reviews: developing a culturally responsive search protocol

The research team acknowledges that First Nations communities experience the enduring effects of trauma associated with colonisation and its aftermath. Non-Indigenous research has often compounded these effects by undertaking research on First Nations peoples (both in Australia and across the globe) without the express permission of the communities being studied. Research continues to be undertaken without reference or adherence to the principles of the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.^{43 44} More recent approaches emphasise that First Nations research must be conducted with, and for the benefit of, First Nations peoples (eg, AIATSIS code of ethics, 2020).⁴⁵ Such approaches involve collaboration with First Nations people and the development of Indigenous frameworks and decolonising approaches.

Nevertheless, it remains challenging to effectively implement culturally responsive approaches, and research frequently fails to achieve this aim. This is also the case for researchers conducting scoping reviews on First Nations topics. Phillip-Becks *et al*⁴⁶ and Brinckley *et al*⁴⁷ both note that reviewers often adopt a standardised, Westernised academic process-orientated approach that does little to account for, include, nor document Indigenous-informed methods, methodologies or processes even when Indigenous topics and concepts form the focus of the review. Hence, this scoping review research seeks to be grounded in a decolonising approach in order to map literature on SEWB for First Nations youth and the programmes that support them.

Aims of this protocol

This scoping review protocol has two overall aims. The first aim is to develop a protocol to identify and map programme success factors and potential SEWB impacts of programmes as described across existing Australian literature. The protocol will support a culturally sensitive search of the literature to uncover and map insights into the everyday functioning and delivery of programmes that support SEWB of youth in Australia.

The second and related aim is to expand on traditional Westernised scoping review methodologies by including methodological elements suited to First Nations Australian research contexts. This protocol makes a contribution to the growing field of culturally responsive research by incorporating First Nations research principles with the addition of a systemic method to map and highlight First Nations research and to systematically document context-specific grey literature searches.

It is anticipated that this culturally responsive protocol will inform future scoping reviews conducted in First Nations contexts by outlining a culturally informed approach for systematic literature searches. This protocol is suited to replication and contextual revision and strengthens methodological rigour and transparency in research conducted in First Nations SEWB contexts. It is further anticipated that the scoping review process associated with this protocol will be iterative with refinements made to ensure it remains culturally appropriate and reflects emerging insights throughout the scoping review conduct.

The protocol: proposed review methodology

First principle of Indigenous respect

A key aspect of this scoping review protocol is to establish a culturally informed approach for conducting future scoping reviews that respects and promotes First Nations methodologies and makes contribution to decolonising research approaches. To do this, the protocol draws on elements of Rogers⁴⁸ Indigenous Literature Re-view Methodology (ILRM) which is 'grounded in Indigenous ways of looking back, to see past, present and future'⁴⁹ (p1580) and centres Aboriginal-led research and knowledge. A first principle of this protocol is thus to identify

and recognise Indigenous perspectives, voices and knowledge. It will do this by privileging the findings of research that is founded in First Nations-informed approaches and that promotes First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing within the youth programme and SEWB literature.

The scoping review will therefore see to respect ILRM protocols by highlighting in the mapping process:

- ▶ Research and literature that is authored or co-authored by First Nations people.
- ▶ Programmes that are led or co-led by First Nations community or programme/service providers within Australia.

Relevant research and publications that do not meet these criteria will be considered for inclusion, however will be assessed in relation to Indigenous-led findings (in a process outlined in the methods and analysis section below). Research findings that are not discussed in the Indigenous-led research may be areas for future research and for the next phase of this research.

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

Protocol objectives

The purpose of this protocol is to outline a method for identifying and mapping literature relevant to impact and success factors associated with SEWB and First Nations youth programmes within the Australian programme context. The proposed scoping review will prioritise understanding how programmes meet the specific SEWB needs of First Nations youth as they transition into adulthood.

