

Fact Sheet:



Keeping safe during COVID-19: Learning from Aboriginal Elders

This factsheet is based on findings from the published article: Furlong, A., Milroy, H., Ryder, A., Kashyap, S., Buergelt, P., Mascall, C., Edmonds, S., Wright, M., & Dudgeon, P. (2025). *Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic: Safety practices and insights from Aboriginal elders, organisations and communities*. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 118, 105263. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2025.105263>

In this fact sheet we provide a summary of perspectives shared by Aboriginal Elders and community members about coping with the COVID-19 pandemic, and how future emergency responses can be more culturally safe for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This project was funded by the WA Department of Jobs, Tourism, Science and Innovation, and involved a collaboration between the University of Western Australia (Bilya Marlee School of Indigenous Studies), Miya Kaadadjiny (Learning Sanctuary) Community Centre, University of Canberra, and Curtin University. This study recognises the strong continuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership during COVID-19 and beyond. We demonstrate how Indigenous knowledges can provide an invaluable resource for policy makers to plan for and respond to future emergency.

COVID-19 saw our world change in unprecedented ways. In Australia, there was significant concern about the physical health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, particularly Elders. This is largely due to health discrepancies compared with non-Indigenous Australians, which existed long before the pandemic [1].

In this project, we yarned with Elders and community members about whether the social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was also considered during the emergency response, and if not, how SEWB could be considered during future emergencies.

Social and Emotional WellBeing

A wellbeing model describing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' connections to self, body, family, community, Country, culture, and spirit and how these are influenced by social, political and historical determinants of wellbeing. Disruptions to these connections can lead to distress [2].

Many of these connections were disrupted during the COVID-19 Pandemic response. Public health orders put in place to limit the spread of the virus also restricted social and cultural gatherings, travel to and from remote Aboriginal communities, and cultural practices with large numbers of people. This impacted people's ability to attend funerals, disrupting connections to Culture, family, community, and prevented people from returning to Country.

Country:

Traditional lands to which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have ancestral ties.

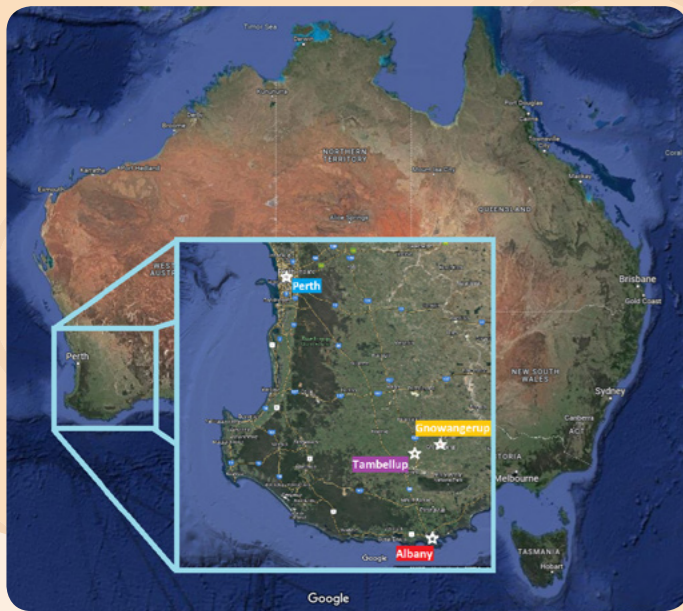


SEWB Diagram adapted from Gee et al., (2014)

For more information about SEWB, see this factsheet:
<https://tinyurl.com/4jyyjba6>

Aboriginal Elders have been commended for their ongoing resilience and leadership during the pandemic [3]. COVID-19 case numbers and transmission was up to six times lower among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples compared to non-Indigenous Australians [4]. However, COVID-19 affected older people and Indigenous populations more so due to existing systemic health inequities [1, 5]. By working with Aboriginal Elders, we were able to explore how some Elders coped and stayed well in Western Australia.

