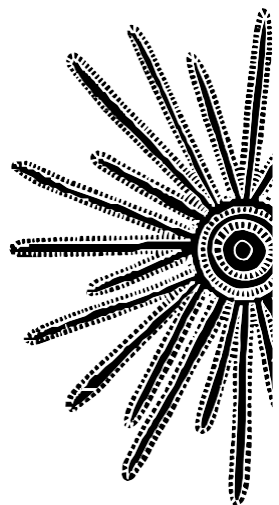


# Research Summary: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health and wellbeing around the Voice to Parliament Referendum

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3. Black Dog Institute

June 2025



# Content Warning

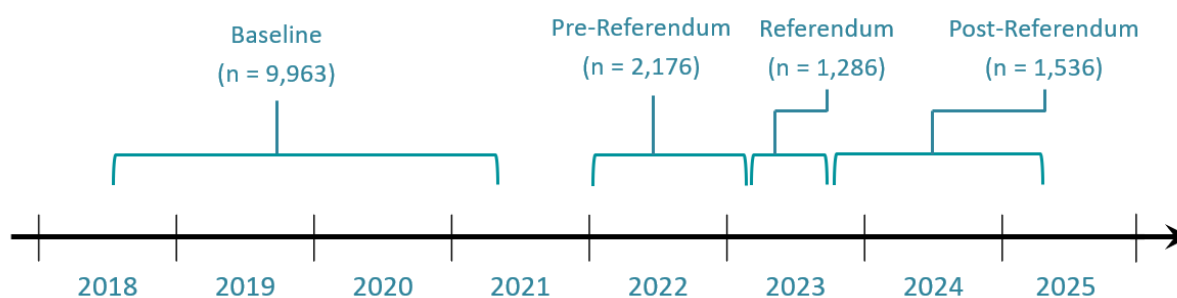
This Research Summary contains information about discrimination, racism, and mental health, which may be upsetting or distressing to read about. If you need to talk to someone, call [13YARN](tel:139276) (13 92 76) to speak to an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Crisis Support worker, or Lifeline on 13 11 14. Self-care resources and links to support services can be found here: <https://yardhurawalani.com.au/information/>.

## Introduction

This Research Summary presents findings from a project that aimed to (1) identify health and wellbeing concerns and services required to support the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population in relation to the Voice to Parliament Referendum, and (2) monitor levels of mental health and wellbeing over this period. For project details and the full report on which this summary is based, see <https://yardhurawalani.com.au/mental-health-and-wellbeing-around-the-voice-to-parliament-referendum/>.

This Research Summary compares levels of health and wellbeing during the first eighteen months following the Referendum vote to the period of the Referendum campaign, and to periods before public discussion around the Voice Referendum was prominent (see Figure 1), defined as follows:

- 'Baseline': June 2018–May 2021 (n=9,963)
- 'Pre-Referendum period': January 2022–January 2023 (n=2,176)
- 'Referendum period': 1 February 2023–14 October 2023 (n=1,286), and
- 'Post-Referendum period': 15 October 2023–14 April 2025 (n=1,536).



**Figure 1. Study periods and participant numbers for this analysis**

Data used in this analysis are from *Mayi Kuwayu: the National Study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing*. To estimate the prevalence of outcomes in the total population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults (aged 18 years and over), weighting was applied to the Mayi Kuwayu Study data using benchmark data from the 2021 Census (age, gender/sex, and remoteness). All changes reported are statistically significant (p-value < 0.05).

## Summary of findings

### Wellbeing in the lead up to the Referendum

During the Referendum period, we identified worsening in numerous wellbeing exposures and outcomes within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adult population, compared with earlier period/s. The negative changes compared with Baseline, include:

- increases in experiences of discrimination in everyday life (up 7 percentage points) and in healthcare settings (up 6 percentage points);
- increases in high/very high psychological distress (up 3 percentage points);
- decreases in measures of physical health and wellbeing (e.g. good general health down 12 percentage points);



- decreases across measures of family support (e.g. a 6 percentage point decrease in family talking with each other about things that matter); and
- decreases in some measures of self-determination (e.g. ability to get involved in community discussions down 3 percentage points).

Alongside these declines in wellbeing, vicarious racism was pervasive during the Pre-Referendum and Referendum periods, with around 70% hearing jokes and/or insulting comments about, and/or witnessing unfair treatment of, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Improvements, compared with Baseline, were observed in some measures of cultural connectedness. For example, there was a 6 percentage point reduction in feeling disconnected from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander culture/s in the lead up to the Referendum, compared with Baseline.

Detailed results are in Figure 2 and the sections following it.

## Wellbeing in the 18 months following the Referendum

In the 18 months after the Referendum, signs of improvement were seen in feelings of life control (an increase of 4 percentage points compared with the Referendum period, to 80.6%), which returned to a level similar to Baseline (79.5%). However, alongside this, we observe a significant increase in the prevalence of anxiety in the Post-Referendum period. One-in-three (33.5%) adults had a doctor diagnosis of, or took medication for, anxiety Post-Referendum, up almost 5 percentage points from Baseline (28.9%). The prevalence of high/very high psychological distress in the Post-Referendum period (42.9%) was similar to Baseline (41.0%).

