Acknowledging the lived experience of Aboriginal employees

Data and insights to help improve the experience for Aboriginal employees in the public sector.

Victorian Public Sector Commission

VICTORIA State Government

Acknowledgment of Country

The Victorian Public Sector Commission acknowledges Aboriginal people as the Traditional Custodians of the land of Victoria and acknowledges and pays respect to their Elders, past and present.

Contents

Language statement

We recognise the diversity of Aboriginal people living throughout Victoria, including First Nations languages and dialects spoken today. We have used the term Aboriginal to refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

In presenting these findings, we'd like to thank the Aboriginal people who shared their experiences and ideas with us in such an open and honest way. Unless stated otherwise, we've used deidentified quotes from our focus group interviews.

Our responsibility in the public sector

Aboriginal employees bring unique knowledge, skills and expertise to the workforce and particular insights into the needs and aspirations of the Aboriginal community. Public sector organisations deliver better services because they have Aboriginal employees.

The Victorian public sector wants to stay an employer of choice, and a focus on improving the wellbeing of all employees is at the centre of this.

To retain and attract Aboriginal employees, the Victorian public sector needs a dedicated focus on improving workplace and wellbeing outcomes for them.

This is essential to delivering both a productive and happy workplace and the outcomes we're seeking for Aboriginal Victorians.

Data and insights we've used

This research combines:

- People matter survey data

- Focus group insights of Aboriginal executives, managers and employees from 14 different public sector organisations on a range of workplace issues.

With this research, we want to better understand Aboriginal people's workplace experiences and start conversations in the public sector that lead to better outcomes.

These issues can be uncomfortable to discuss, but meaningful change and progress start with the truth.

First Peoples in Australia have been calling for a truth-telling process for generations. The Yoorrook Justice Commission was established in 2021 in response to this call.

" Without truth, there can be no Treaty "

  – the Yoorrook Justice
    Commission

This research points to a need to listen more to our Aboriginal employees and act on what they're saying.

Unless otherwise stated, the data we've included represents the 87,178 Victorian public sector employees who voluntarily responded to the People matter survey 2022. About 1.04% of those respondents identified as Aboriginal.

For some charts, we can't show People matter survey data from 2020. This is because some organisations couldn't take part as they were responding to the coronavirus pandemic. Therefore, the 2020 data isn't a true representation of the public sector.

All our data combines:

- agree and strongly agree answers under the label 'agree'

- disagree and strongly disagree answers under the label 'disagree'.

This work also supports the goals, objectives, measures and self-determination guiding principles and actions in the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework (VAAF) 2018-2023.

Impacts of cultural load

One of the strongest themes that came up in our research was how Aboriginal employees experience and manage cultural load.

Cultural load is the extra and often invisible Aboriginal-related workload that non-Aboriginal employees don't have.

Some common examples of cultural load include:

- requests or expectations to educate non-Aboriginal colleagues about Aboriginal history and practices

- being asked to review and approve culturally sensitive material

- caring for family and community members

- attending funerals or 'sorry business'

- living and working off country

- sitting on advisory councils and boards

- racism

- tokenism

- lateral violence.

A lack of understanding of Aboriginal history and cultural practices makes cultural load hard to recognise and manage. We know that Aboriginal employees experience more discrimination in the public sector. It's one of the many reasons people don't speak up if they're struggling with cultural load.

The Gari Yala (Speak the Truth) report is a national report based on a survey 1,033 Aboriginal workers completed across Australia. The survey found that:

- 39% carry the burden of high cultural load, which comes in the form of extra work demands and the expectation to educate others

- 28% work in culturally unsafe workplaces.

Public sector organisations need to educate their employees and create environments and policies that make Aboriginal employees feel safe, supported and respected.

Managers need to be able to recognise cultural load and make an offer of support. They need to create a safe place where employees can call out their cultural load and articulate what support the manager can provide.

If cultural load isn't managed, Aboriginal people may feel pressured to make decisions and compromises that negatively impact their wellbeing – or they may choose to leave the public sector.

" Talking about and explaining cultural load can be tough. You feel like you come across as too emotional or sensitive when people don't understand or know how to help you.

There's not enough knowledge and awareness about it.

At work we're encouraged to have 'courageous conversations' but sometimes I get asked about things that are sensitive or have cultural significance because I'm Aboriginal. I don't want to speak for others. "

Aboriginal employees may experience different types of cultural load depending on the role they have and where they work.

The Commission needs to do more research in this space to understand this across different industries.

However, we have some data on the impacts of cultural load in community-facing roles.

" Aboriginal people in the community reach out to me personally because of the position I'm in. I feel accountable and it can be really hard.

Dealing with Aboriginal mob and working in a system that makes decisions that often oppress them is really difficult.

A lot of us take on community-facing roles so we can make a difference. But sometimes I feel like nothing changes and I have the same conversations over and over again.

It's discouraging. "

Aboriginal respondents in community-facing roles like nursing are more likely to experience negative behaviours.

For example, comparing all Aboriginal respondents to Aboriginal respondents who work in nursing:

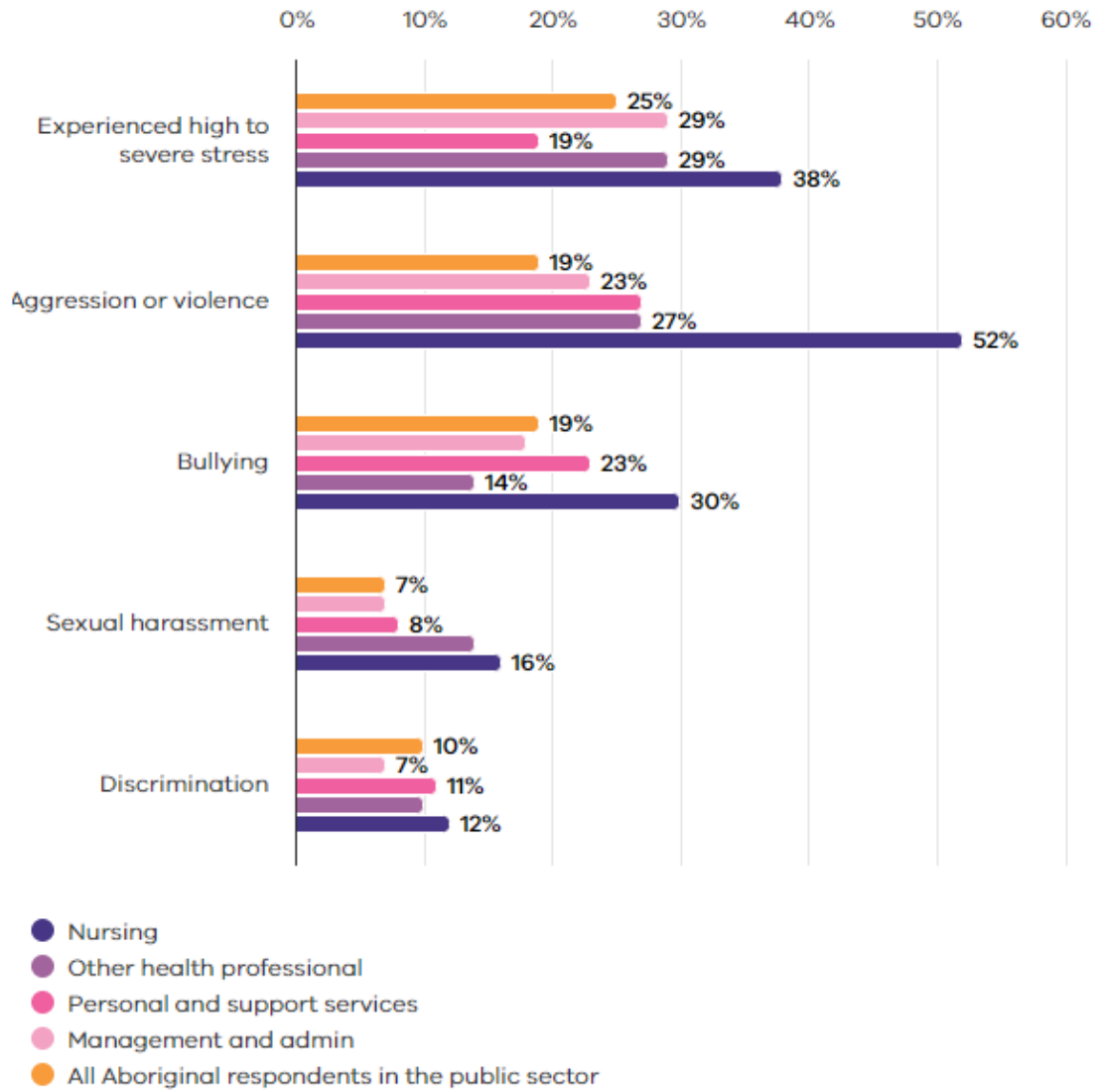- 19% vs 52% experience aggression or violence

- 25% vs 38% experience high or severe stress

- 7% vs 16% experience sexual harassment.

The Department of Health provides guidance for Victorian health services employers to help address occupational health and safety concerns.

The department is also working to eliminate bullying and harassment and occupational violence and aggression through a range of initiatives.

Negative behaviours and stress

Aboriginal respondents who work in health

Chart showing percentages for negative behaviours and stress by role category:

Experienced high to severe stress
- All Aboriginal respondents in the public sector: 25%
- Management and admin: 29%
- Personal and support services: 19%
- Other health professional: 29%
- Nursing: 38%

Aggression or violence
- All Aboriginal respondents in the public sector: 19%
- Management and admin: 23%
- Other health professional: 27%
- Nursing: 52%

Bullying
- All Aboriginal respondents in the public sector: 19%
- Personal and support services: 23%
- Other health professional: 14%
- Nursing: 30%

Sexual harassment
- All Aboriginal respondents in the public sector: 7%
- Personal and support services: 8%
- Nursing: 16%

Discrimination
- All Aboriginal respondents in the public sector: 10%
- Management and admin: 7%
- Personal and support services: 11%
- Nursing: 12%

Legend:
- Nursing
- Other health professional
- Personal and support services
- Management and admin
- All Aboriginal respondents in the public sector

Tokenism and lateral violence as cultural load

Tokenism and lateral violence are forms of cultural load but are distinct concepts. They can interact with one another and contribute to broader negative impacts on Aboriginal wellbeing.

Tokenism

Tokenism is a symbolic act to include people of minority groups that gives the impression of inclusiveness or workforce diversity that isn't meaningful.

Organisations may make tokenistic gestures believing it will offset criticism or project an image they treat employees fairly. This can look like they're simply ticking a box or managing a quota.

For example, it's tokenism if you:

- ask Aboriginal employees to give an Acknowledgment of Country at every meeting, but not non-Aboriginal employees

- ask only Aboriginal employees or teams to plan events during Reconciliation week, instead of also asking non-Aboriginal employees to work on them

- put Aboriginal flags in website footers or in e-signatures but don't pay for employees to do cultural capability training

- have one Aboriginal employee be the voice for all Aboriginal employees in their organisation, instead of consulting with a range of Aboriginal stakeholders.

These acts can be well-meaning but don't lead to the structural changes organisations need to make to improve their workplace.

Aboriginal people can feel tokenised when their value comes from their cultural knowledge or their image and not from the genuine skills or experience they bring.

Because Aboriginal employees make up a small percentage of the public sector workforce, they can often be the only Aboriginal person on their team or one of a small group.

In our research, many Aboriginal employees said this made them feel like the voice for all Aboriginal people or they're only asked for their opinion because they're Aboriginal.

Being tokenised adds pressure and can feel isolating for Aboriginal employees.

" Just because I'm Aboriginal doesn't mean I know all the answers. I was hired to do a job, and I often get asked to do things that have nothing to do with the role I was hired to do and everything to do with who I am.

Sometimes I feel like the token Aboriginal at work, and I have to be a good representative of all Aboriginal people. "

Lateral violence

Lateral violence is a term used to describe acts of aggression between people within the same marginalised community. It can be a form of bullying like gossip, shaming and blaming, backstabbing and attempts to socially isolate others.

In a presentation to the Human Rights Commission, Frankland and Lewis describe lateral violence as "the organised, harmful behaviours that we do to each other collectively as part of an oppressed group: within our families; within our organisations and; within our communities. When we are consistently oppressed we live with great fear and great anger and we often turn on those who are closest to us"

The Human Rights Commission also says "the theory behind lateral violence explains that this behaviour is often the result of disadvantage, discrimination and oppression and that it arises from working within a society that is not designed for our way of doing things."

Aboriginal employees in community-facing roles may experience more incidents of lateral violence and this can add to their cultural load.

Public sector employees and managers need to understand issues like cultural load, tokenism and lateral violence and the contributing factors. Only then can we work toward solutions.

Racism, discrimination and disrespect

Some Aboriginal employees encounter frequent racism, discrimination and disrespect from co-workers, external clients and stakeholders.

This includes:

- casual to overt racism

- prejudice about Aboriginal people and their work practices

- physical assault

- derogatory name-calling

- unfair treatment and denial of opportunity based on race.