This protocol expands the JBI method for conducting scoping literature reviews to identify, summarise, substantiate and map success factors to inform an evidence-based model of success factors for First Nations youth programmes with potential SEWB impacts. The JBI method is described by Aromataris *et al*⁴⁹ and Pollock *et al*⁵⁰ as a rigorous method for identifying and mapping evidence for a particular topic across diverse sources and contexts (including grey literature). Scoping reviews are an appropriate tool to use for exploring research questions that are diverse and complex in nature to clarify concepts within a body of literature.⁵¹ They do so by describing, categorising and cataloguing findings through a rigorous process of addressing a broad topic area by identifying, screening, data extraction and interpretation of findings. This protocol expands on JBI guidance for presenting search results (eg, charting the descriptive criteria of each included source) by intentionally expanding on the JBI method to ensure decolonising methodologies (tools and processes) are incorporated throughout the search and mapping process and are clearly documented.

This protocol outlines and adds culturally responsive elements to a JBI scoping review framework proposed by Arksey and O'Malley⁵² described in detail below:

- ▶ Stage 1: identifying the research question.
- ▶ Stage 2: identifying relevant studies and sources across peer-reviewed and grey literature.

- ▶ Stage 3: study selection and inclusion criteria with inclusion of steps to ensure culturally responsive study selection and inclusion criteria (ie, review and screening by First Nations researchers).
- ▶ Stage 4: charting the data.
- ▶ Stage 5: additional stage—review results with First Nations critical friends.
- ▶ Stage 6: collating, summarising and reporting the results.

To more specifically address the ILRM method and incorporate the first principle of highlighting First Nations research into the JBI guide, additional refinement will be made to that specifically seek to review results in partnership with First Nations academic and community colleagues. A critical element will be to obtain the advice and guidance of First Nations research partners for the broader project. This will actively seek views of First Nations partners as to whether the identified success factors from this scoping review (and any future reviews that adopt this protocol) align with their experience and views, and whether the identified success factors framework might be relevant to local programme community contexts. In other words, this critical phase will seek to ensure that the scoping review has centred on what is important to community, and how they might respond in the translation and further research activities.⁴⁷

Protocol methods

Researcher positionality and reflexivity

This study is grounded in the understanding that research is shaped by the identities, lived experiences and social positions of the researchers involved. In keeping with Indigenous research ethics and reflexive practice, members of the research team offer the following positionality statements in their own words, with First Nations research team member statements presented first. These statements inform how we conceptualise social and emotional well-being, how we engage with communities and how we interpret evidence in this review.

Dr Raelene Ward

I am a proud Kunja woman and Traditional Owner of Cunnamulla and surrounding Country. My professional and cultural identities are deeply interconnected and guide my work. I am a registered nurse, with hospital and university training, and hold a Master's degree and PhD focused on Aboriginal suicide. I have worked at the University of Southern Queensland for 16 years and currently serve as Knowledge Broker and First Nations Engagement Lead for the SQNNSW Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub. My research is Aboriginal-led and community-driven, grounded in grassroots relationships, and committed to amplifying the voices, needs and aspirations of First Nations peoples across Queensland and New South Wales.

**Dr Krystal Schaffer (she/her)**

I am a proud Kamilaroi woman, born and raised on Jaggera, Giabul and Wakka Wakka unceded lands. I am a qualified social worker whose practice and scholarship are deeply informed by cultural humility and community-led approaches. My research specialises in community design-based research methodologies, emphasising collective and participatory frameworks that centre the voices and lived experiences of those I am working with. My teaching and research are grounded in principles of relationality, respect and reciprocity, aligning with both my cultural values and professional ethics.

