

The co-design of an Indigenous and community-led culturally responsive prevention framework to reduce the incarceration of children

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Abstract

This study addresses the disproportionate incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Australia by co-designing an Indigenous community-led, culturally responsive prevention framework. Building on three prior studies – a scoping review and two qualitative studies with Elders, community members, and children – the research employed an iterative co-design process grounded in Indigenist and decolonising methodologies. Participants engaged in single and group yarning interviews to refine framework components, ensuring alignment with cultural values and community priorities. The resulting framework, Transformative healing and Adungadoo pathways, comprises three interconnected levels: universal outcomes for thriving children, connected families and empowered communities, rights-based systemic reforms, and culturally grounded program elements across the life course. Findings highlight the need for holistic, healing-informed and strengths-based approaches that disrupt colonial drivers of child incarceration and promote self-determination. This work offers a practical, community-driven model for justice reinvestment and systemic transformation.

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Keywords: Indigenous and community-led co-design; Decolonising research approaches; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children; Anti-carceral frameworks; Healing-informed and trauma-aware support; Justice reinvestment strategies

Highlights

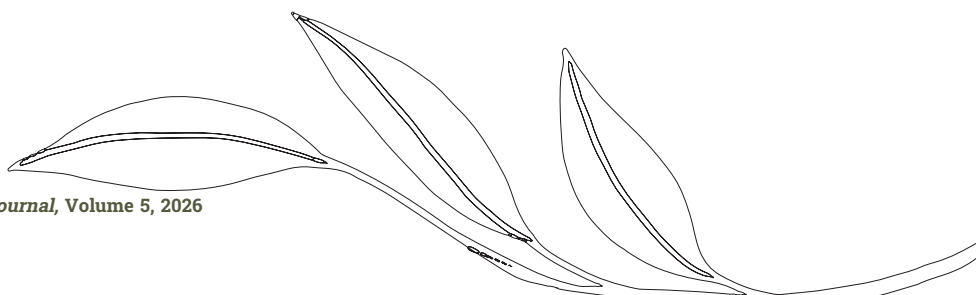
- Co-design principles value collaboration, capacity building and shared power with community.
- Indigenous and community-led co-design advances equity, justice and self-determination.
- A culturally responsive prevention framework of care interrupts child criminalisation pathways.
- Strengths-based and healing-informed support meets trauma needs across the life course.
- Community justice reinvestment enables children and families to thrive on Country.

Introduction

Australia has the resources to ensure that all children thrive within their families and communities (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW] 2024a; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD n.d.]). However, despite this potential, current youth justice policy responses to children with complex support needs often prioritise punitive measures over holistic, supportive approaches for vulnerable children (Clancey et al. 2020; McCausland and Baldry 2023). This trend continues even as crime rates decline (Clancey et al. 2020; Holland et al. 2021). In 2024, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children – who make up 6.6% of the population aged 10 to 17 years – were detained at 27 times the rate of their non-Indigenous peers, comprising nearly 60% of the youth detention population (AIHW 2024b). These figures point to deep systemic inequities and a lack of culturally appropriate community-led support for prevention, diversion and healing pathways (McCausland and Baldry 2023). As the Australian Human Rights Commission (2024) notes, addressing these failures requires more than reform; it demands a fundamental shift in how systems respond to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (Australian Human Rights Commission 2024). Justice

reinvestment is a policy and practice framework aimed at reducing incarceration by redirecting resources from punitive criminal legal systems – including policing, prison infrastructure and courts – into community-led, place-based prevention and support (Stubbs et al. 2015; Cunneen et al. 2017). As Allison (2022) highlights, justice reinvestment in Australia remains underdeveloped and has not involved formal disinvestment from criminal legal agencies. Aboriginal communities have responded by redefining justice reinvestment as a broader framework for self-determination, cultural restoration and structural accountability (Allison 2022). This study adopts the complementary framing of holistic community development to reflect the strengths-based, healing-centred approaches currently being implemented across diverse Indigenous communities.

Building on this context, the present study contributes to that shift by co-designing an Indigenous, community-led, culturally responsive, prevention framework grounded in self-determination, healing and community leadership. Self-determination is positioned within this research as both a fundamental right and a transformative act of resistance against structures that criminalise and marginalise Indigenous children (Rigney 1999). This resistance is inseparable





from Indigenous sovereignty, which, as [Moreton-Robinson \(2000\)](#) asserts, is not granted by the state but is embodied and relational – rooted in knowledge produced through connection to Country. Her work affirms that Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing are central to any meaningful transformation of systems that continue to exclude and harm Indigenous children ([Moreton-Robinson 2000](#)).

A range of interdisciplinary frameworks and models in Australia and internationally inform government and policy-level child development and prevention strategies. Frameworks typically provide overarching principles and domains, while models offer more detailed representations of processes or implementation pathways. Australian examples include The Nest Wellbeing Framework ([Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth 2024](#)), the Crime Prevention Framework ([Battams et al. 2021](#)), and the Public Health Approach to Preventing Child Maltreatment ([Malvaso et al. 2020](#)), all of which emphasise early, holistic interventions for children and families experiencing adversity or systemic disadvantage. Internationally, models such as the Empower Action Model ([Srivastav et al. 2020](#)) and the OECD Child Well-being Framework ([OECD 2021](#)) reinforce the importance of addressing structural and environmental factors that shape children's wellbeing. Together, these frameworks underscore the need for culturally responsive, context-sensitive approaches that support children and families across the life course.

Current study aim

While existing frameworks and models provide strong theoretical and strategic foundations, they often lack practical, community-designed approaches to guide implementation and ensure cultural relevance in real-world settings. This study addressed that gap by co-designing an Indigenous community-led prevention

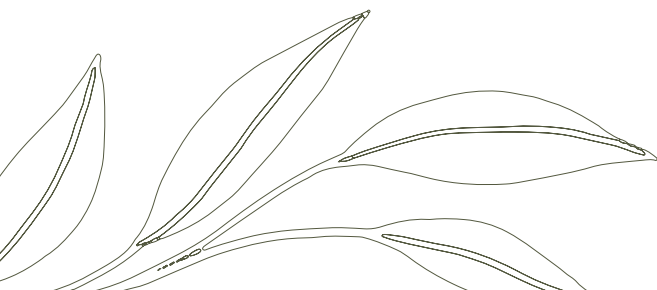
framework that centres Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities' voices and integrates theory with grounded, actionable strategies. Drawing on both Indigenous knowledge systems and interdisciplinary evidence, the framework offers a culturally responsive, context-specific framework for preventing child incarceration.

This study is therefore not only a response to systemic injustice but a deliberate act of sovereign resistance, grounded in relationality and led by the priorities of the communities it serves. These priorities frame incarceration as a continuation of colonial social control – one that criminalises need, disrupts child development, and perpetuates cycles of over-policing, hyper-incarceration and deaths in custody. Central to the framework is a call for healing and the creation of culturally responsive diversion and prevention pathways that keep children connected to family, culture and Country. The framework was co-designed through an iterative process embedded across the research program, informed by three prior studies: (1) a scoping review of culturally responsive diversion programs ([Holland et al. 2024](#)), (2) qualitative yarning interviews with Elders, community members and stakeholders ([Holland et al. 2026](#)), and (3) qualitative interviews with children and adults who had contact with the youth justice system ([Holland et al. 2025](#)). This fourth study synthesised these insights and deepened co-design through collaborative engagement with participants and communities. [Figure 1](#) presents an overview of these studies, while [Figures 2](#) and [3](#) illustrate the findings from the reflexive thematic analysis conducted in study 2 and study 3, respectively.

Methods

Research team characteristics

The research team included both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars with diverse expertise. The first



