What Works for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Men? A Systematic Review of the Literature

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Abstract

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men experience significantly higher rates of suicide, trauma, alcohol related deaths and unemployment than other Australian men. Despite significant levels of government intervention, rates of family violence, unemployment and incarceration continue to increase in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. As a subset of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, there has been a lesser focus on how to meaningfully improve the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men. This systematic review seeks to understand what interventions, programs and activities are successful in improving the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and thereby the wellbeing of their communities. A thorough search of the literature was conducted using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. Fifteen studies met the inclusion criteria. Analysis of the programs, activities and interventions evaluated in these studies indicated two prominent themes that were successful in improving the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men: strengthening identity and increasing social connection. The mechanisms contributing to these outcomes are discussed, as are implications for policy and future research.

It is well evidenced that Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities experience higher rates of violence and other social problems (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2021b; AIHW, 2020; Nadew, 2012; Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision [SCRGSP], 2016; Zubrick et al., 2005). However, the challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men, as a subset of these communities, have received less attention (Blagg et al., 2015; Cavanagh et al., 2022). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men experience significant social difficulties and experience high rates of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (Atkinson, 2008). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men have a suicide rate approximately 2.5 times the national male average (42.9 compared to 18.3 per 100,000) (AIHW, 2021a), they are eight times more likely than non-Indigenous men to have a cause of death attributable to alcohol use (SCRGSP, 2009) and have more difficulty finding and maintaining employment (Stromback & Dockery, 2001) with much higher rates of unemployment (46.3%) compared to non-Indigenous men (19.3%), a gap that has been continuing to widen over time (AIHW, 2021c).

It has been argued that these issues, such as high rates of violence, suicide, alcohol dependence and unemployment (AIHW, 2021a; AIHW, 2021b; SCRGSP, 2009; Wundersitz, 2010), are linked to compounded trauma, including historical trauma (or intergenerational trauma) and individual traumatic experiences (Ralph et al., 2006). Historical trauma includes, among other factors, the breakdown of cultural and social norms within family groups resulting from colonisation (Adams et al., 2017; Blagg, 1999), the loss of traditional law (Lawrence, 2006), the loss of a meaningful role for men in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Blagg et al., 2015) and the loss of the formal means by which boys progress into manhood (McCoy, 2004).

The social difficulties experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have not improved over time, and in some cases have significantly worsened, in part because of the limited or inappropriate support provided to men in their communities (Adams et al., 2017; Arney & Westby, 2012; Australian Government, 2022; Blagg et al., 2015; Blair et

al., 2014; Cunneen, 2002; McCalman et al., 2006). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men have previously been stereotyped as being 'difficult to engage'; however, it has been acknowledged that this lack of engagement and retention has been caused by problematic or unsuitable service design and delivery rather than problems on the part of potential participants (Mitchell & Chapman, 2010). This worsening situation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and men suggests a gap in the literature; specifically, there is a lack of understanding as to what forms of service provision may be effective in addressing these problems.

There have been longstanding calls for targeted, effective service provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men, with the understanding that improving their wellbeing will have a significant and sustainable ripple effect in terms of the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, children and communities (Cunneen, 2002). While some previous reviews have focused on the area of service provision in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, such as reducing violence (Blagg et al., 2015), improving mental health, reducing substance use (Leske et al., 2016), increasing employment (Dockery & Milsom, 2007) and improving social and economic determinants of health (Osborne et al., 2013), no reviews have been conducted to determine what interventions are successful in improving the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men. This systematic review seeks to understand what the common themes are in successful approaches to improving wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men.

Theoretical Framework

This systematic review will utilise the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing (National Strategic Framework) (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017) as a guide for evaluating the results. The National Strategic Framework aims to inform the implementation of strategies to address the high occurrence of emotional wellbeing problems and poor mental health experienced by Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017).

The National Strategic Framework utilises a social model of health and wellbeing. The wellbeing of individuals and their communities is understood in this framework as being determined by wider social, cultural, economic and environmental factors and the resulting context within which they live (Saggers & Gray, 2007). The National Strategic Framework aims to improve wellbeing through a holistic approach, focusing on empowerment, social support, strengthening culture, building capacity, building resilience, promoting equity, direct service provision and enhancing access to services.

Wellbeing

Wellbeing is a broad term and requires defining as a concept as it differs between cultural groups. Much attention has been given to a culturally appropriate definition of wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' wellbeing has numerous facets, many of which are not accounted for by standardised measures developed for Western populations (Butler et al., 2019). A comprehensive and recent review of the literature (Butler et al., 2019) found multiple domains of wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. These include five domains linked to social and emotional wellbeing: autonomy and empowerment (feeling of having personal choice and control over your own life); family and community (being supported by your family and community; the bestowing of a sense of identity and belonging through relationships; a feeling of social harmony; feeling connected to family and community; sharing common history and beliefs); culture, spirituality and identity (knowing about history and culture, knowing your ancestry, language, clan and tribe, having pride in yourself and your culture, taking part in cultural activities); Country (a sense of belonging to land, caring for your country, being on your country, all aspects of nature including animals, plants, earth, water, air and Dreaming); and mental health (loss and grief, trauma, stress, racism, disconnection from family and Country). In addition, there are four practical or physical domains that contribute to wellbeing: basic practical needs (including food, housing, access to services and money); work (meaningful and sustainable employment); education (formal schooling); and physical health (including diet, ill-health and physical fitness).

