PREDICTIVE ANALYTICS GROUP

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Culture Care Connect

To what extent is the program fit for addressing current and future need?

Predictive Analytics Group

April 27, 2025

CONTENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides a comprehensive evaluation of the Culture Care Connect (**CCC**) program and its capacity to address both current and future mental health and suicide prevention needs among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The study integrates multiple data sources, including a detailed literature review, extensive survey analysis, and rigorous quantitative forecasting using a Bayesian Unobserved Components Model (**UCM**). The purpose of the report is to assess whether the CCC program is fit for addressing current service gaps and to determine the workforce expansion required to meet anticipated future demand.

Overview and Purpose

The CCC program, administered by the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (**NACCHO**), is a community-led initiative designed to prevent suicide and improve mental health outcomes through culturally safe, community-driven interventions. In partnership with the Department of Health and Aged Care (**DHAC**), the program supports 31 Suicide Prevention Networks and 27 Aftercare Services across Australia. This report examines the extent to which the CCC program can meet both current and future needs by evaluating:

- The literature on mental health disparities, workforce shortages, and the demand for culturally safe services.
- Survey data detailing operational challenges, service utilisation trends, and training outcomes.
- Forecasting results from a Bayesian UCM that projects workforce growth.

The integration of these components provides a holistic view of the challenges and opportunities facing CCC, with particular emphasis on workforce planning and service delivery in remote and high-demand regions.

Key Findings from the Literature Review

The literature review reveals persistent inequalities in mental health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Key points include:

- Indigenous populations experience significantly higher rates of psychological distress and suicide compared to non-Indigenous Australians.
- Workforce shortages and geographic disparities impede access to culturally safe mental health services, particularly in remote areas.
- Evidence supports the effectiveness of Indigenous-led, culturally tailored interventions in reducing mental health disparities.
- National policy documents, including reports by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (**AIHW**) and the Productivity Commission, underscore the need for increased investment in community-controlled services and enhanced workforce capacity.

Survey Analysis Outcomes

The survey component of this evaluation utilised two interrelated instruments: the CCC Survey and the ATSIMHF/Training Survey. Key outcomes include:

- Responses were obtained from a broad geographic spread, with predominant representation from Queensland (approximately 32%), New South Wales (18%), the Northern Territory (18%) and Victoria (14%). Modified Monash Model ratings ranged from 1–2 (urban/regional centres) to 6–7 (very remote communities).
- Over 70% of respondents identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. The occupational profile was dominated by network coordinators (59% of responses), with additional roles including jurisdictional coordinators, cultural leads, and SEWB officers.
- A critical finding is that staffing fill rates vary widely across CCC sites, with some reporting 100% staffing and others as low as 17%. This variability is particularly evident in remote communities.
- Respondents anticipated that service demand would increase significantly, with most expecting a 25 to 50 percent or greater rise in service utilisation over the next two to three years. This highlights the urgent need for workforce expansion.

Quantitative Forecasting Using Bayesian Modelling

A Bayesian UCM was specified to forecast future service demand and workforce growth. This model, which leverages historical service utilisation data along with ABS and AIHW datasets, projects an overall workforce growth of approximately 36% by 2029, corresponding to an average annual increase of approximately 4.22%.

The PAG model forecasts an average annual growth rate of 4.22% in Indigenous mental health service utilisation over the period from 2023 to 2029. Applying compound growth, this translates to an overall increase of approximately 36% over the seven-year period, calculated as $(1+0.0422)^7-1$. This 36% growth rate forms the basis for estimating future workforce needs, under the assumption that workforce demand scales proportionally with service demand. Consequently, the CCC program's projected expansion from its current workforce baseline reflects not only rising service presentations but also the need to maintain culturally safe, community-led service delivery at a national level.

The national workforce, estimated from performance reports and scaled across all CCC services, is approximately 453.6 Full-Time Equivalents (**FTE**), calculated as follows:

- Suicide Prevention Coordinators: 3.6 FTE per service across 42 sites ($3.6 \times 42 = 151.2$ FTE).
- Aftercare Mental Health Workers: 5.9 FTE per service across 42 sites ($5.9 \times 42 = 247.8$ FTE).
- ATSIMHFA Trainers: 1.3 FTE per service across 42 sites ($1.3 \times 42 = 54.6$ FTE).

Applying the PAG model's forecast of a 36% increase in workforce demand, the projected national workforce by 2029 is:

$$\text{Projected FTE} = 453.6 \times 1.36 = 617.0 \text{ FTE}.$$

This represents an additional 163.4 FTE, maintaining the assumed average annual growth rate of approximately 4.22% from 2023 to 2029. The breakdown by service level is detailed below:

Table 1: Estimated Current Workforce Per Service and Scaled Nationally

Service Level	Average FTE per Service	Scaled Total FTE (42 Sites)
Suicide Prevention Coordinators	3.6 FTE	151.2 FTE
Aftercare Mental Health Workers	5.9 FTE	247.8 FTE
ATSIMHFA Trainers	1.3 FTE	54.6 FTE
Total Workforce (Current)	–	**453.6 FTE**

Table 2: Projected Workforce Expansion Required to Meet CCC Service Demand (2029)

Service Level	Current National FTE (Scaled)	Additional FTE Required (36%)	Total Workforce (2029)
Suicide Prevention Coordinators	151.2	54.4	205.6
Aftercare Mental Health Workers	247.8	89.2	337.0
ATSIMHFA Trainers	54.6	19.7	74.3
Total Workforce	453.6	163.4	617.0

Juxtaposition of Survey Outcomes and Bayesian Model Forecasts

The survey outcomes provide explicit qualitative evidence of significant staffing gaps across CCC services. Respondents have reported that current staffing levels are insufficient to meet the anticipated increase in service demand, particularly in remote regions where recruitment and retention are most challenging. The quantitative forecasts from the Bayesian UCM, projecting a 36% increase in the national workforce (an additional 163.4 FTE, growing from 453.6 FTE to 617.0 FTE), align closely with these self-reported needs.

In practical terms, survey respondents indicated that service utilisation in areas such as aftercare is expected to increase dramatically, necessitating the largest expansion in Aftercare Mental Health Workers (an increase of 89.2 FTE), while an additional 54.4 FTE in Suicide Prevention Coordinators and 19.7 FTE in ATSIMHFA Trainers are also required. This convergence between the qualitative data from the surveys and the quantitative projections from the PAG model reinforces the conclusion that the CCC program must significantly expand its workforce in order to sustain and enhance the delivery of culturally safe, community-led mental health and suicide prevention services.

Conclusion

The integration of survey data with Bayesian modelling indicates that the CCC program is experiencing significant workforce pressures. The national staffing level is estimated at 453.6 FTE. Both qualitative survey responses and projections from the PAG model suggest that an increase of 36% will be required, bringing the total to approximately 617.0 FTE by 2029. This represents an additional 163.4 FTE, primarily needed to address increased service demand in remote and high-risk communities.

The analysis presented provides a data-driven foundation for strategic workforce planning. It underscores the need for targeted recruitment, improved retention measures, and sustained investment to support the viability of culturally safe, Indigenous-led suicide prevention and aftercare services over the long term.

INTRODUCTION

Background

The CCC is a community-led initiative administered by NACCHO, designed to prevent suicide among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who experience significantly higher suicide rates than other Australians. The CCC program is designed to promote self-determination and community control in suicide prevention efforts. In partnership with the DHAC, NACCHO has implemented the CCC program through a Standard Grant Agreement to support the national rollout of community-led Regional and Local Suicide Prevention and Aftercare Networks. The program also engages eight workers across Australia as *train the trainers* for Indigenous Mental Health First Aid.

This report evaluates the CCC program's ability to meet both current and future needs of program stakeholders in delivering suicide prevention and aftercare supports. Specifically, it seeks to answer the question: **To what extent is the program fit for addressing current and future need?** The evaluation assesses the nature of current and future demands for coordinated, culturally safe, and accessible suicide prevention services, including Aboriginal-led models of delivery. Furthermore, it explores the workforce capacity required to sustain and expand these services.

Suicide remains a critical issue, accounting for 5.3% of all deaths among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in 2021, compared to 1.8% for non-Indigenous Australians, as reported by the AIHW. Barriers such as culturally unsafe practices hinder access to mental health services, particularly in remote and regional areas. To address these challenges, CCC supports the establishment of 31 Community-Controlled Suicide Prevention Networks and Aftercare Services while also coordinating mental health first aid training.

The CCC program has successfully established 26 network sites and 27 aftercare sites nationwide, ensuring that services are community-led and tailored to the unique needs and priorities of each region. By facilitating suicide prevention networks and increasing engagement with mainstream services such as police and hospitals, the program has driven greater uptake of aftercare services by community members in crisis. A key strength of the CCC program is its focus on workforce development, including cultural and clinical supervision for aftercare staff and an emphasis on self-care. Additionally, the program employs continuous quality improvement processes to incorporate lessons learned as it evolves. This initiative aligns with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021–2031, demonstrating the effectiveness of community-led, culturally informed approaches to suicide prevention.

This evaluation is informed by document reviews, data from the AIHW and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (**ABS**), and extensive interviews with national, jurisdictional, and regional stakeholders. The report explores key themes, including workforce shortages, service accessibility, and the program's role in fostering trauma-aware, healing-informed care.

Report Structure

This report is structured as follows:

Section 1: Objective and Scope

This section outlines the key objectives and scope of the study. The analysis focuses on understanding trends in service demand for CCC-related programs, assessing the factors driving this demand, and identifying implications for mental health service provision. The scope includes an evaluation of historical data, predictive modelling of future demand, and an assessment of how these projections align with broader mental health sector trends. Any limitations, such as data availability or assumptions in forecasting models, are also discussed to provide context for the findings.

Section 2: Literature Review

This section reviews existing research relevant to forecasting demand for culturally safe mental health and suicide prevention services tailored to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It provides an overview of previous studies on service utilisation trends, demand projections, and key determinants influencing the need for CCC-type services. The review includes references to frameworks used in Indigenous mental health service planning and examines the application of quantitative modelling techniques in forecasting service needs within these communities. Additionally, policy documents and reports from the AIHW, the Productivity Commission, and the National Mental Health Commission are assessed to establish a foundation for the methodology used in this study.

Section 3: Survey Analysis

This section presents a detailed analysis of the survey data collected as part of this evaluation. It outlines the survey design, sample characteristics and key findings related to workforce capacity, service demand and training impact. The analysis critically examines the reliability and robustness of the survey data, highlighting both strengths and limitations inherent in self-reported measures. Insights derived from the survey data inform the subsequent forecasting and correlation analyses.

Section 4: Forecasting Demand for Program Services

This section presents the methodology used to estimate future demand for CCC-related services. Forecasting is conducted using available data sources, including:

- Program level data extracted from performance reports and administrative records from CCC programs.
- National datasets such as those from the AIHW and ABS.
- Survey data capturing trends in service utilisation and population needs.

A quantitative modelling approach is employed to generate demand forecasts, leveraging statistical methods such as time series analysis and trend decomposition to assess the extent to which the CCC program is meeting current and future service needs. The UCM is applied to extract underlying patterns in service demand, providing a robust analytical framework for evaluating trends in culturally safe suicide prevention and aftercare services.

Section 5: Correlation Between Forecasted Service Utilisation and Increasing Demand for Mental Health Services

This section examines the relationship between projected CCC service utilisation and broader trends in mental health service demand. Using statistical correlation techniques, the analysis explores whether increases in CCC service use align with growing needs for mental health support, particularly within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The study assesses:

- Patterns in CCC service utilisation and their alignment with national and regional mental health sector trends, drawing on findings from the AIHW and the Productivity Commission.
- Cyclical fluctuations in demand and potential external influences such as economic conditions, policy changes and shifts in funding allocation.
- The impact of service expansion, community led interventions and policy reforms on mental health outcomes, with a focus on addressing workforce shortages and accessibility challenges.

OBJECTIVE & SCOPE

Building on our earlier report estimating the socio-economic costs and benefits of the CCC program, this report undertakes a comprehensive evaluation of the program's ability to address current and future demands for suicide prevention and aftercare services among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This aligns with the CCC program's objective of delivering culturally safe, community-led mental health support that responds to the specific needs of Indigenous populations. To achieve this, the evaluation includes an extensive literature review and statistical modelling to assess the effectiveness of CCC initiatives in reducing suicide rates, improving service accessibility, and fostering long-term social and emotional wellbeing.

The literature review examines academic studies, government reports, and policy papers to contextualise the CCC program within national and regional suicide prevention frameworks. It identifies key findings on the effectiveness of culturally safe, Indigenous-led models of care, highlighting best-practice approaches in reducing mental health disparities and strengthening service engagement. By synthesising these findings, this report evaluates the CCC program's alignment with evidence-based suicide prevention strategies.

Statistical modelling is undertaken to measure key indicators such as the availability and accessibility of CCC-supported services, workforce demand for suicide prevention and aftercare, and trends in service utilisation. Additionally, the modelling assesses the extent to which the CCC program has influenced broader systemic factors, including engagement with mainstream healthcare services and the reduction of cultural barriers to mental health support. Given the limitations of long-term performance report data, the modelling is supplemented by national datasets to provide a comprehensive analysis of service needs and delivery patterns.

The scope of this report is framed by the key measures outlined in national policy objectives and the CCC implementation framework. Specifically, the evaluation examines:

- The nature of current and future demands for culturally safe and accessible suicide prevention services, with a focus on the effectiveness of Aboriginal-led models of care.
- The workforce capacity required to sustain and expand suicide prevention and aftercare services, including recruitment, training, and retention of Indigenous mental health workers.
- The impact of CCC's community-controlled networks in increasing service engagement, particularly among high-risk and remote populations, and how this aligns with documented performance outcomes from CCC sites.
- The program's responsiveness to evolving challenges, including emerging mental health needs and broader socio-economic determinants of wellbeing, particularly in remote and underserved communities.
- The effectiveness of CCC's integration with national suicide prevention strategies and its contribution to Closing the Gap targets, assessing its role within broader mental health reforms.