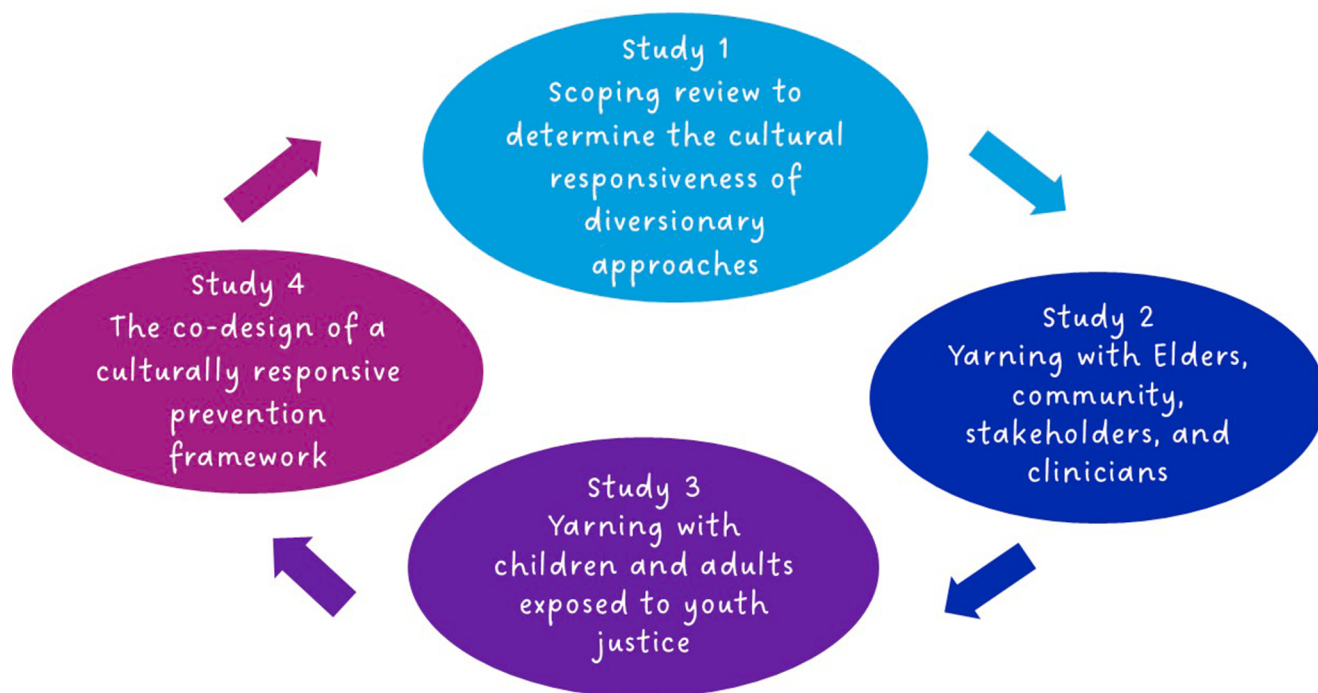


Figure 1: Visualisation of studies to inform the current study 4. Amplifying the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities.

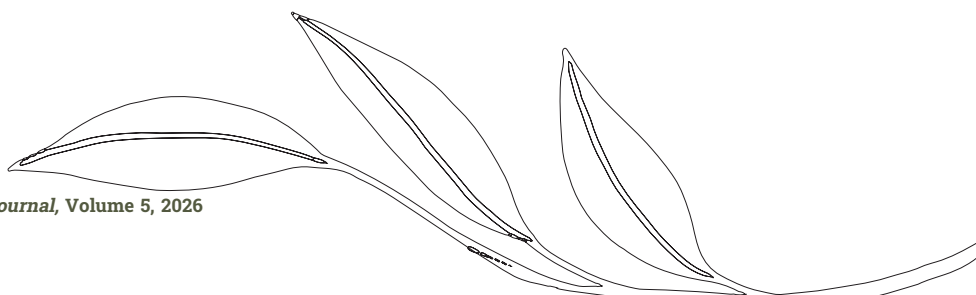
author is an Aboriginal woman and PhD candidate with a background in nursing, Indigenous health and child health. The team also included a non-Indigenous counsellor with paediatric research experience; an Indigenous researcher specialising in health and suicide prevention; a public health academic focused on Indigenous health and harm minimisation in justice settings; and a clinical psychologist with expertise in child development, neurodevelopmental disorders and FASD prevention.

Indigenist and decolonising ontology

Indigenist and decolonising ontologies centre collective wellbeing, relationality and Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing (Graham 1999; Parter and Wilson 2021). They challenge colonial systems – including White supremacy, racial capitalism and the

carceral state – by prioritising Indigenous voices and resisting social control (Martensen 2020; Rowe and Dowse 2021; Rowe et al. 2022). These worldviews emphasise ancestral strength and liberation through self-determination and cultural continuity (Rix et al. 2019).

Ongoing colonial violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples underscores the need for these approaches (Paradies 2020; Smith 2021). Smith (2021) called for a shift from deficit paradigms to strengths-based, decolonising methodologies that envision thriving futures for Indigenous children. These approaches align with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations 2007) and support transformative, participatory research that centres the perspectives



Themes Study 2. Yarning with Elders, Community, Stakeholders, and Clinicians

- **Theme 1:** “The settler colonial project” – systemic barriers to freedom
- **Theme 2:** “You don’t want young people in the system” – recognising need and promoting compassion within Australian society
- **Theme 3:** “I actually don’t know if it’s effective in any situation” – abstaining from child incarceration practices to uphold child rights
- **Theme 4:** “Because we know it’s trauma” – advocating for holistic and healing-informed child and family-focused approaches
- **Theme 5:** “You have to be connected to the community in which you are working” – asserting cultural authority, community empowerment and collaboration
- **Theme 6:** Resisting the “prison industrial complex” – awareness, understanding, identity and belonging

Figure 2: Results of study 2: Reflexive thematic analysis (Holland et al. 2026).

from Elders, communities and lived experience (Baum et al. 2006; Martensen 2020; Romm 2015). Building on these ontological foundations, the following principles guided the co-design approach throughout all stages of the research.

Guiding co-design principles

Co-design, grounded in Indigenist and decolonising ontologies, is a transformative approach that

challenges dominant systems and empowers communities to co-create solutions to complex social and structural injustices. It prioritises relationships, shared power and capacity-building through collaborative, participatory methods (Zamenopoulos and Alexiou 2018). Co-design aligns with transformative and participatory research by using reflexivity to amplify community voices and support marginalised children in shaping better futures. This

Themes from Study 3. Yarning with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Adults Exposed to Youth Justice Systems

Negative Childhood Experiences

- Exposure to Violence, Instability, and the Need for Safety and Support
- Harmful Interactions with Police and Support Systems

Positive Influences and Protective Factors

- Desire for Change and the Need for Support to Exit Offending Pathways
- Respectful Relationships and Flexible Learning Environments
- Hope, Identity, and the Power of Positive Engagement

Figure 3: Results of study 3: Reflexive thematic analysis (Holland et al. 2025).



study embraced a structured co-design process: co-planning, co-design, co-delivery, co-evaluation and co-production ([McKercher 2021](#)). The current focus is on the first two stages, with future collaboration planned to implement and evaluate the culturally responsive prevention framework.

Operationalising co-design: Co-planning and data collection

Community engagement and ethical considerations

Researchers established trust and rapport with Elders and communities across North and South-East Queensland through early engagement with youth justice transition programs, justice-reinvestment groups, independent Indigenous and alternative schools, and health and social service providers. Over a three- to six-month period, initial collaboration helped identify community-driven research priorities and ensured alignment with culturally responsive protocols. Participants received information sheets, consent forms, and a \$50.00 AUD store voucher in recognition of their time (approx. one hour per yarning interview). Letters of support were obtained from all research sites prior to data collection. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Queensland Ethics Committee (2021/HE002741). Follow-up calls or emails were made the day after interviews to check on participants' wellbeing, in accordance with the study's cultural resilience distress protocol.

Research participant recruitment

Co-design was embedded throughout the research program. This group of research participants was the same sample as in the interrelated study 2 ([Holland et al. 2026](#)), alongside additional contributors. Participants were eligible if they were adults of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent, or non-Indigenous Australian allies who had provided educational, health, social or welfare prevention strategies, and/or culturally responsive diversion and

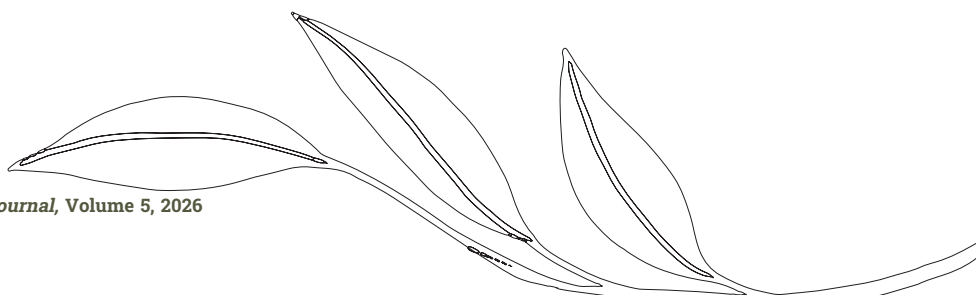
healing programs to Indigenous Australian children exposed to police engagement, custody, court proceedings or incarceration. Of the 18 original participants from study 2, 14 engaged in one to three follow-up co-design discussions to refine the framework based on earlier findings, while four were unable to contribute further due to relocation or other commitments. In late 2024, five new participants joined a dedicated yarning focus group to strengthen cultural and contextual relevance.

Data collection

Data were collected through yarning interviews from August 2022 to December 2024. Yarning, an Indigenous method, fosters culturally safe communication by building trust, enabling deep listening and supporting equal relationships ([Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010](#)). It involved reciprocal introductions, cultural respect and mutual positioning. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and the recordings were deleted afterward. Seventeen interviews were conducted with 18 participants. Four were unavailable for follow-up due to relocation or other commitments; the remaining 14 completed one to three follow-ups. In late 2024, five additional participants joined a focus yarning group to support the iterative design of the prevention framework.

