

RESEARCH SUMMARY



About Us

'Healing the Past by Nurturing the Future' (HPNF) is an Aboriginal-led project which aims to co-design perinatal (from pregnancy to child age two) awareness, recognition, assessment and support strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Aboriginal) parents who have experienced complex childhood trauma.

The project commenced in 2018 and current funding runs until 2021. We are grateful for funding from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and the Lowitja Institute CRC.

This sub-study aimed to develop a trauma informed public health emergency response, funded by APPRISE in 2021-2022

"You can't replace that feeling of connection to culture and country": Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents' experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic

Why is this research important?

Complex trauma can be caused following repeated hurtful or upsetting experiences, termed 'severe threat' (e.g. childhood maltreatment) from which people cannot escape. Trauma experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Aboriginal) people stems from colonial policies, such as stolen generations and land being taken away. Complex trauma can cause long-lasting physical, social and emotional health problems. Trauma can pass from one generation to the next, known as **intergenerational trauma**. Parents may experience distressing trauma responses during pregnancy, birth and early parenting. This can make it harder for parents to care for or bond with their children. However, parenting can also provide a unique **opportunity for healing** and nurturing relationships. This forms the basis for the overarching project Healing the Past by Nurturing the Future.

A trauma informed emergency response

In 2020 as the global COVID-19 pandemic hit, much of what we were learning about complex trauma in the transition to parenthood seemed relevant. The COVID-19 pandemic is an example a 'severe threat' where escape is not possible, and therefore could increase trauma-related distress. In the context of public health emergencies, fear-based messaging is often used to change behaviour. Aboriginal people have experienced substantial trauma in the past, including from previous epidemics, and government 'interventions' including state-sanctioned removal of children from their families. This has resulted in an increased mistrust of government. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and communities have increasingly advocated that mob should be centred in the decision-making process, within a "culturally appropriate governance structure" This component of the project explores the question: **'Is it time for a culturally-responsive, trauma-informed public health emergency response?'**



APPRISE

AUSTRALIAN PARTNERSHIP FOR
PREPAREDNESS RESEARCH ON
INFECTIOUS DISEASE EMERGENCIES



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What were the aims of the project?

- **Aim:** To develop a culturally-responsive trauma-informed public health emergency framework for First Nations communities. The **objectives** of this study were to:
 1. Conduct a systematic review of trauma-informed emergency public health responses.
 2. **Investigate COVID-19 experiences among First Nations parents in three jurisdictions, and experiences of complex trauma-related distress during COVID-19.**
 3. Convene a key stakeholder workshop to consider the outcomes from (1) and (2) (and other presenters) and develop a culturally-responsive trauma-informed public health emergency response framework.
- This research summary focusses on the second objective.

What did we do?

We interviewed parents about their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. A summary of the methods is provided:

Setting

- 3 Australian states and territories (NT, SA, VIC)
- Ethical approval obtained from each state

Interview location and timing

- Over phone by trained interviewers between October 2020-May 2022

Safety

- Participants offered choice of interviewer gender, Indigenous status, location and time

Participants

- 110 parents or expectant parents
- 96% Aboriginal, 4% Torres Strait Islander or both
- Average age 34 years

Recruitment

- Community networks, partner services

Analysis

- Identified common themes across parent responses

What did we ask parents?

Each parent was asked the following five questions:

What effect has the COVID-19 pandemic had for you?

Has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your capacity for parenting and caring for your children? If so, in what ways?

Do you feel the COVID-19 pandemic has affected your children? If so, in what ways?

What has been the most helpful so far in trying to cope with the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Are there any specific supports that are, or would be, most helpful for you and your family during the COVID-19 pandemic?

We recorded the responses on an online form.

What did parents say?

There were three main themes identified from the parent interviews.

1. Changes due to COVID-19

- a. Access to antenatal services, and general health services were negatively affected
- b. Remote learning and working from home was hard to juggle, but for some it was positive
- c. Financial and other supports were considered to be valuable, including from Aboriginal Health Services

2. Impact to social and emotional wellbeing

- a. The pandemic was detrimental to parents and children's mental health, including anxiety, depression, loneliness and self-harm
- b. Fear, worry and exhaustion was commonly reported

3. Disconnection from family, culture and community

- a. Parents not able to see family, or travel home to Country
- b. Cultural practices, such as raising children collectively, births and funerals, were heavily impacted
- c. Technology was not able to replace the loss of connection

It has been really hard. I had to go to a lot of appointments alone because I couldn't take anyone with me to help me to understand what they were saying at the hospital.

It took a big toll on my mental health with the lockdown. I was doing social work and I quit my job because I didn't think I had the capacity to continue while experiencing lockdown and struggling with my own mental health. My depression and anxiety spiked and I didn't do very well. I couldn't see my family and can't leave the house.

And miss that connection to country to ground ourselves. You realise how much of an impact it actually has. [...]. We were able to connect with things online, but it wasn't that same feeling. You can't replace that feeling to connection to culture and country ...



Image: Unsplash

What are the implications of these findings?

The key findings of this research included:

Positive and negative experiences associated with the pandemic

Perceived benefits during the pandemic depended on parent's situations

Access to medical services challenging, particularly for expectant parents

Financial assistance aided in reducing stress

Pandemic detrimental to mental health for parents and children

Loss of cultural connection is detrimental to wellbeing

Digital technology is beneficial, but cannot replace cultural practices and connection

There is a need for culturally appropriate support (e.g. AHS)

Therefore, Indigenous led responses are key to providing culturally appropriate support. These results have been incorporated into a Public Health Emergency Response Framework to guide services, governments, practitioners. See [here](#) for more information.



Image: Unsplash

Suggested citation

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For more information

Kennedy, M., Bright, T., Graham, S., Heris, C., Bennetts, S.K., Fiolet, R., Davis, E., Jones, K.A., Mohamed, J., Atkinson, C., Chamberlain, C. (2022). "You can't replace that feeling of connection to culture and Country": Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents' experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health.

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