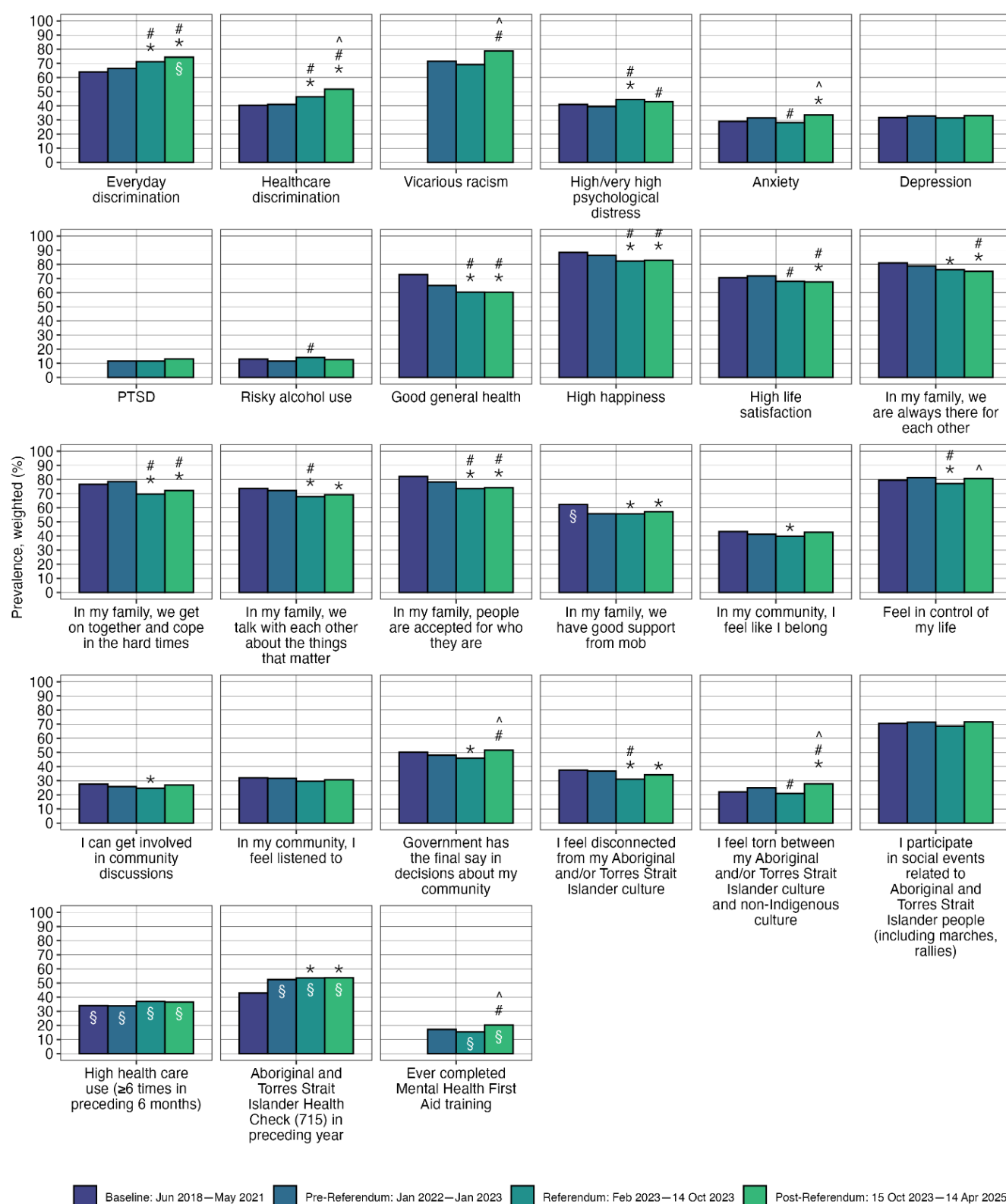
Findings from the first 18 months following the Referendum show continuing high levels—and worsening—of exposure to forms of discrimination and racism. More than half of adults reported experiences of healthcare discrimination (51.8%), a further increase of 6 percentage points from the Referendum period, representing an 11 percentage point increase from Baseline (40.4%). Experiences of vicarious racism are pervasive (78.8%) and have increased 10 percentage points since the Referendum period (69.2%). Experiences of everyday discrimination have remained elevated in the Post-Referendum period, at 74.4%, 10 percentage points above Baseline levels (64.0%).

Several measures of social and emotional wellbeing, general health, and family and community support that worsened from Baseline to the Referendum period remain worse in the Post-Referendum period. For example, good general health has dropped 13 percentage points from Baseline (to 60.3%), high happiness has dropped 5 percentage points from Baseline (to 82.9%), high life satisfaction has dropped 3 percentage points (to 67.6%) and people being accepted for who they are has dropped 8 percentage points from Baseline (to 74.2%).

We observed a concerning increase in feeling torn between cultures Post-Referendum. More than a quarter (27.8%) of adults experienced feeling torn between cultures, an increase of 7 percentage points from the Referendum period (21.0%), returning to levels higher than Baseline (22.1%) and the Pre-Referendum period (24.9%). Some of the increases in cultural connectedness observed during the Referendum period have been maintained Post-Referendum. One-in-three (34.1%) adults felt disconnected from culture in the Post-Referendum period, similar to the Referendum period (31.0%), and still lower than Baseline (37.5%).

Detailed results are in Figure 2 and the sections following it.