Data processing

Participants were informed that all information would be de-identified to ensure confidentiality and privacy, with a participant number allocated to their data. However, research participant 6, Minjerribah Moorgumpin Elder Dale Ruska (Stradbroke Island, Queensland), requested and consented to have his data identified. Dale Ruska did not want anonymity because his people have few opportunities to have their stories heard. Therefore, his words are acknowledged by name and participant number throughout this paper. All participants received a de-



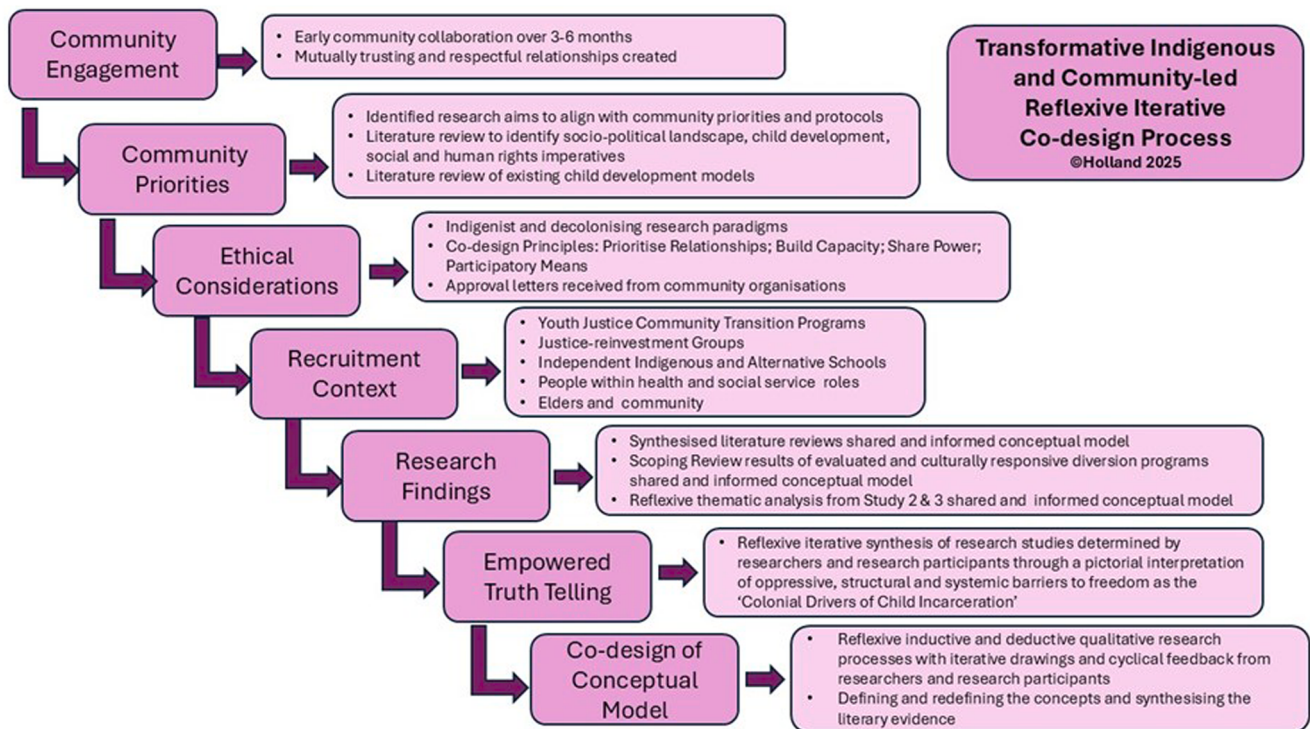


Figure 4: Transformative Indigenous and community-led reflexive iterative co-design process.

identified copy of their transcript after their yarning interview to ensure content accuracy and sufficient de-identification.

Transformative Indigenous and community-led reflexive iterative co-design process

Co-design was the central methodology guiding this study, operationalised through a reflexive, iterative process that embedded community priorities, ethical considerations and collaborative decision-making at every stage. Figure 4 illustrates this process, which began with early engagement and trust-building, progressed through the identification of community priorities and ethical protocols, and culminated in the co-design of the conceptual prevention framework (Holland 2025a). Findings from studies 1 to 3 were synthesised and shared with participants using visual

diagrams, plain language summaries and draft framework illustrations. Feedback was gathered through both individual yarning sessions and group yarning discussions, providing culturally safe spaces for dialogue and collective decision-making. Participants reviewed and refined concepts, program elements, and language through iterative cycles of feedback. Consensus on the final framework was achieved through member checking, ensuring that all participants endorsed it.

Results and Discussion

Participants' characteristics

Twenty-three participants contributed to the co-design process of this study. This diversity provided a rich foundation for interpreting the findings within varied cultural and professional contexts. Of these, 16



Participant Characteristics

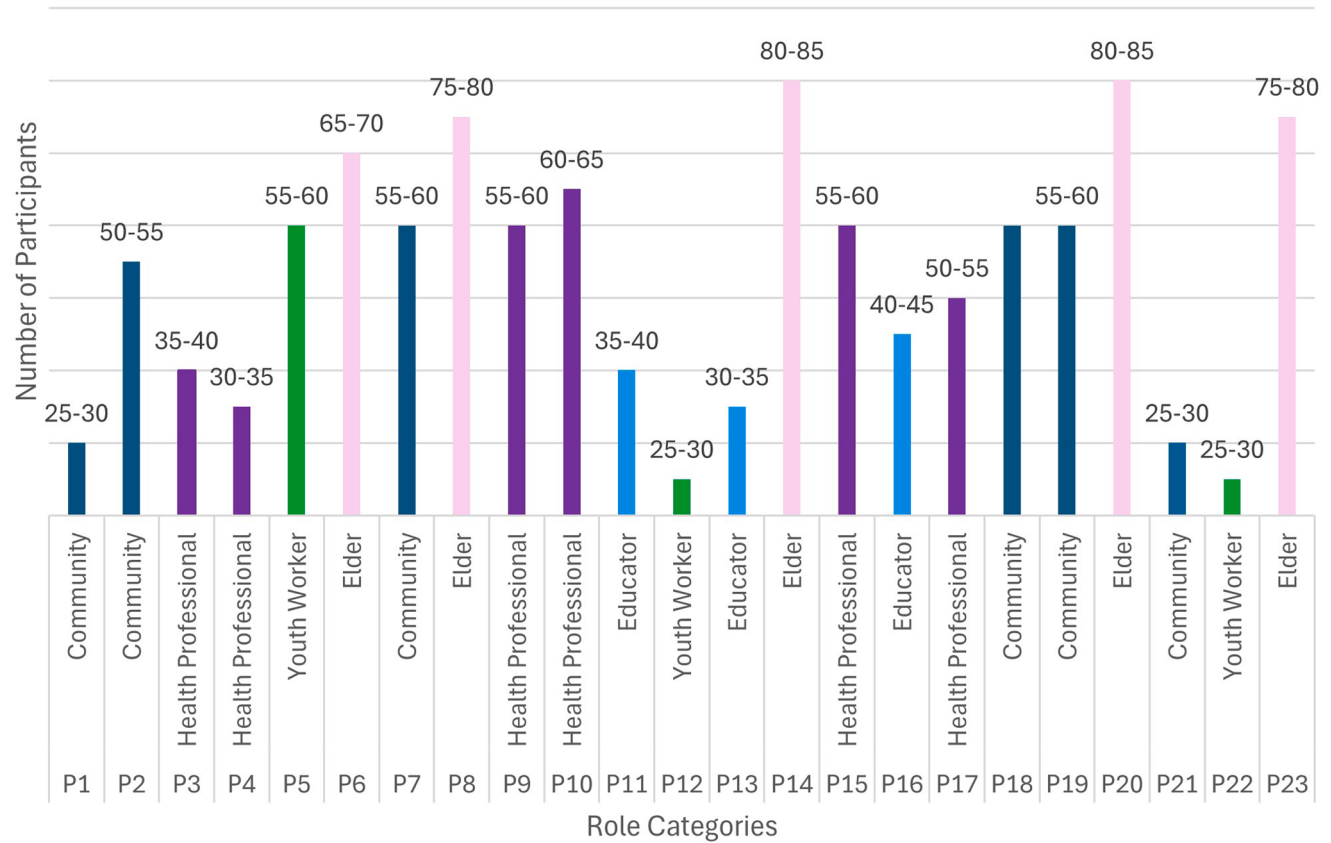
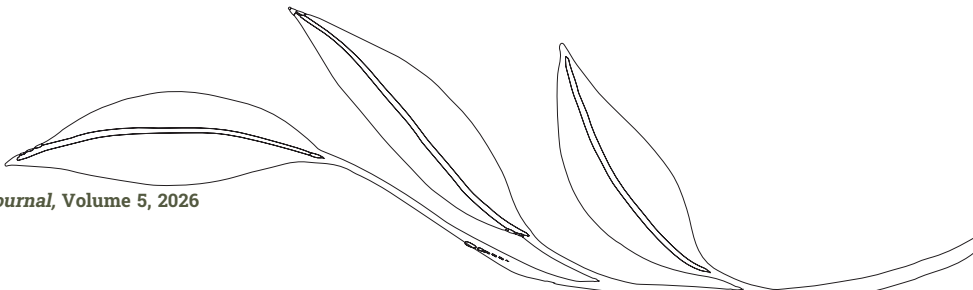


Figure 5: Participants’ characteristics (

identified as Aboriginal, one as Torres Strait Islander and six as non-Indigenous allies. The sample included 12 females and 11 males, representing diverse professional and community roles. Participants included: Elders, youth workers, educators, community members (including youth justice advocates and Indigenous police liaison officers), and health professionals (including nurses, social workers, speech pathologists and psychologists; see Figure 5. Figure 5 presents participants’ characteristics by role category and age bracket. This visualisation was included to provide a

descriptive epidemiological overview of sample diversity, supporting interpretation of qualitative findings. By depicting the distribution of roles and age ranges, the figure enables readers to contextualise quotes and thematic insights within the demographic composition of the sample. To maintain confidentiality, individual identifiers were not used; participants are aggregated into broad categories and five-year age brackets (e.g. 30 to 35, 55 to 60) to ensure deidentification while preserving demographic integrity. The y-axis represents the number of participants.



