

First Nations Disability

The evidence base for this paper draws on the work of the National Disability Footprint, including the Data and Research Footprint (Element 2) delivered in partnership with Dr Scott Avery and Girra Maa Indigenous Health, University of Technology Sydney.

Disability within First Nations communities is understood through both Western and cultural frameworks. While mainstream services define disability using medical models focused on limitation and impairment, many First Nations peoples conceptualise disability through a cultural lens that emphasises community inclusion, holistic wellbeing and connection to family, culture and Country (Disability Royal Commission 2023; NIAA 2023). The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and other government systems use the term ‘disability’ to describe a limitation, restriction or impairment resulting from a long-term health condition that restricts everyday activities for at least six months (ABS 2025).

First Nations cultures have practiced models of inclusion for millennia, embracing diversity as part of community fabric rather than viewing difference as deficit (First Peoples Disability Network 2023). However, since colonisation, First Nations people with disability face compounding forms of discrimination — experiencing both racism and ableism — creating what the Disability Royal Commission termed a ‘double disadvantage’ (Disability Royal Commission 2023; Australian Government 2025).

- **In 2022, one-quarter (25.3% or 183,700) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had disability, with 11.6% experiencing profound or severe limitation (ABS 2025).**
- **First Nations people are approximately twice as likely to experience disability compared to other Australians (NIAA 2023; AIHW 2011).**
- **First Nations people with disability experience intersecting discrimination based on age, gender, sexuality, geographic location and cultural background (First Peoples Disability Network 2023).**
- **There is likely underreporting of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability, resulting in people not being counted by the NDIS and receiving supports that they are entitled to (Avery & ABS 2025; Townsend et al 2018).**
- **Cultural models of disability recognise the importance of connection to family, community, culture and Country as essential to wellbeing (NIAA 2023; First Peoples Disability Network 2023).**



First Peoples
Disability Network

Why it matters

The experiences of First Nations people with disability cannot be separated from the ongoing impacts of colonisation, intergenerational trauma and systemic racism (Disability Royal Commission 2023; Australian Government 2025). These ongoing impacts are evident in the over-representation of First Nations people with disability across child protection and criminal justice systems, and in high rates of poverty, unemployment and social exclusion (Disability Royal Commission 2023; Australian Government 2025).

Despite these adversities, First Nations communities demonstrate remarkable strength. Data shows that First Nations people with disability are included in their own communities across social, cultural and community events on average more than other Australians with disability (First Peoples Disability Network 2023). This reflects millennia of cultural practice centred on inclusion, collective care and respect for all capabilities (First Peoples Disability Network 2023).

The legacy of the Stolen Generations continues to rupture connections with family, culture and Country, creating feelings of shame and guilt about disability within some communities (Disability Royal Commission 2023). This historical trauma, combined with systemic barriers in accessing culturally safe services, means many First Nations people with disability and their families face distrust of government systems (Disability Advocacy Network Australia 2024; First Peoples Disability Network 2023).

First Peoples Disability Network (FPDN) advocates that a cultural model of inclusion must guide all policy and service design (NIAA 2023; First Peoples Disability Network 2023; Avery 2018). This model recognises the diversity of First Nations cultures, languages, knowledge systems and beliefs, ensuring that enablers, approaches, services and supports are culturally safe, accessible and disability rights informed (NIAA 2023; First Peoples Disability Network 2023).

