

Understanding the abuse and mistreatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people

Research snapshot

May 2026

Content warning

The contents of this Research Snapshot are sensitive and may be confronting or distressing to read – including discussions about the abuse and mistreatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people.

Reader discretion is advised. If you or someone you know needs assistance, please call [13YARN](#) on 13 92 76 or 1800 ELDERHelp on 1800 353 374. If you are in immediate danger call Police on 000.

About this project

The abuse and mistreatment of older people is a serious social, human rights, health and justice problem in Australia.

The [National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study](#) (National Prevalence Study; 2021) was the first study to provide comprehensive data on the nature and prevalence of elder abuse for the general population in Australia. However, it was clear that more targeted research was needed to better understand the forms of abuse and mistreatment specifically experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people.

Building on the National Prevalence Study, this project was commissioned by the Australian Attorney-General's Department and is the largest scale Australian research study undertaken with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people aged 50 years and over about the abuse and mistreatment that they experience in older age. The research aimed to improve our understanding of:

- the forms and dynamics of abuse and mistreatment
- what causes it, who experiences it, who uses it, how it affects people, how people seek help and how services respond.

There are important limitations to acknowledge in relation to this project that relate to the qualitative and exploratory nature of the research design, and the sample size, data collection method and target population. This study was not designed to capture prevalence, and there are limitations when interpreting the data in reference to the National Prevalence Study data.

What did this research project involve?

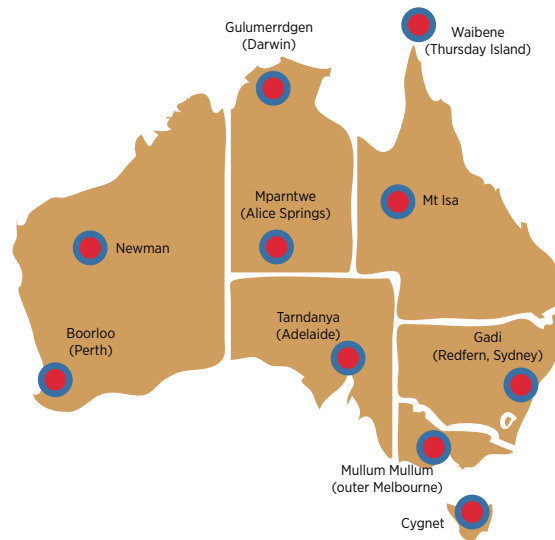
To ensure the cultural safety of participants and to uphold the principle of self-determination in research, this project was led by Aboriginal researchers, Professor Victoria Hovane and Ralph Mogridge, with the support of the Australian Institute of Family Studies. The research team:

- engaged with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) across Australian states and territories, including metropolitan, regional and remote locations. In total, there were 30 consultations
- conducted 19 yarning circles and 8 interviews with 190 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people across Australia

- reviewed research literature (published before this project) about abuse and mistreatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people, and literature about abuse of older people more generally.

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Research Ethics Committee provided ethics clearance for the project.

Figure 1: Yarning circle and interview sites



Forms of abuse and mistreatment experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people

The National Prevalence Study identified 5 types of abuse and mistreatment:



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people experience each of these 5 types of abuse and mistreatment. Data re-analysed from the National Prevalence Study show that 23% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people aged 65 years or older reported experiencing at least one form of abuse, compared to 15% for non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people in the same age range.