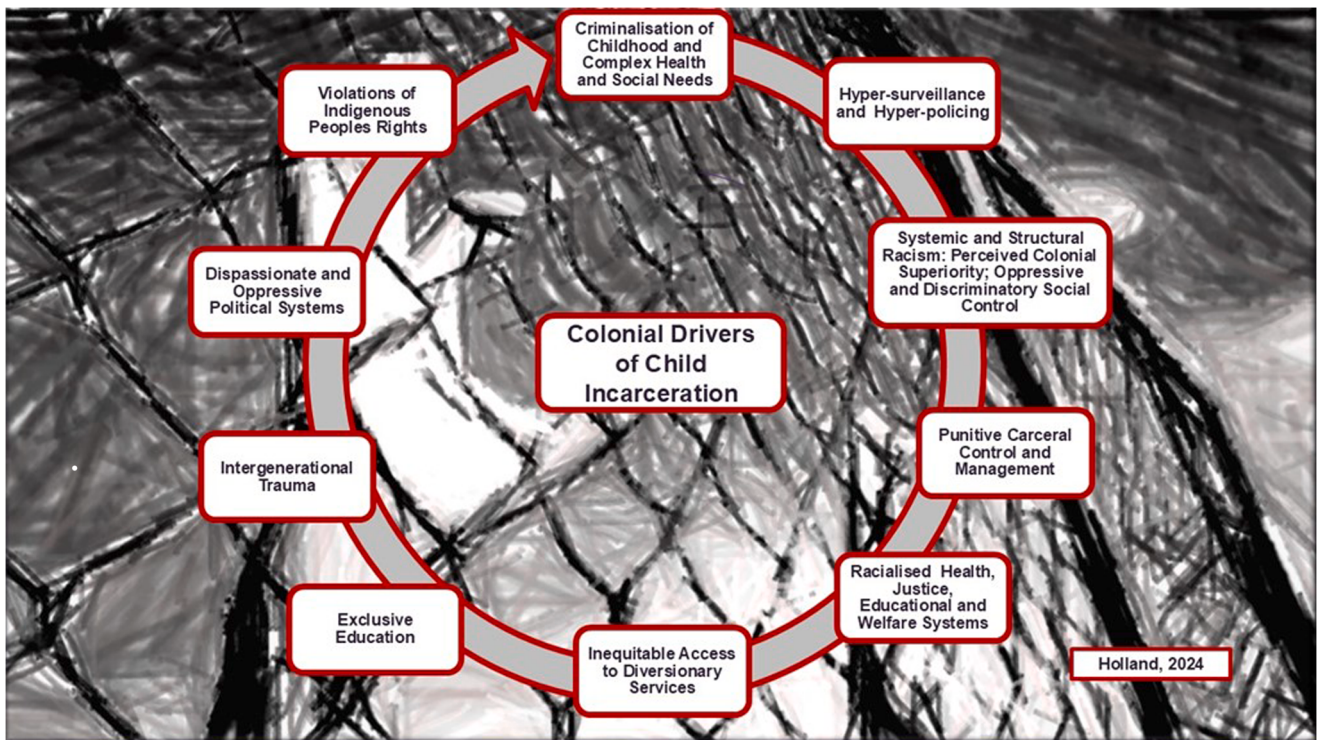


Figure 6: Colonial drivers of child incarceration (Holland, 2025b).

Truth-telling through co-design

Building on participant narratives, the co-design process surfaced systemic forces driving child incarceration.

Figure 6 illustrates these colonial drivers – racial profiling, punitive responses and institutional neglect – identified as root causes perpetuating cycles of harm. Participants emphasised the urgency of naming these truths to catalyse systemic change:

We needed to show it. To name it. Because if we don't name the colonial drivers, they'll keep pretending it's about the kids, not the system (study 2: P6).

This statement underscores the collective resolve to shift the narrative from individual blame to systemic accountability, which is a foundational principle of the

framework. Figure 6 not only informed the framework's development but also served as a catalyst for community dialogue, healing and advocacy.

Framework overview

The co-designed framework, Transformative healing and Adungadoo pathways, responds to systemic harm by embedding Indigenous sovereignty and cultural safety at its core. Figure 7 illustrates its interconnected domains through concentric circles, supported by service principles and a co-creation process that translates conceptual layers into practice. This framework is not only a model but a roadmap for systemic transformation – enabling thriving futures for children. Its design reflects a

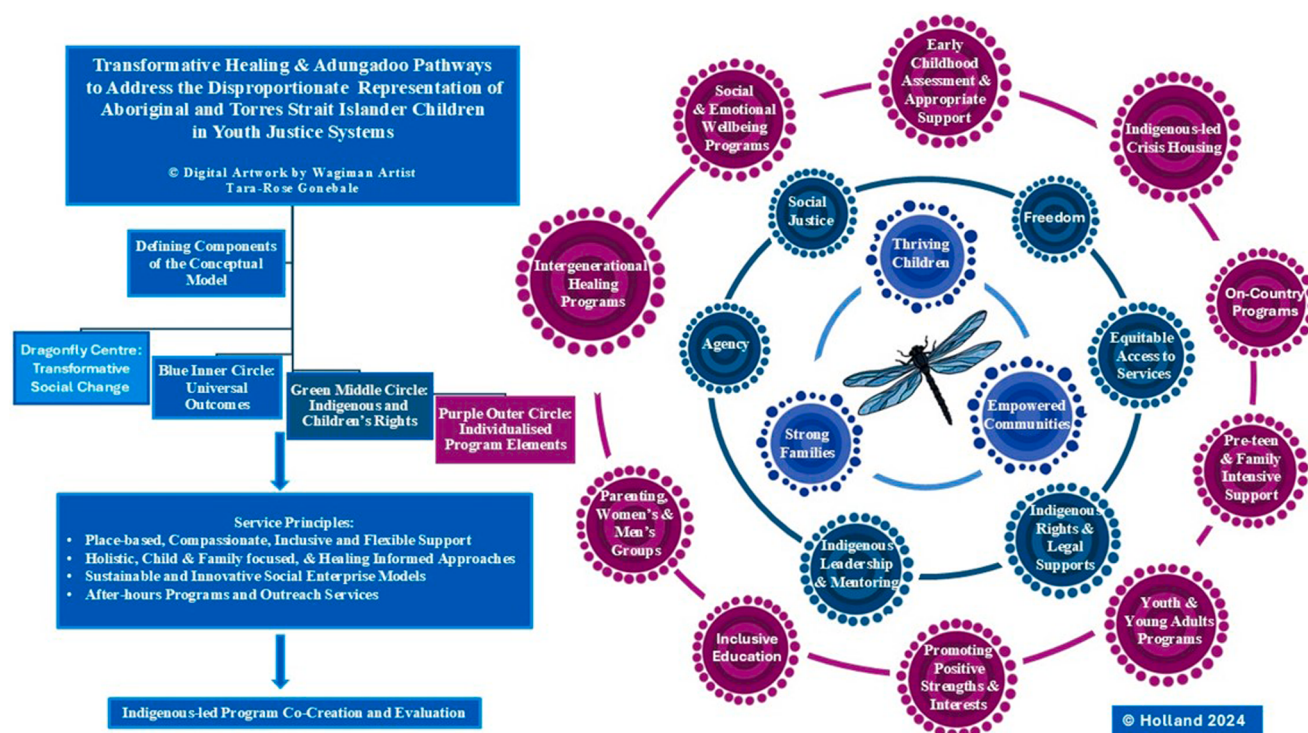


Figure 7: Indigenous and community-led culturally responsive prevention framework to reduce the incarceration of children.

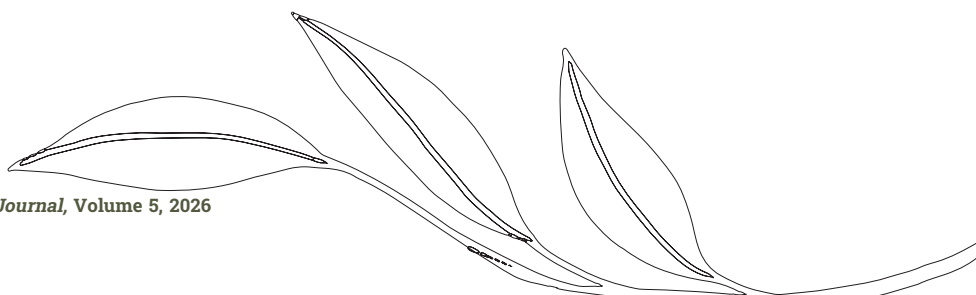
commitment to dismantling punitive paradigms and replacing them with healing-informed, community-led approaches.