Current picture: facts and figures

- In March 2025, 8.1% of National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) participants were First Nations people (about 58,140 people) (NDIS 2025).
- As at 31 December 2022, 42,679 First Nations people were participating in the NDIS, increasing to over 52,000 by 2024 (AIHW 2011; NDIA 2025).
- The most common primary disabilities for First Nations NDIS participants are intellectual disability (30%) and autism (28%) (AIHW 2011).
- 11.6% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have profound or severe disability, up from 8.8% in 2018 (Avery & ABS 2025).
- Increases in profound or severe limitations are driven by rises in psychosocial disability among females (7.1% in 2022, up from 4.1% in 2018) and learning and understanding disabilities among young people aged 15-34 years (6.7% in 2022, up from 1.9% in 2018) (Avery & ABS 2025).
- Seven in ten (70.7%) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability aged five years and over have a schooling or employment restriction (Avery & ABS 2025).
- First Nations people with disability are less likely to be employed (35%) compared to those without disability (56%) (AIHW 2011).
- 46% of First Nations people with disability live in households in the lowest income quintile, compared to 33% without disability (AIHW 2011).
- Over 60% of First Nations NDIS participants in remote and very remote communities are receiving disability supports for the first time (NDIS Review 2023).
- Data gaps persist: population prevalence data for First Nations people with disability is limited, and very remote areas and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are excluded from major surveys like the Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (Avery & ABS 2025; First Peoples Disability Network 2023).

Policy and legal context (Australia)

National

- Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031** is the national policy framework requiring all governments to consider tailored approaches in policies, programs and service systems to address intersectional barriers faced by First Nations people with disability (Health.gov.au 2025; Australian Government 2023, 2024a). The strategy calls for genuine co-design and participation of people with disability in decision-making (Australian Government 2023, 2024a).
- National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).** Provides individualised disability support. In April 2025, the NDIA released the NDIS First Nations Strategy 2025–2030, co-designed with First Nations peoples to ensure the NDIS is accessible, culturally safe and effective (NDIA 2025). The strategy has four focus areas: delivering on the NDIS promise; building capability and relationships; partnering with communities; and improving the evidence base (NDIA 2025). An NDIA Independent Advisory Council First Nations Reference Group was established in 2025 to strengthen strategic advice on policies affecting First Nations people (NDIA 2025; NDIS Independent Advisory Council 2025).
- NDIS Commission.** Regulates quality and safeguards for NDIS services. First Nations participants can lodge complaints about providers and workers through culturally appropriate pathways (NDIS Commission 2022).
- Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA).** Makes it unlawful to discriminate against people with disability in employment, education, access to premises, provision of goods and services, and other areas of public life (Australian Government 2018). The Act applies equally to First Nations people with disability, who can lodge complaints through the Australian Human Rights Commission (Australian Government 2024b).
- Disability Royal Commission (DRC) Final Report (September 2023).** Included 222 recommendations to improve laws, policies and practices (Disability Royal Commission 2023). Volume 9 specifically addressed First Nations people with disability, making 13 specific recommendations including improving NDIS access for First Nations participants, introducing a First Nations Disability Forum, reviewing the Disability Sector Strengthening Plan, developing cultural safety standards, and building the First Nations disability workforce in remote communities (Disability Royal Commission 2023; Australian Government 2025).
- National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2020).** Includes disability as a cross-cutting outcome, recognising the need to incorporate dedicated actions across all socio-economic targets (Closingthegap.gov.au 2024; Australian Government 2025b; DSS 2024). The agreement's four Priority Reforms — shared decision-making, building the community-controlled sector, transforming mainstream institutions, and sharing data — underpin efforts to improve outcomes for First Nations people with disability (Australian Government 2025b; DSS 2024; NIAA 2023).

- Disability Sector Strengthening Plan (2022).** Outlines high-level priorities to build the community-controlled disability sector, including growing the First Nations disability workforce, increasing Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) delivering disability services, and ensuring community-controlled organisations meet accessibility standards (DSS 2024; Closingthegap.gov.au 2022; NIAA 2023).
- Foundational Supports.** Being developed as specific supports outside the NDIS to help people with disability, including general supports (information, capacity building, peer support) and targeted supports for those with extra needs who do not require NDIS support (Health.gov.au 2025; DSS 2024a). Implementation is planned from July 2026, though significant concerns exist about timeline feasibility and ensuring no gaps in support during transition (DSS 2024a).