Indigenous literature globally suggests that safety and protection, decision-making, resilience, and adaptation of Elders are important factors for future emergency responses [6]. Therefore, exploring Aboriginal Elders' perspectives of COVID-19 and their commentary on pandemic responses can provide local service providers with an understanding of what considerations are needed for future emergency responses from an Aboriginal worldview.



Map of Research Sites Across Noongar Boodja in Western Australia, Australia
 Google. (n.d.). [Google Maps Australia and Noongar Country Zoomed In]. Retrieved 1 November, 2023, from <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Australia/>

What did we do?

We yarned with 47 Aboriginal Elders and community members from two metro, and two regional areas in Western Australia about their experience of COVID-19, how they stayed safe and well during the pandemic, their perspectives on the pandemic response, and what can be done to improve future emergency responses.

What did Elders do?

How did Elders keep safe and well?



What did and didn't help Elders keep safe and well?

What helped?

Continuing cultural practices

"...well with families like being outside, ...having a fire outside, being warm...and sit around there, because that's something that did make you, you know, feel good."

Following Public Health Orders

(Mask wearing, vaccinations and social distancing)

"We felt a lot of people protected their Elders and told people for that had coughs and to respect that and stay away, it's pretty simple..."

Positive Experiences with Support Networks

(including family, friends, community and services)

"Well I reckon myself that the government and the people they were spot on, they helped in every way they could and they knew, and that the help and the phone calls, if they didn't come around always, but they had a number there where they call."

Access to Goods and Services

(Grocery and meals delivery and accessing services)

"...they organised straight away with that doctor in East Perth, the Aboriginal doctor. He rang me straight away, and that day they send the Food Bank, ...they sent the big box with the antivirals..."

The Role of Autonomy and Self-Determination

Elders who felt that they were in control of their own decision-making were able to cope better during the pandemic. This included choosing to have the vaccine or not, choosing to isolate or continue as normal.

However, experiencing a loss of autonomy led Elders to revisit past traumas associated with governmental policy restrictions, negatively impacting their abilities to cope during the pandemic.

What didn't help?

Impacts on Cultural Practices (largely Funerals)

"...we are First Nations people, that they should have made allowances for our culture and our tradition that when we do bury our loved ones, everybody, the butcher, the baker and everything else, is all family that you want, they will go to the ends of the earth... to pay their respects to their people, and they weren't allowed to do that."

Fear (of getting sick, from the media, of the vaccine)

"Oh I was frightened, I thought I was going to die. And when the, with the vaccines they brought out, I had the whole three, but it's like, oh, which one's better than the other, you know, is this one going to... kill me too."

Negative Experiences with Support Networks

(including in-family conflicts, discrimination from service providers, inadequate assistance)

"...they [aged care service provider] didn't support me, and they're supposed to. They're supposed to come every day and still wear their mask, everything, so... the aged care mainstream did not support me when they're supposed to; I found all that out after."

Limited access to food, supplies and ongoing support

(including supply chain issues)

"...they were taking and buying, and stocking in their sheds, so it was very, very hard to shop for what you needed, the basics, because everybody was taking it; they were just running wild. They were panicking."

Service Disruptions

(Hospitals and Health Services)

"...My cousin in Esperance, she was a grandmother for the first time, and she couldn't go and see the birth of her first grandchild... and they had plans for her to be there when the granddaughter was born, but it didn't happen."

Mental Health Challenges

"...I had long COVID after that, and for the next three months I just didn't feel like doing anything; it's like mental breakdown. I couldn't do anything. I didn't feel like showering, which you have to, and I didn't feel like cleaning up, and so even my sister came back, and she came over and cleaned my house for me, the room, kitchen anyway. But I'm good now, I'm better."



Maali (black swan) in Whadjuk Noongar language by Julianne Wade (with contributions from community members on NAIDOC day 2023):

The Maali is a well-known Noongar symbol that has been used in many Aboriginal artworks and the image was used throughout the research to pay tribute to Noongar land and culture. This painting is located at one of the Perth workshop sites, Miya Kaadadjiny Learning Sanctuary Community Centre. The Maali's ancestors lived in the Derbal Yerrigan, the Perth Swan River. The Maali starts with a nest for community. It nurtures its cygnets until they grow fully, nurtured by the whole community, communities and students know knowledge wisdom doesn't come easily and the Maali glides across the water but works hard under the surface.