**Figure 2. Weighted prevalence estimates for wellbeing outcomes over the four study periods**

\* significant change compared to Baseline.

# significant change compared to Pre-Referendum period.

^ significant change compared to Referendum period.

\$ indicates that missing data prevalence exceeded 10% in the sample for the respective period; interpret with caution due to potential for bias.

Note: comparisons were not made between the Pre-Referendum period and the Baseline period.

The following outcome variables were not available in Wave 1: vicarious racism, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and mental health first aid training; accordingly, no comparisons are made to the Baseline period.



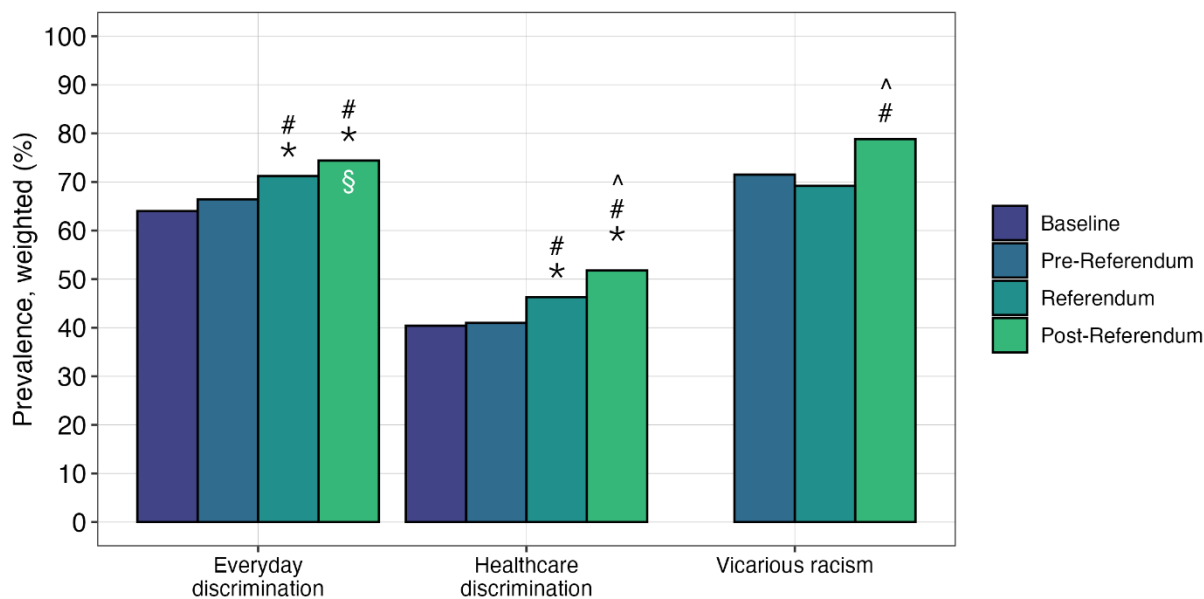
# Detailed findings

## Discrimination and racism

**Discrimination remains widespread and elevated compared to Baseline levels, and experiences of healthcare discrimination and vicarious racism have increased since the Referendum (Figure 3).** In the Post-Referendum period, an estimated 74.4% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults had experienced everyday discrimination. This is similar to the percentage in the Referendum period (71.2%) and represents an increase of about 10 percentage points from the Baseline period (64.0%). This corresponds to an estimated 51,000 additional adults having experienced everyday discrimination in the Post-Referendum period compared to Baseline.

In the Post-Referendum period, over half (51.8%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults had experienced discrimination in healthcare settings, which represents an increase compared to both the Referendum period (46.3%) and the Baseline period (40.4%). The overall increase corresponds to an estimated 56,000 additional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults experiencing discrimination in healthcare settings in the Post-Referendum period compared to Baseline.

From Wave 2 onwards, the Mayi Kuwayu Study has measured aspects of vicarious racism, including the experience of hearing jokes or insulting comments about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and witnessing unfair treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Experiencing vicarious racism was already pervasive in both the Pre-Referendum (71.5%) and Referendum (69.2%) periods, and became more so in the Post-Referendum period (78.8%). This corresponds to an estimated 36,000 additional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults experiencing vicarious racism in the Post-Referendum period compared to the Pre-Referendum period. No data are available for this measure at Baseline.



**Figure 3. Weighted prevalence estimates for discrimination and racism variables over the four study periods.**

*\* indicates significant change compared with Baseline.  
# indicates significant change compared with Pre-Referendum period.  
^ indicates significant change compared with Referendum period.  
§ indicates that missing data prevalence exceeded 10% in the sample for the respective period; interpret with caution due to potential for bias.*  
*Note: comparisons were not made between the Pre-Referendum period and the Baseline period.  
The vicarious racism measure was introduced in Wave 2, hence no data are available for the Baseline period (which uses Wave 1 data).*