Jurisdictions

Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria, Western Australia: All jurisdictions have committed to implementing the DRC recommendations and Australia's Disability Strategy through state and territory disability plans and Closing the Gap implementation plans (Australian Government 2025b).



Intersections and risks to watch

Early childhood and family support

First Nations children with disability face heightened vulnerability in early years. The NDIS Review recommended the Thriving Kids initiative, commencing July 2026, to provide a national system of supports for children aged 8 and under with mild to moderate developmental delay and autism (Health.gov.au 2025; DSS 2024a). Early identification and culturally appropriate developmental screening tools like ASQ-TRAK are essential (South Australia Government 2024). First Nations families often face barriers accessing early intervention due to geographic isolation, limited culturally safe services, and distrust of government systems (Disability Advocacy Network Australia 2024; First Peoples Disability Network 2023).

Justice and custody

First Nations people with disability, particularly young people, are grossly over-represented in the criminal justice system (DRC 2022). The DRC described this as a largely hidden national crisis, with the criminalisation of disability occurring through over-policing, disproportionate exposure to poverty, homelessness and family violence (DRC 2022). First Nations children with disability are more vulnerable to care-criminalisation, entering the justice system as a result of behaviour while in out-of-home care (Disability Royal Commission 2022). Solitary confinement in youth detention disproportionately affects First Nations young people with disability (DRC 2022).

Housing and homelessness

Overcrowding, substandard housing and homelessness disproportionately affect First Nations people with disability (Australian Government 2024c; Australian Government 2025b). The Commonwealth committed \$4 billion over 10 years from June 2024 in partnership with the Northern Territory Government and Aboriginal Land Councils to deliver 270 houses each year in remote NT communities, aiming to halve overcrowding (Australian Government 2025b). Housing accessibility for people with disability remains inadequate across jurisdictions (Australian Government 2025b).

Mental health, alcohol and other drugs

Increases in psychosocial disability among First Nations females, 7.1% with profound or severe limitation in 2022 up from 4.1% in 2018, signal growing mental health needs (Avery & ABS 2025). Social and emotional wellbeing frameworks recognise the interconnection of mental health with cultural, spiritual and community factors. The Commonwealth committed \$24.7 million over four years from 2025–26 for First Nations social and emotional wellbeing and mental health responses, including increasing numbers of First Nations psychologists by up to 150 (Australian Government 2025b).

Remote and regional access

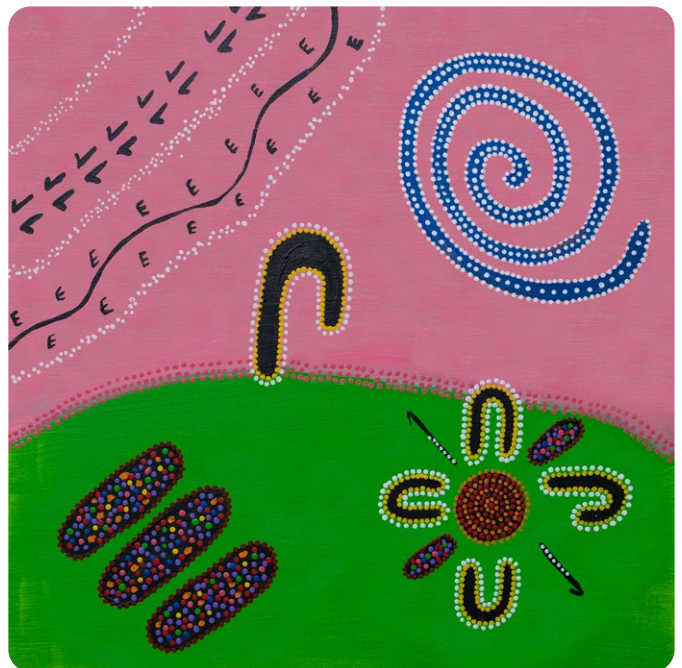
First Nations people in remote and very remote areas face thin markets, limited infrastructure, workforce shortages, high travel costs and inconsistent fly-in fly-out services lacking cultural competence (Disability Advocacy Network Australia 2024; First Peoples Disability Network 2023; NDIS Review 2023). The NDIS Review identified that current market-based models with individualised funding persistently fail to meet needs of remote and First Nations communities (NDIS Review 2023). Alternative commissioning approaches including community-driven models and block funding are being explored to generate more responsive and sustainable supply (NDIS Review 2023).