Julianne Kealey (she/her)

I am a non-Indigenous cisgender woman of settler-colonial heritage living on unceded lands of the Gubbi Gubbi (Kabi Kabi) nation. I teach into undergraduate psychology programmes, with a focus on culturally responsive teaching practice and decolonising psychology curriculum. I also work in a support role for leaders in psychology training in higher education in Australia. My worldview has been shaped by the privileges, assumptions and norms embedded within whiteness. My research centres on social and emotional well-being for First Nations young people, a space in which I recognise that Western perspectives—including my own perspectives—are shaped by Western-centric experiences and hold no authority. This work requires ongoing reflexivity, cultural responsiveness and acknowledgement of the power relations that position me as a beneficiary of colonisation with across many spaces, including determinants and facilitators of well-being.

Professor Celmara Pocock

I am Executive Director of the Institute for Communities and Regional Development at the University of Southern Queensland. My decolonial and anticolonial positionality is demonstrated in a long-term commitment to working with and for Australian First Nations and shaped by personal experiences of migration and queerness. My research career prioritises research that centres social and community approaches to complex challenges, especially working in partnership with First Nations peoples.

Dr Riley Scott (she/her)

I am a non-Indigenous cisgender woman living on Bundjalung Country and working on the unceded lands of the Jagera, Yuggera and Ugarapul peoples. My teaching in cultural and developmental psychology is grounded in humility and a commitment to ongoing critical self-reflection and cultural responsiveness. I continue to deepen my understanding of Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, and strive to meaningfully embed these knowledges within my research and teaching practices.

Professor Lorelle Burton (she/her)

I am a non-Indigenous psychologist raised on the unceded lands of the Jagera, Giabal and Jarowair peoples. Guided by deep listening and respect, I nurture meaningful

partnerships and learn alongside the communities I collaborate with.

The research team recognises the unequal power relations produced through colonisation and the responsibility this places on researchers, particularly non-Indigenous researchers, to act with reflexivity, cultural humility and accountability. These positionalities inform the design of this protocol, the privileging of First Nations knowledges and the inclusion of First Nations critical friends in interpretation of review findings.

Method**Stage 1: identifying the research question**

The first author undertook an in-depth exploration of recent literature describing evaluation activities in Australia, particularly those guiding assessment of programmes and initiatives targeted at SEWB of First Nations peoples. This preliminary search uncovered a significant gap in the literature pertaining first to the lack of culturally sensitive evaluation frameworks for First Nations youth programmes, and second, in the consequent gap in understanding potential SEWB impacts of engagement in programmes targeting First Nations youth in Australia. A preliminary search of MEDLINE, the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews and *JBIEvidence Synthesis* identified, there were no current systematic reviews or scoping reviews specific to the topic outlined in this protocol. However, a need for further culturally responsive explorations of the literature regarding youth SEWB was uncovered. Hence, this scoping review protocol builds on the work of Gupta *et al.*,³² Blignault *et al.*¹⁴ and Brinckley *et al.*¹⁷ in identifying literature relevant to a wide range of programmes, including smaller, informal SEWB programmes that are specifically focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth. Importantly, these scoping reviews were noted as challenging Western-centric approaches to conducting reviews and included Indigenous-informed methodologies.

The following research questions were formulated specific to the current research effort this protocol guides:

1. What are the range of success factors described in the literature associated with programmes targeting First Nations youth aged 10–18 years in Australia?
2. What are the impacts on SEWB described in the literature and associated with programmes targeting First Nations youth aged 10–18 years in Australia?

The following research question was formulated to address the broader aim of establishing a methodological approach for conducting culturally informed scoping reviews:

3. What methodological elements are important in a decolonising approach to conducting a culturally responsive review focused on First Nations SEWB?

Definitions

To answer research question 1 and 2, the following definitions will be used to guide the literature search. Adopting culturally informed understandings of key population

concepts, youth are considered as aged between 10 and 18 years, and of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent. This generally reflects recent research on First Nations youth in Australia, which defines youth from 10 to 18 years.²⁵³ Likewise, health and well-being researchers suggest this age range typically captures the transitional period between childhood and adulthood.⁵⁴ The decision to include young people aged 10–18 years is informed by developmental, educational and program-delivery considerations relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts.³¹⁵⁵⁴ Although youth is sometimes defined more broadly (eg, 12–25 years), such definitions often reflect service system boundaries rather than the specific developmental stages targeted by SEWB programmes. International public health literature commonly identifies adolescence as beginning at age 10 (early adolescence 10–14 years; late adolescence 15–19 years).⁵⁴ This period captures major neurodevelopmental, social, identity and schooling transitions that are directly relevant to SEWB.