Our data shows that most negative behaviours have been in decline since 2016. But bullying and discrimination are much higher for Aboriginal employees.
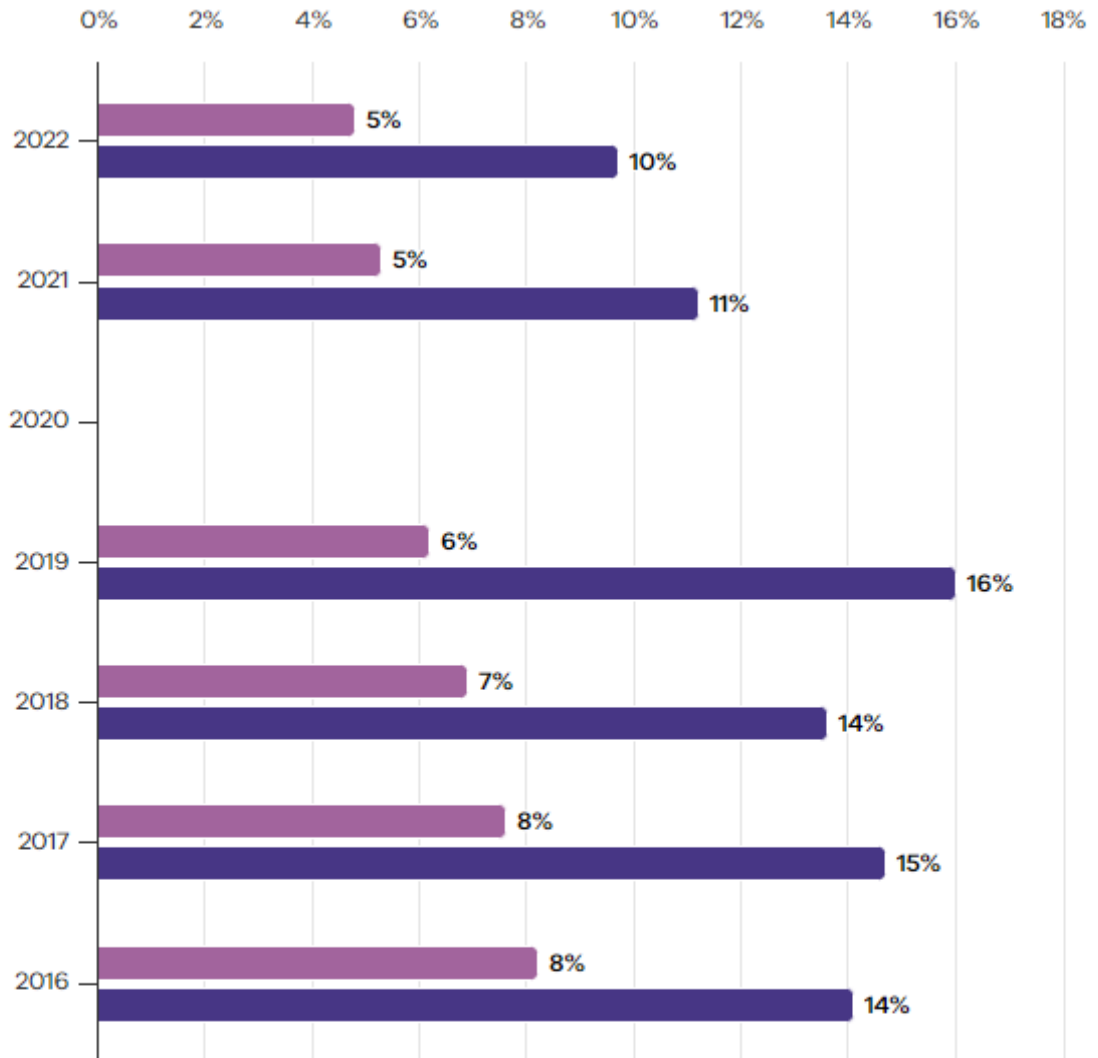
Negative behaviours over time

Respondents who experienced bullying
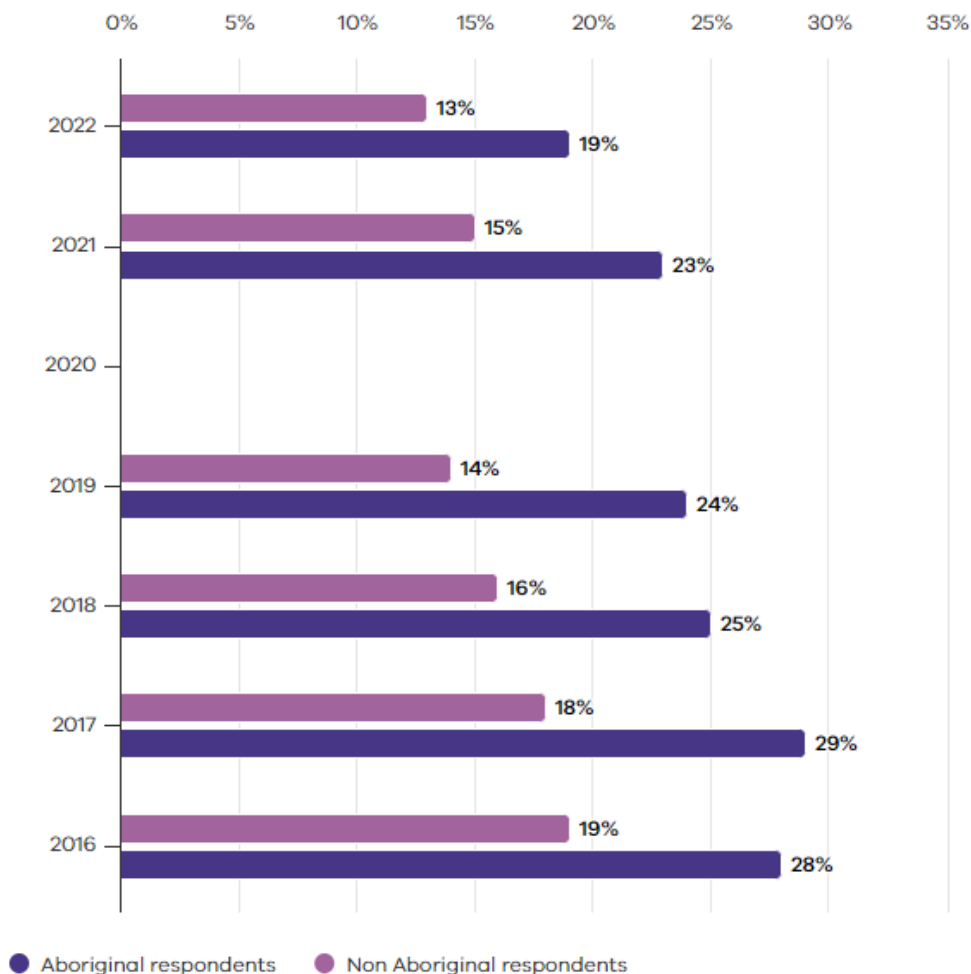
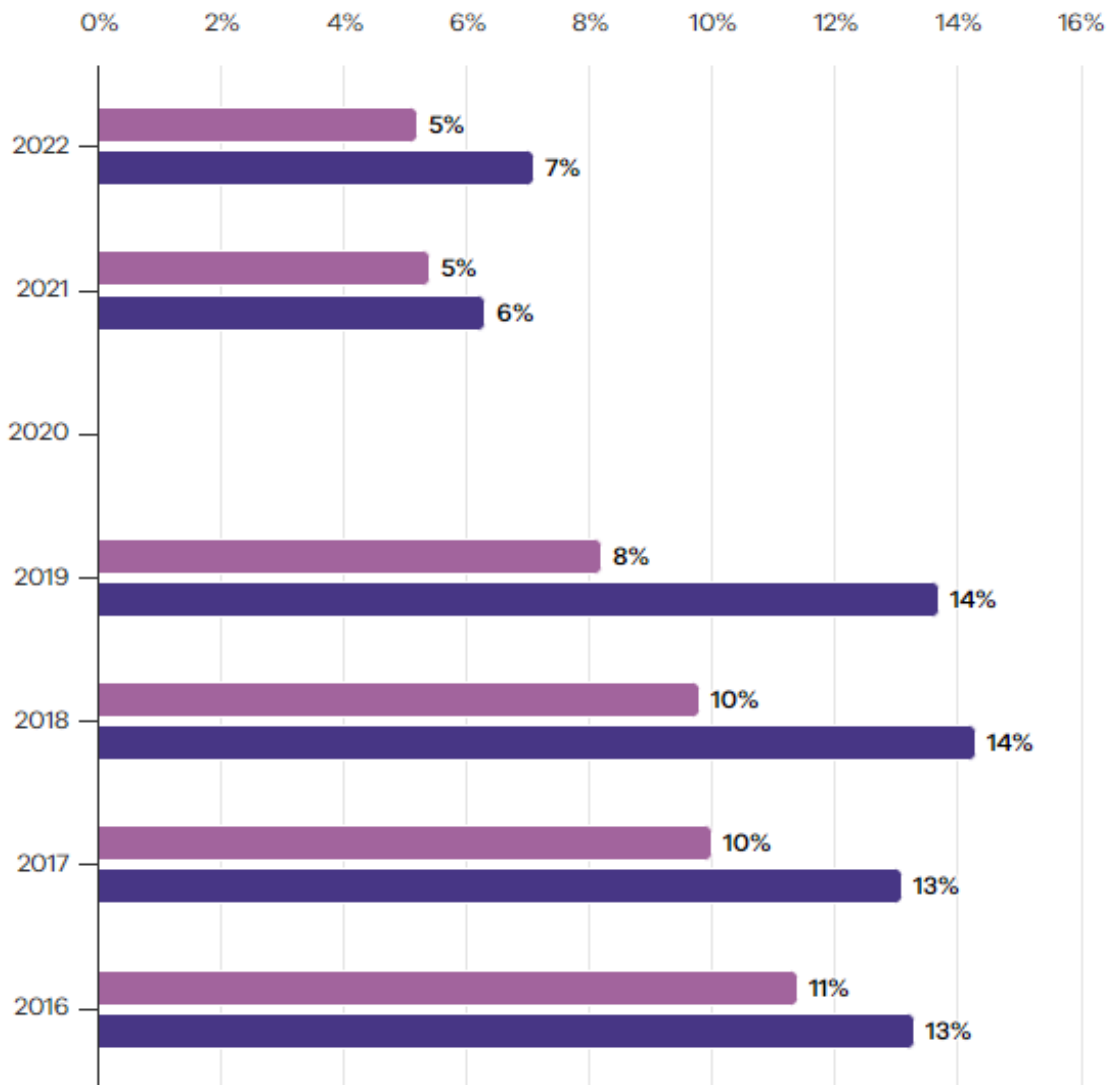| Year	Aboriginal respondents	Non Aboriginal respondents
2022	19%	13%
2021	23%	15%
2020		
2019	24%	14%
2018	25%	16%
2017	29%	18%
2016	28%	19%

● Aboriginal respondents ● Non Aboriginal respondents

Negative behaviours over time

Respondents who experienced discrimination

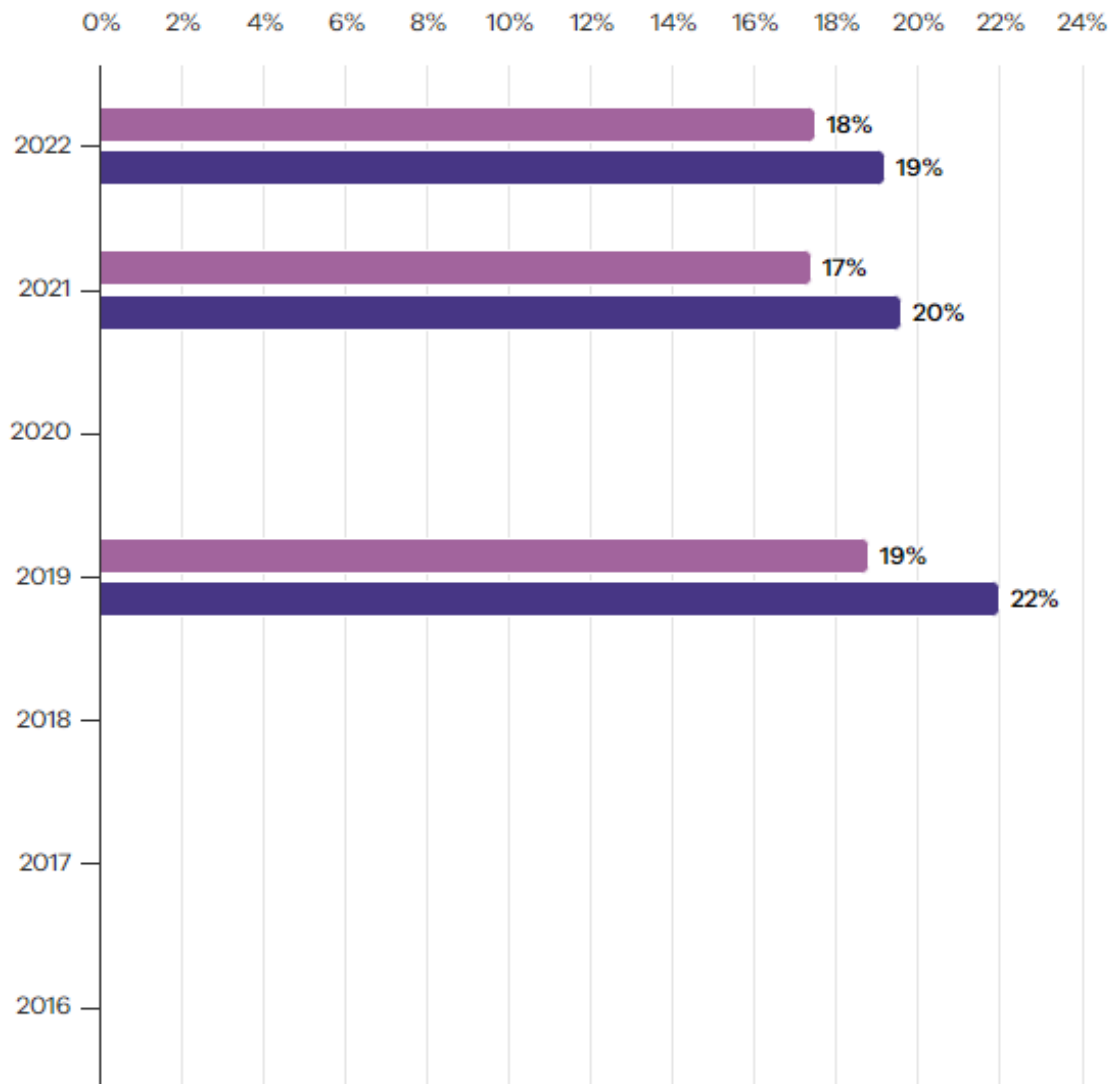| Year	Aboriginal respondents	Non Aboriginal respondents
2022	10%	5%
2021	11%	5%
2020		
2019	16%	6%
2018	14%	7%
2017	15%	8%
2016	14%	8%