## Health and wellbeing

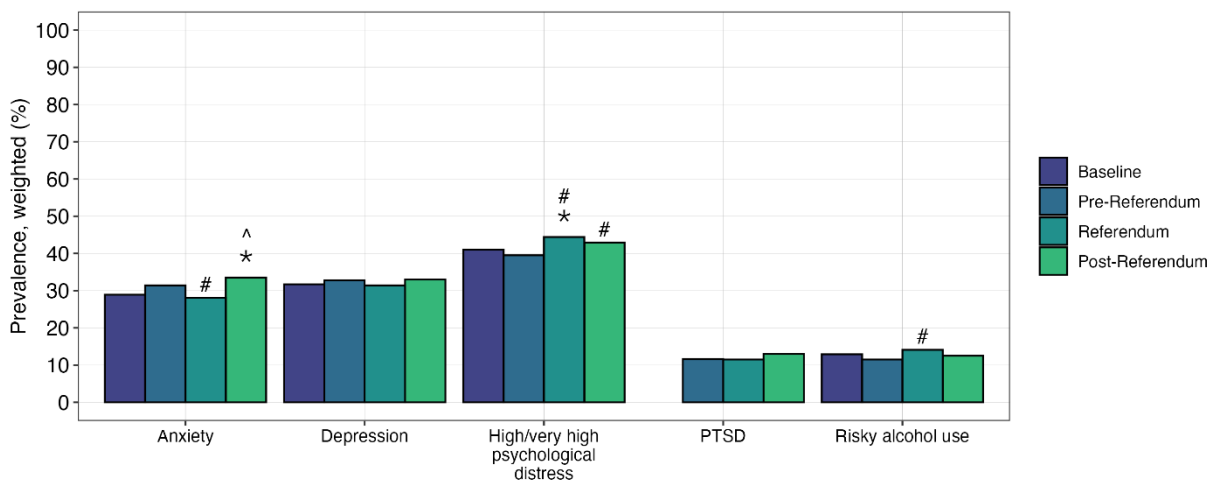
**Psychological distress remains common and elevated compared to the Pre-Referendum period, and anxiety is elevated compared to both Baseline and the Referendum period (Figure 4).** During the Post-Referendum period, 42.9% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults experienced high or very high psychological distress. This is similar to the percentage in the Referendum period (44.4%) and Baseline (41.0%), but represents an increase compared to the Pre-Referendum period (39.5%). An estimated 17,000 additional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults experienced high or very high psychological distress in the Post-Referendum period compared to the Pre-Referendum period.

During the Post-Referendum period, 33.5% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults had a doctor diagnosis of, and/or took medication for anxiety. This is higher than at Baseline (28.9%) and the Referendum period (28.1%), noting the prevalence during the Referendum period was lower than in the Pre-Referendum period (31.4%). Anxiety prevalence in the Post-Referendum period was over 4 percentage points above Baseline, representing an estimated 22,000 additional adults with anxiety.

Our measure of psychological distress (the MK-K5) reflects current symptoms of anxiety and depression (i.e. in the past four weeks). High/very high levels of psychological distress based on the MK-K5 may indicate a risk of anxiety, and therefore would support further assessment, but does not represent a clinical diagnosis.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, a diagnosis of anxiety would generally require consistent symptoms over a longer period (e.g. six months), and assessment by a health professional. The lag in increased prevalence of diagnosed anxiety could also reflect wait times for seeing a doctor. Similarly, a diagnosis of depression or PTSD would also require access to a doctor and/or a psychologist.

During the Post-Referendum period, 33.0% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults had a doctor diagnosis of, and/or took medication for, depression, consistent with earlier time points: 31.7% at Baseline, 32.8% in the Pre-Referendum period, and 31.4% during the Referendum period.

The prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was similar across periods: 11.6% in the Pre-Referendum period, 11.5% in the Referendum period, and 13.0% in the Post-Referendum period. No data were collected on PTSD in the Baseline period.



**Figure 4. Weighted prevalence estimates for selected mental health & physical health variables over the four study periods.**

\* indicates significant change compared with Baseline.

# indicates significant change compared with Pre-Referendum period.

^ indicates significant change compared with Referendum period.

Note: comparisons were not made between the Pre-Referendum period and the Baseline period.

PTSD measure was introduced in Wave 2, hence no data are available for Baseline period (which uses Wave 1 data).

Alcohol consumption is sometimes used as a coping mechanism in response to stress. Alcohol use was included as a variable in this analysis because some focus group participants (see Report 1 in this series) mentioned that alcohol may be used as a way to cope with stressors relating to the Referendum. In this project, risky alcohol use was defined as consuming six or more drinks per day on a weekly or more frequent basis. The estimated prevalence of risky alcohol use was 12.9% at Baseline, 11.5% in the