Digital inclusion

Only 63% of First Nations people have home internet access, creating inequities in accessing NDIS information, telehealth, online services and digital advocacy. The digital divide is particularly pronounced in remote communities.

Cultural safety, accessibility and data gaps

Complex NDIS policies and processes create barriers to access for First Nations people (NDIS Review 2023; Disability Advocacy Network Australia 2024; First Peoples Disability Network 2023). Survey data shows 66.7% of First Nations NDIS participants do not feel culturally safe in NDIS interactions (First Peoples Disability Network 2023). First Nations people with disability often experience racism, lack of cultural awareness from service providers, and services that do not recognise the importance of cultural connection, participation in ceremonies and connection to Country (Disability Advocacy Network Australia 2024; First Peoples Disability Network 2023). Major data gaps exist: very remote areas and discrete communities are excluded from key surveys, population prevalence data is limited, and data disaggregation by both Indigeneity and disability type is insufficient (Avery & ABS 2025; First Peoples Disability Network 2023).



What ACCOs and communities can do now

- **Advocate for community control:** Push for transfer of service delivery and decision-making to Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) (NIAA 2023; DSS 2024; Closingthegap.gov.au 2022). Strengthen the community-controlled disability sector through ACCO involvement in NDIS service provision (NIAA 2023; DSS 2024; Closingthegap.gov.au 2022).
- **Co-design culturally safe programs:** Work in partnership with FPDN, state and territory peaks, and local communities to co-design disability services that embed cultural safety, respect cultural protocols, support connection to Country, and enable participation in cultural activities (NIAA 2023; NDIA 2025; First Peoples Disability Network 2023).
- **Build First Nations disability workforce:** Support development of First Nations disability workers and establish workforce principles that prioritise cultural competence, lived experience and trauma-informed practice (Closingthegap.gov.au 2022; NIAA 2023; First Peoples Disability Network 2023).
- **Utilise cultural assessment tools:** Implement culturally appropriate developmental screening and assessment tools like ASQ-TRAK that support cultural safety (South Australia Government 2024).
- **Strengthen family and kinship care:** For First Nations children with disability in out-of-home care, prioritise placement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kin and ensure cultural support plans maintain connection to family, culture and Country (SNAICC 2024).
- **Advocate for data sovereignty and better data collection:** Demand that data collection on First Nations people with disability is led by First Nations peoples, addresses current gaps, disaggregates by geographic location and disability type, and is used to drive improved outcomes (Australian Government 2025b; DSS 2024; First Peoples Disability Network 2023).
- **Connect with peak bodies and advocacy:** Engage with FPDN (national peak for First Nations people with disability) (NIAA 2023), SNAICC (national voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families), NACCHO (national peak for Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations), Women With Disabilities Australia (WWDA), and state and territory peaks for support, training, resources and collective advocacy.
- **Monitor and evaluate services:** Ensure disability programs are monitored and evaluated using culturally appropriate frameworks that measure not just participation but cultural connection, self-determination and community-defined outcomes (Closingthegap.gov.au 2022).
- **Support NDIS access and navigation:** Provide culturally safe NDIS navigation support to assist First Nations people with disability and families to understand eligibility, prepare access requests, participate in planning meetings, and exercise choice and control (Disability Advocacy Network Australia 2024; First Peoples Disability Network 2023).
- **Advocate for alternative commissioning models:** Alternative commissioning approaches should include block funding, community-driven service models, and provider of last resort schemes tailored to First Nations and remote communities (NDIS Review 2023).