In Australia, many programmes aimed at First Nations youth are school-based or school-linked, delivered across upper primary and secondary schooling; consequently, participation often spans ages 10–18 years, aligning with school enrolment ages rather than administrative youth service categories. Community-led programmes likewise frequently include younger siblings and mixed-age groups, reflecting kinship, family obligations and cultural practices of collective participation.¹⁵ Given the focus of many SEWB programmes on school engagement, identity development, cultural connection and family-based participation, 10–18 years represents the most appropriate age range for the research questions in this review. Young adult SEWB programmes warrant dedicated investigation in future work but fall outside the scope of this protocol.

As previously outlined, SEWB is defined from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective as a holistic concept encompassing mental, physical and spiritual wellness facilitated through connections to country, culture, community, kinship, mind and emotions, body, spirit, spirituality and ancestors.^{21 22} SEWB programmes considered in this review will include those offered within health, mental health and community contexts, with a focus on capturing success factors across a wide range of programme types, including small and informal initiatives. By so doing, we aim to inform future programme development and evaluation practices that honour Indigenous governance and cultural strengths, ensuring the sustained well-being of First Nations youth.

Programme success factors are theoretically defined as any independent variables within or external to a programme that influence a programme's effectiveness and desired outcomes. These may include but are not limited to programme resources, activities, procedures, external environmental influences and leadership.⁵⁵ Programme impact refers to the changes or effects on target populations, participants and/or social conditions that are directly related to the programme's

implementation and objectives.⁵⁶ For this scoping review protocol, we focus on programme factors and impact with potential to influence SEWB of participants. Programme impacts may include positive influence on connections with country, culture, spirituality, community, kin and physical and mental health of programme participants.¹⁹

Stage 2: identifying relevant studies

Inclusion criteria

As suggested by JBI protocols,⁵⁰ scoping reviews are generally broad in scope to capture all available literature pertaining to the research question. The inclusion criteria for this scoping review protocol are guided by the research needed to establish the indicators of success and impact in youth programmes for SEWB outcomes. Eligible studies will be those that describe programmes targeted at First Nations youth within Australia. To capture a wide range of success factors and well-being impacts, we are interested in examining a diverse range of programmes offered across a diverse range of service providers and sectors that offer programmes to youth.

A comprehensive list of primary search terms will be populated in the first instance by the primary author and a senior health research librarian at the University of Southern Queensland using the population, concept, context (PCC). This list will be populated under the guidance of the First Nations researchers and coauthors, namely Dr Raelene Ward and Dr Krystal Schaffer, to ensure search terms important to a First Nations-led perspective are captured. This process creates alignment between key research terms and the research questions and protocol purposes and objectives. The population is First Nations youth in Australia who have participated in a First Nations youth programme. The concept includes outcomes and success factors related to SEWB and programme engagement. The context is diverse programme settings within Australia (across all regions, states and territories).

The primary search terms will be reviewed by the full research and authorship team to refine and clarify the search strategy to ensure adequate coverage of the breadth of literature relative to the research questions. To this extent, this scoping review protocol proposes the following search terms to identify research for inclusion for the proposed scoping review. Adopting a similar approach for research focused on First Nations well-being is recommended for future reviews.

Search terms for First Nations peoples

The terms First Nations, Indigenous Australians, First Peoples, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other terms identified through the 2012 AITSIS research guidelines⁵⁷ will form the initial population search. The researchers note that the period covered by these guidelines will impact terminology used in programme contexts prior to this time. Hence, terms such as Aboriginals and Native Title holders will also inform the search query. We also recognise the diverse ways First Nations identify themselves, hence terms such as Noongar, Koori



(or Koorie), Murri, Yolngu, Nunga and Mob will inform the search query, with the understanding that these terms may not recognise all tribes and nations across Australia.