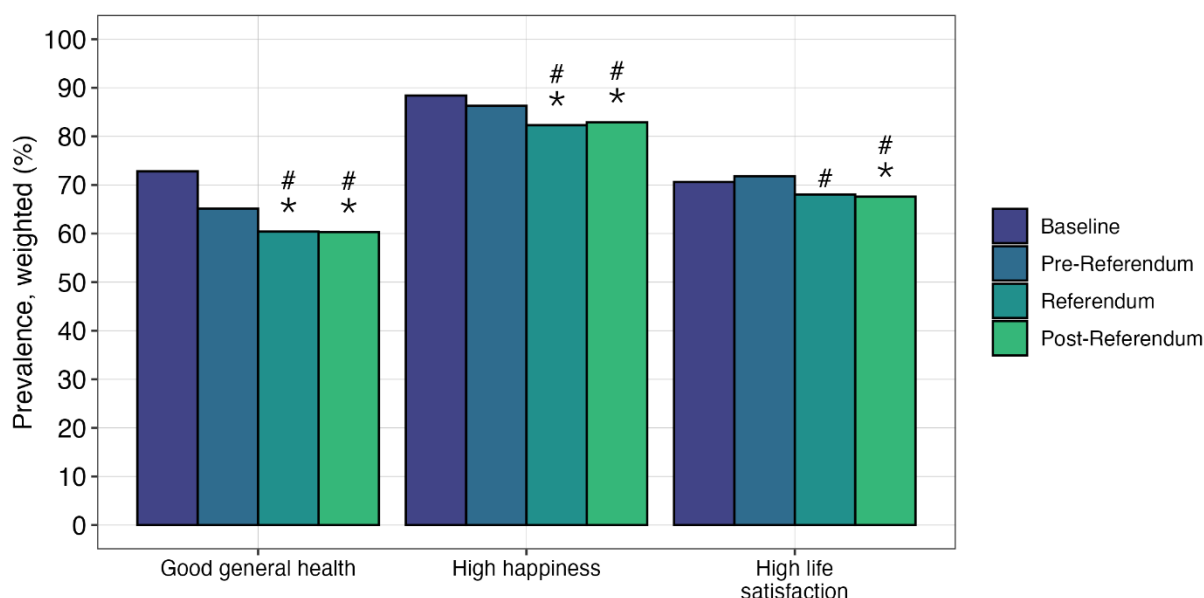


Pre-Referendum period, 14.1% in the Referendum period, and 12.5% in the Post-Referendum period.

**Levels of general health have substantially dropped since Baseline; levels of happiness are high, but remain lower than at Baseline (Figure 5).** An estimated 60.3% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults experienced good general health in the Post-Referendum period. This represents a 13 percentage point decline from Baseline (72.8%) and is similar to the prevalence in the Referendum period (60.4%). This corresponds to an estimated 62,000 fewer Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults experiencing good general health during the Post-Referendum period compared to Baseline.

The prevalence of high happiness in the Post-Referendum period (82.9%) was lower than in the Baseline (88.4%) and Pre-Referendum (86.3%) periods and similar to levels during the Referendum period (82.3%). This represents an estimated 27,000 fewer Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults experiencing high happiness during the Post-Referendum period compared to Baseline.

The prevalence of high life satisfaction in the Post-Referendum period was 67.6%, which was lower than the Pre-Referendum period (71.8%) and Baseline (70.6%), and similar to the Referendum (68.0%) period. This represents an estimated 15,000 fewer Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults experiencing high life satisfaction during the Post-Referendum period compared to Baseline.



**Figure 5. Weighted prevalence estimates for general health, happiness and life satisfaction variables over the four study periods.**

\* indicates significant change compared with Baseline.

# indicates significant change compared with Pre-Referendum period.

^ indicates significant change compared with Referendum period.

Note: comparisons were not made between the Pre-Referendum period and the Baseline period.

## Family and community support

**Family support is high, but many measures remain lower than at Baseline (Figure 6).** Across the measures of family and community support examined, we did not detect any significant differences between the Post-Referendum period and the Referendum period. In the Post-Referendum period it was less common for families to get on together and cope in hard times (72.2%), compared to both the Baseline (76.5%) and the Pre-Referendum (78.5%) periods. Similarly, Post-Referendum, there was a lower prevalence of being there for each other (75.0%) compared to the Baseline (81.0%) and the Pre-Referendum (78.9%) periods. There was also a lower prevalence of people being accepted for who they are in the Post-Referendum period (74.2%) compared to the Baseline period (82.1%) and the Pre-Referendum period (78.2%).

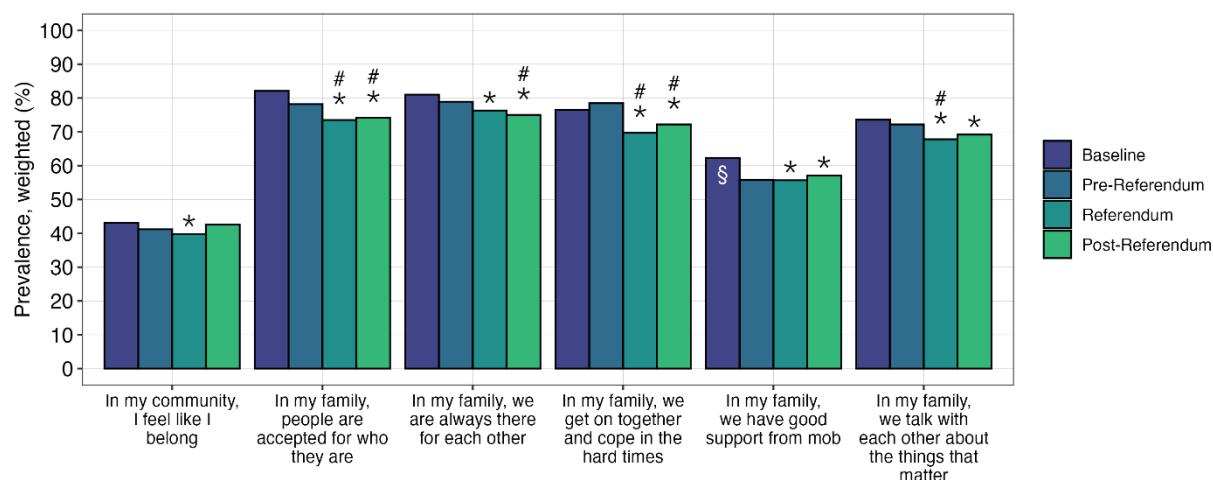
In the Post-Referendum period compared to Baseline, there remained a lower prevalence of talking with each other about the things that matter (69.2% compared to 73.6%) and having good support from mob





(57.1% compared to 62.3%).