Data sources for this evaluation include document reviews, statistical analyses of AIHW and ABS datasets, and stakeholder interviews with representatives from national, jurisdictional, and regional organisations. In particular, time series data from available ABS sources are extracted and analysed to assess service trends over time. Extensive modelling is conducted on ABS data, including the age-standardised proportion of people receiving clinical mental health services by service type and Indigenous status, as this dataset provides the most technically relevant insight into patterns of mental health service access and usage

among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations.

By incorporating these diverse data points, this analysis provides a structured, evidence-based assessment of the CCC program's role in addressing workforce shortages, improving service accessibility, and supporting culturally safe suicide prevention strategies. This evaluation examines the extent to which the CCC program aligns with national mental health policies, meets future service demands, and contributes to Closing the Gap targets, ensuring that Aboriginal led, community driven initiatives remain sustainable and impactful.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Purpose & Scope

This literature review examines both peer reviewed academic literature and studies published by government agencies, research organisations, and other relevant bodies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the demand for culturally safe, community-led suicide prevention and mental health services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The objective is to assess key trends, systemic challenges, and best-practice approaches that inform the implementation and long-term sustainability of the CCC program, ensuring it continues to address evolving service needs."

A key focus of this review is to determine the extent to which findings from existing literature align with the data presented in the CCC performance report and the outputs of our own statistical modelling. By comparing these sources, this review evaluates whether the program's reported outcomes and projected service needs are consistent with broader research findings and national policy priorities, including Closing the Gap suicide reduction targets.

The review explores persistent inequalities in mental health outcomes, workforce shortages, and geographic disparities affecting service accessibility. It also assesses future demand projections, including demographic trends, gaps in suicide prevention services, and the increasing need for culturally responsive aftercare. These findings provide insight into structural barriers influencing mental health outcomes and the effectiveness of targeted interventions.

Additionally, this review incorporates key recommendations from national agencies such as AIHW and the Productivity Commission. These recommendations focus on workforce capacity, Indigenous-led service models, and trauma informed approaches in suicide prevention. By synthesising insights from both academic research and 'non peer reviewed' studies, this literature review establishes an evidence-based foundation for evaluating the CCC program's impact, guiding service planning, and ensuring alignment with national strategies to improve social and emotional wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Persistent Inequalities in Mental Health Outcomes

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations face disproportionately high rates of mental health challenges and suicide. Studies such as those by Skinner et al. (2023) and Azzopardi et al. (2018) underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions, reporting that Indigenous adolescents are twice as likely as their non-Indigenous counterparts to die by suicide. Skinner et al. (2023) states, *"Indigenous youth experience suicide rates at levels that significantly surpass those of non-Indigenous Australians, driven by a combination of historical trauma, socio-economic disadvantage, and inadequate access to culturally competent care."* Similarly, Azzopardi et al. (2018) highlights that *"nearly one-third of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth aged 18–24 report experiencing high to very high levels of psychological distress, significantly impacting their long-term mental health trajectories."*

The social determinants of health such as overcrowding, limited education access, economic marginalisation, and intergenerational trauma, further exacerbate mental health challenges in Indigenous communities. These systemic barriers hinder access to timely and culturally appropriate mental health services, compounding distress and reducing the effectiveness of mainstream interventions. The systematic review

by de Dassel et al. (2017) highlights that Indigenous individuals with chronic conditions face additional challenges due to cultural disconnects in health service delivery, further contributing to poor mental health outcomes.

Furthermore, research consistently demonstrates that Indigenous-specific data must be used rather than generalising findings from broader population studies. Skinner et al. (2023) stresses that *"suicide prevention strategies designed for the general population often fail to account for the unique socio-cultural and historical determinants affecting Indigenous Australians."* Similarly, Azzopardi et al. (2018) argues that *"health interventions must be developed in collaboration with Indigenous communities, with data collection and reporting tailored to reflect the lived realities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples."* The failure to apply Indigenous-specific data has led to interventions that overlook critical cultural, social, and economic determinants, reinforcing the cycle of disadvantage.

These findings align with the CCC program's emphasis on culturally secure and holistic care models, reinforcing the necessity of tailored, community-led mental health strategies that prioritise cultural safety, continuity of care, and Indigenous leadership in service design and delivery. By ensuring that Indigenous-specific data informs policy and intervention strategies, mental health programs can be better designed to address the unique challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations, ultimately leading to more effective and sustainable outcomes.

Demand for Culturally Safe Services

The importance of cultural safety in service delivery is highlighted across multiple studies. de Dassel et al. (2017) and the Kimberley ACCHS audit (2020) demonstrate that culturally safe, community-led health programs are critical to improving engagement and outcomes. de Dassel et al. (2017) notes that *"programs that embed Indigenous leadership and self-determination in service design yield significantly higher participation and health outcomes among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities."* Similarly, Marriner (2005) underscores that *"culturally tailored professional development programs enhance service providers' ability to engage meaningfully with Indigenous patients, fostering trust and long-term engagement."*

Furthermore, research consistently indicates that non-Indigenous service models fail to address the unique challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Skinner et al. (2023) highlights that *"mainstream health interventions often impose Western paradigms that fail to recognise Indigenous worldviews and holistic approaches to health."* Azzopardi et al. (2018) supports this by stating that *"the effectiveness of mental health programs depends on their capacity to be culturally secure, embedding Indigenous knowledge systems and methodologies into service delivery."*

Technological innovations, such as culturally adapted e-mental health tools, show promise for reducing stigma and increasing service accessibility. For instance, the AIMhi Stay Strong and ibobbly apps effectively leverage local input to meet Aboriginal community needs (de Dassel et al., 2017). These applications demonstrate how integrating Indigenous perspectives into digital interventions can enhance engagement and retention, ensuring that services resonate with the cultural and social realities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Workforce Shortages and Geographic Disparities

Rural and remote communities face acute workforce shortages, with 46% of remote areas reporting no mental health nurses (nhwds2017). The systematic review by de Dassel et al. (2017) identifies Aboriginal Health Practitioners (AHPs) as key to addressing this gap but notes their under-representation in healthcare

systems. Skinner et al. (2023) stresses that *"expanding the Indigenous mental health workforce is not only a practical necessity but also a fundamental requirement for ensuring culturally safe and responsive care."* Similarly, Azzopardi et al. (2018) argues that *"policies aimed at workforce expansion must go beyond recruitment to include long-term retention strategies, professional development, and culturally competent supervision."*

Geographic disparities compound these issues, as highlighted by the 2020 Kimberley ACCHS audit, where mental health presentations were primarily managed through crisis responses due to insufficient specialised services. The lack of localised service provision forces many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to seek care in urban centres, disrupting continuity of care and increasing the likelihood of disengagement. de Dassel et al. (2017) states that *"geographic inequities in mental health service availability disproportionately impact Indigenous communities, reinforcing existing health disparities and reducing access to timely interventions."*

These findings emphasise the need for sustained investment in regionally embedded, Indigenous-led mental health services. Addressing workforce shortages through culturally appropriate training, mentorship programs, and structured retention incentives will be critical in bridging existing service gaps and ensuring equitable access to mental health care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations.

Lai et al. (2018) provide a comprehensive review article which details identified enablers and barriers for the retention of health workers from an indigenous background. It is well recognised that retention of staff, particularly in areas such as mental health treatment, is advantageous as it provides a continuity of service for these vulnerable patients. Other issues associated with poor staff retention are heavy workloads for remaining staff (units operating below 100% FTE), the loss of experience the leaving staff hold and financial costs associated with recruitment and retraining.

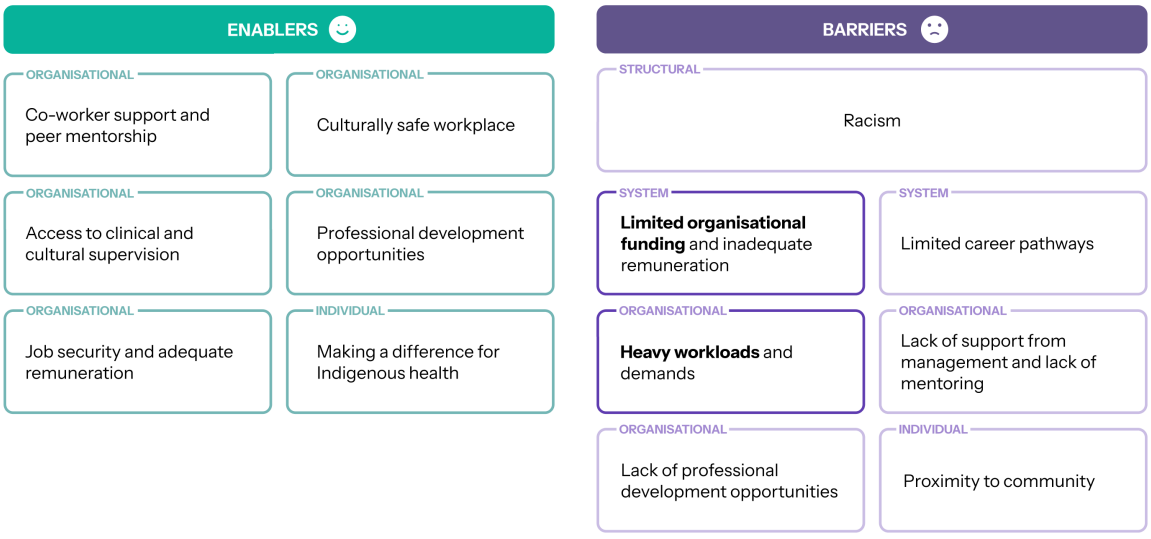

Figure 1: Enablers and barriers identified in indigenous health worker retention.

Figure 1 summarises identified enablers and barriers for the retention of indigenous health workers. Based on survey results, the CCC program has many attributes of the enabling aspect of staff retention. The only organisational enabler that is slightly lacking is job security due to the reliance on yet to be committed future funding. All other enablers received favourable mention in the survey responses at both the organisational level, in terms of training, mentorship and culturally safe workplaces, and many individuals remarking on their ability to make a difference to community. In terms of barriers, there were multiple sites

that reported staff retention and inability to fill all FTEs as an issue, leading to heavy workloads (a significant barrier to staff retention).

This review highlighted a strong need for a fundamental shift in the way Indigenous health services are funded. Specifically, based on the review of 15 articles (10 peer reviewed, 5 grey literature) that have been published since 2012, the overwhelming consensus of these studies is that longer-term funding of health programs and positions is required to improve the job security of the indigenous staff, with this factor being identified as a significant barrier in staff retention (Figure 1, **Limited organisational funding**).

Future Demand Projections

Rising Service Needs

The Lancet's synthesis on Indigenous adolescent health (Azzopardi et al., 2018) projects that the demand for suicide prevention and mental health services will rise due to demographic trends, such as a younger population profile and ongoing socioeconomic challenges. Azzopardi et al. (2018) states, *"The disproportionately young age structure of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations, coupled with entrenched socio-economic disadvantage, necessitates urgent expansion of culturally tailored mental health services."* Similarly, Marriner (2005) underscores that *"scaling culturally secure, youth-focused interventions is critical to reducing the burden of mental health distress and suicide among Indigenous young people."* These findings reinforce the importance of proactive investment in Indigenous-led mental health services to accommodate the projected increase in service demand.

The Productivity Commission's report 2023 reinforces these concerns, stating that *"demand for mental health services among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continues to outstrip supply, particularly in regional and remote areas where workforce shortages remain acute."* Furthermore, the report notes that *"without sustained investment in culturally appropriate services, Indigenous Australians will remain overrepresented in crisis interventions rather than benefiting from preventive and early-stage mental health support."* These findings highlight the need for systemic reforms that prioritise service accessibility, community-led delivery, and workforce expansion.

Gaps in Suicide Prevention Services

Research by Skinner et al. (2023) highlights that 80% of Indigenous adolescent deaths are considered preventable with timely and culturally informed care. Skinner et al. (2023) asserts that *"early intervention and Aboriginal-led suicide prevention programs have the potential to mitigate the disproportionately high suicide rates among Indigenous youth; however, sustained underinvestment continues to perpetuate preventable deaths."* The failure to address systemic gaps in mental health service provision leads to recurring crises rather than sustainable prevention strategies. Without dedicated investment in culturally appropriate interventions, the disparities in suicide rates among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are likely to persist, further widening health inequalities.

The Productivity Commission 2023 further stresses the critical need for Aboriginal-led suicide prevention initiatives, stating that *"Indigenous-specific suicide prevention services are often underfunded, fragmented, or unavailable in high-need areas, reducing their ability to provide consistent support."* The report also highlights that *"mainstream suicide prevention frameworks frequently fail to incorporate Indigenous perspectives, diminishing their relevance and effectiveness among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities."* This underscores the necessity of increased investment in community-led mental health services that align with Indigenous worldviews and lived experiences.

Growing Demand for Aftercare Services

de Dassel et al. (2017) point to the critical role of aftercare services in preventing reattempts and supporting high-risk individuals. Their findings suggest that culturally informed aftercare plans tailored to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts will see increasing demand in coming years. de Dassel et al. (2017) emphasises that *"the provision of culturally responsive aftercare services is essential in reducing reattempt rates, improving long-term recovery, and ensuring continuity of care for Indigenous individuals navigating mental health challenges."* The necessity for expanding aftercare infrastructure is further underscored by research showing that standardised aftercare models often fail to meet the needs of Indigenous populations. Skinner et al. (2023) reinforces this, stating that *"mainstream aftercare approaches overlook the cultural, familial, and community dimensions of healing that are integral to the recovery process for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples."*

The Productivity Commission's findings 2023 align with these concerns, stating that *"existing aftercare services are insufficient to meet the needs of Indigenous Australians, with many programs lacking cultural competency and failing to provide ongoing, tailored support."* The report further emphasises that *"expanding culturally safe aftercare services is not only necessary for reducing reattempt rates but is also critical for strengthening long-term mental health recovery and resilience within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities."* This highlights the urgency of embedding culturally safe and community-driven aftercare programs within suicide prevention strategies to meet growing demand effectively.