Search terms for youth

To capture research regarding young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 10–18 years, inclusion criteria will further include terms such as adolescent, child, youth, young people/person or school-aged. In terms of identifying relevant programmes, a variety of terms will be used to capture youth programmes offered within a broad range of contexts, such as after school, dance, hip hop, youth justice or recidivism, mentoring, cultural knowledge transmission, well-being or SEWB, sports, mental and physical health, on Country, camps, First Nations cultural activities (eg, basket weaving, dance, and music) and language.

Service providers

To capture a wide -range of service providers, terms such as programme evaluation, not-for-profit, non-government organisations or agencies, National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), education and school-based organisations, faith-based organisations, Aboriginal community organisations, land councils, Aboriginal/Indigenous corporations, community groups, youth justice and community justice will be included in the search query.

Criteria for participants

Literature will be included only if programme participants include a majority of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander youth, and the programme is delivered within Australia across any region, state and/or territory. Any programme that includes a majority of, but may not be restricted to 10–18-year olds, will be included. Any literature pertaining to programmes delivered outside of Australia will be removed from the research.

Literature types

Yarning methodologies that capture research outputs, quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, case studies and quasi-experimental studies will be included along with evaluations of SEWB programmes for Australian First Nations youth and reports or articles that document youth programmes. Information sources will not be restricted to peer-reviewed research and will include literature reviews, online ‘grey literature’ articles describing SEWB programmes, commentaries and original research. Grey literature such as government reports, policy statements, issues papers, dissertations and fact sheets that refer to First Nations youth programmes, specifically those that are published or offered by First Nations organisations, will be considered for inclusion.

Research period

To answer research questions 1 and 2, the search will focus on the period from 2000 to 2025, reflecting the emergence and validation of SEWB as a primary framework for

evaluating First Nations health and well-being within the Australian context. This timeframe aligns with the development and validation of the SEWB domain model by First Nations peoples and the publication and dissemination of seminal literature on First Nations SEWB, notably by Gee, Dudgeon, Schultz and colleagues—leading First Nations researchers, academics and mental health professionals.²¹

Search strategy

A multidisciplinary search of databases that index health and mental health literature will be conducted to address research questions 1 and 2. This approach is intended to capture peer-reviewed literature that reflects the diverse programme contexts that First Nations youth may be engaged with. The following databases will be searched:

- ▶ PubMed: biomedical database offering access to literature on health and well-being.
- ▶ PsycInfo: psychology-focused database offering access to mental health and well-being studies.
- ▶ EBSOhost: provides access to multiple databases relevant to mental and psychological research, including access to relevant grey literature and reports including practice-based knowledge that may be valuable to the SEWB research area.
- ▶ Proquest: comprehensive, multidisciplinary database offering access to dissertations and theses in social science and humanities that could provide valuable insight into the topic, and which may be missed in other database searches.

An additional search of Australian Indigenous research and health databases will be conducted to capture programme literature relevant to the research questions from an Indigenous standpoint, which may not be indexed detected in conventional, Western-centric databases. To address research questions 1, 2 and 3, this protocol recommends (but not limited to) searching the following databases and organisations given their First Nations health and well-being focus:

- ▶ Informit-Indigenous Studies Database: a dedicated First Nations repository providing access to Australian Indigenous research.
- ▶ Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet: a dedicated First Nations source for publications, policies, health promotion, health practice-based resources informing practice and education in First Nations health sectors.
- ▶ Lowitja Institute: Australia’s national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled health research institute, which curates and produces research and knowledge exchange outputs relating to First Nations health and well-being.
- ▶ NACCHO: the national peak body representing Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services will be searched for relevant policy documents, reports and publications relevant to SEWB programme delivery.