Table 1: Reports of different types of abuse reported by participants in the National Prevalence Study

Abuse and mistreatment	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents (n = 85)		Non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents (n = 6,892)		All (n = 7,000)	
	%	95% CI	%	95% CI	%	95% CI
Any form	23.3	[12.4, 34.3]	14.7	[13.7, 15.8]	14.8	[13.8, 15.9]
Sub forms						
Financial abuse	2.4	[-0.1, 4.8]	2.1	[1.7, 2.5]	2.1	[1.7, 2.5]
Physical abuse	2.5	[-0.1, 5.2]	1.8	[1.4, 2.2]	1.8	[1.4, 2.2]
Sexual abuse	1.6	[-0.9, 4.1]	1.0	[0.7, 1.2]	1.0	[0.7, 1.3]
Psychological abuse	22.7	[11.8, 33.6]	11.5	[10.6, 12.5]	11.7	[10.8, 12.5]
Neglect	5.8	[-0.4, 11.9]	2.8	[2.3, 3.3]	2.9	[2.4, 3.4]

Notes: Reports are of experiences of abuse or mistreatment in the 12-month period preceding the survey in 2020. Data are from the National Prevalence Study participants aged 65 years or older based on a sample size of 7,000 CATI survey. This table includes 95% confidence intervals with an upper and lower bound, and the value for the population is expected to fall between these bounds with a 95% degree of confidence. Negative confidence intervals, predominantly in the lower bound range, can occur with small sample sizes.

The difference in overall rates of abuse and mistreatment between the 2 groups appears to be driven by greater reporting of psychological abuse for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people.

Rates of neglect were also doubled for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sample.

Noting the limitations of this research outlined in the project report, the yarning circles and interviews show that across 27 yarning circles and interviews, financial abuse and psychological abuse were the most frequently discussed of these 5 forms of abuse and mistreatment.

Frequencies of financial and psychological abuse discussions were similar for women's and men's yarning circles and interviews across locations. Approximately half of the yarning circles and interviews discussed physical abuse.

However, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people also experience other forms of abuse and mistreatment that uniquely reflect the cultural context of their communities and the influence of institutions on their lives. These include:

- institutional and systemic abuse – abuse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people experience in their interactions with institutions, systems and services
- 'humbugging' – repeated requests or demands for money or resources, with harassment sometimes accompanied by threats
- resources abuse – the older person's food, fuel or time taken by other people without paying for or replacing the resource, including taking resources without asking the older person. This may be challenging to acknowledge or manage because older people may have cultural obligations to care for family members and share their resources with family and community. This can be hard for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people who often strongly value and need their communities and families and when practices of reciprocity have become fractured.



Most yarning circles and interviews involved discussion of institutional and systemic abuse, humbugging, and resources abuse.

- Men and women discussed institutional and systemic abuse in similar proportions although women raised these concerns in slightly more yarning circles and interviews than men, and it was raised slightly more often in metropolitan locations than other locations.
- The connections between humbugging and emotional and verbal abuse emerged in near unanimity when humbugging was raised.
- Resources abuse was raised slightly more often in women's yarning circles and interviews than men's, and this issue was raised slightly more often across metropolitan and remote locations than regional locations.

THEY DON'T UNDERSTAND THE NEEDS OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE



THERE SHOULD BE POLICIES, PROCEDURES & PARTNERSHIPS

©Think in Colour

Implications

- These data show the importance of flexible, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led prevention and response activities that are place-based and involve localised decision making about their design, development and implementation.
- These activities need to be adaptive to the numerous and overlapping forms of abuse and mistreatment that can be experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people.

Societal and community factors in the causes and context of abuse and mistreatment

The abuse and mistreatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people is shaped by the profound impact of colonisation and ongoing colonialism, racism, discrimination and oppression.

Due to intergenerational trauma, discrimination and disadvantage, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people face living conditions that put them at greater risk of experiencing abuse and mistreatment. These conditions include economic, food and housing insecurity, as well as factors such as earlier ageing and poor health.

In addition, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are disconnected from their culture as a result of ongoing colonialism. This creates a risk of harm because understandings of how to treat each other according to cultural responsibilities have broken down. For example, in traditional societies, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were/are bound by the system of reciprocity, which ensures that resources and caring duties are shared among families and communities, so everyone is looked after.

However, where there is disconnection from culture, this system of reciprocity can become one-sided or inconsistent, leading to abuse and mistreatment.