The domains of wellbeing have been discussed in other literature (AIHW, 2014; Cairney et al., 2017; Kilcullen et al., 2018), and generally the facets mentioned are agreed upon. Fatherhood, while potentially falling under the domain of family and community, has also been highlighted as an important contributing factor to wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men (Canuto et al., 2019; Stuart et al., 2015). Reduced levels of substance use or dependence—particularly alcohol and tobacco—have also been seen as an important aspect of wellbeing (Cairney et al., 2017). The multifaceted concept of wellbeing underpins the understanding that approaches to improving the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians need to be holistic, ideally by addressing multiple domains simultaneously and supporting the community along with the individual (Biddle, 2014; Dudgeon et al., 2014). The interconnected nature of the domains also indicates that improvements in one area are likely to elicit improvements in other areas (Dudgeon et al., 2014). While the practical domains of wellbeing are important, the need for holistic interventions (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017; Dudgeon et al., 2014) suggests that some aspects of social or emotional wellbeing should also be included in any program to enable meaningful and sustainable positive changes to occur. Thus, this systematic review will focus on programs and interventions that include at least one aspect of social or emotional wellbeing.

The aim of this systematic literature review is to identify interventions, programs or activities that are effective at improving the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men, to identify common themes in these approaches, and to explore the practical mechanisms utilised. This information can inform future service provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and potentially improve the effectiveness of programs available to them.

Method

This systematic review followed the guidelines set out by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement (Moher et al., 2009).

The review protocol was registered on the PROSPERO database of systematic reviews (CRD42022342502).

Search Strategy

Articles were identified by searching the following databases: Informit Health, PsycINFO, Australian Indigenous Health*InfoNet*, Google Scholar and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Clearinghouse. The search terms used were 'Australia*' AND 'Aboriginal' OR 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' OR 'Indigenous' AND 'male' OR 'men' AND 'wellbeing' OR 'emotional' OR 'social' OR 'mental+health' OR 'self-esteem' OR 'identity' OR 'connection'. Searches were limited to only include articles published in English, since 2000. Snowballing of included articles was also used as a search strategy to locate additional potentially relevant research.

Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria for the review were as follows:

- The article reports data indicating the effect of some form of intervention, program or activity on the wellbeing of Australian Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander adult men.

- The reported outcomes include at least one aspect of social or emotional wellbeing - for example, either psychological (self-esteem, substance dependence, the effect of racism or identity), emotional (emotional self-regulation or trauma), social (feelings of connectedness or belonging), cultural (feelings of connection to culture, land, place or community), empowerment or spiritual wellbeing.

- If the data reported also include participants who are not Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Australian men, then the data for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian men are discernible from other participants' data.

- The article is not a review of other articles or other research projects.

Critical Appraisal

The Integrated Quality Criteria for Review of Multiple Study Designs (ICROMS) tool was used to conduct critical appraisal assessments of the selected articles (Zingg et al.,

2016). This tool was selected because of the expectation that multiple types of data may be used in the review, and the ICROMS tool allows for flexibility in analysing both quantitative and qualitative data.

Analytical Strategy

The initial search for articles occurred in January 2022. Titles and abstracts were then used to screen for the inclusion criteria using the NVivo software program version 12. Two researchers conducted this process concurrently, and any discrepancies in the inclusion or exclusion of an article were discussed so an agreement could be reached. A third researcher settled any disagreements that could not be resolved. Articles screened in by consensus at this stage were then checked again against the inclusion criteria by reading their full text. This process was again conducted by two researchers to ensure there was no bias in the decision-making. The same process outlined in the previous stage was used in the event of disagreements.

<div align="center">

Results

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Search Outcome

The search yielded 194 results up to January 2022. Initial screening via titles and abstracts resulted in 128 articles being excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria or were duplicate studies. Full text screening of the remaining 66 articles was independently conducted by the primary author and a fellow researcher from another institution. As a result of consensus screening of these articles, 20 were excluded because they did not include information relating to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males; 24 were excluded because they did not evaluate the effect of a program, activity or intervention on the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males; and five were excluded because they were unable to differentiate the reported data for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men from the data for other participants. Seventeen articles were agreed to meet the inclusion criteria. Two of these articles were removed after applying the ICROMS tool. Their scores were below the minimum required score of 16 for articles utilising

qualitative data. Fifteen articles were included in the final analysis. This process is illustrated by Figure 1, and the articles are presented and numbered in Table 1.