There was no significant change in the percentage of people who felt like they belonged in their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, which remained around 40% across survey periods.



**Figure 6. Weighted prevalence estimates for family and community support variables over the four study periods.**

\* indicates significant change compared with Baseline.

# indicates significant change compared with Pre-Referendum period.

^ indicates significant change compared with Referendum period.

Note: comparisons were not made between the Pre-Referendum period and the Baseline period.

§ indicates that missing data prevalence exceeded 10% in the sample for the respective period; interpret with caution due to potential for bias.

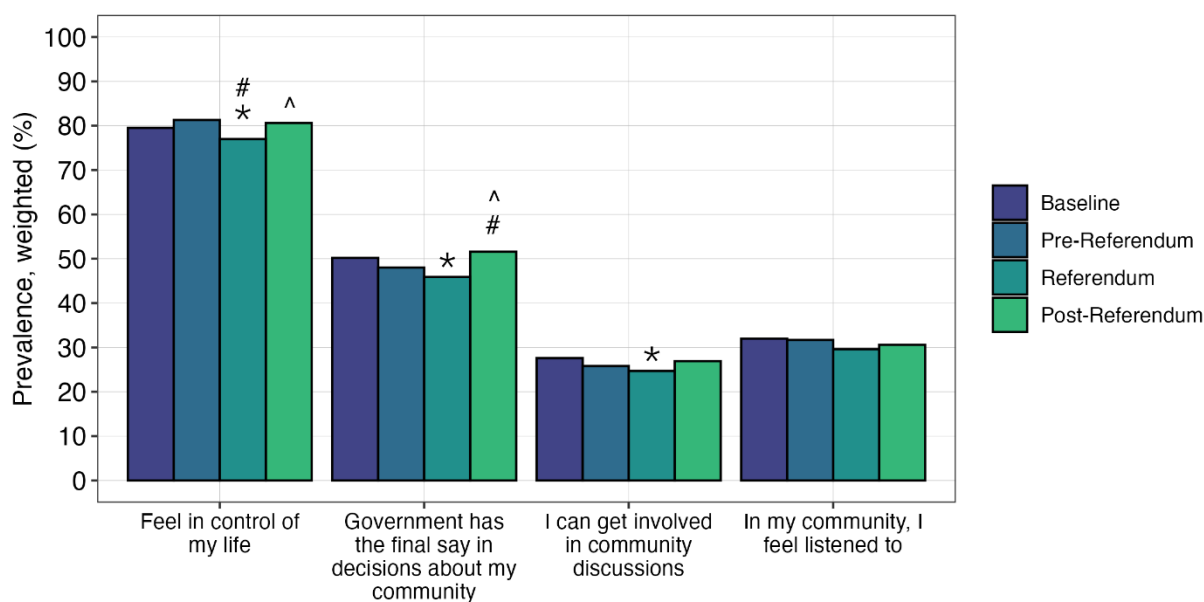
## Self-determination

**All included measures of self-determination are similar to Baseline levels (Figure 7).** During the Post-Referendum period, 80.6% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults felt in control of their lives. This prevalence was consistent with levels at Baseline (79.5%), and the Pre-Referendum period (81.3%), and higher than levels during the Referendum period (77.0%) (which was lower than Baseline and the Pre-Referendum period). The percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults who felt they could get involved in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community discussions was 26.9% in the Post-Referendum period which was similar to the Baseline (27.6%), Pre-Referendum (25.8%), and Referendum (24.7%) periods (the Referendum period was lower than Baseline).

The prevalence of feeling listened to in community was similar across periods: 32.0% at Baseline, 31.7% in the Pre-Referendum period, 29.6% in the Referendum period, and 30.6% in the Post-Referendum period. The prevalence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults who felt that government has the final say in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community decisions was 51.6% during the Post-Referendum period, which was an increase from the Referendum period low of 45.9% and the Pre-Referendum level of 48.0%, but similar to the Baseline level of 50.2%.







**Figure 7. Weighted prevalence estimates for self-determination variables over the four study periods.**

\* indicates significant change compared with Baseline.