©Think in Colour

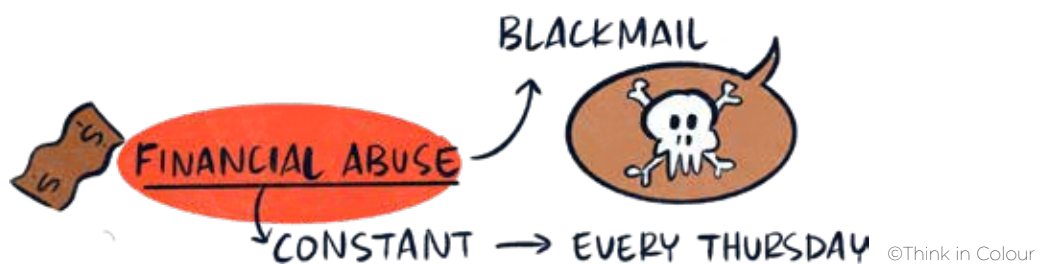
Implications

Prevention and response activities that address fractured family and kinship systems, cultural knowledge and the practice and modelling of reciprocal obligations in their local context, are enablers of holistic measures that address these underlying causes and contextual factors.

Individual, relationship and family factors for people who use abuse and mistreatment

A range of individual, relationship and family factors are often present for people engaging in abuse and mistreatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people. These include:

- the use of alcohol and other substances
- gambling and financial hardship
- being a younger family member of the older person.



©Think in Colour

The use of alcohol and other substances was raised in most yarning circles and interviews and gambling was commonly raised too. Financial hardship often overlapped with alcohol and other substance use and gambling alongside financial abuse.

Participants in the yarning circles and interviews commonly described threats, humbugging or the pressuring of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people for money to support substance use or gambling habits. When

coupled with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people's sense of reciprocal obligation, this abuse and mistreatment led many to feel stressed and distressed.

The findings from the yarning circles and interviews provide in-depth insight into the challenges facing families and communities characterised by intergenerational poverty, trauma and grief and which are reflected in the characteristics of people engaging in abuse and mistreatment.

Implications

- Culturally safe and holistic responses are important in supporting communities that face challenges around substance use and other addictive behaviours, and in relation to experiences of racism and discrimination.
- More specific engagement directly with people abusing and mistreating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people is required to develop a deeper understanding of perpetration and the range of people engaging in this behaviour.
- This approach will better inform the development of prevention and response activities to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people.

Individual, relationship and family factors for people experiencing abuse and mistreatment and its effects

Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people may be at greater risk of abuse and mistreatment where their independence is reduced or where there is an imbalance of power in a relationship. This often occurred where the older person had:

- health issues and support needs, including disability or other health challenges (e.g. dementia)
- family and cultural responsibilities that involved obligations to look after their families and others in the community and share resources
- lower income and disadvantaged living arrangements, associated with financial stress, food and housing insecurity, overcrowded living arrangements or homelessness.

Risk factors for abuse and mistreatment include a lack of access to services and community connections or otherwise being isolated or separated from support networks. This can be exacerbated in rural and remote locations.



Implications

- The identification of greater risk of abuse and mistreatment because of personal, relationship and family factors highlights the need to address compounding disadvantage with measures that respond to health, housing and financial stress, as part of abuse prevention and response activities.
- This again indicates the need for culturally safe and holistic responses to address the underlying individual, family and relationship factors, while focusing on building on the strength and resilience of Elders and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people and their families and communities.

Seeking help for abuse and mistreatment

Most people who experience abuse or mistreatment do not seek help or advice from third parties.

- Almost two-thirds (62%) of participants in the National Prevalence Study indicated that they did not seek help.
- Data from the yarning circles and interviews and the desktop review suggest that most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people do not report or seek help and do not use the specialist elder abuse services that are available in each state and territory.

However, many of the participants in the yarning circles and interviews described the support that they receive from their local ACCOs, who help them to feel valued and connected and assist with practical things such as transport.