The name Adungadoo pathways carries deep cultural significance, gifted from the lead author's connection to Mandandanji Country. It evokes memories of walking along Bingil Creek with her Aboriginal grandmother, Gladys; a place of comfort, identity and belonging. The pathway, lined with ancient river gums and birdlife, remains a tranquil meeting place in Roma, Queensland. This grounding ensures that the framework reflects lived experience rather than abstract policy, reinforcing its foundation in self-determination and cultural safety. It is also symbolic of the spiritual and social significance of water in Aboriginal societies (Langton 2006), where care for

Country and water sustains intergenerational memory and ceremonial practice (Godwin and Weiner 2006).

At its centre, the dragonfly symbolises transformation and collective responsibility for child wellbeing. In Aboriginal culture, dragonflies represent child development and early sensory care – a story echoed in practices where Elders test babies' hearing by the vibration of dragonfly wings (Berger n.d.). This cultural metaphor aligns with evidence on hearing health and child development in Aboriginal communities, underscoring the framework's emphasis on early intervention and relational care (AIHW 2022).

The concentric circles represent three interdependent layers: universal outcomes for thriving children, strong families and empowered communities, rights-based





principles that uphold agency and social justice, and program elements that operationalise these commitments. Participants emphasised that success depends on systemic shifts – such as recognition of Indigenous rights and leadership – without which program-level interventions risk falling short. As one participant explained:

You don't want young people in the system... why can't we make a society that isn't so harsh, that parents can thrive? (Study 2: P17).

This perspective reinforces the framework's emphasis on upstream solutions that strengthen families and reduce reliance on punitive systems. [Figure 7](#) not only visualises these domains but reinforces the narrative of systemic change, positioning communities as architects of justice and wellbeing. While grounded in Australian contexts, these principles offer insights for jurisdictions worldwide seeking to embed Indigenous-led solutions.

Systemic transformation through interconnected justice pathways

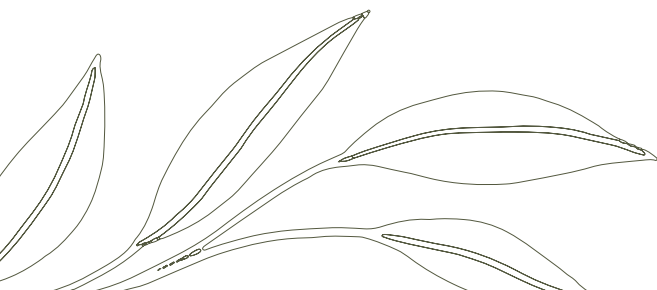
The framework integrates interconnected elements aimed at addressing social, economic and health disparities through transformative, equity-driven action ([Mertens 2010](#)). It emphasises place-based, culturally responsive and flexible support, alongside Indigenous program co-creation and evaluation. By centring lived experiences and tackling root causes of injustice the framework aligns with Indigenous and decolonising ontologies, empowering communities to co-create pathways toward social justice, collective wellbeing and the celebration of cultural strengths.

Crucially, the framework also recognises the interdependence of its elements. For instance, the success of social and emotional wellbeing programs

depends on broader systemic shifts – such as the realisation of Indigenous rights and leadership. Without these foundations, program-level interventions may fall short. This underscores the need for holistic, community-empowered approaches that move beyond isolated initiatives. As [Behrendt \(2003\)](#) argues, social justice for Indigenous peoples requires not only targeted programs but also institutional reform, recognition of sovereignty, and the creation of culturally safe spaces for self-determination ([Behrendt 2003](#)).

Framework components at a glance

The Transformative healing and Adungadoo pathways framework is structured around three interconnected layers. The blue inner circle sets universal outcomes for thriving children, strong families and empowered communities. The green middle circle embeds rights-based principles – agency, freedom, social justice and Indigenous leadership – to dismantle colonial drivers of incarceration. Surrounding these, the purple outer circle translates principles into action through culturally responsive program elements such as inclusive education, on-Country healing, crisis housing, early childhood assessment and intergenerational wellbeing initiatives. Together, these layers provide a practical roadmap for systemic transformation, enabling communities to implement holistic, healing-informed strategies that prevent child incarceration and promote self-determination. To ensure that this framework can be readily implemented by practitioners, policymakers and community organisations, the following sections provide detailed descriptions of its three interconnected layers, supported by participant quotes that justify program elements. Each layer outlines guiding principles, cultural metaphors and practical strategies that translate the framework into actionable solutions.





Blue inner circle: Universal outcomes

The symbolic hope and new life of the dragonfly strengthens the ambition of the blue inner circle of ‘universal outcomes’ for all of society to work together to enable thriving children, strong families and empowered communities. A participant captured the essence of the need to support parents and families to raise children well:

A society ...that parents can have access to supports, that parents can create warm homes to raise their children in, that parents do have the patience, the time, the skillset to role model appropriate behaviours (study 2: P17).

Community-led programs provided across the life course can strengthen family capacity and wellbeing, reducing out-of-home-care requirements. Incarceration rates are worsened by the removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities (AIHW 2024c). A racially discriminatory, culturally unsafe and incompetent child protection system harms a child’s cultural identity (McGlade 2019). These issues reflect ongoing colonial violence and family disruption, causing intergenerational trauma and structural harm to Indigenous children, families and communities (Chamberlain et al. 2022).

Green middle circle: Indigenous and children’s rights

The green middle circle reflects the strengths, rights and resources required to resist the incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children by upholding Indigenous and children’s rights and disrupts the colonial drivers of child incarceration depicted in Figure 5. By focusing on these factors, a more just and supportive system can be created for Indigenous children, reducing overrepresentation in the justice system and promoting health and wellbeing.

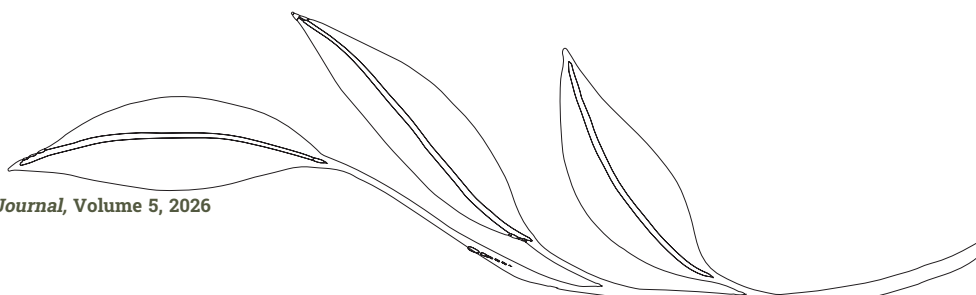
Agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently and make free choices. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, agency is often constrained by systemic forces such as racial profiling, over-policing and institutional surveillance, which foster fear and mistrust. When children are supported to exercise agency, they are better equipped to resist these oppressive systems and assert control over their lives. For example, participants described:

And police walking up and street checking kids. All the time. Never anyone else. But always our First Nations kids. Always (study 2; P10).

Our kids are so threatened, so frightened. And if you think about some of the situations they’ve been in, every time, nearly every single time, there’s a police officer. Even if it’s with mental health, there’s a police officer. Walking the streets... (study 2: P12).

While agency operates at the level of individual action, it is deeply connected to the broader goal of self-determination – the collective right of Indigenous peoples to govern their own lives, communities and futures. In this way, agency can be understood as a foundational tool or expression of self-determination in practice (Behrendt 2003; Sherwood 2013).

Social justice refers to the equitable distribution of resources, opportunities and power within a society, and the active dismantling of structures that perpetuate inequality. In the Australian context, social justice is inextricably linked to the historical and ongoing impacts of colonisation, which continue to shape the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (Behrendt 2003). These impacts manifest through systemic racism, institutional control and the privileging of Western worldviews over Indigenous knowledge systems.





Participants in this study described how social justice for Indigenous Australians is undermined by dominant institutional paradigms that pathologise Indigenous identity and reinforce surveillance and control. As one participant explained:

Organisations operate from a superior viewpoint – if there isn't an issue, they'll find one. That's the complexity of racism and the dominance of Western over Indigenous worldviews (study 2: P3).

[Behrendt \(2003\)](#) argues that achieving social justice for Indigenous Peoples requires more than equal treatment – it demands structural reform, recognition of Indigenous sovereignty, and the creation of culturally safe spaces where Indigenous voices and perspectives are central to decision-making.