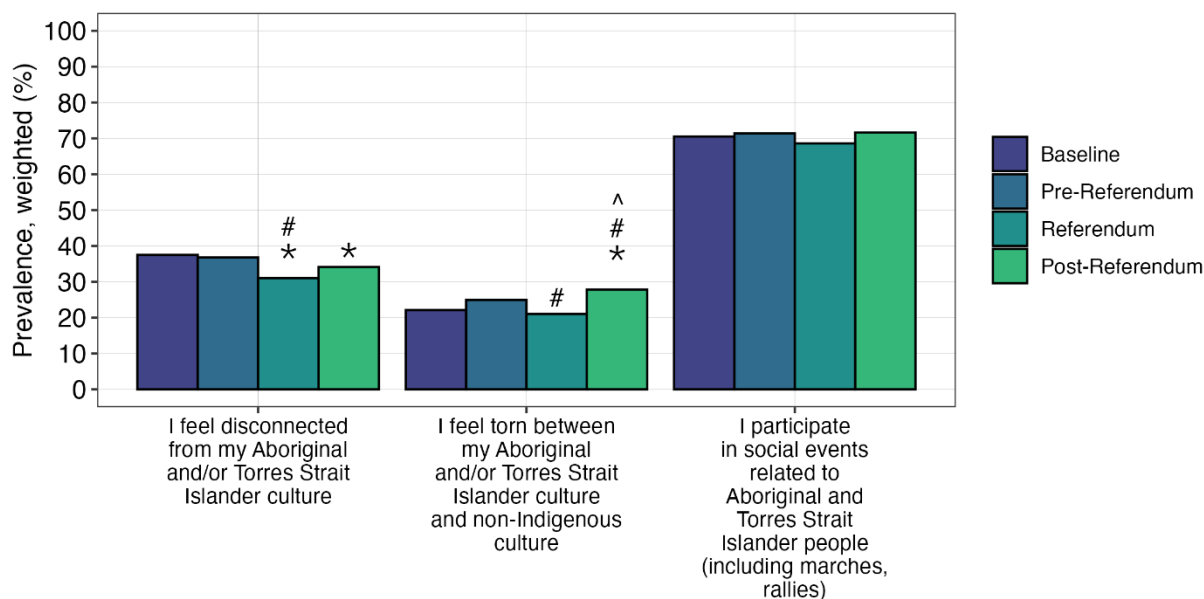
# indicates significant change compared with Pre-Referendum period.

^ indicates significant change compared with Referendum period.

Note: comparisons were not made between the Pre-Referendum period and the Baseline period.

## Cultural connectedness

Feeling torn between cultures is increasing, but connection to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander culture is better than at Baseline (Figure 8). Some measures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural connectedness had improved during the Referendum period compared to earlier period/s; some of these improvements were maintained but others were not.



**Figure 8. Weighted prevalence estimates for cultural connectedness variables over the four study periods.**

\* indicates significant change compared with Baseline.

# indicates significant change compared with Pre-Referendum period.

^ indicates significant change compared with Referendum period.

Note: comparisons were not made between the Pre-Referendum period and the Baseline period.

It was less common to feel disconnected from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultures during the Referendum period (31.0%) compared to Baseline (37.5%), indicating improvements in connectedness to



culture. In the Post-Referendum period the prevalence of feeling disconnected was 34.1%, which was similar to the Referendum and Pre-Referendum period, and lower than levels observed in the Baseline period.

During the Post-Referendum period, the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults who felt torn between their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultures and non-Indigenous culture was higher in the Post-Referendum period (27.8%) than in the Referendum (21.0%), Pre-Referendum (24.9%), and Baseline (22.1%) periods.

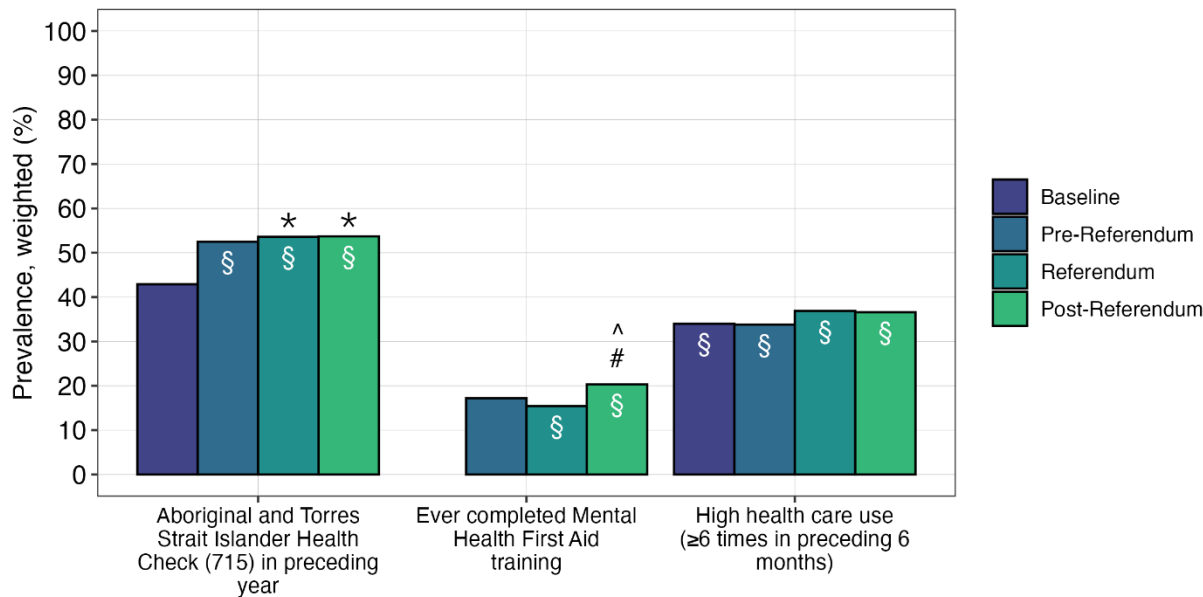
**Participation in social events related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has remained high.** More than two-thirds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults participated in these events across the Baseline (70.5%), Pre-Referendum (71.4%), Referendum (68.6%), and Post-Referendum (71.6%) periods.