● Aboriginal respondents   ● Non Aboriginal respondents

Negative behaviours over time

Respondents who experienced sexual harassment

Year	Aboriginal respondents	Non Aboriginal respondents
2022	7%	5%
2021	6%	5%
2020		
2019	14%	8%
2018	14%	10%
2017	13%	10%
2016	13%	11%

● Aboriginal respondents   ● Non Aboriginal respondents

Negative behaviours over time

Respondents who experienced aggression or violence

Chart showing percentage of respondents who experienced aggression or violence by year:

Year	Aboriginal respondents	Non Aboriginal respondents
2022	19%	18%
2021	20%	17%
2020	—	—
2019	22%	19%
2018	—	—
2017	—	—
2016	—	—

● Aboriginal respondents   ● Non Aboriginal respondents

In 2022, 10% of Aboriginal employees said they experienced discrimination at work in the last 12 months.

Of those who said they experienced discrimination, 39.8% said it was based on race.

" Most of us have experienced discrimination and heard stereotypical comments.

Some Aboriginal people are afraid to identify as Aboriginal. It feels like you'll be put in a box. "

Our data aligns with other national studies. The Gari Yala (Speak the truth) report revealed:

- 63% experienced high identity strain – when someone doesn't feel like their identity matches the norms and expectations of their workgroup or organisation

- 44% heard racial slurs

- 38% reported being treated unfairly because of their Indigenous background

- 59% experienced appearance racism – receiving comments about the way they look or 'should' look as an Aboriginal.

Intentional and unintentional negative comments and remarks can damage the mental and physical health of Aboriginal people.

For example, negative comments about Aboriginal people only getting a job because of their identity can lead to feelings of self-doubt and shame. The consequence of this can be missed opportunities for Aboriginal employees.

The report also found that racism impacts wellbeing and job satisfaction. Compared to those who didn't experience racism, Aboriginal employees who did were:

- 5 times less likely to be satisfied with their job

- 3 times less likely to always recommend their workplace to other Aboriginal people

- 2 times as likely to be looking for a new employer in the new year.

Cultural and ceremonial leave entitlements

Remarks or gossip about Aboriginal employees leaving early or having flexible work hours, field visits or taking cultural and ceremonial leave is a form of racism.

This may stem from cultural insensitivity or ignorance. Transparency, education and cultural awareness may help address this.

The Victorian Public Service Enterprise Agreement 2020 gives Aboriginal employees paid leave for:

- a day during NAIDOC Week

- Aboriginal community meetings

- Annual General Meetings of Aboriginal community obligations

- ceremonial purposes

- participation in the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria.

As non-Aboriginal employees may not be aware of these entitlements, Aboriginal employees end up having to advocate and educate their managers.

" Asking for and having to educate my managers about my cultural leave entitlements is awkward and makes me feel like I'm asking for special treatment. "

To improve this, organisations can look at ways to better educate their employees and managers on these entitlements.

For example, mention all entitlements and Aboriginal days of significance in your induction materials. Or make this information mandatory for all managers to share with their employees – the same way they would share occupational health and safety information.

Intersectionality and negative outcomes

Intersectionality refers to the way different aspects of a person's identity can expose them to overlapping forms of discrimination and marginalisation.

The Commission has limited research on the impacts of intersectionality. More research needs to be done to better understand and improve outcomes for people with overlapping characteristics in the public sector.

What we do know

Since 2016, the rates of negative behaviour have gone down. But Aboriginal respondents who identify as women, as carers and as LGBTIQ+ experience higher rates overall.
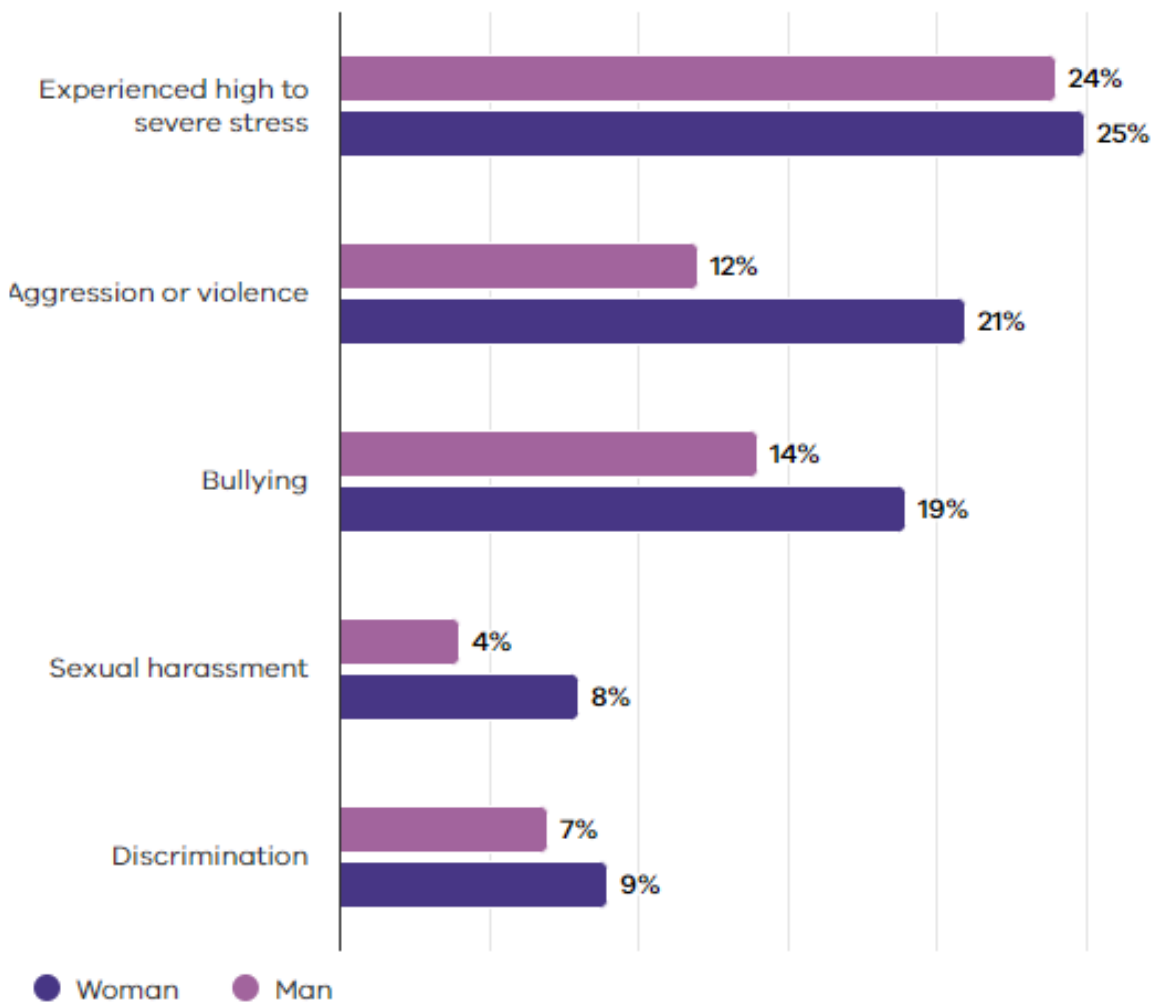
For respondents who identify as Aboriginal women compared to Aboriginal men:

- 21% of women vs 12% of men experience aggression or violence

- 19% of women vs 14% of men experience bullying

- 8% of women vs 4% of men experience sexual harrassment

- 61% of women vs 64% of men feel their organisation is psychologically and physically safe.

Negative behaviours

Aboriginal respondents by gender

Behaviour	Woman	Man
Experienced high to severe stress	25%	24%
Aggression or violence	21%	12%
Bullying	19%	14%
Sexual harassment	8%	4%
Discrimination	9%	7%

● Woman ● Man

The Gari Yala (Speak the Truth) report on gender and Aboriginal identity issues in the Australian workplace found Aboriginal women:

- had significantly less support in culturally unsafe situations

- had the highest cultural load overall

- had the highest cultural load in leadership and management roles

- had the lowest levels of support in junior roles

- with caring responsibilities are particularly vulnerable in the workplace.

Caring responsibilities are an important additional intersection to consider when addressing issues of gender and Aboriginal identity in the workplace.

The Gari Yala report refers to this as The Triple Jeopardy Effect: Indigenous, woman, carer.
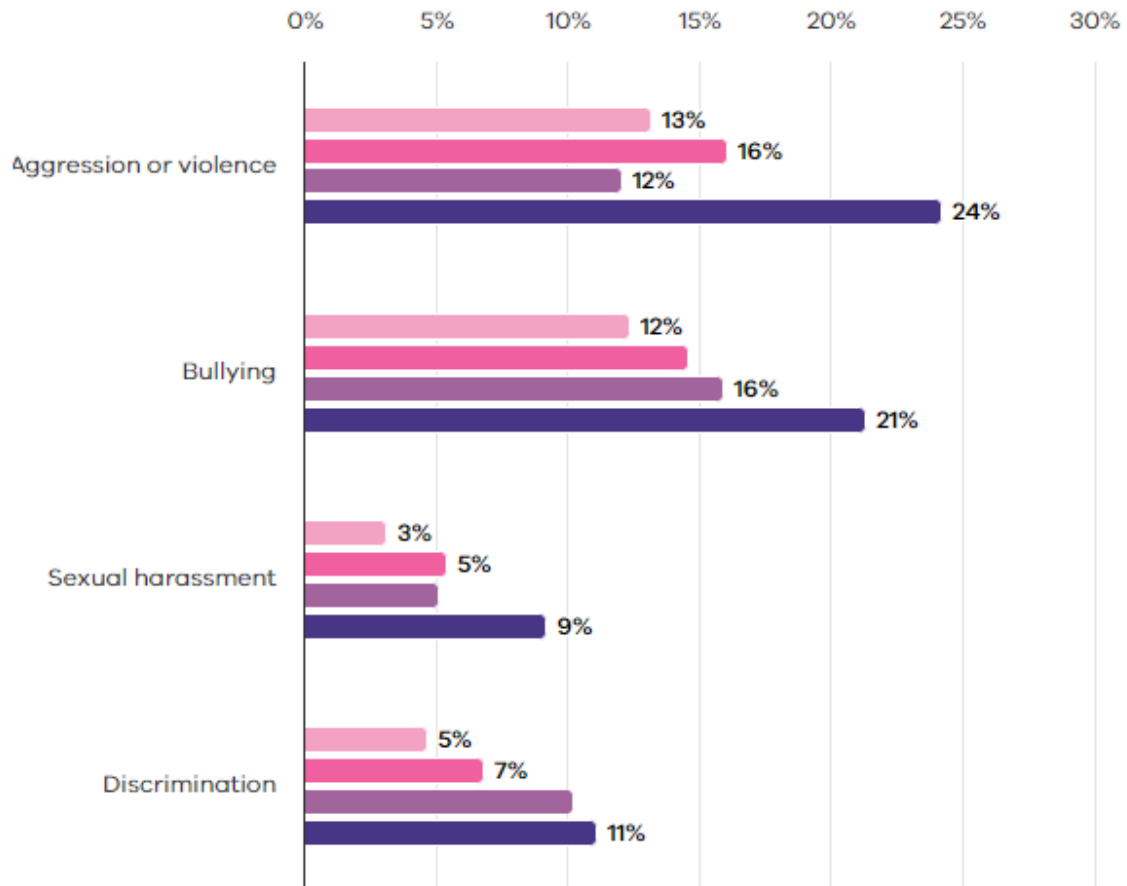
The Commission has limited research on the reasons why this intersection exists and what's driving these differences in the workplace.