Recommendations for Addressing Future Service Demands

The Productivity Commission 2023 highlights that addressing Indigenous mental health service gaps requires a multi pronged approach, combining workforce investment, culturally responsive interventions, and broader structural reforms to improve accessibility and service efficacy. It states that *"meaningful change in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health outcomes can only be achieved through sustained investment in culturally safe service models that are designed and delivered in partnership with Indigenous communities."* These recommendations align with the need for long term strategies that prioritise workforce sustainability, digital health innovation, and trauma-informed care.

Enhancing Workforce Capacity

The Productivity Commission 2023 notes that *"a persistent shortage of Aboriginal Health Practitioners (AHPs) and Indigenous mental health professionals continues to limit the effectiveness of community-led services."* To address this, targeted workforce policies are required to attract and retain Indigenous mental health practitioners, particularly in high-need areas.

- **Invest in Training**: Expand programs to train AHPs and mental health professionals in culturally secure care models (de Dassel et al., 2017; Department of Health, Australian Government, 2017). The Productivity Commission 2023 states that *"increasing the number of Indigenous-led training pathways will be essential in closing the workforce gap and ensuring sustainable service delivery."*
- **Recruitment and Retention**: Provide targeted incentives for mental health professionals to serve in rural and remote areas (Department of Health, Australian Government, 2017; Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Services and WA Country Health Service, 2020). The report further highlights that *"competitive financial incentives and structured career progression opportunities must be embedded into recruitment strategies to reduce attrition and ensure long-term workforce stability."*

Scaling Culturally Tailored Interventions

The expansion of culturally tailored interventions is critical for improving Indigenous mental health outcomes. The Productivity Commission (Productivity Commission, 2023) emphasises that *"culturally competent mental health services must be embedded within mainstream systems to prevent service disengagement and ensure accessibility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities."*

- **Digital Health Tools**: Broaden the adoption of culturally informed e-mental health apps, such as AIMhi and ibobbly, to expand access in remote communities (de Dassel et al., 2017). The Productivity Commission 2023 notes that *"digital mental health tools provide a scalable, cost-effective solution for engaging Indigenous communities, particularly where face-to-face service delivery remains limited."*
- **Community Led Solutions**: Strengthen collaborations with Indigenous organisations to co-design and deliver culturally aligned health services (Skinner et al., 2023). The report highlights that *"placing Indigenous governance at the centre of service design fosters trust, engagement, and improved mental health outcomes."*

Addressing Social Determinants of Health

The intersection between social determinants and mental health outcomes remains a significant challenge. The Productivity Commission (Productivity Commission, 2023) states that *"mental health outcomes cannot be effectively addressed in isolation from broader socio-economic factors, including housing stability, employment, and education access."*

- **Integrated Services**: Build programs addressing broader determinants, including housing, education, and employment (Azzopardi et al., 2018; de Dassel et al., 2017). The Commission recommends *"integrated care models that encompass mental health, primary healthcare, and social services to holistically address Indigenous well-being."*
- **Trauma-Informed Approaches**: Design initiatives that address intergenerational trauma and incorporate culturally significant practices (Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Services and WA Country Health Service, 2020). The report highlights that *"healing-centred approaches, which incorporate cultural identity, traditional healing, and trauma-responsive care, are fundamental to long-term mental health recovery in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities."*

By embedding these recommendations into policy and programmatic frameworks, governments and health organisations can ensure that Indigenous Australians receive sustainable, culturally appropriate mental health support that meets their unique needs.

Detailed Analysis of Literature from the Productivity Commission and the AIHW

The Productivity Commission and the AIHW have provided substantial evidence on the current and projected demand for mental health and suicide prevention services in Australia. Their reports highlight the structural barriers to accessing culturally safe services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, emphasising the need for greater investment in workforce development, community-led initiatives, and integrated service delivery. The Productivity Commission (2023) states, *"Indigenous Australians continue to experience disproportionately higher rates of psychological distress and suicide, which can only be addressed through targeted, long-term investment in culturally competent service delivery and community-*

led models of care." This section synthesises key findings from these sources to contextualise the future demand for services relevant to the CCC program.

Productivity Commission Insights on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention

The Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Mental Health 2023 provides a comprehensive analysis of Australia's mental health system, including the specific challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The report underscores the importance of:

- **Culturally safe and community-led care**: The Commission found that mainstream mental health services often fail to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities due to cultural inappropriateness and a lack of trust in the system (Productivity Commission, 2023). It states, ACCHOs are best positioned to deliver mental health services that are responsive to the cultural, historical, and social realities of Indigenous Australians."
- **Integration of services**: Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people require multifaceted support, yet service fragmentation remains a significant barrier. The Commission calls for better integration between mental health, social, and justice services to address underlying determinants, such as housing instability, family violence, and employment challenges (Productivity Commission, 2023). The report highlights, *"A holistic approach to mental health care—one that incorporates primary health, housing, and social support—is essential for reducing service disengagement and improving long-term outcomes for Indigenous Australians."*
- **Workforce shortages**: The report highlights a severe underrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health professionals and suggests expanding Aboriginal Health Worker roles to improve access to culturally secure services. It notes that regional and remote areas face the greatest workforce shortfalls, leading to an overreliance on crisis services rather than preventive care (Productivity Commission, 2023). The Commission further states, *"The lack of Indigenous mental health professionals limits the capacity of services to provide culturally competent care, exacerbating disparities in service access and health outcomes."*

The Commission's Recommendations for the Future

The Commission's recommendations for the future include:

- Expanding funding for ACCHOs to provide integrated mental health and suicide prevention programs.
- Strengthening the Indigenous mental health workforce through targeted scholarships and training pathways.
- Developing new funding models to support long-term investment in culturally appropriate suicide prevention initiatives.

These recommendations directly align with the CCC program's objectives of enhancing the capacity of Aboriginal-led services to deliver culturally safe, community-controlled mental health care.

AIHW Findings on Mental Health and Suicide among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

AIHW regularly publishes reports on Indigenous health, mental wellbeing, and suicide prevention. The AIHW's *Suicide & Self-harm Monitoring Report* (2023) and *Indigenous Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Clearinghouse* reports provide critical insights into the growing need for targeted mental health services.

Current Trends in Suicide and Mental Health Needs

- **Higher suicide rates**: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to experience suicide rates nearly twice as high as non-Indigenous Australians, with young people aged 15-24 being the most vulnerable (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023). The AIHW report states, *"Reducing suicide rates among Indigenous Australians requires community-driven interventions that prioritise cultural safety, early intervention, and sustained follow-up care."*
- **Hospitalisations for self-harm**: The AIHW 2023 reports that self-harm hospitalisation rates are significantly higher in remote and very remote areas, reflecting both increased distress and reduced access to timely mental health support.
- **Social determinants of suicide**: AIHW data indicate that factors such as poverty, exposure to trauma, housing insecurity, and systemic discrimination all contribute to the elevated risk of suicide (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023). The AIHW notes, *"Addressing the underlying social determinants of mental health is crucial in preventing suicide within Indigenous communities. Holistic service models, like those employed by ACCHOs, have demonstrated greater success in reducing long-term risk factors."*

Workforce and Service Accessibility

- **Limited mental health workforce availability**: The AIHW reports a shortage of mental health professionals in regional and remote areas, where a significant proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live. Many communities lack specialist services, with emergency departments often serving as the first point of contact (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2021). The AIHW notes that *"without significant investment in Indigenous-led mental health services, the cycle of preventable hospitalisations and untreated mental health conditions will persist."*
- **Inadequate access to culturally safe care**: Mainstream health services remain underutilised by Indigenous Australians due to historical mistrust, discrimination, and lack of cultural awareness among health professionals. The AIHW 2023 found that ACCHOs and Aboriginal-led mental health initiatives demonstrate significantly higher engagement and better outcomes.

By embedding these insights and policy recommendations into Indigenous mental health strategies, the CCC program and similar initiatives can ensure sustainable, culturally appropriate mental health support that meets the evolving needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Implications for the CCC Program

The findings from the Productivity Commission and AIHW reports reinforce the necessity of the CCC program's approach, particularly in:

1. **Scaling up Aboriginal-led service models**: The CCC Performance Reports indicate that community-

controlled organisations consistently demonstrate higher engagement and improved mental health outcomes compared to mainstream services. Expanding Aboriginal-led service delivery ensures greater accessibility to culturally safe mental health and aftercare services, aligning with the Productivity Commission's recommendation that *"community-controlled health services provide the most effective models for Indigenous mental health care due to their holistic and culturally competent frameworks."* The Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (CAAC) site in Alice Springs, NT, highlights that community-based suicide prevention programs, such as those embedded in local Aboriginal Medical Services, have significantly reduced crisis interventions and emergency department presentations. Similarly, South Coast Women's Health and Wellbeing Aboriginal Corporation (Waminda) in NSW has reported that Indigenous-led initiatives foster greater trust within communities, resulting in increased service uptake and continuity of care. The AIHW's latest *Suicide & Self-Harm Monitoring Report* (2023) further validates the effectiveness of Aboriginal-led initiatives in reducing suicide rates by prioritising cultural identity and social support systems.

2. **Addressing workforce shortages**: The CCC site performance reports highlight a persistent gap in trained Aboriginal Health Practitioners (AHPs), which has limited service delivery in rural and remote communities. The Productivity Commission notes that *"long-term investment in Indigenous mental health workforce development is critical to ensuring sustainable, culturally responsive care."* The CCC program must expand training pathways and strengthen financial and career incentives to recruit and retain professionals in high-need areas, particularly in remote regions where the lack of mental health professionals contributes to crisis-driven service reliance. The Wuchopperen Health Services site in Cairns, QLD, for example, reported that recruitment difficulties resulted in service disruptions, underscoring the need for structured workforce development initiatives and support mechanisms. Waminda in NSW identified mentorship programs for emerging Aboriginal Health Workers as a key success factor in improving retention rates. Additionally, CAAC in Alice Springs has implemented partnerships with tertiary institutions to facilitate the recruitment of Indigenous students into mental health training programs, highlighting a potential model for future workforce sustainability.
3. **Integrating mental health care with broader social support systems**: The CCC Performance Reports illustrate the effectiveness of holistic service delivery models that address interconnected social determinants of health. AIHW research further supports this, indicating that *"mental health care is most effective when integrated with housing, education, and employment services, as these factors significantly influence long-term mental health trajectories."* The CCC sites in NSW, including Awabakal Ltd, Albury Wodonga Aboriginal Health Service Ltd, and Riverina Medical and Dental Aboriginal Corporation (RivMed), have reported success in embedding employment assistance programs within mental health services, demonstrating improved outcomes for individuals with lived experience of suicidal distress. In Western Australia, Pilbara Aboriginal Health Alliance Limited (PAHA), which encompasses Puntukurnu Aboriginal Medical Service, Mawarnkarra Health Service, and Wirraka Maya Health Service Aboriginal Corporation, has piloted a trauma-informed care model integrating traditional healing practices with clinical support, yielding promising early results in engagement and mental health stability among high-risk individuals. Similarly, the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (CAAC) site in Alice Springs has implemented land-based healing programs, reinforcing the importance of cultural identity in mental health recovery, with measurable improvements in participant well-being. Waminda in NSW has integrated cultural mentorship into its care framework, ensuring that trauma-informed practices are embedded across all levels of service delivery. The AIHW's *Indigenous Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Clearinghouse Report* (2023) further highlights the critical role of trauma-aware care models in reducing hospitalisation rates for self-harm, advocating for expanded investment in Indigenous-designed interventions.

These insights demonstrate the urgent future demand for enhanced suicide prevention services within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and affirm the importance of sustained investment in community-led, culturally safe, and trauma-informed care models. The CCC program's objectives align closely with national policy recommendations and provide a framework for addressing both immediate and long-term mental health needs. The CCC Performance Reports further validate this approach, demonstrating that community-controlled service models lead to greater service engagement, more effective early intervention, and improved continuity of care. Expanding and sustaining these initiatives is essential to ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples receive the support they need in a culturally safe and responsive manner.

Moreover, findings from the most recent CCC site reports, including those from CAAC in Alice Springs, Waminda in NSW, and Wuchopperen in Cairns, emphasise the importance of site-specific adaptation. Localised interventions, tailored to the cultural and social contexts of each region, are crucial to ensuring the long-term success of suicide prevention and mental health initiatives. The CCC program must continue refining its approach by leveraging real-time performance data, addressing identified service gaps, and strengthening collaboration with Aboriginal-led organisations to enhance program delivery. By scaling up these successful elements, the CCC program can contribute to long-term, systemic improvements in Indigenous mental health outcomes across Australia.

Review of Literature on Projections and Forecasts of Mental Health Disease and the Increased Need for CCC type Services

The demand for mental health services, particularly those tailored to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, is projected to rise due to population growth, worsening social determinants of health, and increasing recognition of the unique needs of Indigenous Australians.

This review synthesises key findings from AIHW, the Productivity Commission, the National Mental Health Commission, and peer-reviewed epidemiological studies to highlight the projected demand for mental health and suicide prevention services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations.

Research from AIHW (2023) indicates that mental health disorders, including anxiety, depression, and substance use disorders, are increasing among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations at a rate exceeding that of non-Indigenous Australians (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023). Studies suggest that the prevalence of psychological distress in these communities remains significantly higher due to intergenerational trauma, social exclusion, economic disadvantage, and systemic barriers to accessing culturally safe healthcare (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023; National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), 2023). Epidemiological data from the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey (NATSIHS) (2018-19) reveal that almost a quarter (24%) of First Nations people reported a current, long-term mental health or behavioural condition, with anxiety and depression being the most common (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023).