Thinking ahead

What needs to be considered for future crisis responses?

Need for accurate, appropriate, and relevant information.

"But also most of the information that was delivered is delivered by social media, it's delivered by television, you know, even by phones and that's how we access our data and information these days, and... our patients do not have regular access to internet, so how would they be able to get appropriate and good quality information...? So, that's probably another issue, and that's probably what conflated some of the rumours around the Covid coming out, even the Covid vaccinations. So, that was probably one of the factors. It's that isolation that probably really stuck people. Also just accessing appropriate information"

Aboriginal People helping Aboriginal People

"We need to know those that are going to be incapacitated from these things, the crisis, and allocate certain people to out either to their Elders and people that...don't have cars, or don't have money and stuff like that and do their shopping if they can. And get all their essentials, like their toilet papers, their kangaroo meats and stuff like that, and take it out to them. I think people in the community need to know where their Elders are, the elderly and infirm, and help them with their medications and all that stuff."

Collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

"Making sure that the people in the community that have the broad ability to converse in community are the ones that are involved in that process..."

Need for a Centralised Agency focusing on the SEWB of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

"I think again that one point of contact where people could communicate. They're very aware that they've got that space where they can communicate. So like that central response space and around the cultural protocols is having people in there that can actually communicate with the community in that appropriate manner..."

Directory of Services Available

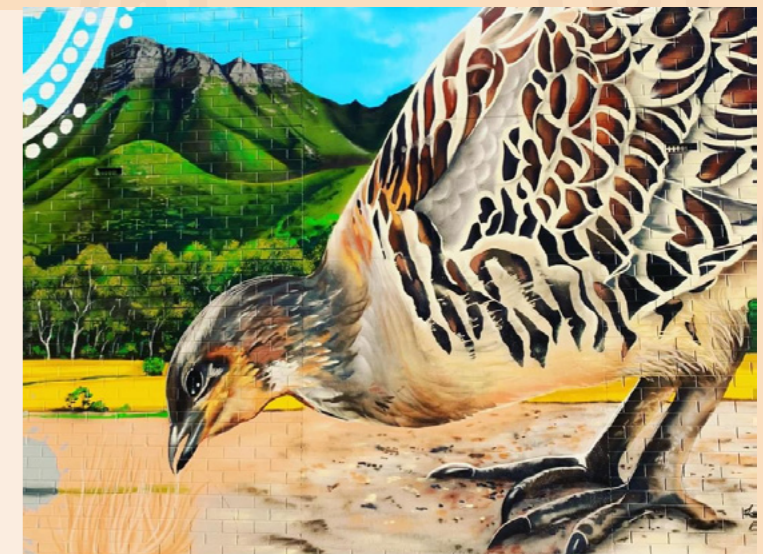
"I think for every household, community member to know what services that's available in their own local area. Make all the calls, might travel distances, or ring and get in contact with groups that aren't, don't do work in their community just so no one gets left out. So, they're informed of what's around for help... a directory thing."

Ease of Accessibility

"I think that's why they go out and talk to them in groups... because they're not going to read it, they're not going to understand it. That's why I think they get black fellas who are in the health system to go out and explain all their rights and in a language that they understand."

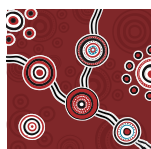
Mural of the Malleefowl and the Stirling Ranges

This artwork is located at one research site and was spoken about extensively by participants as Gnowangerup's faunal emblem. This mural is next to the Gnowangerup IGA supermarket, created by artist Jerome Davenport and photographed by Aimee Macaulay. Gnowangerup region and shire is home of the Malleefowl, and the name Gnowangerup is derived from the Aboriginal word 'Ngow,' meaning the Malleefowl (bird) and the plains around Gnowangerup are home to the Goreng Noongar people.



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