Factors encouraging help seeking	Barriers to help seeking
Physically safe environments	Not identifying behaviour as abuse or mistreatment
Connecting with trauma-informed, culturally safe services	Experiencing shame or fear of experiencing shame
Linking of relevant services to facilitate access to support	Lack of access to accessible and culturally safe services
Connecting with Community	Loyalty to families and communities and not wanting to invoke police or legal responses or otherwise harm relationships
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander role models who are community champions against abuse and mistreatment	Protection of personal, family and community privacy
	Lateral violence including threats of violence or neglect
	Lack of information about, or knowledge of, where to go for help or whether they are eligible for help
	Not trusting government systems and service providers that may be identified as potentially providing relevant services

Implications

- Consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities should be prioritised in any government or sector activities to explore effective ways to harness the factors identified as encouraging help seeking, such as communication, acceptance and safety, as well as minimising barriers such as fear, inaccessibility and shame.
- This consultation should facilitate localised decision making through the design, development and implementation of place-based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led services that are specific to their needs and will encourage help seeking behaviours.
- This consultation may inform the Action Plan and future initiatives of the National Plan to End the Abuse and Mistreatment of Older People 2025–2035 or a specific strategy to address the abuse and mistreatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people.

Improving service responses and education: repair, strengthen and empower

Participants in the yarning circles and interviews emphasised the importance of services that help repair and strengthen connection to family, community, culture and Country. This includes services that facilitate connections between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people, as well as with support services, and support intergenerational connection.

Improvements to service responses were identified as needing to:

- empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people and communities to lead the development of strengths-based, community-led solutions and services that are culturally centred, holistic, flexible, solution-focused and non-judgemental in their service provision and response

- collaborate with ACCOs and ACCHOs to support localised decision making, and facilitate the design, development and implementation of place-based, specialist elder abuse services and/or other services
- build awareness and knowledge of what abuse and mistreatment is in culturally appropriate ways, with improved education and skills development for both younger and older community members, as well as targeting these activities to those engaging in the abuse and mistreatment
- ensure responses within mainstream systems and support services are culturally safe and are tailored, flexible and inclusive in their approach to meet the unique and intersectional needs of different individuals.



Implications

- This project illustrates the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led design and implementation of prevention and response activities that are by Community and for Community.
- Collaborative engagement with ACCOs and ACCHOs would support localised decision making, and facilitate the design, development and implementation of place-based, specialist elder abuse services and/or other services to address the needs Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people.
- Co-designing services and supports with communities would better facilitate the delivery of coordinated and holistic support services directed at addressing the underlying causes of the abuse and mistreatment. However, the implementation of measures will need to avoid community fatigue with the cycle of consultation.

Acknowledgement of Country

AIFS acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognises their continuing connection to lands and waters. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and to Elders past and present.

Acknowledgement of participants

AIFS acknowledges and thanks all of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) who facilitated and participated in interviews and yarning circles for this project.

© Commonwealth of Australia 2026. With the exception of AIFS branding, the Commonwealth Coat of Arms, content provided by third parties, and any material protected by a trademark, all textual material presented in this publication is provided under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International licence (CC BY 4.0). You may copy, distribute and build upon this work for commercial and non-commercial purposes; however, you must attribute the Commonwealth of Australia as the copyright holder of the work. Content that is copyrighted by a third party is subject to the licensing arrangements of the original owner.

AIFS | Level 4, 40 City Road, Southbank VIC 3006 Australia | Ph: (03) 9214 7888 Web: aifs.gov.au

Cover image: © gettyimages/Lisa-Blue

Illustrations: Tuna Blue (www.tunablue.com.au) and Think in Colour (www.think-in-colour.com.au)

ISBN (online): 978-1-76016-403-4 | ISBN (PDF): 978-1-76016-404-1

Suggested citation: Australian Institute of Family Studies. (2026) *Understanding the abuse and mistreatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people. Research snapshot*. Melbourne: AIFS.

Edited by Katharine Day | Typeset by Rachel Evans