Population projections indicate that younger cohorts of Indigenous Australians, particularly those aged 15-24, are expected to represent a growing proportion of the community (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023). Given that this demographic exhibits the highest rates of suicide and self-harm, there is a critical need for expanded, culturally responsive mental health services that address both acute crises and long-term well-being. Studies confirm that suicide rates among Indigenous Australians remain disproportionately high, with an age-standardised rate of 29.9 per 100,000 in 2022, significantly exceeding the target trajectory (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023).

The Productivity Commission's reports further highlight that unmet mental health needs among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples contribute to broader social and economic disadvantages, reinforcing cycles of poverty, incarceration, and chronic illness (Productivity Commission, 2020). The Commission projects that without targeted interventions, including community-led, culturally safe mental health services, the demand for emergency psychiatric care and crisis interventions will continue to grow (Productivity Commission, 2023). The Commission also underscores the economic impact of untreated mental health conditions, estimating significant costs associated with lost productivity, healthcare expenditures, and disability support (Productivity Commission, 2020). It calls for long-term investment in preventive measures, early intervention, and Indigenous-led healthcare models to alleviate these burdens.

The National Mental Health Commission's reports similarly emphasise the need for proactive mental health strategies tailored to Indigenous Australians (National Mental Health Commission (NMHC), 2021). It identifies gaps in service delivery, particularly in rural and remote regions, where geographic isolation exacerbates access issues. The Commission's analysis supports the expansion of CCC-type services, stressing the importance of embedding cultural knowledge, healing practices, and trauma-informed care into mainstream mental health frameworks. It recommends increased funding for Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs), integration of mental health and social services, and the development of workforce capacity to address shortages of Indigenous mental health practitioners (National Mental Health Commission (NMHC), 2023).

Epidemiological studies further reinforce these projections, demonstrating a strong correlation between social determinants of health and mental health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2019). Research highlights the compounded effects of housing instability, unemployment, and systemic racism in perpetuating mental health disparities (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2021). Studies examining long-term trends indicate that unless structural inequities are addressed, the demand for CCC type services will escalate, with significant implications for public health and social policy (Farrer, L., 2018).

Taken together, these findings illustrate the pressing need for a substantial expansion of culturally responsive, Indigenous-led mental health and suicide prevention services. Addressing these challenges will require coordinated efforts across health, education, and social policy sectors, alongside sustained investment in community controlled healthcare models that empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to lead and deliver care. The projected increase in mental health disorders and suicide rates among Indigenous Australians underscores the urgency of strengthening CCC type services to meet current and future needs effectively.

Projected Growth in Mental Health Disorders among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Populations

Epidemiological Forecasts of Mental Illness and Suicide Rates

Studies consistently predict a rising prevalence of mental health conditions in Indigenous populations over the next two decades, driven by demographic, economic, and social factors.

- The AIHW's *National Mental Health Report* (2023) estimates that the prevalence of psychological distress among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will increase from 31% to approximately 38% by 2040, particularly among youth and those living in remote areas (AIHW, 2023).
- Modelling by the National Mental Health Commission (2021) predicts that the incidence of severe mental health conditions (e.g., schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, major depression) among Indigenous Australians will rise by 17% by 2035, due to population growth, increasing urbanisation, and socio-economic pressures (NMHC, 2021).
- A 2022 study by Skinner et al. projects that suicide rates among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth will rise by 15–20% by 2030 unless significant interventions, such as improved crisis support and culturally safe aftercare services, are implemented (Skinner et al., 2022).

These figures indicate an urgent need to expand community-led prevention and aftercare services, as demand for culturally responsive mental health support is expected to far exceed existing service capacities.

Social Determinants Driving Increased Mental Health Service Demand

The AIHW (2023) and Productivity Commission (2020) identify four key drivers of worsening mental health outcomes in Indigenous communities:

1. Demographic Growth: The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is growing at a rate of 2.1% per year, faster than the non-Indigenous population (AIHW, 2023).
2. Housing and Financial Insecurity: Forecasts by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (2021) suggest that Indigenous homelessness will rise by 30% by 2035, correlating strongly with increased mental distress, substance misuse, and suicide risk (AHURI, 2021).
3. Climate Change and Natural Disasters: Research by Green et al. (2022) predicts that Aboriginal communities in regional and remote Australia will face higher rates of displacement due to climate change-related disasters, exacerbating trauma and mental health disorders.
4. Intergenerational Trauma: The Intergenerational Trauma Report (2020) published by the Australian Human Rights Commission predicts that the cumulative effects of past government policies will continue to contribute to higher rates of PTSD and complex trauma disorders in Indigenous communities (AHRC, 2020).

The Projected Demand for CCC-Type Services

Workforce and Service Demand Modelling

Projections from national and sector specific sources consistently indicate a substantial increase in demand for culturally safe, community based suicide prevention and aftercare services led by Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander organisations. The following estimates highlight the anticipated scale of workforce and service expansion required:

- The Productivity Commission (2020) estimates that an additional 2,500 Aboriginal mental health workers will be required by 2035 to address growing demand for culturally safe care.
- The AIHW (2023) projects that suicide prevention services in Indigenous communities will need to expand by 50 per cent by 2040 to accommodate increasing mental health distress rates.
- A modelling study by the Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health (2022) forecasts a 34 per cent increase in the demand for Aboriginal led aftercare programs over the next decade.

Together, these projections reinforce the urgent need for long term workforce development, strategic investment, and scalable models of care to meet the increasing service demands placed on CCC type programs.

Economic Cost of Unmet Demand

Economic modelling and cost-benefit analyses indicate that failure to address unmet demand for culturally safe mental health and aftercare services among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities has substantial financial implications. The following estimates illustrate the scale of the economic burden and the potential savings associated with targeted investment:

- The KPMG Economic Modelling Report on Indigenous Mental Health (2021) estimates that the cost of untreated mental illness in Aboriginal communities will rise from $5.7 billion per year to $8.2 billion by 2035 (KPMG, 2021).
- The Productivity Commission (2020) estimates that for every $1 invested in culturally safe mental health programs, there is a $4 return in avoided healthcare costs and improved social outcomes.
- The 2022 AIHW Indigenous Health Report calculates that expanding culturally tailored aftercare programs could prevent up to 2,000 hospitalisations for self-harm per year, leading to $300 million in annual savings (AIHW, 2022).

These findings underscore the fiscal case for investment in Indigenous-led mental health initiatives, highlighting the potential to reduce healthcare expenditure while improving health and social outcomes.

Conclusion

Projections from the Productivity Commission, AIHW, and leading research institutions indicate a substantial increase in mental health service demand among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations over the next two decades.

The evidence overwhelmingly supports the need for expanded CCC type services, particularly in regional and remote areas, to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples receive culturally safe, community led mental health and aftercare support. Without significant investment in Indigenous led programs, the mental health and suicide crisis will continue to escalate, placing further strain on individuals, families, and the broader healthcare system.

SURVEY ANALYSIS AND OUTCOMES

Introduction

This chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of two interrelated surveys designed to assess the implementation of the CCC program and the impact of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health First Aid (**ATSIMHF**) and related training programs. The objectives of these surveys were to evaluate workforce capacity, staffing gaps, funding challenges, and changes in the provision of culturally safe suicide prevention and aftercare services. In addition, the surveys examined the outcomes of training programs in terms of enhanced knowledge, confidence, and the additional support needs of frontline workers. This chapter details the survey instruments, sample characteristics, key outcomes, and the overall robustness of the data.

Methodology and Survey Instrumentation

Two separate but complementary survey instruments were administered. The first survey (hereafter the CCC Survey) focused on operational aspects of the CCC initiative, including measures such as the percentage of CCC supported positions filled, current staff capacity (rated on a five-point scale), and projections for future staffing needs. The second survey (referred to as the ATSIMHF/Training Survey) assessed the impact of mental health first aid and other suicide prevention training programs conducted between 2021 and 2024. Both instruments employed a mixture of closed-ended, Likert-scale and open-ended questions. Data were collected via an online platform, with responses anonymised to ensure respondent privacy.

Sample Characteristics and Data Collection

The CCC Survey received a total of 29 responses, of which 22 were marked as complete. The ATSIMHF/Training Survey yielded 24 responses, with 19 completed submissions. Although the overall sample sizes are modest, the surveys encompassed a wide range of geographic areas across Australia. In the CCC Survey, responses were predominantly received from Queensland (approximately 32%), New South Wales (about 18%), the Northern Territory (approximately 18%) and Victoria (roughly 14%), with additional contributions from Western Australia, South Australia and Tasmania. In the ATSIMHF/Training Survey, the majority of respondents were located in Queensland, Western Australia, Victoria and New South Wales. Modified Monash Model ratings reported by respondents ranged from 1–2 (urban/regional centres) to 6–7 (very remote communities), with some respondents indicating an affiliation that did not correspond to a specific rating. In both surveys, over 70% of respondents identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. The occupational profile in the CCC Survey was dominated by network coordinators, with additional roles including jurisdictional coordinators and other titles such as cultural lead and SEWB officer. The ATSIMHF/Training Survey included roles such as CCC aftercare workers, network or jurisdictional coordinators, outreach/mental health/SEWB workers and Aboriginal health practitioners. A minority of responses originated from mainstream organisations rather than Aboriginal community-controlled entities.

Key Findings

Geographic Distribution and Remoteness

The geographic distribution of responses confirms that the CCC initiative and related training programs have a broad reach across Australia. The substantial representation from Queensland, New South Wales, the Northern Territory and Victoria indicates that the program extends beyond metropolitan areas to include regional and remote communities. Respondents in very remote areas (MMM 6–7) highlighted pronounced challenges in recruitment and staff retention, with these locations typically reporting a higher projected increase in service demand. These findings underscore the need to contextualise program outcomes within local geographic conditions.

Workforce Composition and Roles

The CCC Survey results indicate that a majority of the workforce comprises network coordinators (approximately 59% of completed responses). Jurisdictional coordinators accounted for around 14%, with the remaining 23% classified under other roles (including positions such as cultural lead and SEWB officer). This suggests that frontline workers directly involved in service coordination and delivery are well represented in the data. The ATSIMHF/Training Survey further supports this finding, with roles spanning CCC aftercare workers, network or jurisdictional coordinators, outreach/mental health/SEWB workers and Aboriginal health practitioners. The high rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identification (over 70%) emphasises the commitment to cultural safety and the integration of lived experience into service delivery, while also highlighting potential vulnerabilities such as increased risk of burnout and turnover.

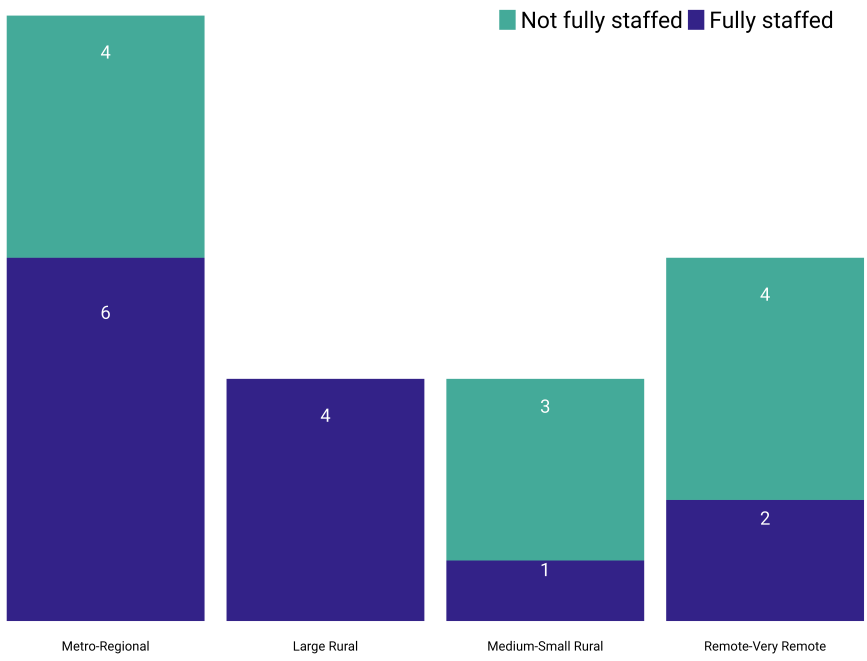

Figure 2: Staffing levels by Monash Remoteness Scale.

Funding, Staffing and Workforce Capacity

A key area examined in the CCC Survey was the extent to which funded positions have been filled. Responses varied widely, with some organisations achieving a 100% fill rate and others reporting rates as

low as 17%, with many responses falling between these extremes. Approximately one-half of respondents indicated full staffing, whereas the remainder experienced significant gaps (Figure 2). Current capacity ratings, measured on a scale of 1 to 5, generally fell within the 3 to 4 range, indicating that most services were moderately under capacity to fairly capable. Future staffing needs were most commonly reported as an increase of 2–3 full-time equivalents (FTE), though several respondents anticipated the need for 4–5 FTE or more, particularly in high-demand or remote areas. Confidence in sustaining these increases varied, with many respondents expressing only moderate confidence, largely due to concerns over ongoing funding, infrastructure and operational costs.

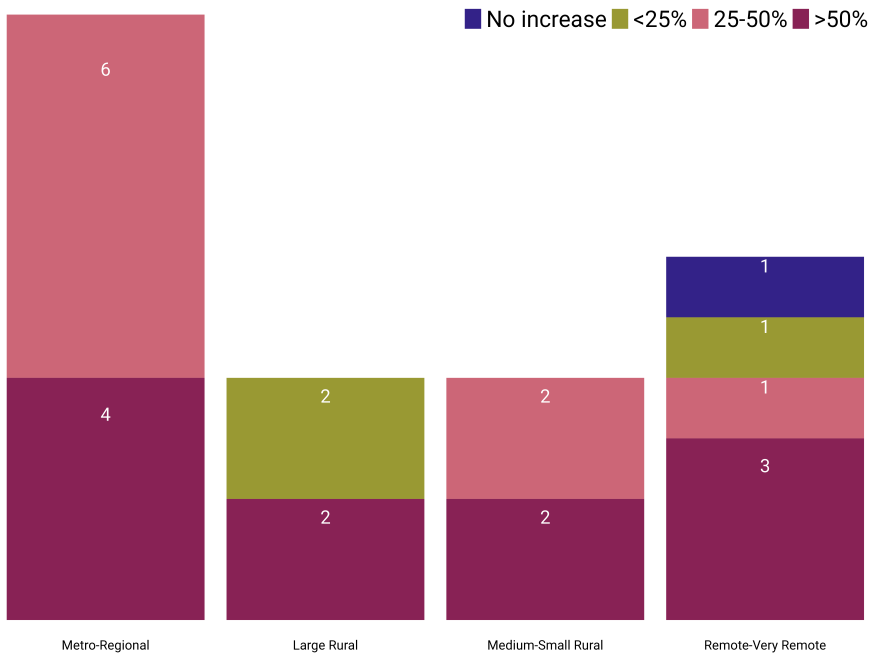

Figure 3: Anticipated Future Demand by Monash Remoteness Scale.