## Health service use

**Comprehensive health checks and high healthcare service use remain common (Figure 9).** An estimated 36.6% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults accessed healthcare services monthly or more frequently during the Post-Referendum period, consistent with 34.0% in the Baseline period, 33.8% in the Pre-Referendum period, and 36.9% in the Referendum period.

The Mayi Kuwayu Study survey collects data on participants’ completion of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Check (“715 Health Check”) within the last year. During the Post-Referendum period, an estimated 53.7% had recently completed a Health Check. This was an increase of almost 11 percentage points compared to Baseline (42.9%), and consistent with levels during the Referendum period (53.6%) and Pre-Referendum period (52.5%).

An estimated 20.3% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults had completed Mental Health First Aid training during the Post-Referendum period. This was an increase compared to the Referendum period (15.4%) and the Pre-Referendum period (17.2%). No data were available for this measure at Baseline.



**Figure 9. Weighted prevalence estimates for service use variables over the four study periods.**  
 \* indicates significant change compared with Baseline.  
 # indicates significant change compared with Pre-Referendum period.  
 ^ indicates significant change compared with Referendum period.  
 § indicates that missing data prevalence exceeded 10% in the sample for the respective period; interpret with caution due to potential for bias.  
 Note: comparisons were not made between the Pre-Referendum period and the Baseline period.  
 The Mental Health First Aid training measure was introduced in Wave 2, hence no data are available for the Baseline period (which uses Wave 1 data).



## What do these results mean?

Experiences of discrimination, general health, happiness, and family and community wellbeing remain worse Post-Referendum compared to Baseline. Experiences of healthcare discrimination, vicarious racism and doctor-diagnosed anxiety have continued to increase from levels observed during the Referendum period. Whereas aspects of health and wellbeing remain strong in the face of escalating stressors—a testament to the strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures—continued pressure on protective factors such as family and community support and strong connection to culture threatens to erode health and wellbeing. In addition to action against all forms of racism and discrimination, the results of this project highlight the need for additional measures to support self-determination and holistic health and wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, families, and communities.

This report's findings are consistent with concerns expressed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants in focus groups conducted earlier in this project (Report and summary factsheets available online: <https://yardhurawalani.com.au/mental-health-and-wellbeing-around-the-voice-to-parliament-referendum/>). Our findings on discrimination and racism align with reports from 13YARN, a national First Nations crisis support service. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people's calls to 13YARN increased by 40% during the Referendum campaign; Post-Referendum, over a quarter (26%) of calls have been from people experiencing distress caused by racism.<sup>2</sup> Our findings are also consistent with annual reporting from the Call It Out First Nations Racism Register, in which one in five validated reports of racism during the 2023–24 reporting period specifically mentioning the Voice and/or the Referendum.<sup>3</sup>

The cross-sectional design of this project does not permit attribution of the results to any particular cause, however the discourse around the Referendum is likely to have contributed to the observed increases in racism, discrimination, and associated declines in health outcomes. It is not possible to disentangle other factors that may have contributed to the results observed, and there is no shortage of events and discourses that have negatively impacted—and continue to negatively impact—the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Settler-colonial violence—in physical, structural, and discursive forms—continues to be pervasive internationally and in Australia, including: violent conflict in Gaza;<sup>4</sup> Indigenous deaths in custody;<sup>5</sup> and racist policies and positions being at the forefront of political debate in election campaigns in the US in 2024,<sup>6</sup> in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2024,<sup>7–9</sup> and in Australia at state/territory and federal levels in 2024 and 2025.<sup>10–12</sup> For example, the Queensland and Northern Territory elections in 2024 saw escalations in structural racism via regressive youth crime legislation and associated public discourse (e.g. “adult crime, adult time”<sup>13</sup>), repeal of the *Path to Treaty Act 2023 (QLD)* and abolishing of Queensland's Truth-telling and Healing Inquiry. Backlash against Welcome to Country ceremonies and Acknowledgements of Country has been prominent,<sup>14,15</sup> promoted by some politicians,<sup>16,17</sup> and comprised part of the election platform for the Trumpet of Patriots party.<sup>18</sup> Regardless of their causes, the observed increasing racism prevalence and declines in aspects of wellbeing are of deep concern.

The racism, discrimination, and associated health harms observed over the Referendum period, and since, do not represent justifications for not pursuing structural change designed to eliminate racism or address injustices suffered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Justice must be pursued, as this is a fundamental determinant of the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Robust commitments to truth-telling and respectful discourse by politicians and media are fundamental for processes of structural change and enactment of Indigenous rights to proceed with minimal harm.

The results of this project underscore the urgent need for action against all forms of racism and discrimination. Ongoing monitoring is but one part of this. While monitoring can enable visibility and validation for the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, meaningful action and accountability is required from governments, politicians, media, and public organisations. There is no shortage of advice from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on what such action should look like.<sup>19–28</sup>



# Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on whose lands we conduct our work and offer our respects to all Elders and their continuing care for Country and connection to culture.

We acknowledge and thank all Mayi Kuwayu Study survey participants, everyone who has contributed to study development and data collection. We acknowledge the assistance and guidance of the Mayi Kuwayu Study Data Governance Committee, the Study Chief Investigators and partners, and all members of the Mayi Kuwayu Study team.

We thank the members of Thiitu Tharrmay, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research governance group, for sharing their ideas and perspectives throughout this project. We acknowledge and thank the community and policy stakeholders we have engaged with for their ongoing valuable contributions.

This project was funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care.

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