Aboriginal women report higher rates of sexual harassment, bullying and violence and aggression at work compared to Aboriginal men despite having caring responsibilities or not. But Aboriginal women with caring responsibilities report higher rates of negative behaviour overall.

Aboriginal men with caring responsibilities report higher rates of negative behaviour compared to Aboriginal men without caring responsibilities.

Negative behaviours experienced by carers

Aboriginal respondents by gender

Chart showing percentages across 0% to 30%:

Aggression or violence
- Men who are not carers: 13%
- Women who are not carers: 16%
- Men who are carers: 12%
- Women who are carers: 24%

Bullying
- Men who are not carers: 12%
- Women who are not carers: 14%
- Men who are carers: 16%
- Women who are carers: 21%

Sexual harassment
- Men who are not carers: 3%
- Women who are not carers: 5%
- Men who are carers: 5%
- Women who are carers: 9%

Discrimination
- Men who are not carers: 5%
- Women who are not carers: 7%
- Men who are carers: 10%
- Women who are carers: 11%

Legend:
- Women who are carers
- Women who are not carers
- Men who are carers
- Men who are not carers

And of the Aboriginal respondents who identify as LGBTIQ+ vs non-LGBTIQ+ Aboriginal respondents, our data shows:

- 30% vs 17% of non-LGBTIQ+ Aboriginal respondents experience aggression or violence

- 32% vs 24% of non-LGBTIQ+ Aboriginal respondents experience high-to-severe stress

- 15% vs 13% of non-LGBTIQ+ Aboriginal respondents intend to leave their organisation in the next year.

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Negative behaviours and stress

Aboriginal respondents who identify as LGBTIQ+

Category	LGBTIQ+	Non-LGBTIQ+
Experienced high to severe stress	32%	24%
Aggression or violence	30%	17%
Bullying	20%	19%
Sexual harassment	18%	5%
Discrimination	16%	9%

● Aboriginal respondents who identify as LGBTIQ+
● Aboriginal respondents who do not identify as LGBTIQ+
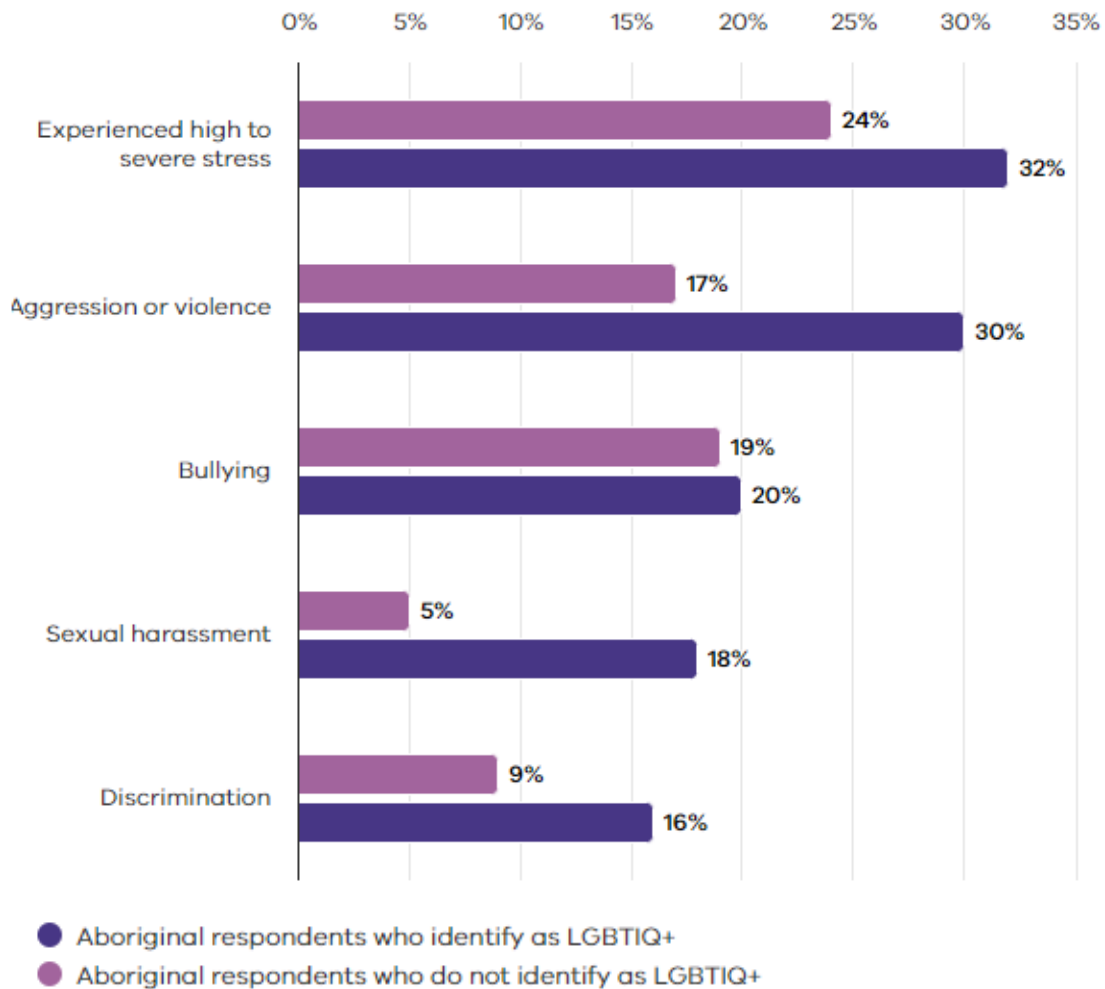
Not feeling safe to speak up

We define feeling safe to speak up as feeling safe to raise mistakes, concerns and poor behaviour without fear of retribution.

The People matter survey 2022 tells us that of the employees who identified as Aboriginal, 15% don't feel safe to speak up at work. This number could be higher noting some employees won't identify as Aboriginal in the survey due to perceptions about anonymity and privacy.

Our data shows:

- 73% of Aboriginal vs 86% of non-Aboriginal respondents agreed with the statement 'I feel culturally safe at work'

- 70% of Aboriginal vs 72% of non-Aboriginal respondents agreed with the statement 'People in my workgroup are able to bring up problems and tough issues'.

" I naturally think differently as an Aboriginal person, and I feel like my ideas are often dismissed

Everyone has a different capacity to share, particularly negative experiences. Asking Aboriginal people to share is scary, especially when we don't feel safe.

I'm afraid to rock the boat too much and lose my job.

Some have the ability to speak up, but might not feel heard or that change is being made. "

The results in the graph combine agree and strongly agree answers to each statement.

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Factors that make people feel safe to speak up

Per cent of Aboriginal respondents who agreed

Non Aboriginal respondents
- 86%
- 70%
- 72%

Aboriginal respondents
- 73%
- 69%
- 70%
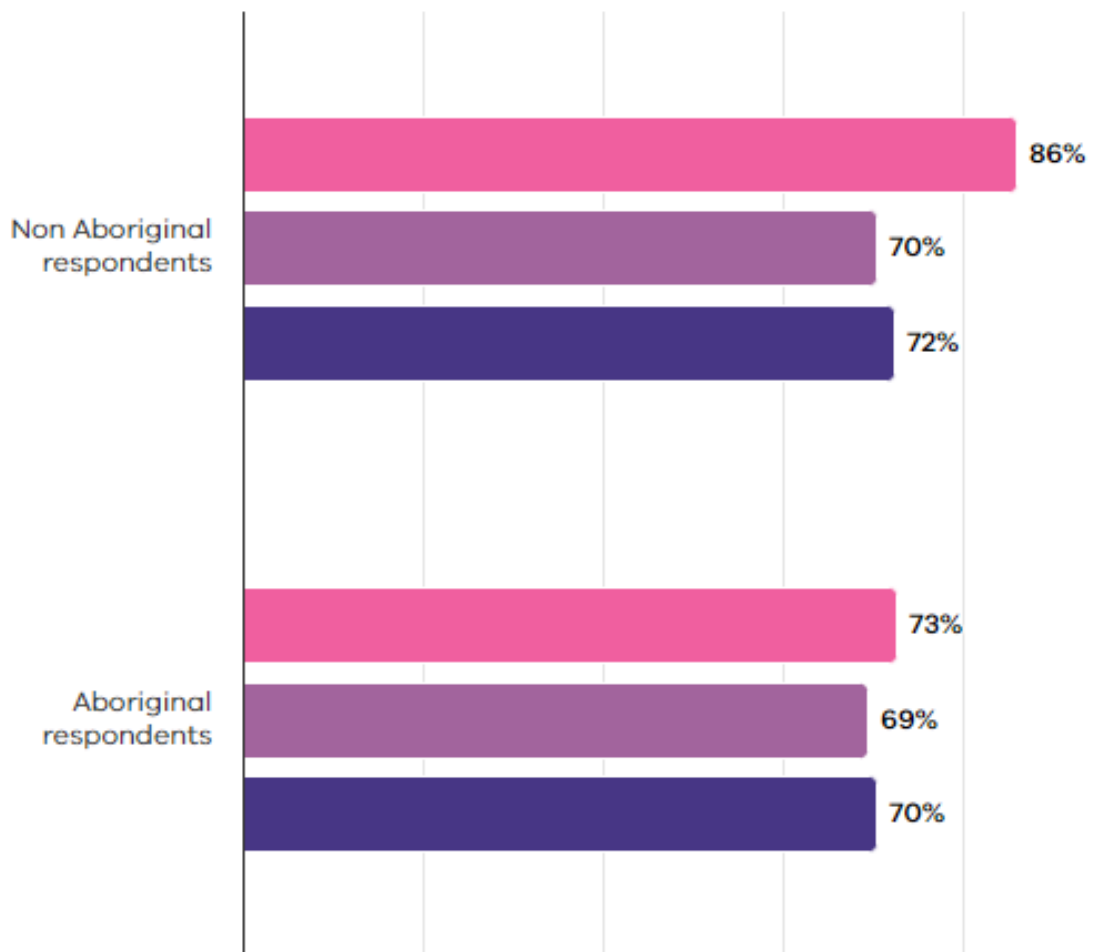
● People in my workgroup are able to bring up problems and tough issues
● I feel safe to challenge inappropriate behaviour at work
● I feel culturally safe at work

Aboriginal employees may experience shame or embarrassment when asked to share personal information or talk about personal achievements.

Fear and shame are alarming. The feeling of shame may overwhelm and disempower Aboriginal employees.

To help address this, public sector organisations can look at how to improve trust, safety and transparency for all employees.

Those who do feel safe to speak up told us:

" Talking about difficult things and providing clear cultural advice can directly affect policy and system changes.

I see my role as creating positive change for those around me. I am happy to raise issues if it makes a difference for others.

Deep down it feels like we are clutching at straws by filling out surveys. I still feel a responsibility to champion and speak up for others. "

Recruitment, career development and retention

Aboriginal employees bring unique knowledge, skills and expertise to the workforce that help enrich the lives of the Victorian community.

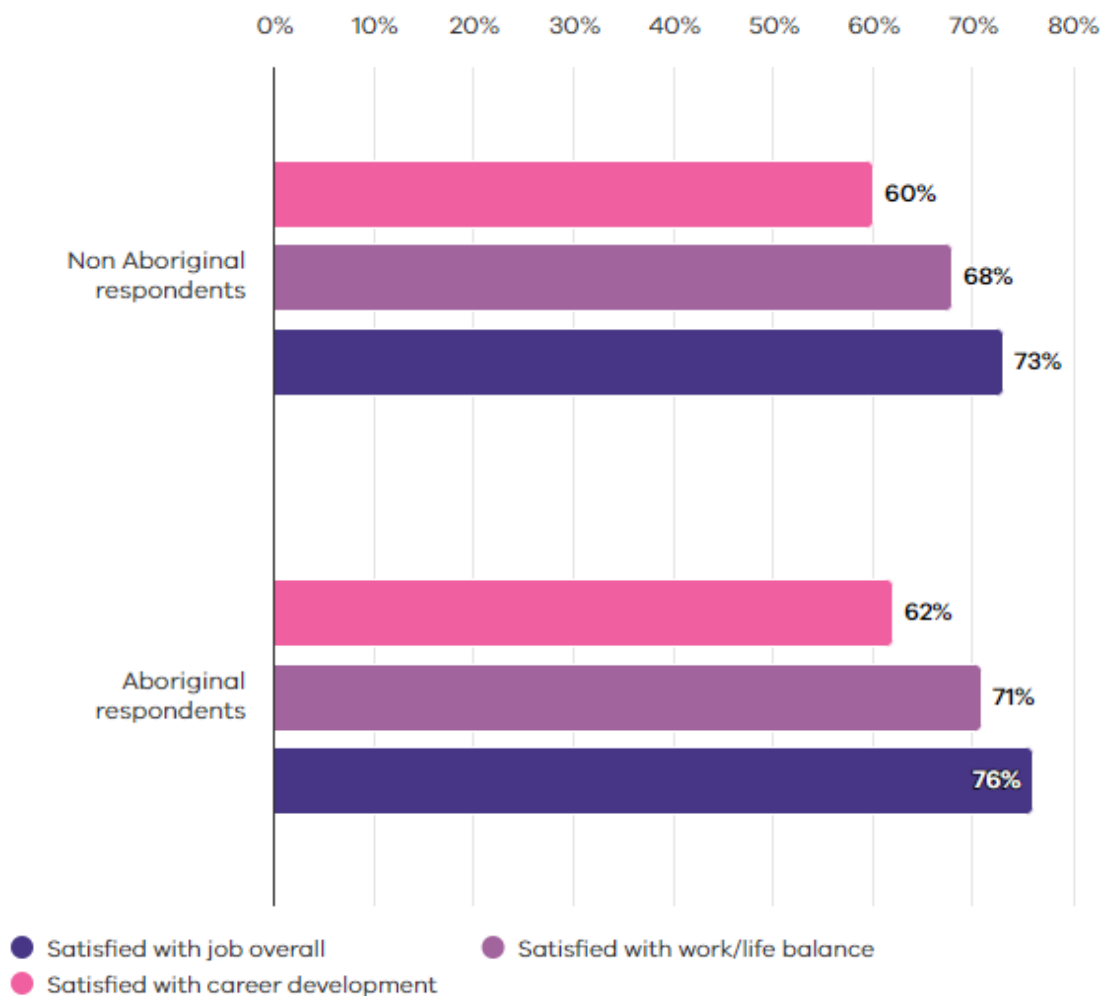Our data shows Aboriginal respondents are more likely to:

- be satisfied with their job overall

- be satisfied with their career development

- report their work made them feel happy and enthusiastic.