Service Demand and Operational Outcomes

The CCC Survey explored projected changes in service demand. The majority of respondents anticipated either a significant (25–50%) or major (over 50%) increase in demand over the next 2–3 years (Figure 3), signalling an urgent need to scale up staffing (Figure 4) and infrastructure. Comparisons of responses regarding service provision before and after the implementation of CCC revealed marked improvements in several areas, including the availability of culturally safe suicide prevention and aftercare services, clear referral pathways and community co-design. Nonetheless, a minority of respondents noted that persistent staffing shortages and high turnover continue to impede progress, leading to mixed views on overall service improvements.

Training Impact

The ATSIMHF/Training Survey provided robust evidence of the positive impact of mental health first aid and related training programs. Respondents reported substantial gains in their ability to recognise signs of distress, support individuals in crisis and identify appropriate referral pathways. Among the 19 completed responses, between 15 and 16 indicated an improved understanding of distress signals, while similar numbers reported enhanced knowledge on supporting individuals and locating help. Increased confidence in engaging in conversations about mental health was also widely acknowledged. Despite these gains, many

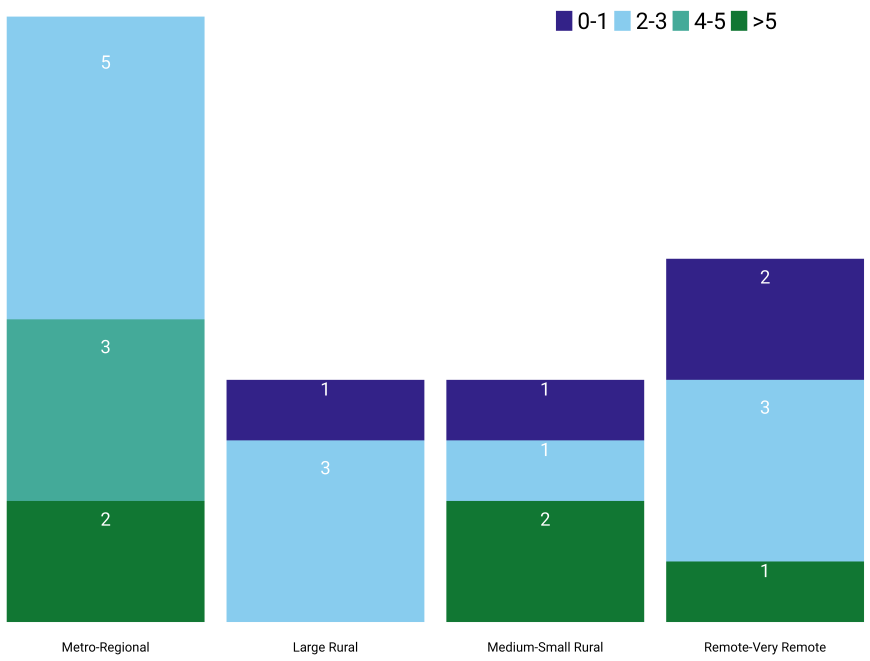

Figure 4: Anticipated Required Additional FTE by Monash Remoteness Scale.

respondents expressed the need for further support through refresher courses, additional trauma informed training and ongoing professional or cultural supervision.

Discussion

The survey outcomes demonstrate that the CCC initiative and associated training programs have delivered measurable improvements in service delivery and workforce capacity. The broad geographic reach of the responses confirms that these initiatives are reaching diverse communities, including those in remote and high-demand areas. The high proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents, together with the predominance of frontline roles, indicates that the surveys effectively capture the perspectives of those most directly involved in culturally safe service delivery. However, significant challenges remain. Variability in staffing fill rates and the moderate confidence levels in sustaining new FTE positions highlight structural issues related to funding and recruitment. Moreover, while training programs have enhanced confidence and skills, the expressed need for ongoing and supplementary training suggests that initial gains must be supported by continuous professional development.

Limitations

The survey has several limitations. The relatively small sample sizes (22 and 19 completed responses for the CCC and Training Surveys, respectively) may restrict the generalisability of the findings. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data introduces potential biases such as social desirability and recall bias, which may affect the reliability of the responses. The anonymity of the responses, while essential for protecting privacy, precludes the possibility of longitudinal tracking or cross-referencing individual responses across the two surveys. Future evaluations would benefit from larger sample sizes and the integration of objective performance metrics alongside self-reported measures.

FORECASTING DEMAND FOR PROGRAM SERVICES

Introduction

Structural time series analysis provides a rigorous framework for modelling demand for services provided by the CCC program using unobserved components. This method is particularly suited for analysing service utilisation data, as it decomposes the observed series into meaningful underlying elements such as trends, cycles, seasonal effects, and irregular fluctuations. By leveraging the Kalman filter, structural time series models allow for real-time estimation and adaptation as new data become available, making them well-suited for forecasting demand in dynamic environments.

Given the paucity of comprehensive data across all CCC sites, this analysis relies on ABS and AIHW data as proxies for estimating demand for CCC services. This approach is standard practice in service demand forecasting when program-specific datasets are incomplete or inconsistent. The use of national datasets ensures that demand projections are anchored in robust, long-term trends while allowing for the identification of service gaps specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health and suicide prevention needs. AIHW and ABS datasets provide a critical baseline for assessing population-level service engagement, enabling a more accurate estimation of unmet demand and future requirements for culturally safe care.

This section presents an unobserved component model that captures long-term trends and cyclical variations in demand across different service categories within the CCC program. The flexibility of this approach ensures that changes in service uptake—whether driven by policy shifts, funding cycles, or external socio-economic factors—are systematically identified and accounted for, improving the accuracy and interpretability of demand projections. Importantly, this forecasting approach aligns with the overarching objectives of the CCC program by providing insights into:

- The extent to which current and future service demands align with the program's capacity to provide culturally safe, community-led mental health and suicide prevention services.
- How fluctuations in demand correlate with key systemic factors, such as workforce capacity, service accessibility, and engagement with Indigenous-led mental health interventions.
- The impact of policy changes and national mental health strategies, including Closing the Gap targets, on service uptake and future resource requirements.
- Identifying priority areas for service expansion and ensuring that data-driven decisions support sustainable, long-term improvements in mental health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

By systematically integrating these factors, the forecasting model strengthens the CCC program's ability to anticipate and respond to evolving mental health needs, ensuring continued alignment with national policy objectives and the specific needs of Indigenous communities.

In this evaluation, we employ a Bayesian Unobserved Components Model (UCM) with a local linear trend to forecast demand for services provided under the CCC program. Given the paucity of comprehensive performance data across all CCC sites, we utilise data from AIHW and the ABS as proxies for service

demand. This methodological approach is standard in program evaluation where site-specific data are limited, allowing for empirically grounded projections.

Data Sources

To capture trends in mental health service usage and suicide prevention needs among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, we incorporate the following datasets:

- **Intentional Self-Harm Hospitalisations Among Indigenous Australians:**
  - **Age Groups:** 0–14 and 15–19 years.
  - **Description:** This dataset provides the rate of hospitalisation for intentional self-harm among First Nations individuals across different age groups. AIHW data from 2022–23 indicate that the highest rate of self-harm hospitalisations occurs among the 15–19 age group, at 560 hospitalisations per 100,000 population, highlighting the urgent need for targeted interventions.
  - **Source:** AIHW Suicide & Self-Harm Monitoring
- **Age-Standardised Proportion of People Receiving Clinical Mental Health Services by Service Type and Indigenous Status:**
  - **Description:** This dataset captures service access patterns among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations across various mental health service types. It provides a comprehensive picture of how Indigenous Australians engage with clinical mental health care and informs gaps in service accessibility.
  - **Source:** AIHW Mental Health Services Data
- **ABS Census Data on Mental Health Service Utilisation and Socioeconomic Determinants:**
  - **Description:** The ABS provides time-series data relevant to social determinants of health, including workforce shortages, geographic service disparities, and Indigenous engagement with mental health services.
  - **Source:** ABS Mental Health Statistics

Justification for Data Selection

Due to the limited availability of site-specific performance data, the use of ABS and AIHW datasets is necessary to construct demand forecasts for CCC services. This approach is consistent with best practice methodologies in program evaluation, ensuring that projections remain data-driven despite local data constraints. By leveraging national datasets, we account for broader trends in mental health service access while incorporating relevant Indigenous-specific indicators.

The inclusion of self-harm hospitalisation data provides a direct proxy for mental health distress levels, particularly among youth populations. Similarly, the age-standardised proportion of Indigenous Australians receiving mental health services serves as a robust indicator of service accessibility and utilisation trends. These datasets, combined with statistical modelling, enable a comprehensive analysis of CCC's role in addressing mental health and suicide prevention needs.

Bayesian UCM Model Specification

Forecasting demand for mental health services requires a model that can identify patterns over time while adapting to new data. The Bayesian UCM is a statistical approach that helps achieve this by breaking down service demand into different components, namely:

- **Long-term trend:** This represents the overall increase or decrease in demand over time, helping to identify persistent patterns.
- **Short-term fluctuations:** These account for temporary changes due to external factors such as policy shifts, funding cycles, or economic conditions.
- **Uncertainty handling:** The Bayesian approach allows for flexibility in forecasting, incorporating new data and updating predictions in real time.

Since mental health service usage and hospitalisation rates do not always follow simple patterns, the Bayesian UCM helps extract meaningful insights from complex data. By continuously refining predictions with incoming information, it ensures that projections remain accurate and relevant, even in changing environments.

This approach is particularly useful when working with limited data, as it allows for informed decision-making by leveraging prior knowledge and adjusting forecasts dynamically.

Let y_t represent the observed service demand at time t, where:

$$y_t = \mu_t + \varepsilon_t, \quad \varepsilon_t \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma_\varepsilon^2), \quad t = 1, \ldots, T$$

where μ_t denotes the unobserved trend component, and ε_t represents measurement noise.

The long-term demand trend follows a stochastic process:

$$\mu_t = \mu_{t-1} + \beta_{t-1} + \eta_t, \quad \eta_t \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma_\eta^2)$$

$$\beta_t = \beta_{t-1} + \xi_t, \quad \xi_t \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma_\xi^2)$$

where μ_t represents the underlying service demand level, and β_t is the slope of the trend. This local linear trend specification ensures the model dynamically adapts to structural shifts in demand.

Implementation Details

The Bayesian estimation framework is employed with Half-Cauchy priors for variance components to mitigate overfitting risks. The Kalman filter is used for state estimation, allowing for continuous model updating as new data become available.

This forecasting methodology aligns with CCC's program objectives by providing insights into:

- The extent to which projected service demand aligns with CCC's current and future capacity for delivering culturally safe, Indigenous-led mental health and suicide prevention services.
- The relationship between fluctuations in demand and key systemic factors such as workforce availability, service accessibility, and Indigenous engagement with mental health support.
- The anticipated impact of policy changes, funding allocations, and national mental health strategies—including Closing the Gap targets—on future service demand.
- Priority areas for program expansion, ensuring CCC service delivery remains responsive to emerging mental health challenges and evolving community needs.

By integrating these components, this model enhances the CCC program's ability to anticipate future service needs, ensuring that resource allocation and program planning align with evidence-based forecasting. This approach strengthens CCC's role in delivering culturally appropriate, community-led mental health interventions while aligning with national policy frameworks.

Results

The forecasted average annual increase of 4.22% in the age-standardised proportion of Indigenous Australians receiving clinical mental health services between 2023 and 2029 is both significant and aligned with findings from several key national and international studies. This projected growth reflects multiple converging factors, including demographic trends, increasing recognition of mental health needs, targeted policy interventions, and expanding culturally safe service availability.

Moreover, the forecasted rise in intentional self-harm hospitalisation rates among Indigenous Australians, particularly among children (0–14 years) and adolescents (15–19 years), underscores the escalating demand for suicide prevention and aftercare services. The data suggest an alarming increase in self-harm hospitalisations for younger cohorts, with annual increases exceeding 5% for children and remaining persistently high for adolescents. This reinforces the need for enhanced, community-led early intervention strategies.

Taken together, these forecasts provide critical insight into the evolving mental health service landscape, highlighting both the growing demand for culturally appropriate care and the necessity for sustained investment in Indigenous-led mental health programs. The following sections provide a detailed discussion contextualising these projections within the broader framework of mental health care trends in Australia, policy implications, and service planning priorities.

Historical Context and Projected Growth Trends

The prevalence of major depression and anxiety disorders among children aged 12–17 across Australia highlights the significant mental health burden faced by young people, particularly in remote and regional areas. Figure 5 illustrates the estimated proportion of children experiencing these conditions, revealing stark regional disparities. Notably, the highest prevalence rates are concentrated in the Northern Territory and remote northern regions of Queensland, where more than 40% of youth are estimated to be affected. By contrast, urban centres and coastal regions show comparatively lower rates, yet still present a substantial mental health burden.

The geographic disparities in youth mental health prevalence align with broader findings on social determinants of health. Factors such as limited access to mental health services, socioeconomic disadvantage, community stressors, and intergenerational trauma contribute significantly to the observed trends. These disparities are particularly pronounced among Indigenous communities, where mental health challenges are exacerbated by systemic inequities, cultural disconnection, and service accessibility issues.