The freedom of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is often compromised by punitive justice systems that fail to recognise their rights, dignity and cultural needs. Elder Dale Ruska, a respected community advocate and cultural leader, exemplifies the power of Indigenous leadership in resisting systemic oppression and fostering transformational change grounded in self-determination. His words reflect a deep commitment to decolonisation and collective healing:

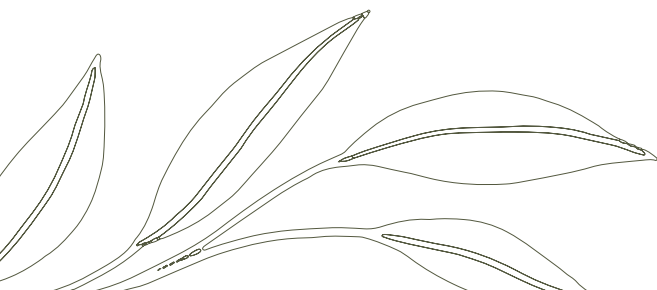
I feel a sense of gratitude and a sense of strong hope. And knowing that from the process of awareness raising and acceptance, we've been able to decolonise our state of thinking from the suppressed state back into a free state to be able to identify and know what is necessary on our behalf and to be able to also determine what we need to do to bring that about no matter how hard it is (study 2: P6).

Elders such as Dale Ruska play a vital role in guiding communities through cultural, political and spiritual renewal. Their leadership is not only symbolic but also practical – anchoring movements for justice in cultural authority, lived experience and intergenerational wisdom.

Equitable access to services refers to the fair distribution of health, education and social supports, ensuring that all individuals – regardless of socioeconomic background – can benefit from essential resources. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, access is often shaped by systemic disadvantage and structural inequality, which contribute to their overrepresentation in the justice system. Participants emphasised the importance of addressing upstream determinants of wellbeing, such as housing, education and healthcare. As one participant explained:

They're not creating societies that are conducive for parents to raise healthy children. We've got to go upstream, we've got to look at housing, we've got to look at education, we've got to look at health. All these are all interrelated. They're not silos and it's all very much connected (study 2: P17).

Indigenous rights and legal supports are fundamental to the obligations outlined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which calls for legal protections to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are treated fairly within the justice system ([Australian Law Reform Commission 2017](#); [United Nations 2007](#)). Legal advocacy helps children and families navigate complex systems and assert their rights, even in cases involving minor offences.





Participants strongly emphasised the need to raise the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to at least 14 or 16 years, aligning with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, which recommends a minimum age of 14 and commends countries with higher thresholds ([United Nations 2019](#)). As one participant explained:

But then putting them in juvey as young as 10 in Queensland just makes things rapidly worse... like putting them in a box, a steel box that disconnects them, for hours a day. They need to be cared for as humans (study 2: P7).

Indigenous leadership and mentoring are vital for fostering culturally responsive approaches and driving change within systems that have historically marginalised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples ([Sanchez et al. 2023](#)). While Elders hold cultural authority, Indigenous leaders may also include professionals – such as teachers, nurses or police officers – who bring cultural insight and community accountability into mainstream institutions. Leadership in Indigenous contexts is relational and grounded in cultural responsibility. As the [Australian Indigenous Governance Institute \(2020\)](#) notes, leadership is not about hierarchy but about being accountable to community, culture and Country. A participant described the importance of recognising Indigenous spirituality in care settings:

There was a young Indigenous man who said an owl landed and he was talking about that owl, and it was a visit of a family member... I was like, 'But this is that spirituality. This is the being of an Indigenous person.' And we've got to come off superior of our standpoint to go, 'Well, maybe we should just listen to that' (study 2: P3).

Elders, Indigenous leaders and mentors play key roles in transmitting cultural knowledge through ceremony, story and spiritual signs. This continuity strengthens identity and provides stability for children ([Edwige and Gray 2021](#); [Sanchez et al. 2023](#)). As one participant reflected:

If someone identifies and applies for a position and it is an identified position, they need to understand that that identified position came as a result of a lot of community struggle and loss... You have to be connected to the community in which you are working to be able to carry that voice (study 2: P10).

Purple outer circle: Program elements

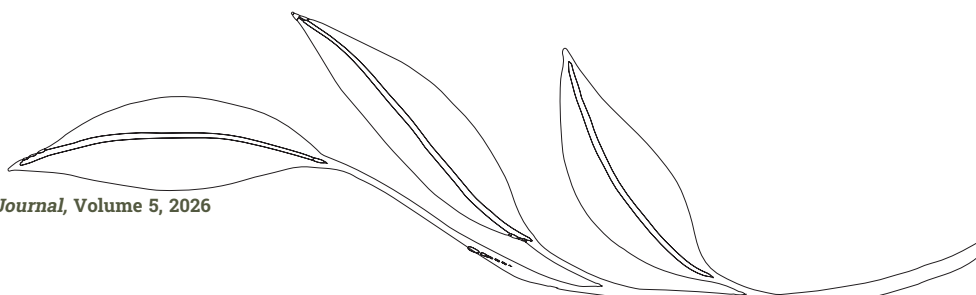
The purple outer circle provides examples of individualised program elements that could be offered to children, families and communities across the life course, based on participant recommendations and findings from the scoping review ([Holland et al. 2024](#)). Ultimately, program elements are to be co-designed according to the following service principles:

- Place-based, compassionate, inclusive and flexible support
- Holistic, child and family-focused, and healing-informed approaches
- Sustainable and innovative social enterprise models
- After-hours programs and outreach services

Fundamentally, the essence of the 'Culturally Responsive Prevention Framework' enables Indigenous-led program 'co-creation and evaluation'.

Inclusive education

Participants emphasised the importance of creating educational environments that are holistic, inclusive and trauma-aware. Effective education provides stability, reduces discrimination and offers alternative pathways away from crime by fostering positive





behaviour and lifelong protective factors. One participant, a teacher in an alternative school, described using flexible curricula and individualised learning plans to keep students engaged:

We aim not to make the classes any bigger than 15, with two staff, a youth worker and a teacher... I would consult the young people at the end of term, 'What would you like to learn about next term?' (study 2: P11).

In Australia, flexischools support students excluded from mainstream education. [Shay and Heck \(2015\)](#) found that over 30 per cent of flexischool students and staff are Indigenous and that schools are often in low socioeconomic areas. These schools prioritise flexibility, cultural connection and social justice over discipline ([Shay and Heck 2015](#); [Shay and Lampert 2018](#)). Trauma-informed positive education further supports students affected by violence or neglect by enhancing self-regulation and learning outcomes through rhythm, mindfulness and de-escalation ([Brunzell et al. 2016](#)).

Promoting positive strengths and interests

This program element emerged from children's narratives in study 3, highlighting the importance of aligning activities with their strengths and interests. Despite experiencing significant adversity, children articulated aspirations, personal strengths and the value of supportive programs. Their interests spanned sport, music and the pursuit of stability through school-based casual employment. One participant, reflecting on their involvement in a youth justice transition program, proudly recalled receiving a gold medal for English and shared a passion for writing and historical events:

I got a gold medal for English. Captain Cook... How he came to Australia to try to claim this land, but then they had a fight with the Aboriginal people, like

all the Elders. And they called for food and the ship that was coming over with all the food on it, that broke down in the ocean and everyone died on that boat (study 3: P12).

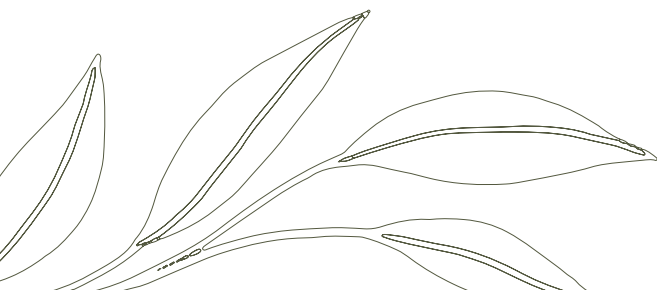
These insights underscore the need for holistic, identity-affirming approaches that integrate educational achievement with recreational and culturally grounded activities. Programs co-designed with communities to reflect children's interests are critical for sustained engagement and success. Diverse, strength-based pathways in education, training and employment – particularly those supported by Indigenous mentorship – offer meaningful alternatives to justice system involvement and help disrupt cycles of criminalisation ([Holland et al. 2024](#)).

Youth and young adult programs

To provide culturally responsive alternatives to youth detention, research participants emphasised the importance of therapeutic healing centres that are community-run and provide 'home-like' environments. These centres should enable young people to maintain connections with their families, which is crucial for their emotional and social wellbeing:

So, I think it really all does come back to that healing... If we do have therapeutic healing centres for children, then ensuring that they are community run, that they are home-like environments, that they still enable young people to have connections with their family. And this would all be supported by the literature of like the Diagrama model in Spain (study 2: P1).

There are also a range of international exemplars that can be drawn on regarding therapeutic models of care. For example, the Diagrama model in Spain





serves as a compelling example of a therapeutic healing centre. Diagrama operates small-scale residential facilities known as ‘re-education centres’, which focus on educating young people and preparing them for reintegration into their communities. These centres emphasise strong family and community connections, providing a supportive and non-punitive environment that encourages personal growth and social skills development ([Diagrama Foundation 2019](#)).

Pre-teen and family intensive support

Early, family-centred interventions are critical in preventing child incarceration, particularly for children aged 10 to 14 years, which is a developmental window identified by participants as pivotal for engagement and redirection. Participants consistently advocated holistic, trauma-aware and healing-informed approaches that scaffold both the child and their family:

From 10 to 14 is a pivotal age to capture and connect with young people before they get too embedded with the child justice system... But if we are going to capture them at that age, we need to scaffold family and community. Building community capacity, connecting families to try and heal some of that trauma...
(study 2: P9).