But Aboriginal employees report higher levels of stress.

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Impacts of the workplace

Per cent of Aboriginal respondents who agree

Non Aboriginal respondents
- 60%
- 68%
- 73%

Aboriginal respondents
- 62%
- 71%
- 76%

● Satisfied with job overall
● Satisfied with career development
● Satisfied with work/life balance

Aboriginal employment strategies like Barring Djinang help strengthen Aboriginal leadership and develop future leaders. This is a foundation for the advancement of self-determination.

To support Aboriginal leadership, organisations could explore targeted employment and career development programs.

Aboriginal employment characteristics

Understanding how and where people work helps organisations target their efforts and create policies to help us attract, retain and develop our people.
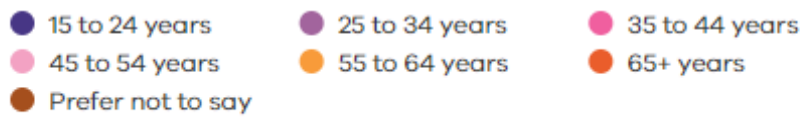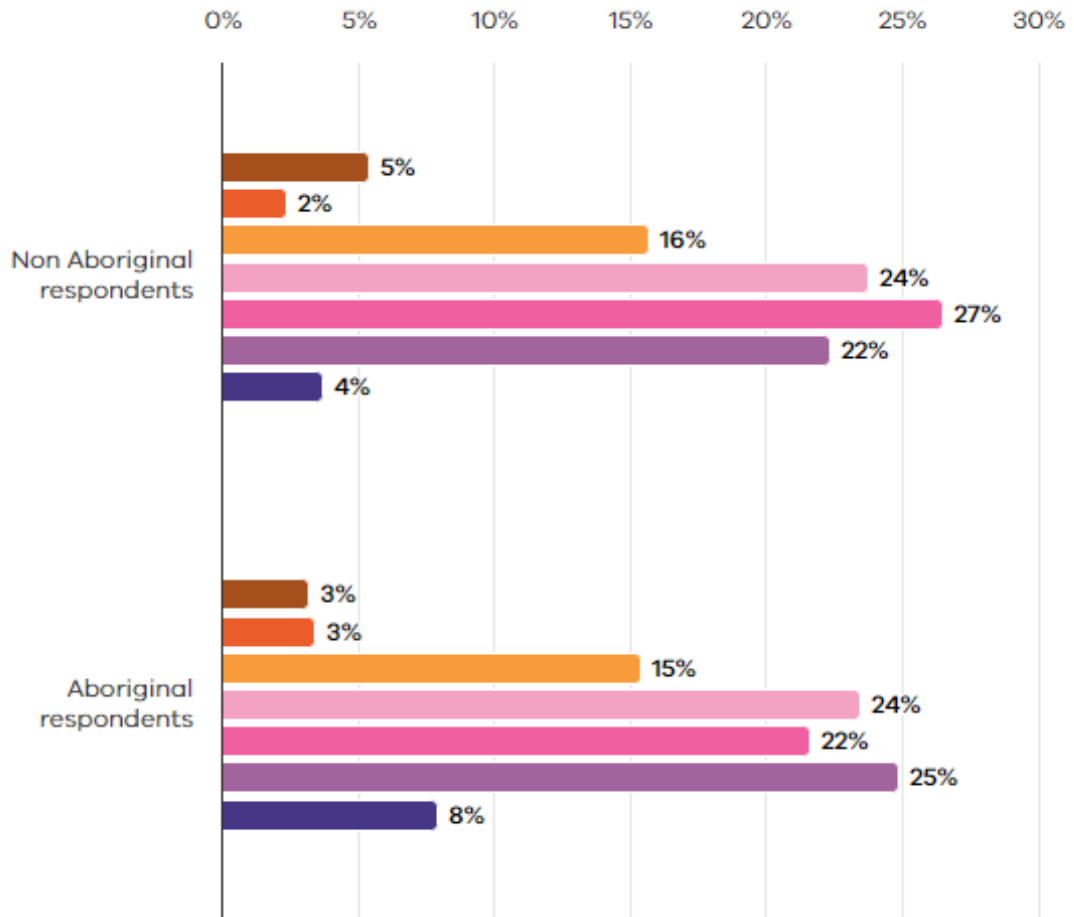
For Aboriginal respondents, the average length of employment in their current organisation was generally shorter.

Our data shows:

- 69% of Aboriginal vs 63% of non-Aboriginal respondents work full-time

- 53.2% of Aboriginal vs 36.1% of non-Aboriginal respondents work in regional and rural Victoria

- 7.9% of Aboriginal vs 3.7% of non-Aboriginal respondents are under 24 years of age

- 20.6% of Aboriginal vs 10.9% of non-Aboriginal respondents earn less than $55,000

- 19.9% of Aboriginal vs 24.2% of non-Aboriginal respondents have management responsibilities

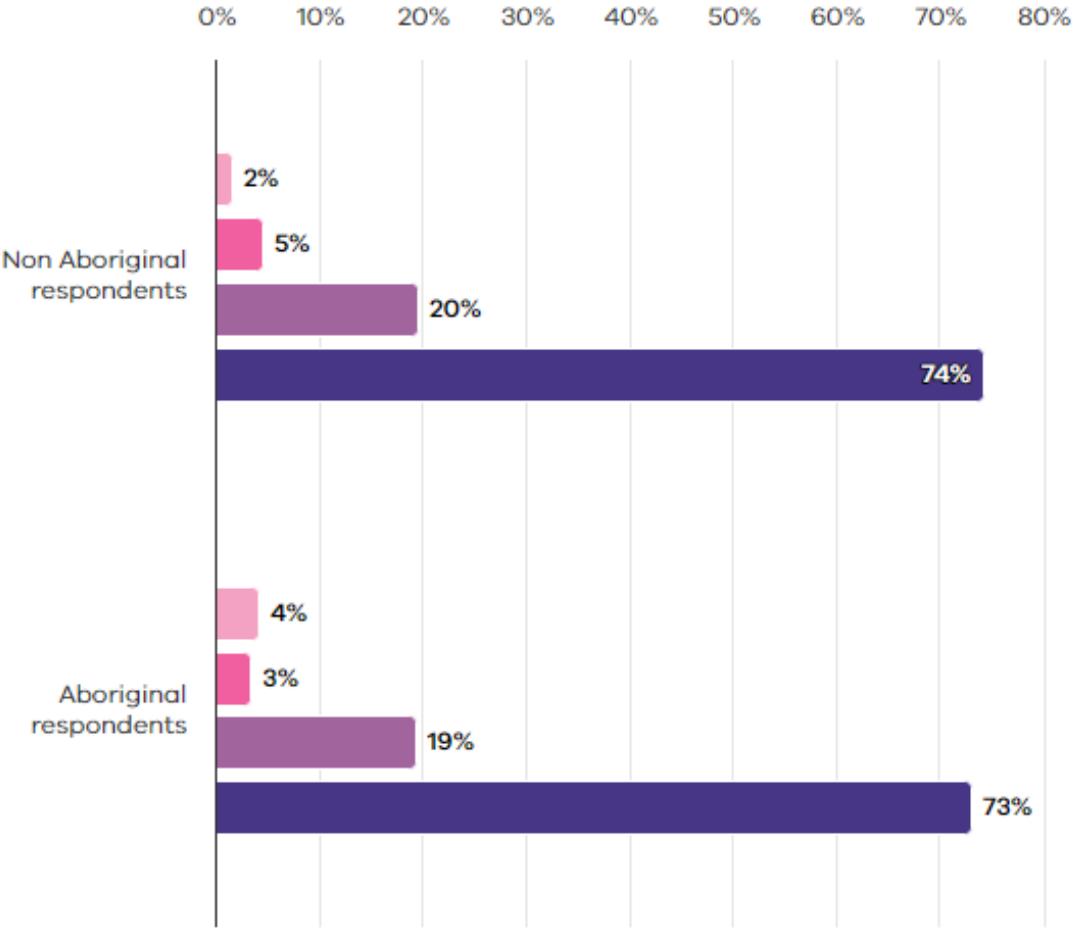- 7.4% of Aboriginal vs 13.9% of non-Aboriginal respondents earn more than $135,000

Demographic and employment characteristics

Age

Non Aboriginal respondents
- Prefer not to say: 5%
- 65+ years: 2%
- 55 to 64 years: 16%
- 45 to 54 years: 24%
- 35 to 44 years: 27%
- 25 to 34 years: 22%
- 15 to 24 years: 4%

Aboriginal respondents
- Prefer not to say: 3%
- 65+ years: 3%
- 55 to 64 years: 15%
- 45 to 54 years: 24%
- 35 to 44 years: 22%
- 25 to 34 years: 25%
- 15 to 24 years: 8%

Legend:
- 15 to 24 years
- 25 to 34 years
- 35 to 44 years
- 45 to 54 years
- 55 to 64 years
- 65+ years
- Prefer not to say

Demographic and employment characteristics

Contract type

Non Aboriginal respondents
- Don't know: 2%
- Casual or sessional: 5%
- Fixed term: 20%
- Ongoing (excluding executives): 74%

Aboriginal respondents
- Don't know: 4%
- Casual or sessional: 3%
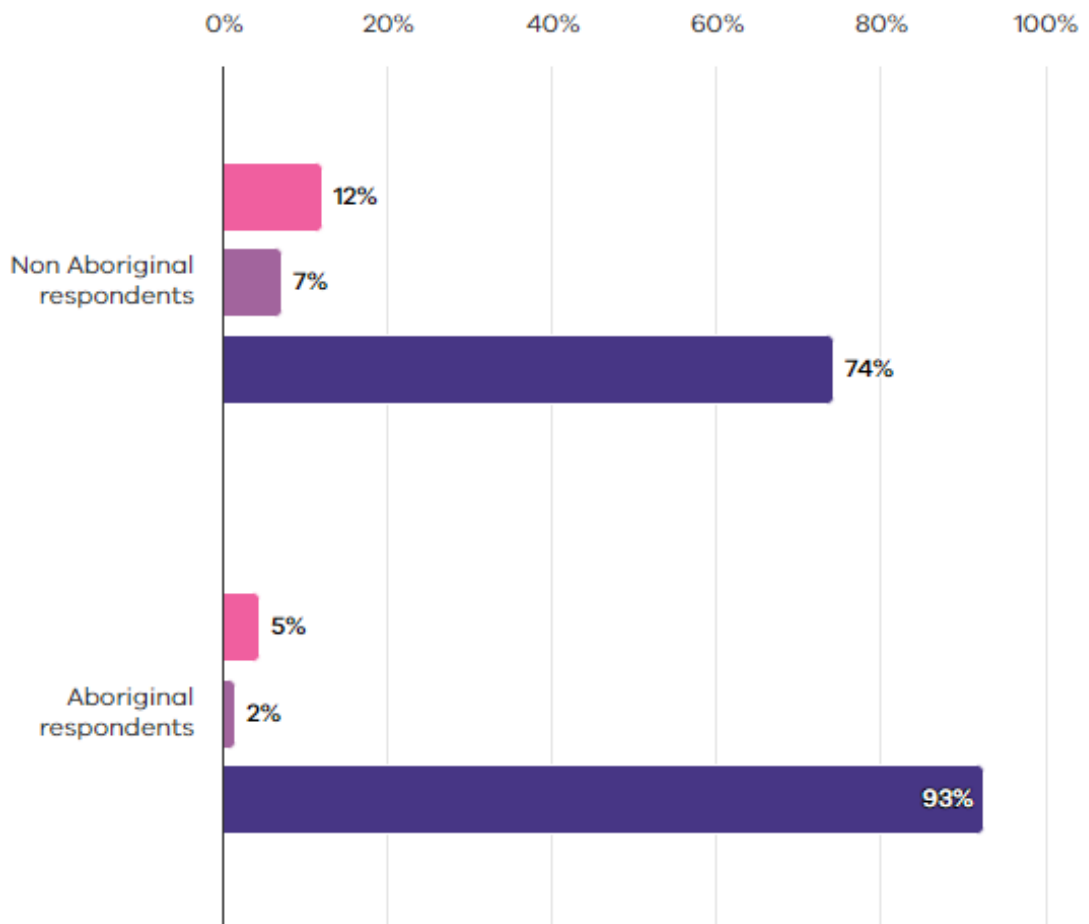- Fixed term: 19%
- Ongoing (excluding executives): 73%