Search strategies will be tailored to suit the structure and navigation of individual databases. Given that some

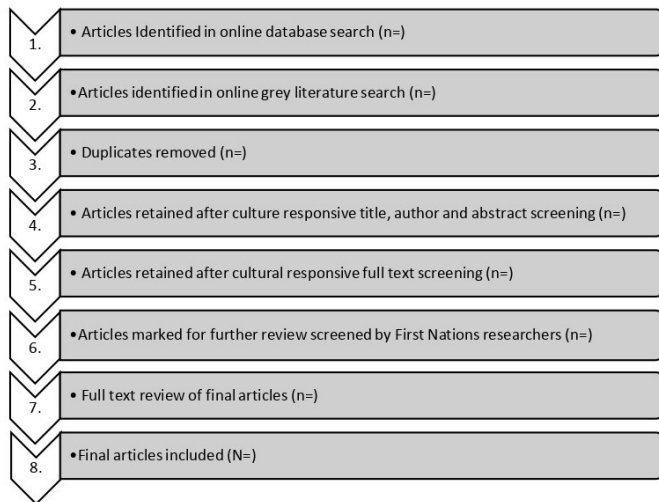


Figure 2 Revised Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) source selection process. Source: Revised from Arksey and O'Malley.⁵²

organisational platforms do not support Boolean logic or controlled terminology, these searches may rely on keyword filtering and manual screening of tabs or website pages such as 'Resources', 'Research', 'Publications', 'Projects' or 'Services'.

In accordance with JBI standards and to address research question 3, the search process for each Indigenous database will be clearly documented, including search terms used, a description of tabs or website sections and any limitations encountered during the search process. This promotes methodological transparency and replicability. This protocol recommends clearly documenting and reporting the search process for databases. This approach contributes to an Indigenous-informed methodology and strengthens the cultural integrity of reviews focused on First Nations concepts of SEWB. Explicitly, this approach honours the methods and ways that knowledge is generated, stored and shared by First Nations knowledge holders.

Stage 3: study selection

The source selection process follows the revised JBI conventions demonstrated in [figure 2](#). Step 1 in Source Selection stage is to conduct an initial search of online databases. Step 2 is to conduct a search of relevant bodies of grey literature that promote First Nations health and well-being to locate information sources (eg, government reports, theses, conference proceedings, non-government or not-for-profit organisations). Additionally, grey literature published by service providers and community organisations that may not meet traditional 'evidence' criteria will be identified. This will include information sources relevant to programme evaluations. Step 3 is removal of duplications after importing step 1 and step 2 results into EndNote. Steps 4 and 5 involve a two-stage screening process using the inclusion criteria outlined above. Titles and abstracts will be screened for inclusion in the

full-text review. For eligibility in full-text review and to ensure assessing eligibility is culturally responsive, articles must include a majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth who may be aged between 10 and 18 years and should mention well-being or factors associated with SEWB in the abstract. At this stage, author biographies and research protocols will be examined. In keeping with an IRLM approach, studies that mention Indigenous-led research or collaborations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers and programme providers, and those that mention First Nations methodologies or guidelines will be highlighted. Programmes or study protocols that appear to integrate First Nations perspectives or methodologies will also be highlighted. Studies that do not openly align with IRLM approach (outlined above) but at first review appear to align with Indigenous methodologies or understandings of SEWB will be retained and marked for further review. In step 7, articles identified in step 6 will be screened by two First Nations members of the research team and either removed, retained or marked for further review. Any discrepancies will be discussed by the full research team before a final decision on retention is made. A full-text review (step 7) will then be conducted on all eligible articles.