Figure 1

Flow Chart of Systematic Selection of Review Articles
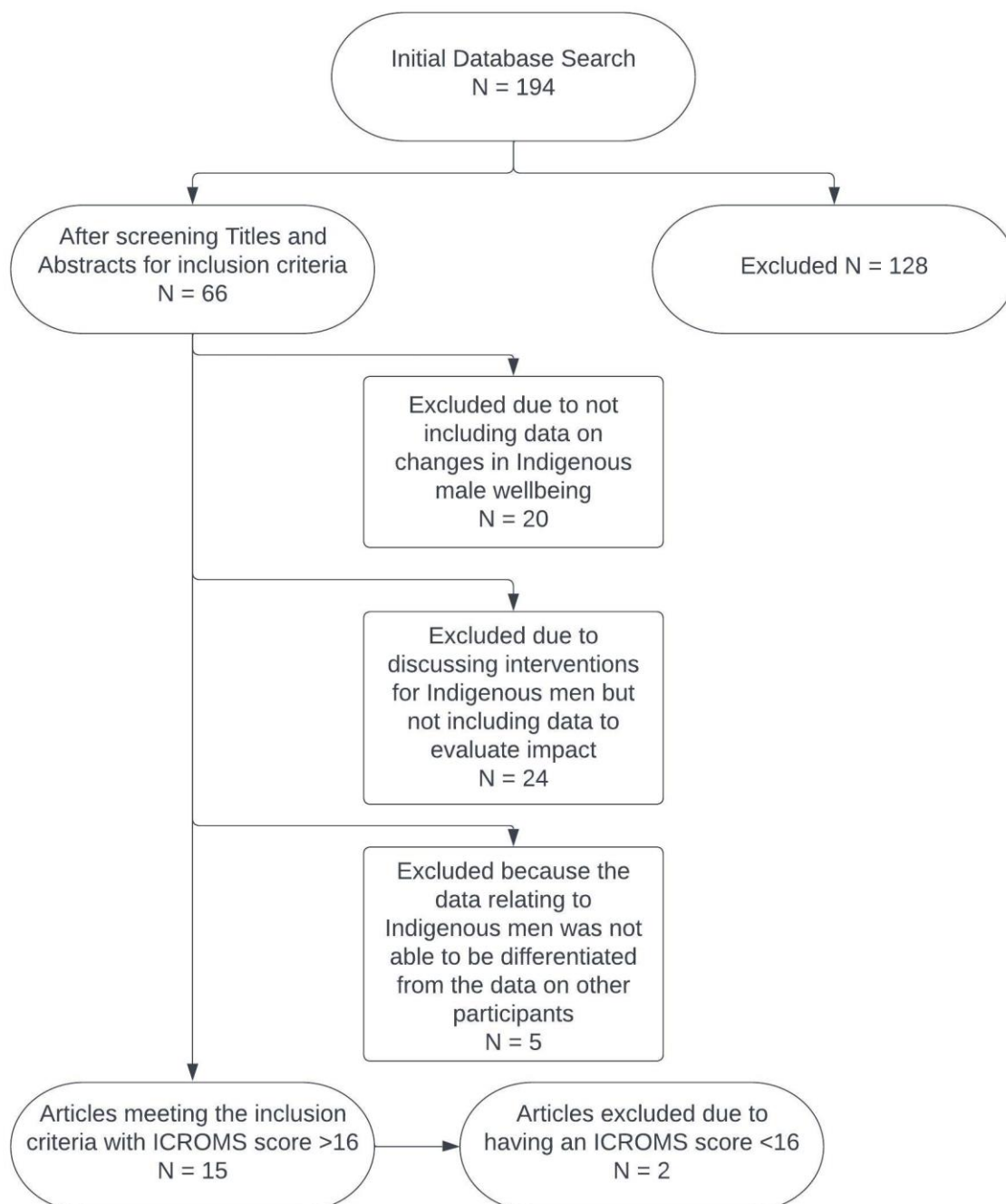
Study Characteristics

Multiple forms of interventions, programs and activities were found to be beneficial to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men. Most commonly, there was a significant element of social connection involved. Seven of the studies included a primary or significant element of social interaction and connection between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men (1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10). Additionally, the six studies relating to men's groups or men's sheds incorporated social connection as a core element (9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15). Facilitating social connection between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men was an important element in the design of 12 of the 15 interventions. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men gained social support, empowerment, understanding and improved mental health or emotional wellbeing by being able to connect with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men.

In the only study on an involuntary program (1), most participants rated the social components of the program - that is, talking to other male participants and sharing stories, jokes, tea and food - as being the most enjoyable part of the program. Men's groups and sheds were the most common type of program evaluated. It is a repeated theme with respect to these groups that participants value and derive significant benefits from meeting with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men to talk to and share stories, as well as discuss shared experiences and life challenges. Although not primarily focused on building social connections, the brief intervention (2) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people suffering from chronic mental illness (motivational care planning) incorporated social networks into the development of a treatment plan for patients. This included a discussion of how family support could be better used to improve the wellbeing of patients. Family members were involved in care planning and goal setting.

The other recurring theme between studies (4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 13) was improving wellbeing by re-establishing male identity. This was primarily achieved by strengthening participants' connection to culture, creating a positive sense of self and role modelling by other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men. One study (4) focused on an Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander football club; participants expressed a strong positive sense of identity and belonging they derived from being part of a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men. Being with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men was described as being in a safe environment. A similar theme was raised by participants in the studies on men's groups and sheds. The evaluation of the Wulgunggo Ngalu Learning Place (6) heavily emphasised the importance of a strong sense of identity grounded in connection to culture as being central to improved wellbeing. This was a core component of their program, which used Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men as role models to help participants develop their own sense of self. Caring for land and Country was also seen as a means by which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men can strengthen their connection to culture and foster a positive sense of identity (5). This was framed as potentially being both an independent activity and a group activity. The evaluations of men's groups and sheds (9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15) also discussed specifically or broadly an improvement in participants' sense of identity. Men felt that they belonged to the group, which improved their self-esteem and gave them a sense of safety, belonging and identity. One or both of these two key themes of social connection and strengthening identity were present - often as the central component - in each of the 15 studies.