Legend:
- Ongoing (excluding executives)
- Casual or sessional
- Fixed term
- Don't know

Demographic and employment characteristics

Country of birth

Non Aboriginal respondents
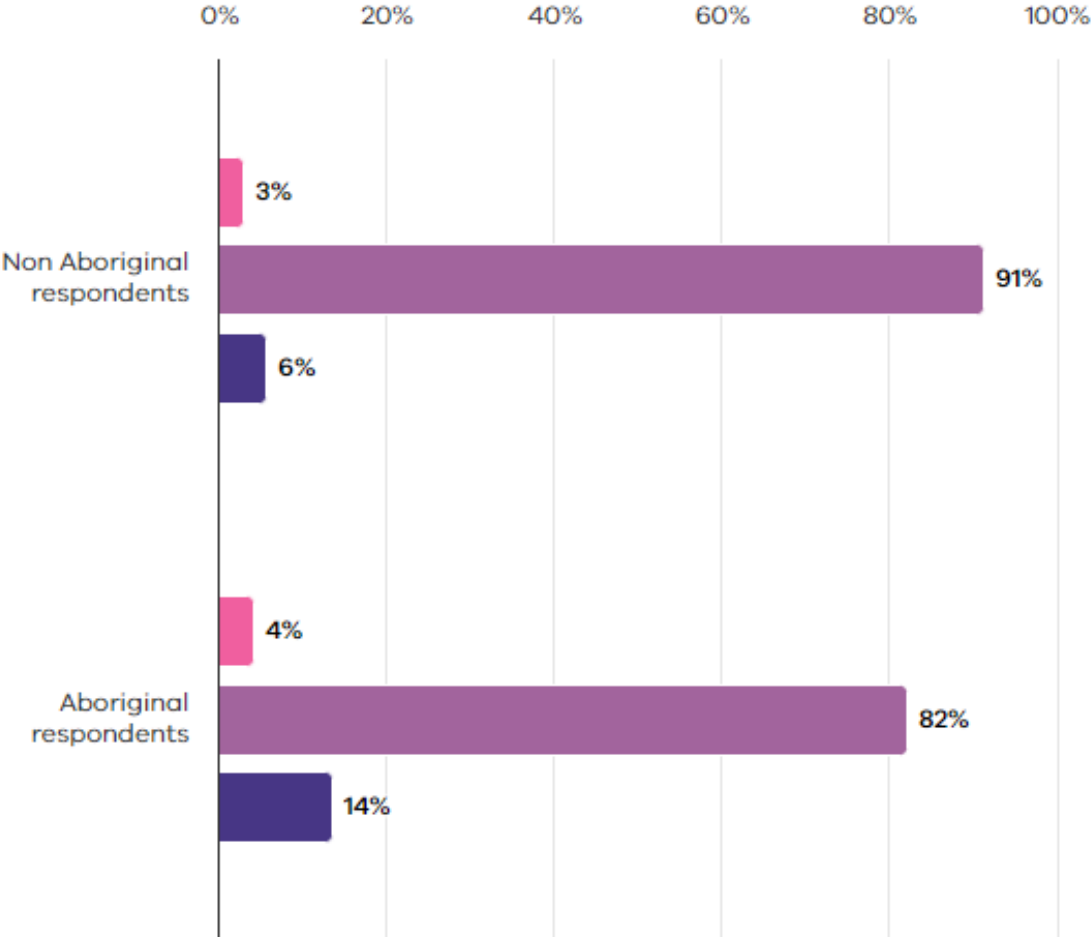- 12%
- 7%
- 74%

Aboriginal respondents
- 5%
- 2%
- 93%

- ● Australia
- ● Overseas in an English speaking country
- ● Overseas in a non English speaking country
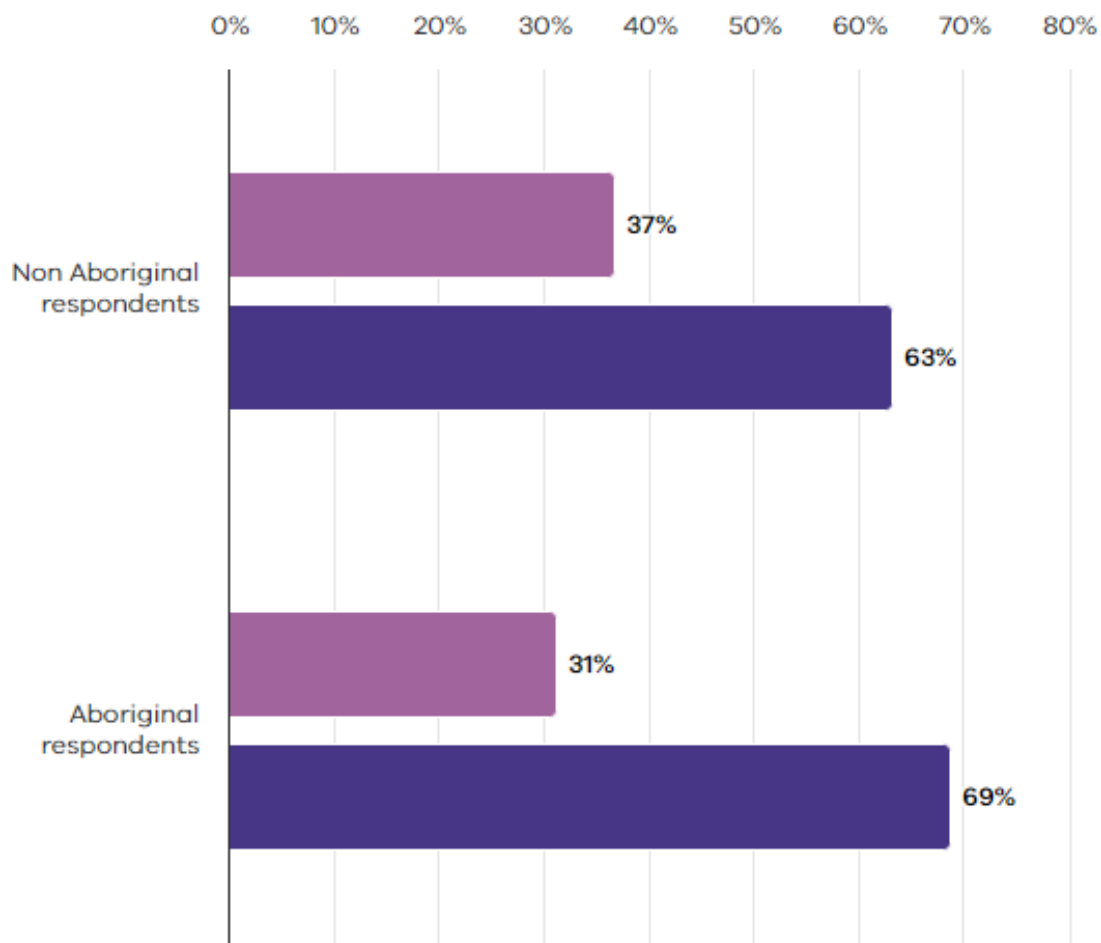
Demographic and employment characteristics

Disability

Non Aboriginal respondents
- 3%
- 91%
- 6%

Aboriginal respondents
- 4%
- 82%
- 14%

● Identify as a disabled person   ● Not a disabled person   ● Prefer not to say

Demographic and employment characteristics

Employment type

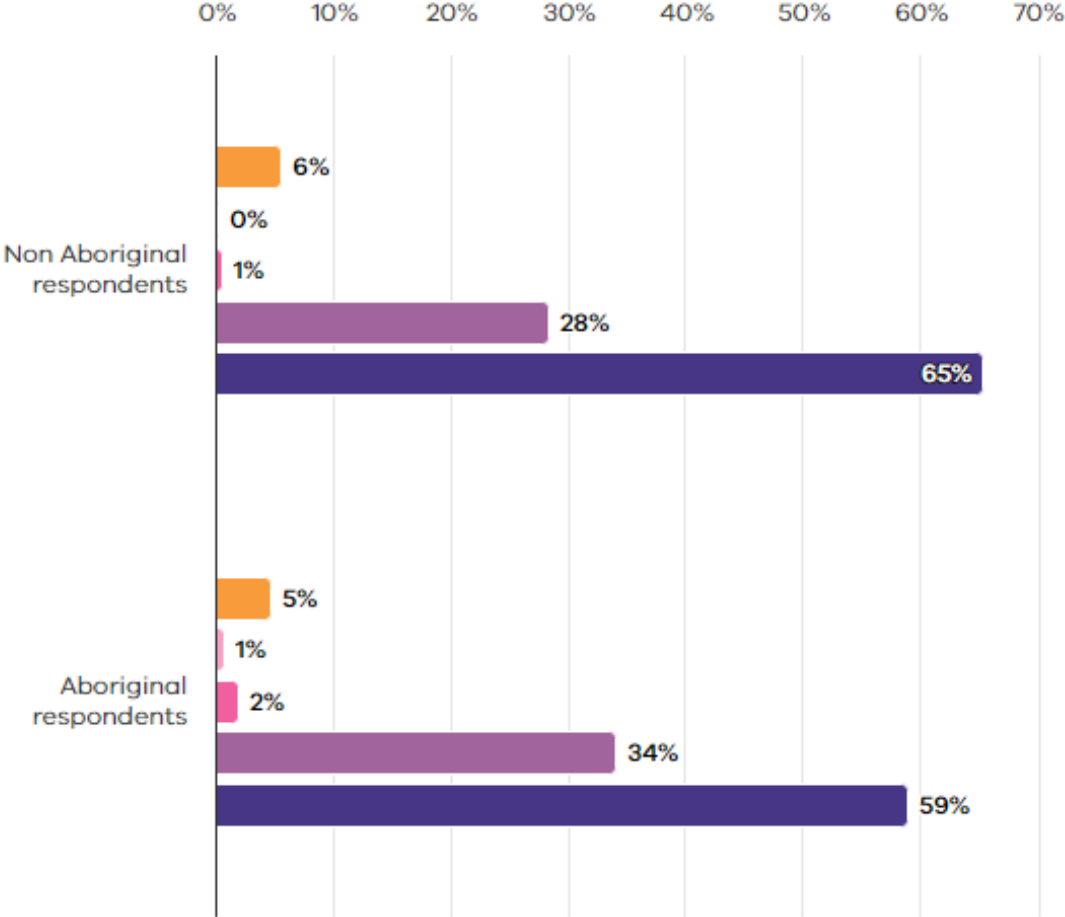Non Aboriginal respondents
- Part time: 37%
- Full time: 63%

Aboriginal respondents
- Part time: 31%
- Full time: 69%

Legend:
- Full time
- Part time

Demographic and employment characteristics

Gender identity

Non Aboriginal respondents
- Prefer not to say: 6%
- I use another term: 0%
- Non binary: 1%
- Man: 28%
- Woman: 65%