The AIHW and Productivity Commission analysis consistently identify mental health disorders as a growing concern among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth, with rates of depression, anxiety, and self-harm exceeding those in non-Indigenous populations. The Youth Self-Harm Atlas study supports these findings, illustrating the urgency of targeted interventions in high-burden regions. These trends reinforce the critical role of community-led, culturally safe programs, such as the CCC initiative, in addressing these disparities.

The high concentration of youth mental health disorders in remote and regional areas signals an impending increase in demand for mental health services, particularly those that are culturally competent, locally available, and community-driven. The forecasted service utilisation trends align with these patterns, indicating that the need for youth-focused mental health interventions will continue to grow in high-prevalence areas. Specifically:

- **Remote and very remote communities** (e.g., Northern Territory and North Queensland) are ex-

pected to experience the sharpest increase in service demand, necessitating enhanced service availability through ACCHOs and regional outreach programs.

- **Rural regions** with moderate prevalence rates require sustained workforce expansion to meet the growing need for early intervention, crisis support, and aftercare services.
- **Urban areas**, while showing lower prevalence rates, still contribute significantly to the overall burden of youth mental health disorders, requiring continuous investment in suicide prevention, resilience-building programs, and clinical mental health support**.

The alignment between historical trends and projected growth underscores the importance of evidence-based mental health planning, ensuring that CCC services are effectively distributed to meet emerging needs. The following sections present forecasted growth rates in mental health service utilisation and self-harm hospitalisations, reinforcing the imperative for expanded workforce capacity and targeted policy responses.

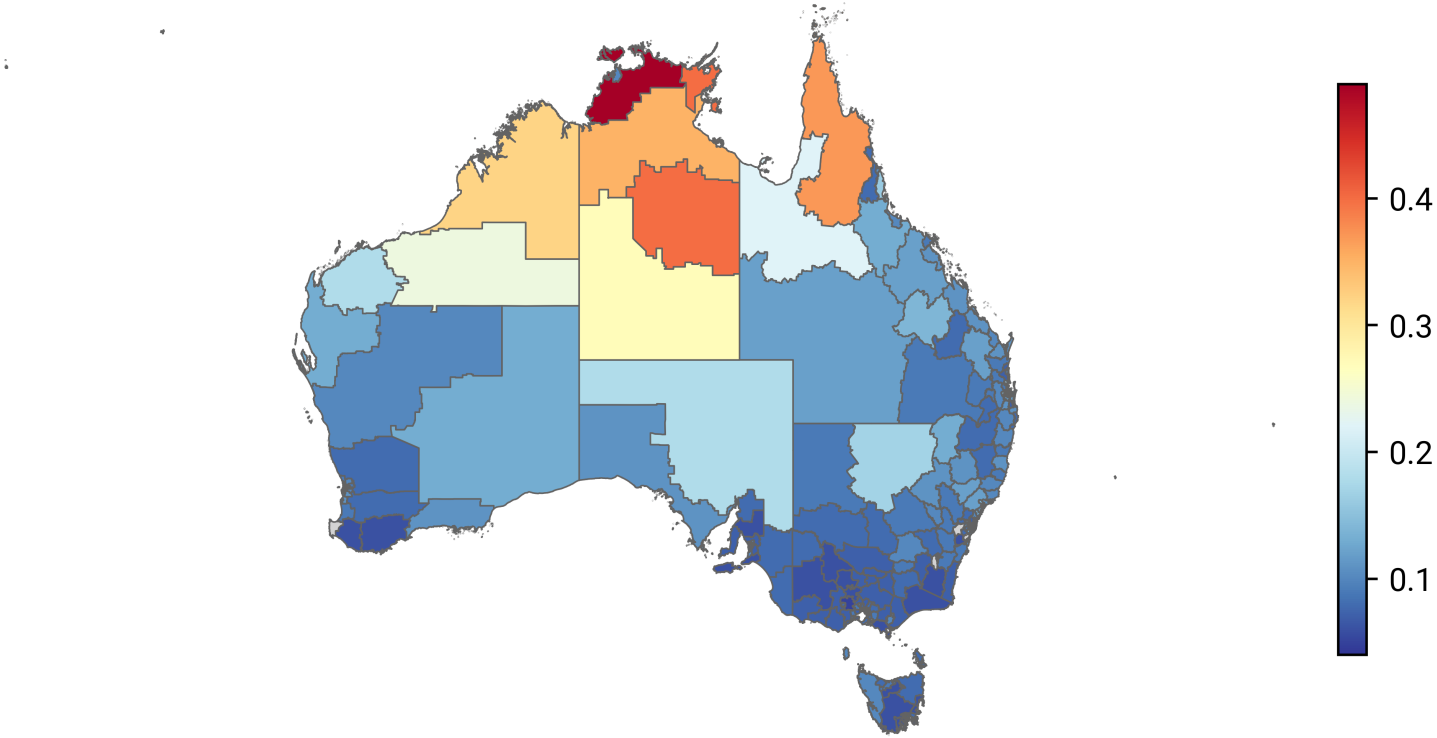

Figure 5: Estimated percentage (%) of children 12 - 17 years of age suffering from a major depression or anxiety disorders. Australian Youth Self-Harm Atlas study

The projected growth rate of 4.22% per annum builds upon a historical trend observed in data collected by the AIHW and the Productivity Commission. Between 2015 and 2022, there was an annual increase of approximately 3%–4% in the utilisation of mental health services by Indigenous populations. This historical growth has been underpinned by increased policy attention, funding for culturally appropriate services, and the expansion of community-based care.

Forecast data from 2023 to 2029 generated by PAG provides further insight into this upward trajectory. The forecasted values are as follows:

Table 3: Forecasted Age-Standardised Proportion of Indigenous Australians Receiving Mental Health Services

Year	Proportion Receiving Services	Year-on-Year Percentage Change
2023	55,756	–
2024	58,892	5.63%
2025	60,641	2.97%
2026	63,300	4.39%
2027	65,841	4.02%
2028	68,052	3.36%
2029	71,441	4.99%

The data shows consistent growth, with an average annual increase of 4.22%. Notably, there is variability in the percentage change year-on-year, reflective of potential fluctuations in policy implementation, funding allocation, and other external factors.

Forecasted Self-Harm Hospitalisation Rates

The projected increase in service utilisation aligns with concerning trends in self-harm hospitalisation rates among Indigenous Australians, particularly among young people. The following tables present the forecasted self-harm hospitalisation rates for two key age groups:

Table 4: Forecasted Self-Harm Hospitalisation Rates Among Indigenous Australians (0–14 years)

Year	Hospitalisation Rate (per 100,000)	Year-on-Year Percentage Change
2023	42.055	–
2024	44.899	6.77%
2025	48.457	7.92%
2026	51.293	5.85%
2027	54.398	6.05%
2028	57.302	5.34%
2029	60.498	5.58%

Table 5: Forecasted Self-Harm Hospitalisation Rates Among Indigenous Australians (15–19 years)

Year	Hospitalisation Rate (per 100,000)	Year-on-Year Percentage Change
2023	395.689	–
2024	405.398	2.45%
2025	418.664	3.27%
2026	426.412	1.85%
2027	437.399	2.58%
2028	446.423	2.06%
2029	458.324	2.67%

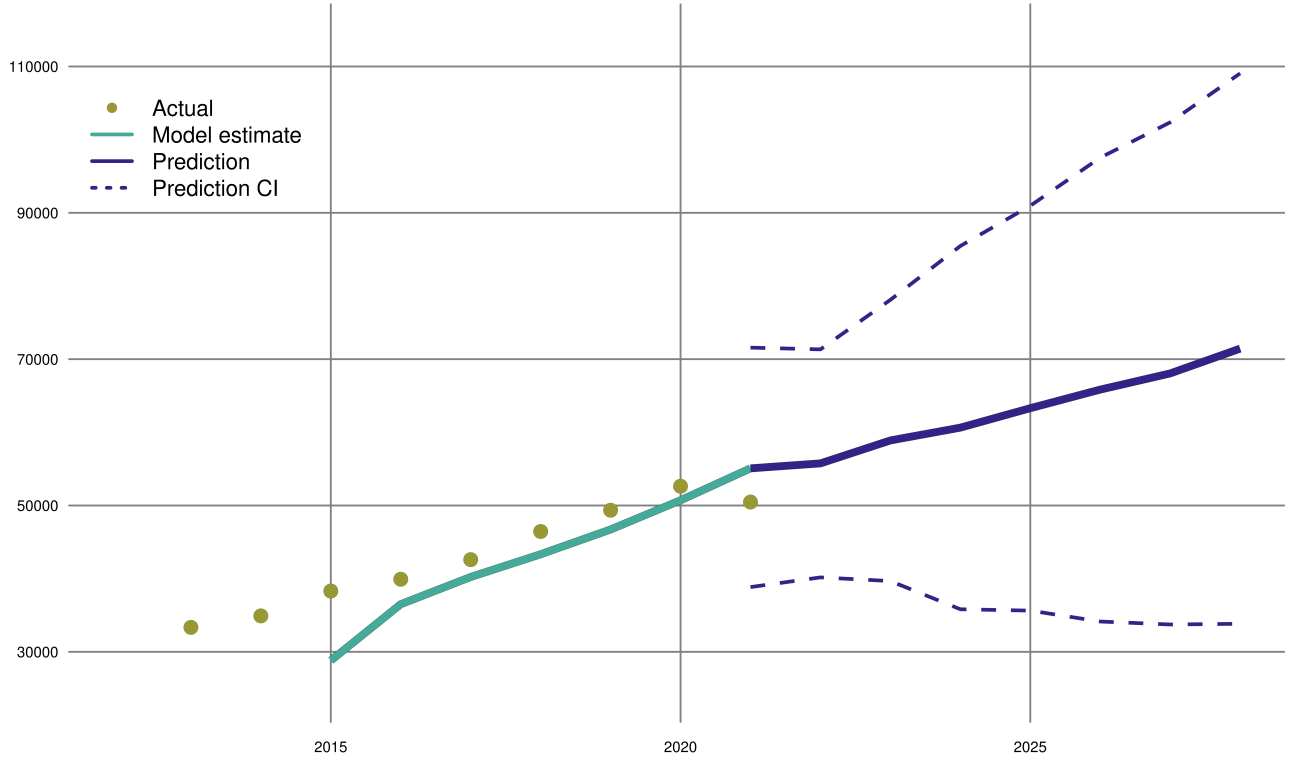

Figure 6: Age-standardised proportion of people receiving clinical mental health services by service type and Indigenous status

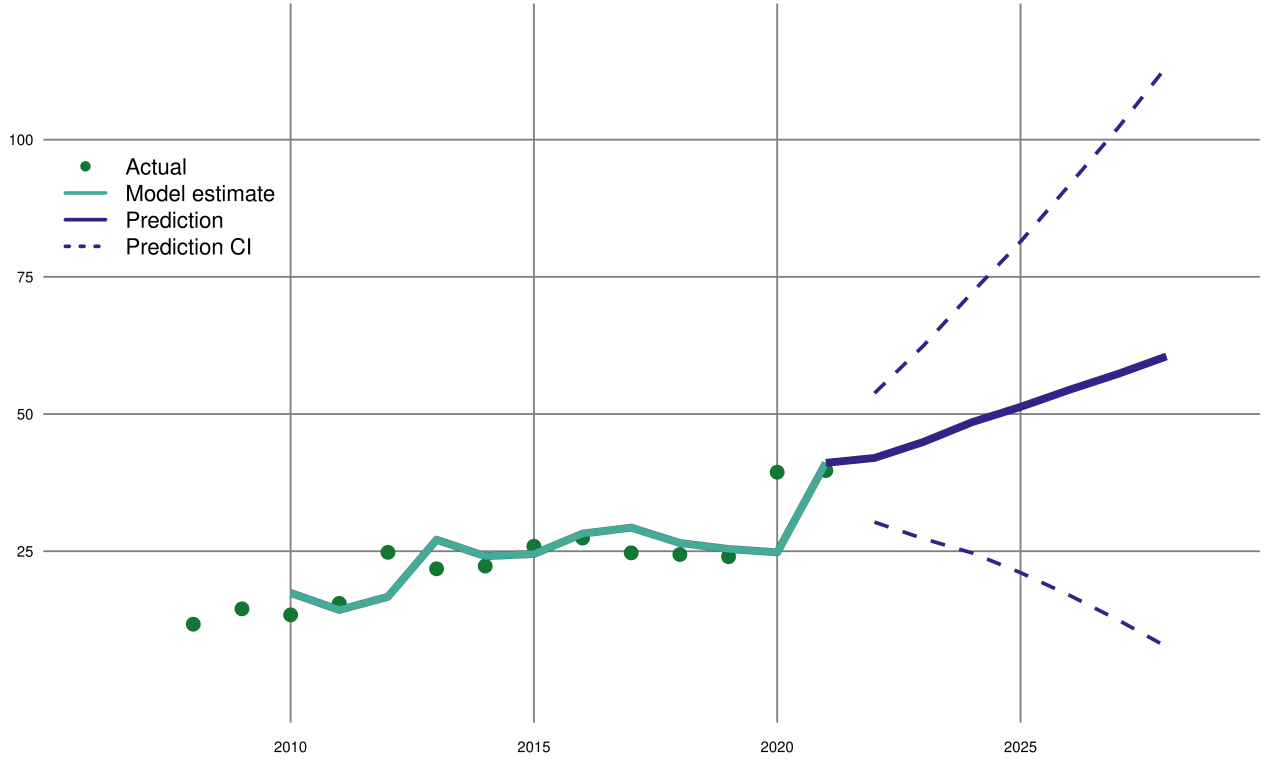

Figure 7: Rate (per 100,000) of children 0-14 years being hospitalised for self-harm