Table 1

List of Studies Included in the Review

Study (reference number)	Program name	Target population	Content of program	Duration of program	Area of wellbeing addressed	Methodology — how were outcomes measured	Summary of findings (regarding benefits for adult male participants)	Critical appraisal result	Limitations of evaluation
(1) Willis & Holcombe, 2014	Cross Borders Indigenous Family Violence Program	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men in remote communities in South Australia and the Northern Territory, primarily who had been ordered by the court or corrections to complete the program (N=23)	Multimedia delivery of anti-violence messages/stories in English. Group discussions and developing anger management plans	4 weeks	Emotional self-regulation and a reduction in violent offending	Surveys with participants, surveys with professional stakeholders, program facilitators, interviews with partners, surveys with partners, offence data for participants	Participants surveyed indicated that they enjoyed the program, the DVDs shown, the stories told and the opportunity to socialise with other men. They indicated that the program helped them understand more about how and why violence occurred as well as how to avoid it. Partners of participants indicated that the program had a positive influence on their partner, but this may have been influenced by their partner also being present during the interview. Offence data showed reoffending rates of 70% in the Northern Territory and 20% in South Australia.	17/24	Survey results from participants were noted as lacking detail and being similarly brief across groups. Offence data could not be linked to the program to the exclusion of other factors and seemed to demonstrate a significant disparity between different communities and locations. Information provided by partners of participants may have been influenced by the presence of the participant during data collection. During the interview, one partner was noted as seeming to have been recently assaulted.
(2) Nagel et al., 2009	Culturally adapted brief motivational care planning	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women	Problem solving, motivational therapy and self-management	Two 1-hour treatment sessions	Mental health, emotional wellbeing, substance	The primary outcome measure was the Health of the Nation	The results show an advantage for the intervention in terms of wellbeing, life	23/24	The strength of evidence provided was good because

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		living in remote Northern Territory communities with chronic mental illness (but able to give informed consent) (N=49 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women)	principles. Discussion of family support, exploration of strengths and stressors, and goal setting. The second session included a review of progress and development of new strategies as required. Family carers were present for treatment and incorporated in the planning and goal setting. Psycho-educational videos were also shown.	2–6 weeks apart	dependence, life skills	Outcomes Scale. This is a 12-item clinician-rated instrument measuring behaviour, impairment, symptoms and social functioning for use with people with mental illness as a measure of severity of mental health disorders. Substance dependence was measured by the 5-item severity of dependence scale that focuses on the psychological aspects of dependence. Wellbeing was measured using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) scale. Patient self-assessment and observations of mental health workers were also used.	skills and alcohol dependence, which is sustained over time. These positive findings are further supported by a self-assessment questionnaire at six months post-intervention, which showed that patients generally believed they had made significant progress towards their goals. Further support for improved outcomes is provided by the assessment of Aboriginal mental health workers. At 18-month follow-up, they reported decreased family domestic violence, substance misuse, self-harm behaviour and mental illness.		the design included a treatment-as-usual control condition. There was recognition that some of the tools used may not be culturally appropriate, but a reasonable explanation was provided as to how this was managed. The effect of participants' sex was controlled for, suggesting similar impact for male and female participants.
(3) J. Sun & Buys, 2013	Community-based singing activity	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women from five urban, regional and rural	Communal singing led by a professional musician	2-hour weekly session each week for 12 months	Social interaction, sense of connection and community, physical exercise	Health surveys were completed pre- and post-intervention. Participants completed the Singing Activity	The intervention group experienced an increased sense of connectedness, and a significant proportion of participants	21/24	The study relied on self-report questionnaires and used a tool not developed for use with Aboriginal and

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		communities in Queensland (N=75 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men)				Participation Questionnaire.	improved their engagement with physical, artistic and other health benefit activities. A significant proportion also quit smoking.		Torres Strait Islander Australians. Additionally, there was a very high attrition rate, particularly for the control group (77.5%). Although the participant group included both men and women, gender was controlled for, and thus the benefits were present for both male and female participants.
(4) Thorpe et al., 2014	Fitzroy Stars Football Club (Aboriginal community sporting team)	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men engaged with the Fitzroy Stars Football Club (N=14)	Team-based physical activity, social interaction	Events occur at a minimum of weekly. Program is ongoing.	Cultural and community connections, physical activity, social support, identity and belonging, self-esteem	Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, thematic analysis of content	Involvement with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander football club showed benefits to community connection, including a sense of belonging and identity. Participants reported cultural benefits including sharing between men and strengthening cultural identity. Social and emotional wellbeing was improved, including self-esteem, stress relief, reduced isolation and anxiety. Participants had	22/24	A sound qualitative methodology was used to gather data and determine concepts and sub-concepts. Evidence gathered related directly to the experience of program participants and, as such, was strong.