Rather than managing complex needs through incarceration, participants emphasised the importance of community-led, therapeutic, wrap-around programs that address the interrelated needs of children and their families. These programs aim to empower families through practical support – such as budgeting, health and substance misuse services – while fostering long-term resilience:

It's about working with the whole family... budgeting, food, your health, everything, substance misuse... And you should see the empowerment of what that family

feels once they get there and start kicking on with it
(study 2: P5).

Successful models described by participants involved collaboration between schools and non-government organisations (NGOs), offering voluntary, intensive support tailored to family needs over flexible timeframes:

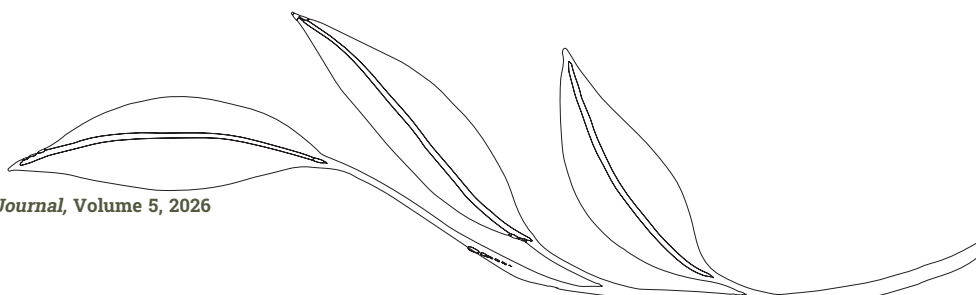
There were programs... in collaboration with clusters of primary schools and an NGO... The school focused on the student and the NGO focused on the wraparound and working with the family. It was voluntary (study 2: P16).

These findings align with a growing body of evidence supporting trauma-informed, strengths-based and culturally responsive practices in education and social services. Such approaches recognise the cumulative impact of trauma and the importance of relational, community-embedded responses ([Brunzell et al. 2016](#)). Programs that integrate education, health and social supports – particularly those co-designed with families – are shown to reduce justice system contact and promote long-term wellbeing ([Dudgeon et al. 2022](#)).

Indigenous-led crisis housing

Crisis and emergency housing are essential to prevent child protection intervention during periods of family instability or homelessness, particularly for young people who cannot safely remain at home. Participants reflected on the historical role of Indigenous-run hostels as culturally safe spaces that provided therapeutic support, stability and cultural continuity:

If you had that safe haven for these fellas to be able to sit back and relax and not have to worry about food,



not have to worry about any violence, not have to worry about peer pressure... Most of them come up from trauma-impacted families (study 2: P5).

These insights align with national advocacy for Aboriginal community-controlled housing models. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing Association (NATSIHA) champions self-determined, culturally appropriate housing solutions that prioritise safety, healing and community leadership (NATSIHA, n.d.). Similarly, an urgent need exists for Indigenous-led responses to housing insecurity, particularly in regions where Aboriginal people are disproportionately affected by homelessness and overcrowding. Research also underscores the importance of sustainable, culturally responsive housing in regional and remote communities to support long-term wellbeing and reduce systemic disadvantage (Lea et al. 2021).

Early childhood assessment and appropriate support

Early intervention offers a critical opportunity to address children's needs and reduce their risk of contact with the youth justice system. Participants emphasised the importance of culturally responsive neurodevelopmental assessments to accurately identify children's strengths and challenges. However, a lack of culturally appropriate tools remains a significant barrier:

You want funding for the kids, but a lot of the assessments are not culturally appropriate... Speech pathology is becoming more prioritised – distinguishing between Standard Australian English and Aboriginal English, so kids aren't misdiagnosed with language disorders when they're just speaking home talk... There's really limited assessment at the moment (study 2: P4).

Designing early childhood and family interventions based on robust evidence is essential. For example, Allen et al. (2024) evaluated the Pathways to Prevention project (2002–11) in Brisbane, which delivered two key interventions: the Preschool Intervention Program and the Family Independence Program. The preschool component improved language and classroom behaviour among 616 four-year-olds, leading to a 56% reduction in youth offending compared with a control group. The family program supported over 1,000 families with counselling and parenting education. Notably, children whose families engaged in both programs recorded zero offending. While outcomes included improved parental efficacy and classroom behaviour, families facing multiple adversities required more intensive support. The program's success was attributed to its evidence-based design, integration within the education system, and universal, preventive approach (Allen et al. 2024).

Social and emotional wellbeing programs

Participants noted that many young people could benefit from access to appropriate support for mental health challenges, addiction and other health conditions. These issues substantially affect wellbeing and behaviour, increasing the risk of criminalisation. Communities could use multi-pronged prevention strategies to address alcohol-related harm. For example, education and support programs to prevent alcohol uptake during childhood and harm reduction strategies to provide safe places for recovery and healing rather than criminalising trauma and substance use (Holland et al. 2023). As one participant described:

Oh, and we know that, particularly in this country, we don't treat mental health, we don't treat addiction in the ways that we should, and we criminalise. And that



speaks to the prison industrial complex whereby lots of people are getting very rich off locking people up when we know that there's probably a lot of people in these institutions, in these prisons that could benefit from access to healthcare to treat mental health and other undiagnosed conditions that might be impacting their behaviours and attitudes (study 2: P17).

On-Country programs

On-Country programs are vital for reconnecting with cultural practices and identity. One participant recalled spending school holidays in the bush with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, learning cultural ways and finding respite from harmful urban influences:

Take them out bush, take them away from the city. Even if they're urban, rural, sorry, take them back out, go back out bush, run a program. There's all this funding in amongst drug and alcohol, substance misuse, mental health. Take them out bush. I always believe in it. I did it when I was a young fella. That was a part of our thing. For a month-and-a-half on the school holidays we'd go out bush, and we'd go out bush with 50 other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids and learn our ways again (study 2: P5).

For example, the Yiriman project in Western Australia is a culturally responsive, Elder-led initiative supporting Aboriginal youth through prevention and intervention strategies addressing crime, suicide, education, health and on-Country healing (Palmer 2013). It provides a safe, alcohol- and drug-free space where young people reconnect with culture through relationships with Elders and immersive experiences in language, land, ceremony and storytelling. These practices strengthen identity and foster leadership through cultural responsibility.

Intergenerational healing programs

Intergenerational trauma is transmitted through harmful behaviours, such as violence and risky substance use, and is exacerbated by racialised interventions in health, juvenile justice, child protection and welfare systems. Children living in households with members of the Stolen Generations are twice as likely to experience significant emotional and behavioural difficulties compared with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (AIHW 2019; Darwin et al. 2023). Healing through Indigenous perspectives of social and emotional wellbeing fosters resilience by strengthening connections to family, culture and Country (Edwige and Gray 2021).

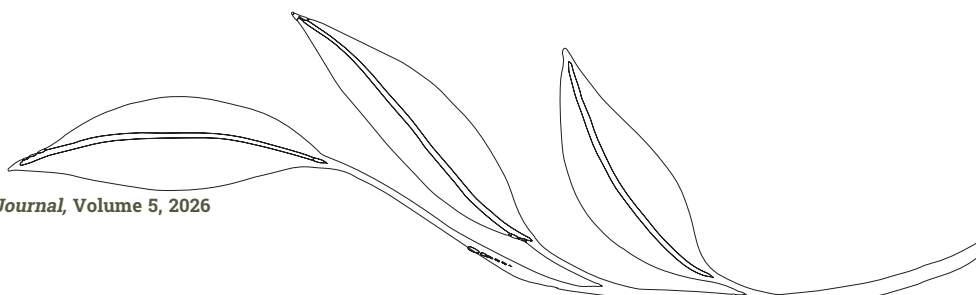
Participants advocated for prioritisation of social and emotional wellbeing outcomes for children and families by identifying, recovering and healing from the trauma produced by colonial harm. Providing a safe space on-Country to share stories, art, music, dancing and weaving with the provision of leadership and mentoring by the knowledges of Elders recognises the value of ceremony, tradition, spirituality and cultural continuity to strengthen community collectively (Edwige and Gray 2021).

Dale Ruska: *There's no emphasis put on the need for our healing, moral healing, physical healing (study 2: P6).*

Because we know it's trauma, we know what's happened in the past, we know all about the Stolen Generations. And these things are still happening, kids are still getting taken without looking at next of kin (study 2: P5).

Parenting, women's and men's groups

Parenting, women's and men's groups play a vital role in disrupting intergenerational cycles of child





maltreatment by creating space for healing from trauma and strengthening family relationships (Chamberlain et al. 2019). These groups can foster traditional Indigenous child-rearing practices through shared knowledge, cultural education, and community support, promoting positive parenting and healthy family dynamics. Participants highlighted the value of embedding reproductive health, pregnancy education and parenting skills into high school curricula to support early intervention. One participant emphasised the need for targeted education on foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), noting its disproportionate impact on Aboriginal children in youth detention:

If we're considering how do we prevent young people from coming into contact with the "criminal injustice system", if we're thinking about age groups, I would think about all age groups. I would think about when they're in the tummy, the impact of FASD, foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, we would think about the educational components addressing people in black communities about the dangers of FASD and how that impacts the capacity for young people to develop healthy brains, and how FASD impacts the area of the brain that addresses our good decision-making stuff (study 2: P17).