Aboriginal respondents
- Prefer not to say: 5%
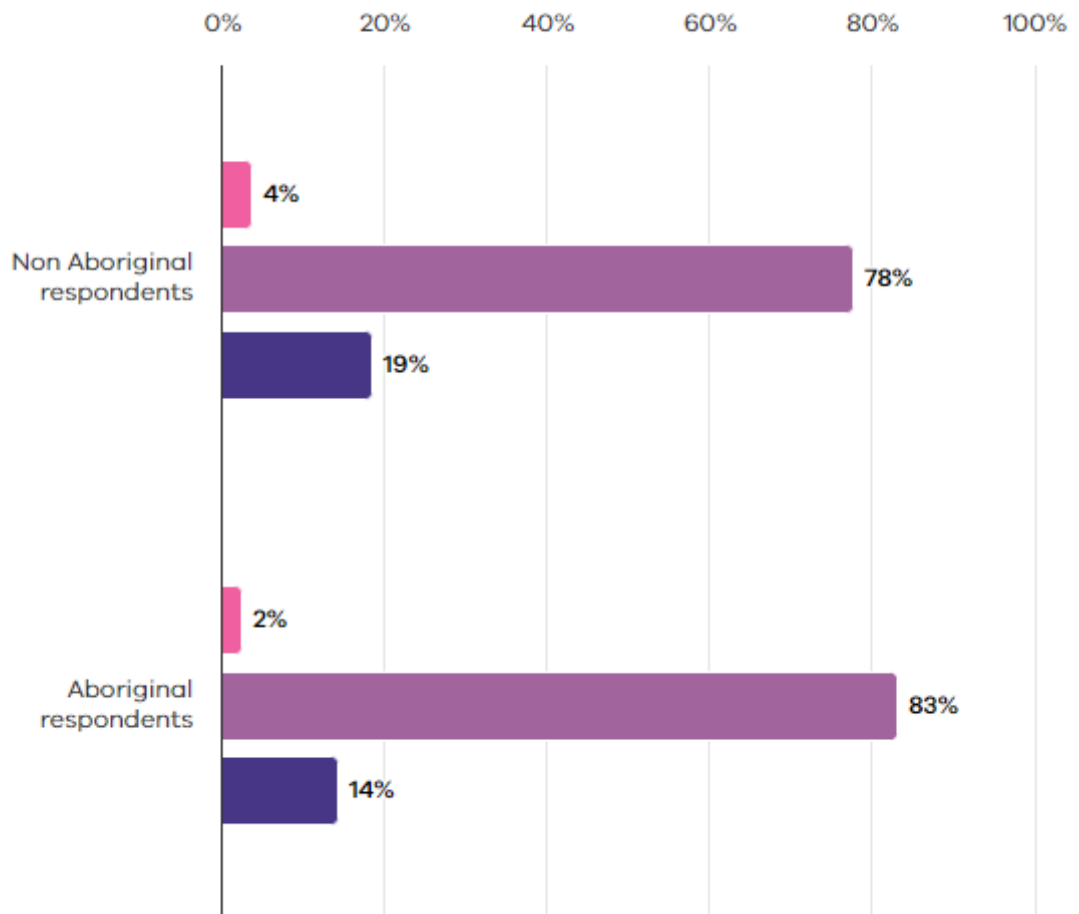- I use another term: 1%
- Non binary: 2%
- Man: 34%
- Woman: 59%

Legend:
- Woman
- Man
- Non binary
- I use another term
- Prefer not to say

Demographic and employment characteristics

Language other than English spoken
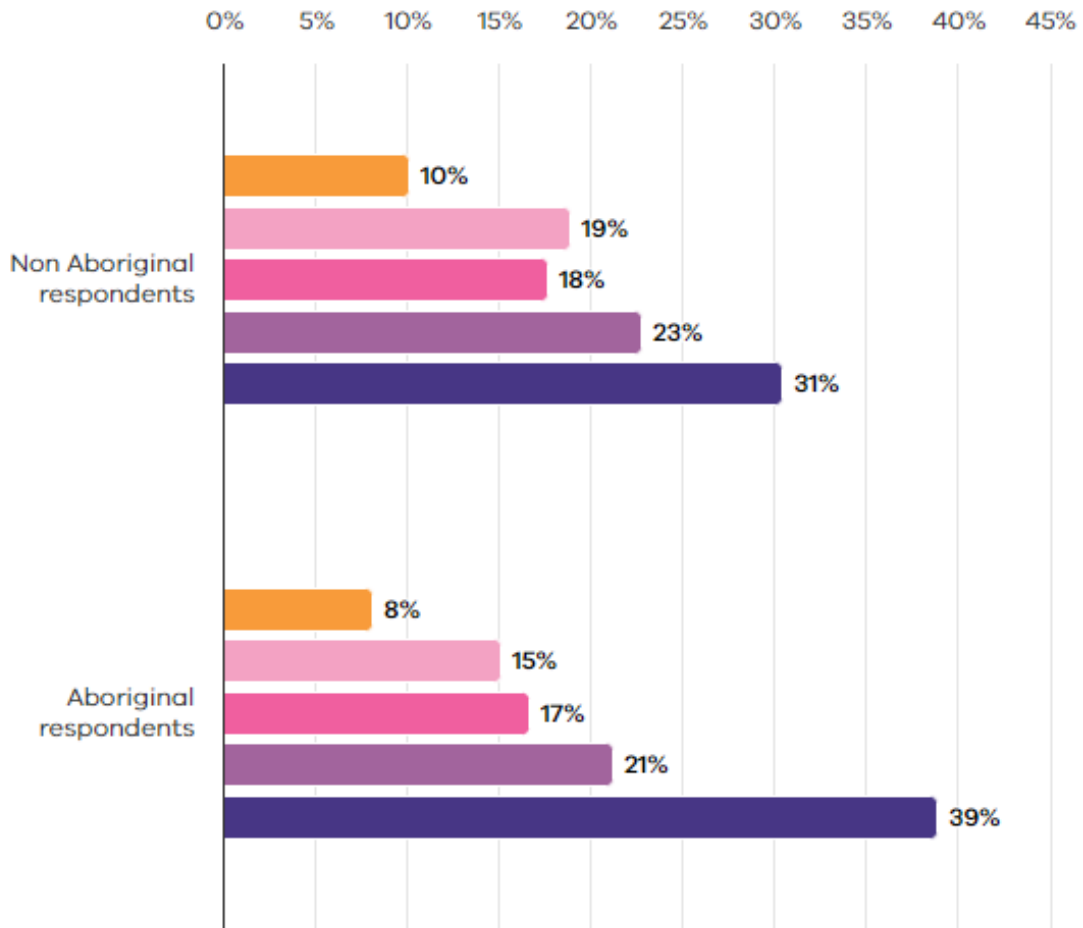

Non Aboriginal respondents
- 4%
- 78%
- 19%

Aboriginal respondents
- 2%
- 83%
- 14%

Legend:
- ● Speak a language other than English
- ● Speak only English
- ● Prefer not to say

Demographic and employment characteristics

Length of service
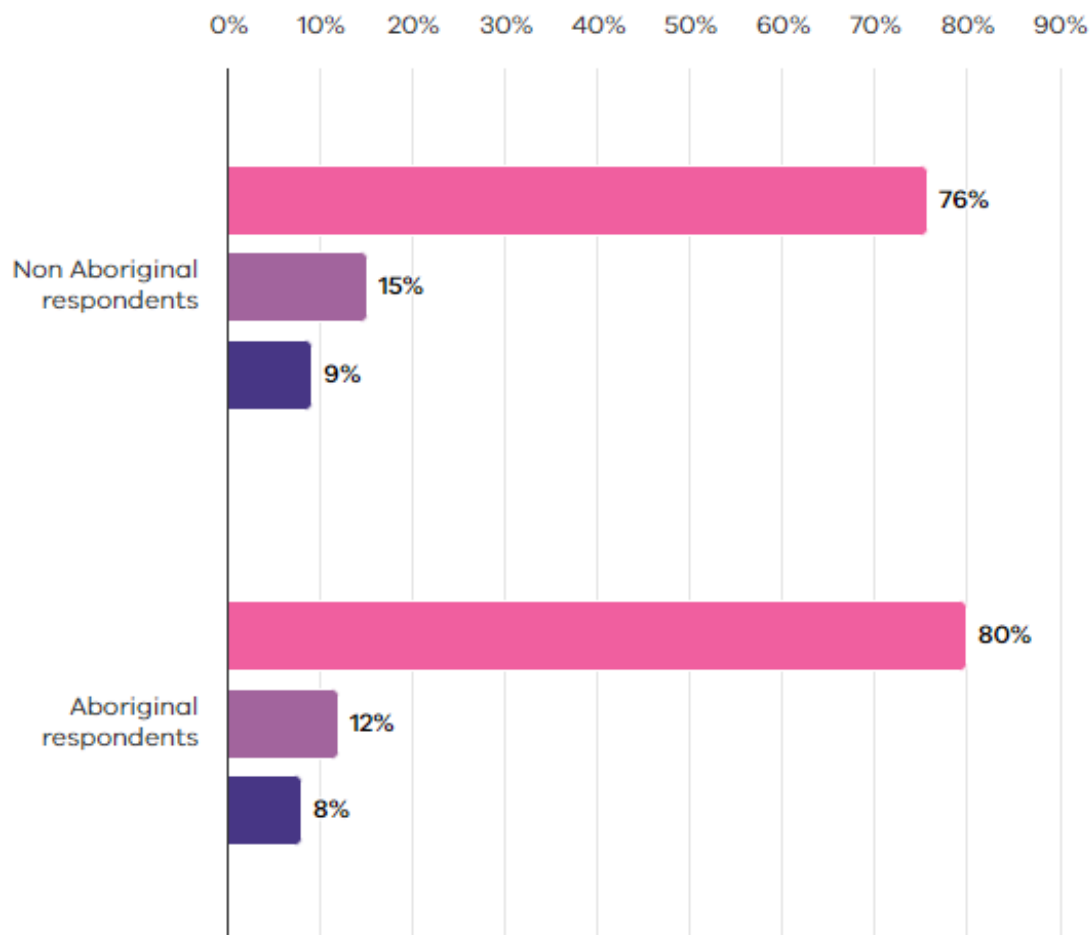

	Less than 2 years	Between 2 and 5 years
●	Between 5 and 10 years	● Between 10 and 20 years
●	More than 20 years	

Demographic and employment characteristics

Management responsibilities

Non Aboriginal respondents
- 76%
- 15%
- 9%

Aboriginal respondents
- 80%
- 12%
- 8%
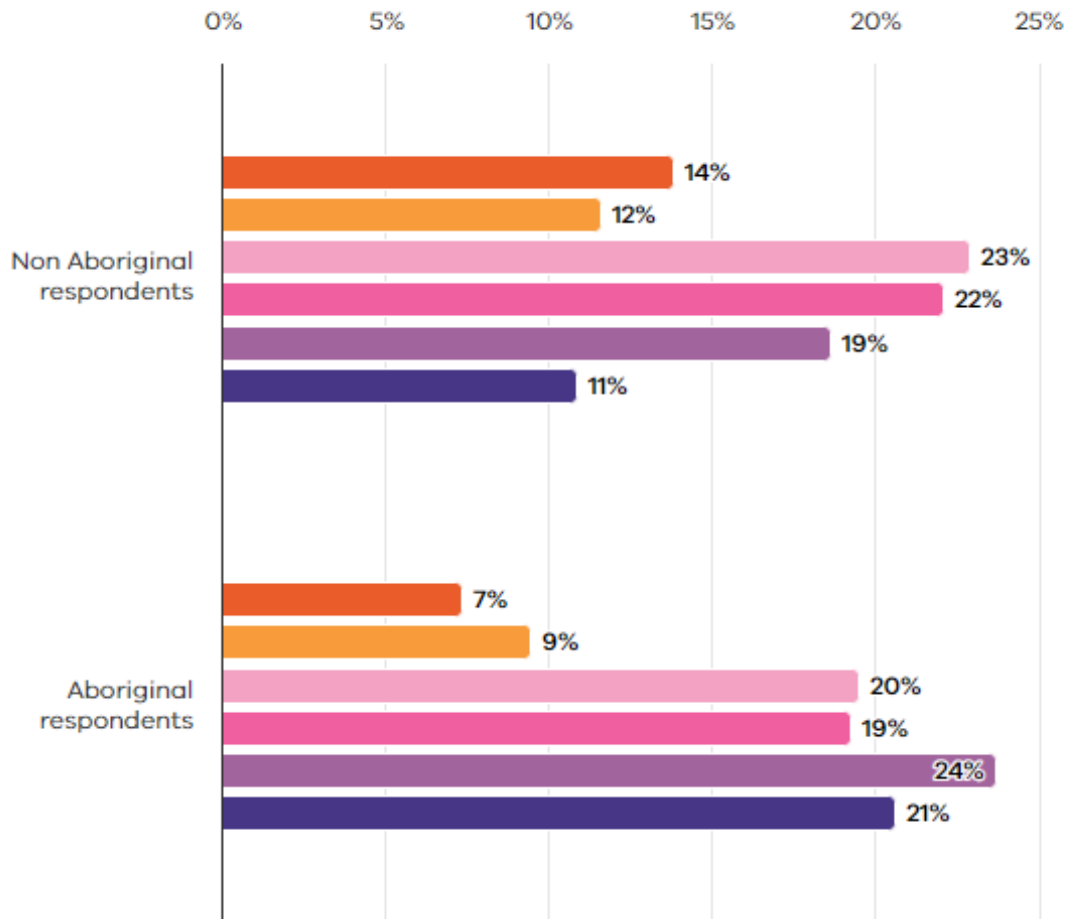
● Manage other managers   ● Manage staff, but not other managers
● No management responsibilities

Demographic and employment characteristics

Salary

Chart: Horizontal bar chart showing salary distribution for Non Aboriginal respondents and Aboriginal respondents.