Study (reference number)	Program name	Target population	Content of program	Duration of program	Area of wellbeing addressed	Methodology — how were outcomes measured	Summary of findings (regarding benefits for adult male participants)	Critical appraisal result	Limitations of evaluation
							improved capacity in leadership and role modelling. There was a benefit to physical health and wellbeing as well as a reduction in the effect of racism.		
(5) Kingsley et al., 2009	Caring for Country	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults in Victoria (N=5 men)	Having knowledge of traditional lands, having the right to be involved in the care and management of traditional lands and actually doing so	Ongoing	Self-esteem, identity, cultural connection, reduced stress, improved mood	Semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis	Being on Country and engaging with traditional lands enabled participants to feel more culturally and spiritually connected, including to their ancestors. This created a more positive sense of identity and self-esteem, as well as improved mood. Being on Country was described as enriching, energising, relaxing and comforting. Working with their traditional lands gave participants a sense of belonging, leadership and connection, and seemed to heal the effects of discrimination. Caring for traditional lands conveyed feelings of pride, accomplishment and improved self-worth. Participants also reported that those without connection	23/24	A sound qualitative methodology was used following accepted Indigenous research guidelines. Although only a few cultural groups were approached to be included in the study, there is meaningful justification as to why this was done.

Study (reference number)	Program name	Target population	Content of program	Duration of program	Area of wellbeing addressed	Methodology — how were outcomes measured	Summary of findings (regarding benefits for adult male participants)	Critical appraisal result	Limitations of evaluation
							to their land were more likely to experience substance dependency and violence. Caring for Country also created practical benefits, including employment and education.		
(6) Clear Horizon Consulting & Department of Justice, 2013	Wulgunggo Ngalu Learning Place	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men serving Community Corrections Orders in Victoria (N=28)	Community-based voluntary residential diversionary facility providing cultural safety, individually focused holistic cultural strengthening and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander male role modelling	Program is ongoing and participants are able to voluntarily engage for varying periods. This is recorded as being between less than 1 month and more than 5 months.	Emotional wellbeing, cultural connection, self-esteem, emotional self-regulation, social connection, physical wellbeing, substance dependency, empowerment	Interviews and a digital storytelling workshop	Participants experienced stress relief, reconnection to culture, felt empowered via supported employment, social connection and role modelling by other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men. Participants gained self-esteem, pride, practical skills and the ability to set and meet goals. Participants developed a better understanding of their role and identity as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander man.	24/24	The strength of evidence was quite strong. Participants noted that there were difficulties in transitioning changes made during their time with the residential program to their every-day life in the 'real world'. As such, it is unclear whether changes are sustainable outside the residential environment.
(7) Hanley & Marchetti, 2020	Dreaming Inside	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander male prisoners at Junee Correctional Centre in New	Creative writing program	1-day workshop recurring at the Correction Centre	Spiritual wellbeing, self-esteem, empowerment, connection to culture	Program feedback form and semi-structured interviews	Improved self-esteem, confidence and emotional wellbeing, improved connection to culture	19/24	Interviews provided strong evidence regarding the effects of the program. Program evaluation forms

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		South Wales (N=96)							were less informative. Given that participants were serving prison sentences, this may have influenced their enjoyment of the program. Researchers had significant difficulty gaining data from participants who had exited prison since completing the program.
(8) Whiteside et al., 2016	Family Wellbeing Program	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men aged 16–25 from the Central Coast area of New South Wales (N=30)	A semi-structured 5-stage program. Participants undertake 6 months of full-time training and complete a Certificate II qualification. The topics covered are group agreement, human qualities, basic human needs, life journey, relationships, conflict resolution, emotions, crisis, grief and loss, and beliefs and attitudes.	6 months	Emotional wellbeing, physical wellbeing, social wellbeing, empowerment, substance dependence	K10, adapted for Aboriginal participants, was administered pre- and at 3-months' post-intervention. Additional questionnaire items were asked post-intervention. Interviews and a small focus group were also conducted with program facilitators.	Significant reduction in psychological distress after completion of the program. Improved capacity to manage personal relationships. Half of the participants were able to find better employment after completing the program. Reduced substance dependency, improved physical health and self-care.	22/24	Although there was a small number of participants aged slightly under 18, the majority of the data were gathered from adult Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men. There were difficulties in terms of program attrition in that one-third of participants did not complete the program or the post-intervention questionnaire. The data may thus be skewed towards participants capable enough

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									to complete the program. No interviews were conducted with participants. This may have increased the depth of data gained.
(9) Cox et al., 2020	Men's Shed	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men in a rural Tasmanian community (N=10)	Social activities and workshop projects. This can include woodworking, gardening, cultural activities, cooking, yarning and playing cards.	2 days per week, ongoing	Emotional wellbeing, social connection, cultural connection, physical wellbeing	Semi-structured interviews	Participants were engaging in an informal male-friendly therapeutic environment and experienced benefits to their social, emotional and physical wellbeing. They gained feelings of belonging and hope and were able to engage in mentoring and be mentored by other Aboriginal men. They gained a stronger sense of identity. Men were able to share their experiences of physical or mental illness, which also improved their sense of connection and general wellbeing.	22/24	In-depth qualitative data were gained, demonstrating a strong evidentiary basis. The sample was quite small and tended to consist of older men (mean age of 62.6 years), meaning the benefits gained may need further testing in terms of their applicability to younger men.
(10) Berry et al., 2012	Oolong House	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous adult men (N=46 Aboriginal and	Residential Substance Abuse Rehabilitation Centre	16 weeks	Substance dependency, social connection, cultural knowledge and connection, empowerment	K10 (yarning about mental health), Drug Taking Confidence Questionnaire (DTCQ-8), Growth and	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men found the cultural components of the program to be significantly beneficial, more so	20/24	Although several psychosocial measures were used, only results from the TCE were reported independently for Aboriginal and