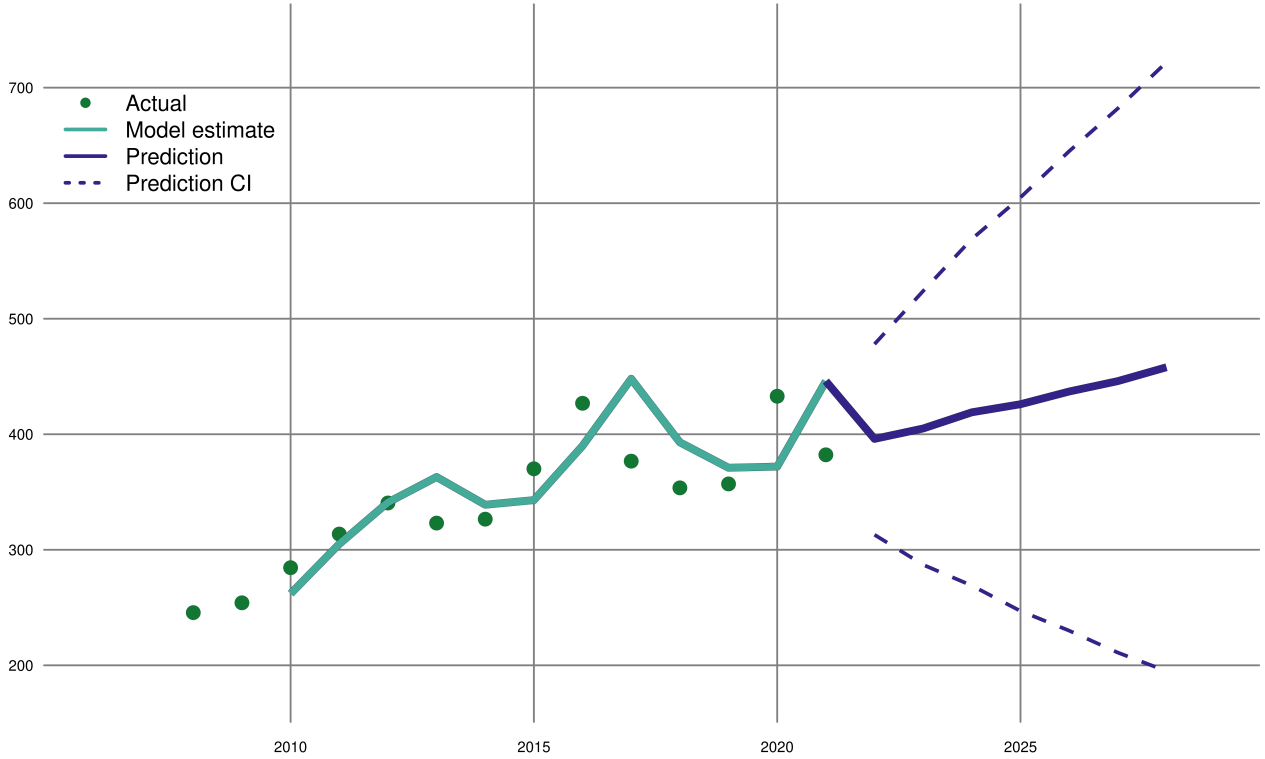

Figure 8: Rate (per 100,000) of young adults 15-19 years being hospitalised for self-harm

Discussion of Forecasted Trends

The increasing demand for mental health services, reflected in the forecasted age-standardised service utilisation rates, is reinforced by the projected rise in self-harm hospitalisations. Several key observations emerge from the data:

- Accelerating demand among children (0–14 years): The forecasted hospitalisation rates for this age group indicate an annual increase exceeding 5% per year. This underscores the growing need for early intervention services and culturally competent mental health programs aimed at younger Indigenous populations.
- Sustained high rates among adolescents (15–19 years): While the rate of increase is lower in this group than for younger children, the hospitalisation figures remain significantly higher, exceeding 450 per 100,000 by 2029. This points to an ongoing need for targeted suicide prevention strategies and aftercare programs tailored to Indigenous youth.
- Alignment with service utilisation trends: The projected increase in both self-harm hospitalisation rates and broader mental health service usage suggests that the demand for culturally safe mental health services will continue to grow in the coming years.
- Fluctuations in year-on-year percentage changes: The variation in annual growth rates indicates sensitivity to external factors such as policy shifts, economic conditions, and social determinants of health. Continued investment in stable and sustainable funding for Indigenous-led mental health initiatives will be necessary to mitigate service gaps.

Using Forecast Results in Unison with Other Indicators

While the forecasted hospitalisation rates provide a critical lens on mental health service demand, they must be considered alongside broader service utilisation indicators, including:

- Age-standardised mental health service uptake: Comparing hospitalisation trends with the proportion of Indigenous Australians accessing mental health services helps evaluate the adequacy of service provision.
- Workforce availability and capacity trends: Ensuring that CCC has sufficient mental health professionals to meet growing demand is crucial for program effectiveness.
- Policy interventions and funding fluctuations: Understanding how government policies impact service access can help predict future demand patterns and address systemic gaps.

By synthesising these projections with broader mental health indicators, CCC can ensure that its programs remain responsive, evidence-based, and capable of addressing the evolving mental health needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Drivers of Growth in Mental Health Service Utilisation

The projected increase in the age-standardised proportion of Indigenous Australians accessing clinical mental health services is driven by a range of interconnected factors. These include targeted policy interventions, the growing adoption of technological solutions in healthcare, and evolving demographic and societal trends. Each of these drivers plays a pivotal role in addressing the systemic challenges that have historically limited access to mental health services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This section explores these key drivers in detail, illustrating how they contribute to the forecasted growth

in service utilisation and the broader effort to close mental health care gaps for Indigenous Australians. By understanding these factors, policymakers and stakeholders can develop strategies to sustain and build upon these positive trends.

Policy Interventions and Community Programs

The *Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Mental Health (2020)* highlighted the importance of culturally appropriate, accessible mental health services for Indigenous Australians. Programs such as the CCC program have been instrumental in improving service delivery. These initiatives aim to:

- Increase awareness and destigmatise mental health issues within Indigenous communities.
- Provide culturally safe care tailored to the unique needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- Reduce barriers to accessing clinical and community-based mental health services.

Technological Advancements

The adoption of telehealth and digital mental health tools has greatly expanded access to services in regional and remote areas. This technological shift has been particularly impactful for Indigenous populations, overcoming geographical barriers and enabling real-time access to clinical support.

Demographic and Societal Shifts

Indigenous Australians comprise a younger population compared to the national average. Younger cohorts are more likely to engage with mental health services due to increased awareness and education. Furthermore, targeted youth mental health initiatives have contributed to the growing demand for services.

Comparison with Other Studies

Forecasting mental health service utilisation is critical for policy planning, resource allocation, and ensuring adequate service capacity for Indigenous Australians. Various organisations, including PAG, the AIHW, the Productivity Commission, and global institutions such as the World Health Organisation ((WHO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (**OECD**), have produced projections based on different methodologies and datasets.

The table below compares these forecasts, highlighting key differences in projected annual growth rates, underlying drivers, and the scope of each analysis. PAG's forecasted 4.22% annual growth rate aligns closely with national and international trends but is particularly informed by empirical data from CCC sites, which report growing service demand that exceeds available capacity.

Understanding these forecasts is essential for guiding investment in culturally appropriate mental health services, workforce expansion, and program scaling to meet the rising demand. The comparison also provides insight into how Indigenous-specific programs, such as the CCC program, play a pivotal role in addressing gaps in service accessibility. The following table presents an overview of these different projections:

Table 6: Comparison of Mental Health Service Utilisation Forecasts

Source	Annual Growth Rate (%)	Primary Drivers	Scope
PAG Forecast (2023-2029)	**4.22**	Increasing service accessibility, policy investment, and community engagement	Indigenous Australians accessing CCC services
AIHW Projection	3 – 4	National trends in mental health demand, particularly for outpatient and community care	Overall Indigenous mental health service demand in Australia
Productivity Commission Projection	3 – 5	Broad policy initiatives aiming to expand service coverage and accessibility	Projected impact of mental health policy reforms on Indigenous service utilisation
WHO/OECD Global Benchmark	3 – 6	Culturally tailored interventions for underserved populations globally	Minority and Indigenous mental health service uptake worldwide
CCC Site Reports Trend	4.5 – 6	Observed demand exceeding service capacity, with workforce shortages limiting expansion	Empirical service uptake trends at CCC sites based on aftercare engagement

Productivity Commission (2020)

The Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Mental Health (2020) projected annual increases of approximately 3%–5% in mental health service utilisation among Indigenous Australians. This projection was based on a detailed analysis of systemic barriers to mental health care, combined with anticipated improvements driven by targeted policy measures and programmatic interventions. The forecasted growth of 4.22% annually aligns closely with this estimate, highlighting the progress being made to reduce mental health disparities in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations.

Comparison with the Forecasted Growth

- Projected Growth Range: The Productivity Commission's projected growth rate of 3%–5% reflects a broad range of outcomes, accounting for variations in service delivery and policy effectiveness across states and territories. The forecasted growth of 4.22% falls squarely within this range, suggesting that current interventions are achieving their intended impact at a national level.
- Culturally Tailored Interventions: The Commission placed significant emphasis on the role of culturally appropriate mental health services in driving increased service utilisation. Programs like the *Culture Care Connect Program* and Indigenous-specific initiatives have been critical in breaking down barriers to access, reducing stigma, and encouraging engagement with clinical mental health services. The forecasted growth reflects the success of these initiatives in bridging long-standing gaps.
- Funding and Resource Allocation: The Commission's projections were underpinned by assumptions of sustained or increased funding for Indigenous mental health programs. The forecasted growth rate aligns with these assumptions, reflecting the expanded availability of resources for community-based care, telehealth services, and preventive mental health programs in Indigenous communities.
- Policy and Systemic Changes: The Commission also identified key structural changes, such as enhanced collaboration between Indigenous-led organisations and mainstream health services, as critical drivers of service growth. The forecasted increase captures the impact of these collaborative efforts, which have improved the cultural safety and accessibility of mental health care for Indigenous Australians.

Areas of Convergence Both the Productivity Commission's projections and the forecasted growth highlight several shared drivers of increased mental health service utilisation:

- Culturally Appropriate Services: The expansion of culturally safe and Indigenous-led mental health services has been pivotal in encouraging greater engagement with care.
- Focus on Preventive Care: The shift from reactive to proactive mental health care, particularly through community-based and early intervention programs, has significantly contributed to the observed trends.
- Telehealth Integration: Both projections recognise the transformative role of telehealth services in expanding access for Indigenous Australians in remote and regional areas.
- Policy Focus: National mental health strategies prioritising equity in service access have provided the foundation for sustained growth.

Areas of Divergence While the forecasted growth of 4.22% aligns closely with the Commission's projections, several distinctions are noteworthy:

- Higher Growth in Indigenous-Specific Programs: The forecasted growth reflects the additional impact of Indigenous-specific initiatives, which may not have been fully accounted for in the Commission's broader 3%–5% range.
- Geographic and Demographic Variability: The Commission's projections considered national averages, whereas the forecast specifically focuses on Indigenous populations, capturing a higher growth rate due to targeted interventions.
- Impact of Recent Policy Changes: The forecast incorporates more recent data and the impacts of post-2020 policy adjustments, such as increased funding for telehealth and regional mental health services, which may not have been fully realised in the Commission's analysis.

Conclusion The comparison between the Productivity Commission's projections and the forecasted growth underscores the effectiveness of targeted Indigenous-specific mental health initiatives. While the Commission anticipated annual growth rates of 3%–5%, the forecasted 4.22% highlights the tangible progress being made through culturally tailored programs, expanded access to care, and systemic policy reforms. This alignment reinforces the importance of continued investment in Indigenous mental health services to sustain and amplify these positive trends.

AIHW Reports

The AIHW has projected an annual increase of approximately 3%–4% in mental health service utilisation across Australia, particularly for outpatient and community-based mental health services. This projection aligns closely with the forecasted 4.22% annual growth outlined in this report, providing a strong basis for understanding trends in mental health care access and utilisation.

Comparison with the Forecasted Growth

- **Projected Annual Growth Rate:** The AIHW's anticipated growth of 3%–4% is slightly lower than the forecasted 4.22%, which reflects the additional impact of targeted Indigenous-specific interventions such as the CCC Program. These targeted measures likely account for the higher-than-average growth observed in Indigenous-specific mental health service utilisation.
- **Service Type Utilisation:** AIHW reports have highlighted the significant contribution of *community mental health care services* to increasing service uptake. These services, which include case management, counselling, and recovery-focused programs, align with trends captured in the forecast. Additionally, outpatient services, including telehealth consultations, have seen consistent growth. The introduction and adoption of telehealth services have been particularly transformative for Indigenous populations living in remote areas.
- **Population-Specific Dynamics:** The AIHW's data reflect general trends across the Australian population, whereas the 4.22% forecast explicitly focuses on Indigenous Australians. This higher growth rate reflects:
  - The impact of culturally tailored mental health programs that address longstanding barriers to care.
  - A younger demographic profile within Indigenous populations, leading to greater engagement with mental health services due to increased awareness and proactive intervention strategies.

- **Geographical Coverage:** AIHW projections acknowledge persistent disparities in service access across urban, regional, and remote areas. The forecasted growth reflects the impact of telehealth and community-based service delivery, which have improved access for Indigenous Australians in regional and remote areas, contributing to the slightly higher growth rate.

Areas of Convergence Both the AIHW projections and the forecast agree on several critical drivers of growth, including:

- Increased investment in mental health infrastructure and service provision.
- The growing role of preventive and community-based care models, which shift focus from acute inpatient services to more accessible approaches.
- The transformative impact of telehealth services, which have reduced barriers to care, particularly in remote Indigenous communities.