This aligns with research showing the overrepresentation of children with FASD in the justice system and the need for culturally appropriate prevention and support strategies (Bower et al. 2018).

The findings presented in this study illuminate the systemic drivers of child incarceration and the transformative potential of Indigenous-led, culturally responsive approaches. Through iterative co-design, participants articulated interconnected priorities – healing, cultural continuity and relational care – that

challenge punitive paradigms and advance justice reinvestment strategies. These insights extend current knowledge by reframing prevention as a process grounded in Indigenous sovereignty and community leadership, rather than deficit-based interventions. The framework operationalises these principles through practical pathways that integrate cultural authority, trauma-aware and healing-informed practice, and holistic support across the life course. In doing so, it offers a roadmap for systemic transformation that aligns with Indigenist and decolonising worldviews, positioning communities as architects of change rather than subjects of reform. These findings resonate beyond Australia, offering insights for jurisdictions seeking to dismantle punitive systems and embed Indigenous-led solutions. This synthesis provides a conceptual bridge to consider the study's limitations and future research directions.

Limitations and future directions

Reducing the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in detention requires more than piecemeal incremental reform – it calls for systemic transformation. Current approaches that emphasise punishment overlook the deep-rooted impacts of colonisation, intergenerational trauma and institutional racism (Behrendt 2003; Holland et al. 2024; McCausland and Baldry 2023). As Behrendt (2003) asserts, true justice requires structural reform, recognition of sovereignty and space for self-determination. Rather than expanding carceral systems, there is a growing need to invest in Indigenous-led, culturally responsive alternatives that prioritise healing, empowerment and community wellbeing. Justice reinvestment – when designed and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities – offers a promising pathway to addressing underlying causes of criminalisation and strengthen cultural continuity (Aboriginal and Torres



[Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner 2020](#); [Holland et al. 2024](#)). These solutions must be holistic and preventative, addressing unmet needs in health, education, housing and social support ([Baidawi 2020](#); [Chamberlain et al. 2022](#)). Trauma-informed, culturally safe early interventions can play a critical role in supporting families, building resilience and strengthening cultural identities. Co-designed healing programs that keep children connected to kin, culture and Country are vital to this vision. By investing in community-driven support, systemic barriers can begin to be dismantled and a future where all children are supported to thrive can be built, where they are valued for their strengths, not punished for their needs. While the prevention framework presented in this study is grounded in extensive community consultation and reflects widespread Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contributions, it does not claim to speak for all communities across Australia. The diversity of cultural knowledge, lived experiences and local contexts means that no single framework can fully encompass every perspective. However, the framework is intentionally designed to be flexible and agile – capable of being adapted to suit the unique needs, strengths and aspirations of different communities. Future work should continue to engage with a broader range of voices to ensure the framework remains responsive, inclusive and grounded in self-determination.

While detailed implementation strategies will be developed in partnership with communities and funding bodies, the next phase of this work will prioritise co-delivery and co-evaluation through community-controlled organisations, supported by iterative, culturally grounded evaluation processes. Practice resources and evaluation tools will be co-

designed to reflect Indigenous ways of knowing and measure outcomes such as cultural connection, relational wellbeing and reductions in systemic harm. These steps will ensure that the framework remains adaptable, locally-led and responsive to community priorities.

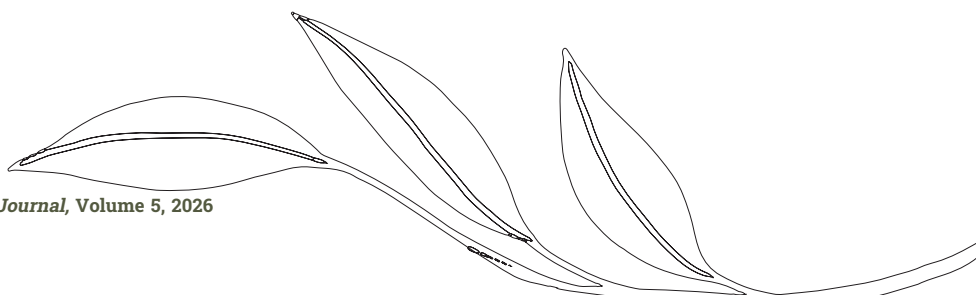
Conclusion

This study outlines the collaborative co-design of an Indigenous community-led, culturally responsive prevention framework aimed at reducing child incarceration. Grounded in trauma-aware, healing-informed and strengths-based principles, the framework promotes holistic, community-driven support across the life course. By centring Indigenous knowledge, lived and living experiences, and leadership, the framework offers a pathway toward intergenerational healing and justice. Its approaches are designed to empower families with the legal, cultural and social tools to raise children in safe, nurturing environments. Ultimately, this research calls for a systemic shift – one that amplifies the voices of Indigenous children and families, acknowledges the ongoing impacts of colonisation, and invests in culturally grounded, preventative solutions. In doing so, Australia can move toward breaking cycles of incarceration and building a more just, compassionate society for all children.

Author contributors

All authors contributed to the conceptualisation of the study. L. Holland drafted the manuscript. All authors provided editing and revisions of the manuscript. All authors have approved the final manuscript for submission.

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used Microsoft Copilot (University of Queensland secure





enterprise environment) to improve grammar, spelling, readability and reference formatting. No data were shared outside the institutional system. All outputs were reviewed and edited by the authors, who take full responsibility for the final content.

Declaration of interests

We declare no conflicts of interest in the writing or the content of the manuscript.

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Ethical approval and informed consent statements

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Queensland Ethics Committee (2021/HE002741). Information sheets and consent forms were provided and signed by research participants. Dissemination of the findings outlined submission to high impact journals.

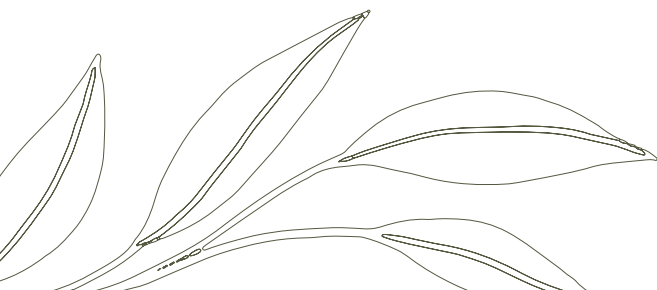
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Professor Maree Toombs (ORCID: [0000-0002-7481-167X](#)) is a proud Euralayie/Kooma woman from North Western NSW. Professor Toombs is an accomplished and strategic leader in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and research with national and international networks in the field of public health. Her work on aspects of social and emotional wellbeing has improved health outcomes for Indigenous People and led to changes in quality





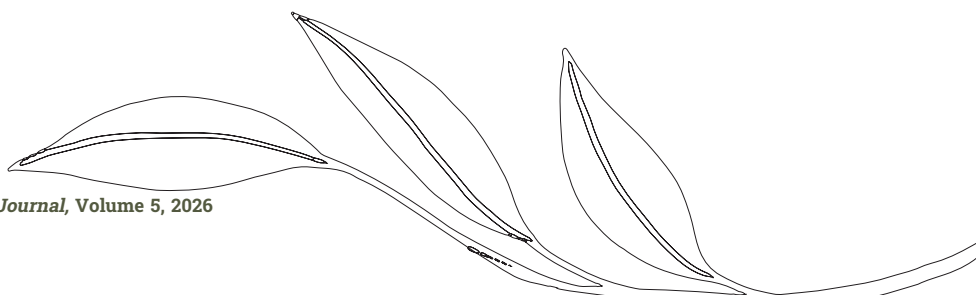
assurance and policy changes here in Australia and internationally. Through her book, lectures, research and appointments, Professor Toombs has improved the way that people work with Indigenous Australians. She also continues to provide leadership in cultural and ethical guidelines and expertise in qualitative data collection and dissemination.

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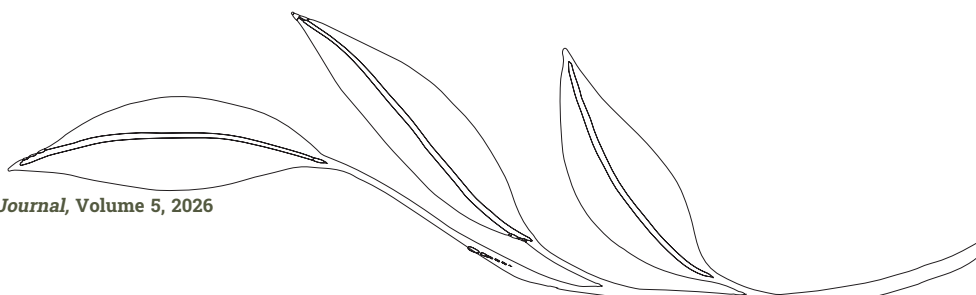
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