Study (reference number)	Program name	Target population	Content of program	Duration of program	Area of wellbeing addressed	Methodology — how were outcomes measured	Summary of findings (regarding benefits for adult male participants)	Critical appraisal result	Limitations of evaluation
		Torres Strait Islander men)				Empowerment Measure (GEM), Treatment Component Evaluation (TCE)	than non-Indigenous participants. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients also found receiving support with managing finances and finding employment more helpful than non-Indigenous clients.		Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous participants, meaning that the other data reported could not be used in the context of this review. Additionally, there was a high attrition rate of approximately 67%, which may have affected outcomes.
(11) Southcombe et al., 2014	Men's groups and men's sheds	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men (N=45)	Social connection between men, role-modelling, dissemination of information and supported access to health services	Ongoing	Social connection, cultural connection, empowerment, emotional wellbeing	Yarning circle, semi-structured interviews and observational data	Participants expressed that engaging with the groups improved their emotional wellbeing, made them feel more connected, helped them manage difficult life situations and substance dependency, reconnect with family, and feel more empowered	20/24	In-depth qualitative data were gained, demonstrating a strong evidence base. Data were gathered from numerous groups in urban, regional and remote settings, suggesting good external validity. Data were gathered from group participants and facilitators.

Study (reference number)	Program name	Target population	Content of program	Duration of program	Area of wellbeing addressed	Methodology — how were outcomes measured	Summary of findings (regarding benefits for adult male participants)	Critical appraisal result	Limitations of evaluation
(12) Cavanagh et al., 2014	Men's groups and men's sheds	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men (N=12)	Social connection between men, role-modelling, dissemination of information and supported access to health services	Ongoing	Social connection, cultural connection, empowerment, emotional wellbeing	Yarning circle	Men benefited from the cultural connection gained from participating in the Men's Group or Men's Shed. Men's emotional wellbeing and healthcare outcomes improved through social connection with other men and culturally competent healthcare practitioners.	18/24	Qualitative data from relevant participants were gained via a yarning circle. The sample was relatively small, with only one yarning circle comprising 12 men being held. The participants were representative of 5 separate groups. Where the participants were from was not stated.
(13) Cavanagh et al., 2016	Men's groups and men's sheds	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men (N=45)	Social connection between men, role-modelling, dissemination of information and supported access to health services	Ongoing	Social connection, cultural connection, empowerment, emotional wellbeing	Yarning circles and semi-structured interviews	Men felt less isolated by engaging with other men. They were able to share stories and challenges, allowing them to feel empowered and supported. Men felt that talking about their problems reduced their levels of stress. They were also able to learn new skills and information through their engagement, which contributed to reducing the impact of other social problems, including family violence, unemployment, financial stress and poor mental or	19/24	Qualitative data was used to outline the beneficial learning outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and how these outcomes improved various aspects of their wellbeing. Data was gathered from urban, regional and remote areas. Although there may have been differences in the level of social challenges faced between these separate groups,

Study (reference number)	Program name	Target population	Content of program	Duration of program	Area of wellbeing addressed	Methodology — how were outcomes measured	Summary of findings (regarding benefits for adult male participants)	Critical appraisal result	Limitations of evaluation
							physical health. Through their engagement men developed a stronger sense of identity.		the data was analysed as a whole.
(14) Henwood et al., 2017	Men's groups and men's sheds	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men (N=61)	Social connection between men, role-modelling, dissemination of information and supported access to health services	Ongoing	Social connection, cultural connection, empowerment, emotional wellbeing	Yarning circles and semi-structured interviews	Men felt more connected to other men, which improved their sense of belonging and thus their wellbeing. Men felt safe having a shared space for them and other men. This gave them the opportunity to talk about present or past challenges they have faced. By sharing their stories and experiences, men felt less stressed, more supported and were able to identity potential practical solutions to help them overcome barriers.	21/24	Qualitative data provided a clear picture of the experiences of men involved with the various Men's sheds. Men spoke of some of the social and emotional benefits they had experienced as a result of their participation in the program. Men also spoke of areas where the program could be improved to better address their needs. Although data was gathered from remote and urban areas, there was no delineation of the data or focus on any particularly

Study (reference number)	Program name	Target population	Content of program	Duration of program	Area of wellbeing addressed	Methodology — how were outcomes measured	Summary of findings (regarding benefits for adult male participants)	Critical appraisal result	Limitations of evaluation
									geographical area.
(15) Cavanagh et al., 2018	Men's groups and men's sheds	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men (N=32)	Social connection between men, role-modelling, dissemination of information and supported access to health services	Ongoing	Social connection, cultural connection, empowerment, emotional wellbeing	Yarning circles	Men feel more connected and through feeling safe and accepted are able to deal with difficult experiences, trauma and grief more effectively. Men felt that having a space to express themselves reduced stress. Men felt empowered and positive when given the opportunity to share their stories particularly in the context of helping and supporting other men.	20/24	Although strong qualitative data was presented; most of the quotes provided were from program facilitators rather than participants. This limited the strength of data related to positive change experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants.