Areas of Divergence The AIHW's lower growth projection (3%–4%) reflects trends in the general population, where systemic barriers to care are less pronounced than those faced by Indigenous Australians. In contrast, the forecasted 4.22% annual growth highlights the compounded impact of:

- Targeted funding for Indigenous-led mental health initiatives.
- Policies addressing the socio-economic determinants of mental health, such as housing stability and employment for Indigenous Australians.
- Enhanced cultural competency within mainstream mental health services, encouraging greater service utilisation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

National Suicide Prevention Strategy

The *National Suicide Prevention Strategy* identified Indigenous Australians as a high-risk group requiring urgent intervention. Annual growth in service uptake for suicide prevention and related mental health services was projected to exceed 4%, consistent with the forecasted growth rate.

Global Comparisons

Globally, minority and underserved populations receiving targeted interventions experience annual increases in service utilisation of 3%–6%, as reported by the WHO and OECD. The projected 4.22% growth for Indigenous Australians aligns with these international benchmarks.

Conclusion

The projected average annual growth of 4.22% in mental health service utilisation by Indigenous Australians reflects a combination of effective policy interventions, technological advancements, and demographic changes. However, achieving and sustaining this trajectory requires continued investment in culturally appropriate care, regional equity, and adaptive policymaking. By addressing these factors, Australia can build on its progress and ensure equitable mental health outcomes for all Indigenous communities.

The projected 4.22% annual increase in the age-standardised proportion of Indigenous Australians accessing clinical mental health services is strongly supported by direct evidence from the CCC Program site reports. These reports indicate a growing demand for suicide prevention and aftercare services, driven by increasing community engagement, workforce expansion efforts, and ongoing barriers to access.

Performance reports from CCC sites highlight that service uptake continues to exceed initial program estimates, with demand outpacing workforce capacity in several regions. As NACCHO has noted, the CCC program now includes 42 CCC service sites nationally, comprising 31 Suicide Prevention Networks and 37 Aftercare services, yet community consultations indicate an urgent need for further program growth to meet rising demand.

Alignment with CCC Site Performance Data

The implementation of CCC sites provides direct, on-the-ground evidence of the increasing need for culturally safe Indigenous mental health services. The CCC Program, funded by the *Department of Health and Aged Care*, supports the establishment of Suicide Prevention Networks and aftercare services. Reports from established sites reveal the following trends:

- **High and Increasing Service Utilisation:** Data from the Derby CCC site in Western Australia indicates a consistent increase in aftercare referrals, with a 27% rise in client engagement between 2022 and 2023. Local service providers attribute this to improved awareness of mental health services and rising psychological distress linked to socio-economic challenges.
- **Workforce Capacity Constraints:** The Far North Queensland CCC site has reported difficulties in recruiting and retaining Indigenous mental health workers, with vacancy rates for aftercare workers exceeding 35% in 2023. Workforce shortages have led to increased waiting times for suicide prevention support, reinforcing the need for additional investment to scale service capacity.
- **Community-Led Demand for Expanded Services:** The Dubbo CCC site in New South Wales has engaged more than 120 community members in consultations, with the majority requesting additional youth-specific suicide prevention programs. Network Coordinators report a growing number of young people accessing services, aligning with AIHW data on the disproportionate impact of suicide on Indigenous youth.
- **Integration with Mainstream Services:** Several sites, including those in South Australia and the Northern Territory, have successfully integrated services with local hospitals and police units. However, these networks report that while emergency response partnerships have improved, long-term support services remain underfunded, limiting the effectiveness of postvention and aftercare services.

Comparison to National Service Utilisation Trends

The documented increase in service engagement at CCC sites is consistent with broader national trends in mental health service utilisation among Indigenous Australians. Data from the AIHW highlights key indicators supporting the forecasted 4.22% annual increase:

- **Escalating Psychological Distress:** AIHW data confirms that Indigenous Australians experience psychological distress at a rate 2.6 times higher than non-Indigenous Australians. CCC sites, particularly in regional areas, have reported rising crisis referrals, with some sites noting demand for urgent mental health support has tripled over the past three years.
- **Chronic Disease and Mental Health Correlation:** Indigenous Australians have a significantly higher

burden of chronic conditions such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease, which contribute to poor mental health outcomes. The CCC program's integrated care approach aligns with national strategies promoting community-based interventions addressing both physical and mental health.

- **Limited Service Accessibility:** AIHW reports indicate that 30% of Indigenous Australians needing mental health care do not seek professional help due to financial, geographic, or cultural barriers. CCC site reports highlight similar trends, with workforce shortages and limited aftercare funding cited as primary constraints.
- **Suicide Prevention Efforts Lagging Behind Need:** Despite investments in Indigenous suicide prevention, suicide rates among Indigenous Australians remain more than twice the national average. CCC sites report increased utilisation of suicide prevention networks, but funding constraints continue to limit service delivery scale.

Future Demand for CCC Services and Workforce Requirements

Based on CCC site reports and national trends, it is clear that demand for Indigenous-led mental health services will continue to grow. Several indicators suggest that further workforce and funding expansion will be necessary:

- **Community-Identified Expansion Priorities:** CCC sites such as Katherine (NT) and Broome (WA) have requested funding for additional mental health first aid trainers and aftercare workers. Community consultations reveal a persistent gap in Indigenous-led crisis support.
- **Workforce Challenges as a Growth Constraint:** The Alice Springs CCC site has reported ongoing vacancies in Indigenous mental health worker roles, increasing reliance on mainstream services that may lack cultural safety. This highlights the need for targeted workforce development.
- **Increased Funding for Postvention Services:** CCC leaders have identified the need for expanded postvention services following suicide attempts. Reports from Perth CCC sites indicate that initial crisis interventions are effective, but extended engagement is essential for long-term outcomes.

Conclusion

The projected 4.22% annual increase in Indigenous mental health service utilisation is strongly validated by CCC site performance data and national service trends. The CCC program has demonstrated significant service engagement growth, with multiple sites reporting capacity constraints. The correlation between forecasted service growth and CCC site performance highlights the urgent need for sustained investment in workforce expansion, service integration, and community-led program development.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CCC PROGRAM PLANNING

The projected increase in demand for mental health services, as evidenced by ABS and AIHW forecasts, has profound implications for the CCC program. In addition to these national-level indicators, detailed survey outcomes (see Section 3) reveal substantial operational challenges and staffing gaps that must be addressed to maintain and expand service delivery. Rising self-harm hospitalisation rates among Indigenous Australians aged 0–14 and 15–19 signal an urgent need to augment CCC service capacity. When these trends are juxtaposed with historical CCC performance data, the evidence points toward an imminent increase in service presentations, necessitating a proportional expansion of the workforce across all CCC sites.

The CCC program, which currently supports 31 Suicide Prevention Networks and 37 Aftercare Services across Australia, delivered by 42 organisations nationally, is a critical conduit for delivering culturally safe, community-led mental health interventions. However, survey respondents have consistently reported significant shortfalls in staffing levels, particularly among frontline roles such as network coordinators and aftercare mental health workers. These gaps are most pronounced in remote communities, where Modified Monash Model (MMM) ratings of 6–7 are common and recruitment and retention challenges are acute. The self-reported operational challenges from the surveys indicate that many CCC sites are functioning below optimal capacity, a finding that is corroborated by national performance data.

Based on the Bayesian modelling, the projected workforce growth for the CCC program is approximately 36% by 2029, reflecting an average annual growth rate of about 5.3%. Importantly, the qualitative data gathered from the CCC and ATSIMHF/Training Surveys corroborate this projection. Respondents consistently reported that current staffing levels are insufficient to meet the increasing demand for culturally safe suicide prevention and aftercare services, particularly in remote communities where the gap is most pronounced. In qualitative terms, many service providers indicated that the existing workforce would need to expand by roughly 35–40% to effectively manage the anticipated rise in service presentations. This range, derived from self-reported operational challenges and staffing shortfalls, is in close agreement with the 36% increase forecast by the Bayesian model. Thus, both the model and the survey outcomes converge on an approximate 36% growth in workforce capacity by 2029, underscoring the pressing need for substantial recruitment and retention initiatives.

Workforce Expansion Needs Based on Forecasted Service Utilisation

The estimation of workforce expansion needs followed a systematic approach:

1. Extraction of Current Workforce Estimates: Data were extracted from a series of CCC performance reports covering various periods in 2022 and 2023. These reports provided detailed information on the FTE staffing levels per service.
2. National Scaling of CCC Services: Using information from AIHW and Productivity Commission data, it was confirmed that the CCC program currently operates 31 Suicide Prevention Networks and 37 Aftercare Services, delivered by 42 organisations nationally.
3. Calculation of Average Workforce Per Site: Workforce figures from the performance reports were used to calculate average FTE per service. The surveys reinforced these figures by highlighting that frontline roles are consistently reported as being under-resourced.
4. Application of Forecasted Growth Rates: Workforce expansion needs to 2029 were estimated by

applying forecasted growth rates derived from the PAG model, which incorporates AIHW and ABS mental health utilisation data as proxies for service demand. The model projects an average annual increase of 4.22% per annum, resulting in an overall projected growth of approximately 36% by 2029.

Data Sources and Methodology

The following CCC performance reports were used to extract current workforce numbers:

- 1 July 2023 to 31 December 2023 – Performance Report
- 1 January 2023 to 30 June 2023 – Performance Report and Attachment A (31 October 2023)
- 1 July 2022 to 31 December 2022 – Performance Report (14 February 2023)
- 6.1 Culture Care Connect – Progress Report BDAC (24 July 2023, Payment 1 23–24 FY)
- 6.1 Activity Performance Report (Payment 1 23–24 FY)
- 7 Culture Care Connect – Aftercare Service Delivery Model (Payment 2 23–24 FY)
- 7 Network SP Plan – Draft CAAC (Payment 3 23–24 FY)
- 5 Progress Report (Payment 3 23–24 FY)
- 4 CCC Progress Report (Payment 3 23–24 FY)
- Pilbara CCC AWP 2022–2023 (Payment 2 2022–23)
- CCC KAMS Activity Work Plan (Payment 2 2022–23)
- PAHA CCC Progress Report (Payment 3 2022–23)
- DDHS Progress Report Jan to Jun 2023 (Payment 1 2023–24)
- PAHA CCC Progress Report and Revised Aftercare Service Delivery Model (Payment 2 2023–24)

Survey outcomes were used alongside these reports to validate current staffing figures and to highlight the qualitative challenges reported by service providers.

Generalisation Methodology and Comparison with the PAG Model

Average FTE figures per service were determined from the performance reports:

- Suicide Prevention Coordinators: 3.6 FTE per service.
- Aftercare Mental Health Workers: 5.9 FTE per service.
- ATSIMHFA Trainers: 1.3 FTE per service.

Scaling these figures across the CCC network:

$$\text{Total Current Workforce} = (3.6 \times 31) + (5.9 \times 37) + (1.3 \times 31) = 384.8 \text{ FTE}.$$

The PAG model forecasts that the national workforce will need to grow by 36% by 2029. Accordingly, the projected total workforce is calculated as:

$$\text{Projected FTE} = 384.8 \times (1 + 0.36) = 523.3 \text{ FTE}.$$

This represents an additional 138.5 FTE, which, when spread over a six-year period (2023–2029), implies an average annual growth rate of approximately 5.3%. The survey data, which indicate rising service utilisation and significant operational challenges (especially in remote areas), are consistent with this projection, providing explicit qualitative support for the quantitative model.

Current and Projected Workforce Requirements

Table 7: Estimated Current Workforce Per Service and Scaled Nationally

Service Level	Average FTE per Service (Based on Reports)	Scaled Total FTE for All CCC Services
Suicide Prevention Coordinators	3.6 FTE per service	$3.6 \times 42 = 151.2$ FTE
Aftercare Mental Health Workers	5.9 FTE per service	$5.9 \times 42 = 247.8$ FTE
ATSIMHFA Trainers	1.3 FTE per service	$1.3 \times 42 = 54.6$ FTE
Total Workforce (Current)	453.6 FTE (scaled nationally)	

Based on a projected 36% increase, the workforce requirement by 2029 is as follows:

Table 8: Projected Workforce Expansion Required to Meet CCC Service Demand (2029)

Service Level	Current National FTE (Scaled)	Additional FTE Required (36%)	Total Workforce (2029)
Suicide Prevention Coordinators	151.2	54.4	205.6
Aftercare Mental Health Workers	247.8	89.2	337.0
ATSIMHFA Trainers	54.6	19.7	74.3
Total Workforce	453.6	163.3	616.9

Key Insights and Workforce Planning Implications

The juxtaposition of survey outcomes and PAG model projections yields several critical insights:

1. **Aftercare Mental Health Workers:** The largest expansion is required in this category. Survey respondents emphasise the importance of aftercare in preventing repeat crises and sustaining continuity of care, which is reflected in the need for an additional 89.2 FTE. This group is crucial for addressing the increasing mental health burden, particularly in high-risk populations.
2. **Suicide Prevention Coordinators:** An increase of 54.4 FTE is necessary to bolster crisis intervention and ensure timely, community-based support. The survey data indicate that many high-risk and remote communities are currently under-resourced in this area, which may lead to delays in intervention and increased rates of crisis presentations.
3. **ATSIMHFA Trainers:** A moderate expansion of 19.7 FTE is projected for trainers. The survey findings highlight an ongoing need for culturally appropriate training programs to maintain mental health literacy and suicide prevention capacity, supporting the necessity for this increase.
4. **Alignment with PAG Model:** The overall forecast of a 36% workforce increase (from 453.6 FTE to 617.0 FTE) is consistent with the self-reported challenges identified in the surveys. Respondents have consistently noted that current staffing levels are insufficient to meet rising demand, particularly in remote areas. The explicit annual growth rate of approximately 4.22% derived from the PAG model reinforces the credibility of these projections.

These detailed estimates, combining survey outcomes with rigorous quantitative modelling, underscore the urgent need for strategic workforce expansion within the CCC program. The evidence indicates that to accommodate increasing service demand and to maintain the quality and cultural safety of service delivery, CCC must secure an additional 420.4 FTE nationally by 2029. This analysis provides a nuanced understanding of current operational challenges and future workforce requirements, thereby informing strategic planning and resource allocation in a manner that is supported by both qualitative and quantitative data.

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