Supports and contacts

First Peoples Disability Network (FPDN):

National peak organisation for First Nations people with disability (NIAA 2023). Provides advocacy, policy advice, training and resources.

www.fpdn.org.au

NDIS and NDIS Commission

- **NDIS general enquiries:**
1800 800 110
- **NDIS Commission complaints:**
1800 035 544 (free call from landlines)
or TTY 133 677 (NDIS Commission 2022)
- **National Relay Service:**
ask for 1800 035 544

Australian Human Rights Commission:

For complaints under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Australian Government 2024b).

Enquiries: 1300 656 419

www.humanrights.gov.au

SNAICC – National Voice for our Children:

National non-government peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families (SNAICC 2025).

www.snaicc.org.au

National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO):

National peak body for Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations.

www.naccho.org.au

Women With Disabilities Australia (WWDA):

National Disabled People's Organisation for women, girls and gender-diverse people with disabilities

www.wwda.org.au

State and territory Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family peaks:

Contact state and territory offices for local support and services, details available through SNAICC (SNAICC 2025).

Disability advocacy organisations: National Disability Advocacy Program organisations provide free, independent advocacy.

Crisis support

Lifeline: 13 11 14

13YARN (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander crisis line):
13 92 76

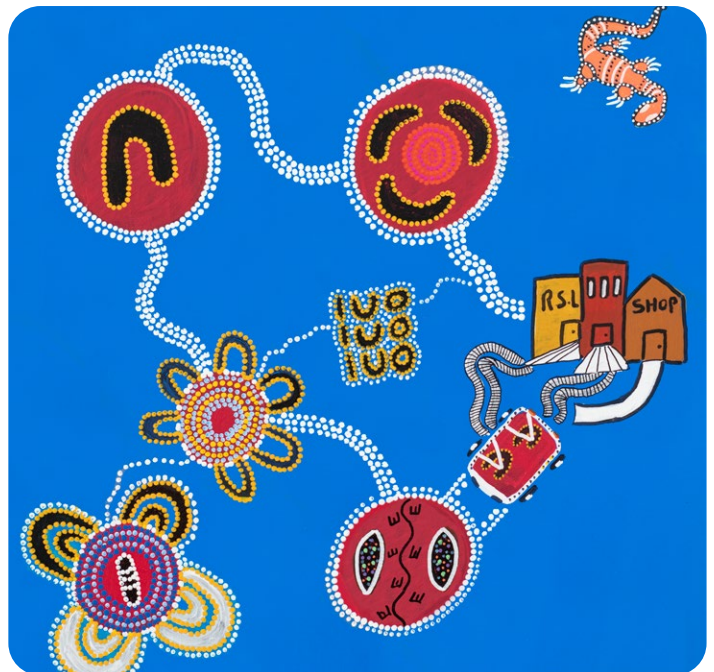
Emergency services: 000

Know Your Rights

- **Right to non-discrimination:** The Disability Discrimination Act 1992 protects First Nations people with disability from discrimination in employment, education, accessing services, accommodation and other areas of public life (Australian Government 2018).
- **Right to complain:** You can lodge complaints about NDIS providers and workers with the NDIS Commission (1800 035 544), or complaints about broader disability discrimination with the Australian Human Rights Commission (NDIS Commission 2022; Australian Government 2024b).
- **Right to culturally safe services:** NDIS providers must follow the NDIS Code of Conduct, which includes acting with respect for individual rights and providing culturally safe services. The NDIS First Nations Strategy 2025–2030 commits to improving cultural safety (NDIA 2025).
- **Right to participate in decisions:** Under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap Priority Reforms, First Nations people with disability have the right to shared decision-making in policies and programs that affect them (Closingthegap.gov.au 2024; Australian Government 2025b).

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