Discussion

The aim of this systematic review was to better understand what interventions, programs and activities are effective in improving the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men. Fifteen studies were identified in the literature that met the inclusion criteria for the systematic review. Understanding how to best approach supporting and empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men is a key factor in addressing the severe and worsening social difficulties experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians (Adams et al., 2017; Arney & Westby, 2012; Australian Government, 2022; Blagg et al., 2015; Blair et al., 2014; Cavanagh et al., 2022; Cunneen, 2002; McCalman et al., 2006). The two themes found in the literature were strengthening identity and increasing social connection. These themes and the specific mechanisms utilised are discussed below.

The invasion and colonisation of Australia resulted in the undermining of identity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, particularly men who previously were leaders, protectors, providers and teachers in their respective communities (Reilly & Rees, 2018; Wenitong, 2006). Given that a positive sense of identity is considered a core aspect of positive wellbeing (Durie et al., 2009), it correlates that strengthening identity was a successful component of numerous programs in this review. Other research has also suggested that identity - particularly through connection to land and culture - is critical to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Berry et al., 2010; Kingsley et al., 2013; Trzepacz et al., 2014).

It has previously been argued that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men would benefit from a more positive sense of identity (Adams et al., 2017; Blagg, 1999; Blagg et al., 2015; Lawrence, 2006). This can potentially occur through connection to culture (Dockery, 2010), role modelling (Canuto et al., 2019), employment (Schultz et al., 2018) or other similar mechanisms. Of the 15 studies included in this review, 12 had a significant focus on strengthening identity (4 through 15). There were a number of mechanisms utilised in these interventions, programs and activities which contributed to this outcome.

Role modelling was effectively utilised to strengthen identity. Role modelling involved men sharing guidance, wisdom and knowledge with other men and demonstrating to other men how to accomplish various tasks, including construction projects or playing a sport, or managing social and emotional problems, such as relationship difficulties or poor mental health. Role modelling has been discussed in the literature as a way for men to feel stronger in themselves, thus supporting a more positive sense of identity in the present (Canuto et al., 2019). Within the most popular forms of intervention, Men's Sheds and Men's Groups, role-modelling has been highlighted as a central component of the interactions between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men (McCalman et al., 2005; Tsey et al., 2004). Importantly it is noted that both the sharer and the receiver in the role modelling exchange seem to derive benefit to their sense of identity and thus their overall wellbeing (Cox et al., 2020).

Sharing personal experiences, history, stories and challenges with others supported participants to develop a more positive sense of identity. This was primarily noted within the Men's Sheds and Men's Groups interventions, but also in the intervention for incarcerated men (Hanley & Marchetti, 2020). Men felt safe and supported to talk about and share problems, challenges or traumatic experiences they had faced or were facing. This sharing enabled them to deal with past issues and to reflect on their own experiences and their own choices. Through reflection and sharing, men were able to reorient themselves in the present and reinforce a more positive sense of identity, less burdened by their past (Henwood et al., 2017). While sharing difficult past experiences may seem classically therapeutic, it is the context within which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men felt safe to do so that is important to highlight. In the presently summarised interventions, this was primarily with other men with who they felt a sense of shared lived experience and shared challenges.

A sense of belonging enabled men to have a more positive sense of identity. Men felt stronger in their own identity by spending time with others whom had shared culture, values, interests, priorities and experiences. This validated their own values, ideals and experiences

and made them feel more confident. Men felt a sense of belonging by being around other men and engaging in the same activities together with shared purpose. Men felt a sense of ownership to their group or club, that it was theirs and thus that they belonged there. They felt safe and accepted in that space with other members of their group. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men have historically received less focus and attention in terms of improving their wellbeing, as compared with other groups in Australia (Adams et al., 2017; Arney & Westby, 2012; Blagg et al., 2015; Blair et al., 2014; Cunneen, 2002). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men have expressed feelings of disempowerment, and of their voice being taken away, due to a more pronounced focus on women's and children's issues and wellbeing (Cavanagh et al., 2022). Given this context, safe spaces for men, where they can have ownership and a sense of belonging appear to be an effective mechanism for creating a more positive sense of identity and thus improved wellbeing.

Learning about their culture by being taught and by doing, enabled men to create a more positive sense of identity. This took place through a number of means, including spending time with elders; spending time on Country; caring for Country; the sharing of personal history; learning about history and cultural traditions; engaging in cultural activities such as artwork, dance, music, sport, fishing, hunting and swimming; visiting culturally significant sites; making musical instruments; and making traditional weapons. Having more knowledge of their culture, and actively experiencing their culture, enabled men to feel a greater sense of pride in their culture and in themselves as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander man.

Although only formally present in two of the interventions, practical aspects of interventions also supported a more positive sense of identity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men. Practical mechanisms included educational courses focusing on literacy, numeracy and employment skills; work readiness and job specific training programs; work experience opportunities; and intensive support seeking employment. Men experienced improved self-esteem when they were able to learn and master new skills, they felt they had more options in life as compared to what they may have previously believed. Men felt

through learning, training and obtaining employment, a sense of hope that they could have employment and be able to provide for their families. The identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men is often significantly negatively impacted by feeling that they are unable to hold employment and support or provide for their family (Atkinson, 2008). Through these practical mechanisms, men were able to establish a renewed sense of purpose and meaning in their lives, and a positive sense of identity in being a provider for their family.