Documenting the grey literature search

It is suggested that grey literature searches in scoping reviews present challenges due to the influence of search engine algorithms and the lack of standardised, replicable search methods.^{58 59} However, they are deemed essential for this review given research on First Nations programmes and programme evaluations are underrepresented in peer-reviewed literature.³⁵ Grey literature serves as an important source of unpublished or non-traditionally published materials such as records from non-government or not-for-profit organisations and grassroots community organisations. To enhance rigour, the grey literature search will follow an adapted grey literature search plan based on that described by the University of Toronto.^{58 60}

For inclusion, grey literature identified as relevant to the research question will be critically appraised using a contextually revised version of Tyndall's⁶¹ AACODS checklist presented in online supplemental appendix A. Based on critical appraisal discourse by Burls,⁶² the checklist provides a guide for critical appraising the authority, accuracy, coverage, objectivity, date and significance of a data source. Additionally, the checklist has been updated to include checks for authority, accuracy, coverage, objectivity, date, significance in a First Nations research context in Australia, particularly that research with an SEWB focus. This revised checklist will be iteratively tested and refined for utility as part of the conduction of the scoping literature review process related to the current research effort. Furthermore, all article citations and information sources (including PDFs) deemed to meet inclusion criteria

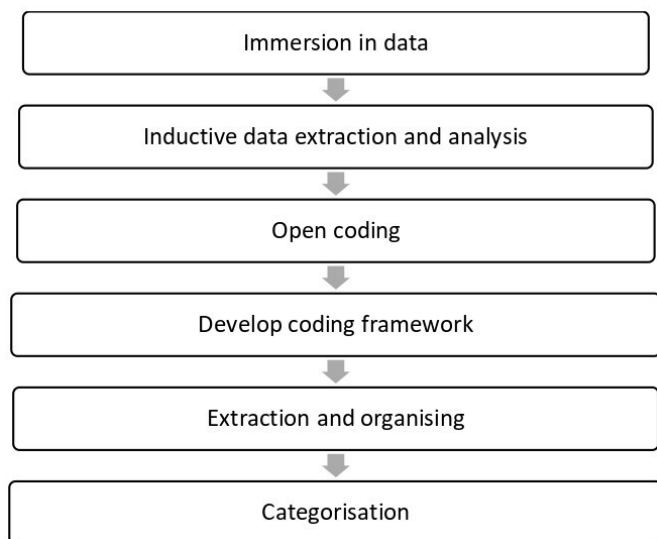


Figure 3 Process for qualitative inductive content analysis in scoping reviews. Source: Pollock *et al.*⁵⁰

will be uploaded in EndNote⁶³ for storage and collaborative analysis with any duplications removed.

Stage 4: charting the data

Data extraction and analysis

A qualitative approach of inductive content analysis (ICA) will be adopted to identify programme success factors.^{50 64 65} ICA follows an iterative process of first examining each data piece in detail to gain high-level insight and understanding of each piece of data, then second comparing each piece of data as the researcher moves through the data set. The aim is to identify and draw together ideas that are similar to describe and answer the research question. We will follow Pollock *et al.*⁵⁰ recommendations for conducting ICA in scoping reviews as overviewed in [figure 3](#) below. Content relative to programme success factors will be extracted from final articles and information sources by the lead reviewer/author and cross-checked by the research team.

Extracted data will be reviewed by the research team including First Nations advisors to assess its fit with Indigenous understandings as evidenced in the First Nations programme and SEWB literature within Australia. Based on this review, decisions regarding retention or removal of problematic data will be collaboratively made by the authorship team.

Stage 5: additional stage—review results with First Nations critical friends

This additional stage will be incorporated into the review process to ensure interpretation of findings is grounded in First Nations knowledges and experiences. Following data extraction and preliminary synthesis, findings will be reviewed with First Nations critical friends, including First Nations members of the research team and invited external First Nations colleagues.

Critical friends will be individuals with recognised expertise in First Nations social and emotional

well-being, research, service provision, and/or lived community experience. This group will include First Nations members of the authorship team and may also include external First Nations practitioners. Additional First Nations critical friends may be invited where appropriate.