The second key theme in the literature was increasing social connection. Social connection was a significant component in 14 of the 15 articles reviewed (only excluding study 5). The primary mechanism used to increase social connection was the group context in which the activities, programs or interventions were undertaken. This included group yarning; sharing of experiences; overcoming challenges as a group; undertaking projects or crafts as a group; working as a group; playing group sports; or doing other physical activities together. The group generally included other men, who were known or unknown, sometimes also including known family members. Another means by which social connection was facilitated was by the organised inclusion of local elders in activities. Participants were enabled to connect with elders socially, to learn from them about history and culture, and to visit local culturally significant sites with them. Social connection within these settings was facilitated and encouraged by similarity and shared context between participants. Men expressed that they were able to connect socially because of shared experiences, challenges, beliefs and culture. This shared personal history enabled participants to feel safe and that they would not be judged or ostracised for their own history or experiences.

A significant body of research has outlined how interconnected the concept of wellbeing is for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their communities (Dudgeon et al., 2014). It is suggested that an individual's wellbeing is connected to the wellbeing of their community and vice versa, and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' wellbeing is closely based on the strength of kinship and community connections (Butler et al., 2019; Cairney et al., 2017). Men expressed that they derived improved wellbeing and feelings of happiness and safety from spending time with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

men to talk about their lives, difficulties, goals and successes. Reconnecting to community, kinship and culture is considered a key factor in healing the intergenerational trauma caused by colonisation (Muid, 2006), and there is an inextricable link for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians between individual empowerment and community empowerment (Dudgeon et al., 2014). Hence, this central theme in the reviewed studies aligns with the broader body of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing literature.

Social connection has also been shown to have a positive relationship with good mental health in various other groups (Almedom, 2015; Berkman et al., 2000; Ziersch et al., 2011). Specifically, for marginalised groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, it has reduced the impact of racism by enabling an individual to think about discrimination as being against a group, rather than as being against them as an individual, thus reducing the impact of racism on the individual (Harrel, 2000; Mellor, 2004). Participants in the reviewed studies expressed a similar outcome, feeling that connecting with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men, made them less vulnerable to the negative repercussions of racism.

Results Interpreted Against the National Strategic Framework

The National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017) is the National Framework that the federal government has developed in order to guide progress in improving the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.

Both social connection and strengthening identity are discussed as effective means of improving wellbeing in the National Strategic Framework. Improving social connection is a key strategy of the Framework and is operationalised through improving community cohesion and by specific support for both Men's and Women's Groups. Improved connection to family, kinship and community is seen as a core aspect of good wellbeing within the Framework.

A strong sense of Identity is discussed in the Framework as being a protective factor against poor wellbeing or mental health, with connection to culture and Country being core

components of this. Strengthening identity is highlighted as an important approach for younger people so as to empower them to become healthy adults. Although strengthening identity is not specifically mentioned for adults, some of the mechanisms outlined within this review are included. The National Framework states that an important aspect of improving wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is to support elders and other community members to act as role models and leaders in their communities. The body of research summarised herein supports this conclusion, suggesting that creating opportunities for role modelling is an effective way of improving wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men by fostering a strong sense of identity. Sharing stories and a sense of belonging, while not individually discussed, do form key components of Men's Groups which are encouraged by the Framework. The learning of, and engaging with, culture is supported throughout the Framework, with a strong focus on strengthening connection in this context. In this aspect the body of literature is well aligned with the Framework.

Practical outcomes leading to a stronger sense of identity, particularly training and employment, are incorporated into the Framework. Employment is seen as a means to improve wellbeing as well as a protective factor against poor mental health. Although practical outcomes, such as sustainable employment, were only central in a few of the interventions reviewed, they have been repeatedly discussed as a key aspect of improving identity and wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men (Atkinson, 2008; Cavanagh, 2022).

Limitations

The literature search included databases primarily focused on psychology, social work and primary health. This may have resulted in some publications not being included due to being published outside of the scope of these databases, for example, literature in the education field. Significantly this review was only able to capture outcomes wherein there were published evaluations available. It is likely that there are successful programs, interventions or activities being undertaken with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men in Australia that have not undergone a published evaluation. As such, the approaches

incorporated in these circumstances could not be included in this review, thus limiting the potential scope of the results.

Implications of the Findings

Future research may seek to place a greater focus on evaluating interventions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men in remote areas. These areas tend to experience the highest levels of social difficulty (AIHW, 2021b) and thus would benefit from improved understanding and service delivery. Programs seeking to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men should seek to incorporate the key themes outlined in this review and give consideration to the various effective mechanisms being utilised to achieve these outcomes. More intensive interventions may seek to place a greater focus on practical outcomes, particularly employment, as this seems to be a critical component of positive identity formation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men (Atkinson, 2004; Cavanagh et al., 2022). The findings within this review may serve to inform future development of policy and service provision with the goal of improving wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men. This review may make a meaningful contribution to the National Strategic Framework in future iterations, with the potential for a greater focus on addressing the needs of men, in the context of the community-wide benefits this could promote.

Conclusion

The studies analysed included two key themes that were shown to be beneficial for the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian men: establishing a positive sense of identity and increasing social connection. The mechanisms to achieve these outcomes included, spending time with others who had shared values, experiences, culture and beliefs; feeling safe to share personal history and challenges; learning about and experiencing culture; role-modelling; feeling a sense of belonging; and practical outcomes, such as learning new skills and finding employment. It is recommended that interventions or programs aimed at improving the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian men incorporate the key themes and mechanisms outlined in this review.

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