Engagement will occur via culturally safe discussion processes (eg, yarning-style meetings or small group discussions) to:

- ▶ Sense-check the cultural appropriateness of interpretations.
- ▶ Identify where key concepts or meanings may have been overlooked.
- ▶ Provide guidance on language and framing.
- ▶ Comment on the relevance of identified success factors to community realities.
- ▶ Highlight areas requiring caution or further cultural consideration.

Participation will be voluntary and invitations will be extended with clear acknowledgement of capacity, competing responsibilities and cultural load. The research team will actively avoid overburdening key First Nations practitioners or Elders and will remain responsive to participants' preferred modes and timing of engagement.

Feedback provided by critical friends will not be treated as research data but as cultural and methodological guidance to strengthen the interpretation of findings. Recommendations arising from this stage will be documented reflexively by the research team and integrated into the final synthesis where appropriate.

Stage 6: collating, summarising and reporting the results

Presentation of evidence

This protocol will be reported in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR)). The completed checklist (see online supplemental appendix C) includes page numbers for each reporting item, and items not applicable to a study protocol are marked 'n/a'.⁵⁰ Descriptive criteria (ie, programme success factors identified in the data extraction process) will be chartered in tabular form accompanied by an explanatory, descriptive narrative. These narratives will be presented in success case method format (SCM; see online supplemental appendix B) described by evaluation researchers as a descriptive method drawing on storytelling that gives voice to experiences of multiple stakeholders in a programme environment.^{66 67} Additionally, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Quality Appraisal Tool will be used in conjunction with Prisma-ScR checklist to critically appraise and report evidence (see online supplemental appendix D). According to Harfield *et al.*,⁶⁸ this 14-question checklist is designed to appraise and report on the quality of data (studies) in scoping and systematic reviews through an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lens.

ETHICS AND DISSEMINATION

The broader research effort associated with this scoping review protocol has ethics approval from the University of Southern Queensland Human Ethics Committee under application H18REA059. Results from the scoping review will be disseminated through multiple channels, including publication in peer-reviewed journals, academic and service-based conferences relevant to social and emotional well-being and First Nations youth development and mental health. Results will also be made available to relevant SEWB programme providers, community organisations and relevant government and non-government stakeholders with particular interest in supporting the health and well-being of First Nations youth in the Australian context. The scoping review protocol will also be registered online with the Open Science Framework (see osf.io/yq6sv). A supplementary discussion paper is planned in parallel with the publication of results, outlining the scoping processes, ethical considerations and culturally responsive methods developed in consultation with First Nations advisors. This protocol and the accompanying paper will provide practical guidance for other researchers, service providers and community-led initiatives seeking to explore or develop evaluation frameworks for SEWB programmes. By sharing both the protocol and the codesigned best practice processes, this work aims to support ongoing knowledge exchange and the development of locally relevant, strengths-based approaches across SEWB service provision.

Ethics and decolonising guidelines

The decolonising approach for the protocol and subsequent scoping review is guided by key Australian Indigenous research ethics frameworks. In particular, the research is informed by the NHMRC guidelines *Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities* and *Keeping research on track II*, which emphasise Indigenous governance, community benefit, reciprocity and respect.⁶⁹ We also adhere to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research, which articulates principles for Indigenous leadership, self-determination and data sovereignty.⁷⁰ Furthermore, the Lowitja Institute provides critical guidance on community-driven, strengths-based and impact-focused Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research.⁷¹ Together, these frameworks inform the decolonising orientation of this protocol and subsequent review, including how research questions were developed, how evidence will be interpreted and how findings will be returned to communities.

Proposed methods and analysis timelines

The scoping review searches will be conducted in March 2026 and April 2026. Study selection, data charting and analysis will occur from May 2026, and manuscript

preparation and dissemination will occur from May 2026 onwards.

Patient and public involvement

Patients and/or the public were not involved in the design, conduct or reporting plans of this research. As detailed above, First Nations community members and relevant service providers will contribute to codesign of dissemination materials. Results will be shared with participating and relevant communities and organisations through accessible reports, presentations and yarning-based feedback.

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