Non Aboriginal respondents
- More than $135,000: 14%
- Between $115,000 and $134,999: 12%
- Between $95,000 and $114,999: 23%
- Between $75,000 and $94,999: 22%
- Between $55,000 and $74,999: 19%
- Less than $55,000: 11%

Aboriginal respondents
- More than $135,000: 7%
- Between $115,000 and $134,999: 9%
- Between $95,000 and $114,999: 20%
- Between $75,000 and $94,999: 19%
- Between $55,000 and $74,999: 24%
- Less than $55,000: 21%

Legend:
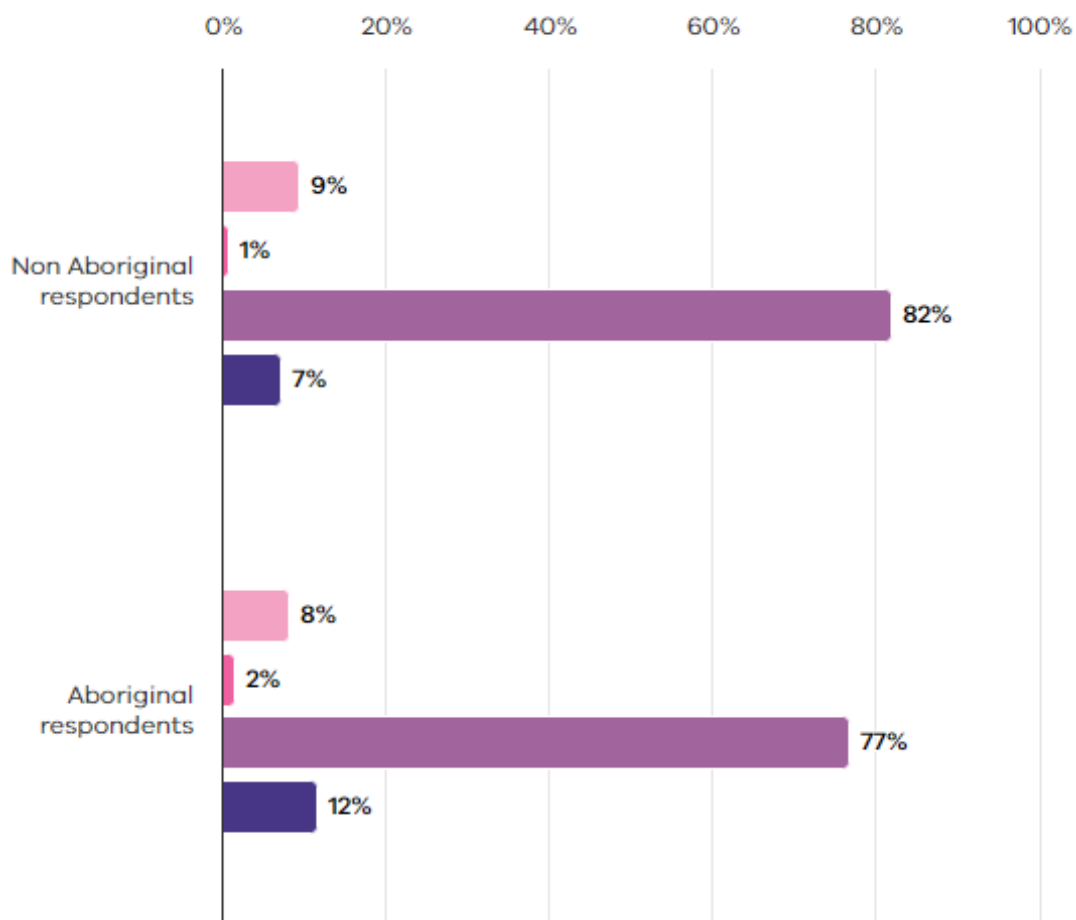- Less than $55,000
- Between $55,000 and $74,999
- Between $75,000 and $94,999
- Between $95,000 and $114,999
- Between $115,000 and $134,999
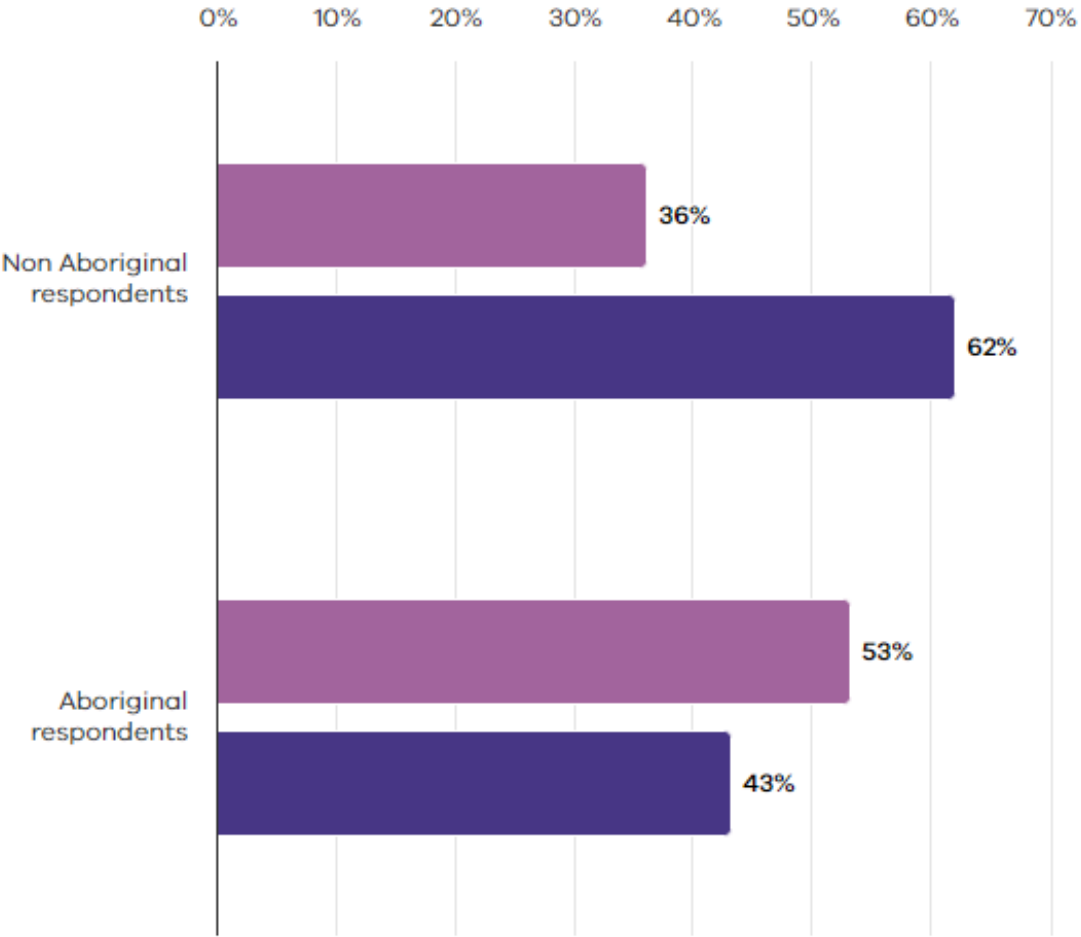- More than $135,000

Demographic and employment characteristics

Sexuality

Non Aboriginal respondents:
- Prefer not to say: 9%
- Use a different term: 1%
- Straight (heterosexual): 82%
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual or asexual: 7%

Aboriginal respondents:
- Prefer not to say: 8%
- Use a different term: 2%
- Straight (heterosexual): 77%
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual or asexual: 12%

- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual or asexual
- Straight (heterosexual)
- Use a different term
- Prefer not to say

Demographic and employment characteristics

Workplace location

Non Aboriginal respondents: Rural and regional Victoria 36%, Metropolitan Melbourne 62%

Aboriginal respondents: Rural and regional Victoria 53%, Metropolitan Melbourne 43%

Legend: ● Metropolitan Melbourne ● Rural and regional Victoria

Inducting and welcoming Aboriginal employees

Every employee is different and your approach should be tailored to their needs.

Managers should plan an initial conversation with their employees to:

- let them know they have an open-door policy

- discuss their cultural and ceremonial leave entitlements

- discuss what supervision approach they prefer.

Introductions

Managers can create opportunities for their new starters to meet colleagues and connect.

For example, managers can:

- ask if their employees would like to meet other Aboriginal employees and connect to Aboriginal peer networks

- pair them with a work buddy or informal mentor – if this person isn't Aboriginal, make them aware of resources like the Aboriginal Cultural Capability Toolkit.

Don't introduce a new starter as a 'new Aboriginal employee' or similar. Many people don't define their employment by their cultural background.

Identity

When managers get to know their new starter, don't make insensitive comments or ask inappropriate questions.

Never:

- ask what percentage or 'how much' Aboriginal they are – Aboriginal people generally view being Aboriginal as either something you are or aren't.

- assume they're across the languages and protocols of other Aboriginal groups.

- share their personal story with anyone else if they've decided to share it with you – it's their story to tell.

- assign Aboriginal-specific work if it doesn't align with their role or interests – it could be inappropriate, especially if you're doing so because they're Aboriginal.

Read more

- Recruiting Aboriginal staff

- Inducting and welcoming Aboriginal staff

Offering flexible working arrangements

The health, safety and wellbeing of employees is at the core of the Victorian Public Service flexible work policy.

Offering flexible work in the public sector also means we may attract more Aboriginal employees.

For example, 53.2% of Aboriginal survey respondents compared to 36.1% of non-Aboriginal work in regional and rural Victoria. Flexible work arrangements may help some Aboriginal employees manage their cultural load.

As with any other employee, if a manager notices a change or they seem unhappy at work, have a conversation with them. Ask them what is going on and how best you can support them.

This could include changed work hours, working from home, sharing responsibilities at work along with a range of other support mechanisms.

Arrangements for ceremonial and compassionate leave are available in the Victorian Public Service Enterprise Agreement for Aboriginal employees to attend funerals and observe Sorry Business.

For Victorian public sector employees not employed under the Victorian Public Service Agreement, we encourage organisations to implement a flexible work policy to help employees meet their cultural obligations.

Ways to make a positive difference

Public sector organisations can help their employees learn more about Aboriginal culture and not rely on Aboriginal people to teach us.

Look for ways to actively engage with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal employees creating cultural change and safe work environments.

To help you get started, read our supporting Aboriginal staff resource.

Victoria is the first Australian jurisdiction to commit and action all elements of the Uluru Statement from the Heart – Voice, Treaty and Truth. Take time to read and understand more about Victoria's Treaty process and the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

Our focus group participants said examples of what makes a positive difference for them at work are to:

- have access to Aboriginal networks and peer groups

- feel supported by senior colleagues and managers

- feel valued and appreciated for their culture and knowledge

- see Aboriginal flags in the office

- have tailored support, especially for people who work in community-facing roles

- invest in Aboriginal career programs like the Aboriginal Career Development Program

- build culturally safe workplaces.

Take steps to improve employee wellbeing

Improving employee wellbeing has many benefits. It leads to higher levels of engagement and productivity, which then leads to better health, wellbeing and satisfaction with work.

Understanding what measures support the wellbeing of Aboriginal employees can help organisations come up with meaningful ways to:

- lighten their cultural load

- decrease rates of negative behaviour towards them

- make them feel safe to speak up.

Most of the top drivers of employee wellbeing for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal respondents were similar.

But for Aboriginal employees, the importance of manager and workgroup support ranked higher.

Drivers of positive wellbeing

Aboriginal respondents

1. Safety climate
2. Manager support
3. Learning and development
4. Meaningful work
5. Workgroup support

Non-Aboriginal respondents

1. Meaningful work
2. Safety climate
3. Learning and development
4. Manager support
5. Workload

Drivers of negative wellbeing

Aboriginal respondents

1. Workload
2. Safety climate
3. Safe to speak up
4. Manager support
5. Innovation

Non-Aboriginal respondents

1. Workload
2. Safety climate
3. Manager support
4. Safe to speak up
5. Job enrichment

Invest in the cultural capability of managers

The importance of supportive leadership featured strongly in our focus group research. This is also a key driver of wellbeing for both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal employees.

Senior public sector leaders and managers have a strong role to play in creating sustained cultural change across all levels of their organisation. To drive cultural change in leaders, the public sector needs to find ways to ensure all employees have completed cultural capability training. For example, make it mandatory for all people leaders to take cultural capability training, link it to professional development progression (PDP) and acknowledge it as a core skill for effective leadership.

For example, a supportive leader can do things like:

- support leave requests and help employees make alternate arrangements for their work when cultural leave is required

- be open to feedback and provide opportunities for employees to engage with you

- listen for, call out and follow policies to address unacceptable behaviours in the workplace

- raise important issues with senior managers and executives if required

- support Aboriginal employees through the reporting and resolution process if issues arise.

" Managers need to put Aboriginal voices and perspectives at the centre of how we work and create culturally safe teams.

Being upskilled and supported by managers who know how to support us makes a huge difference. "

Create a culturally safe work environment

Building Aboriginal cultural capability and safe work environments is a continuous process that builds over time.

The Gari Yala (Speak the truth) report has 10 truths organisations can use to improve inclusion for Aboriginal employees. Each truth is based in evidence and designed for workplaces to use.

Respectful and inclusive environments help your employees feel more culturally safe and help organisations attract and retain Aboriginal employees. This includes:

Cultural awareness

Cultural awareness is when you're aware of and develop sensitivity to the diversity of Aboriginal culture.

It involves having openness and respect for other people and other cultures' languages, religions, dress, communication styles and more.

Cultural safety

For Aboriginal people, a culturally safe environment is one where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity and experience.

A culturally safe workplace considers power relations and cultural differences. It encourages people to reflect on their own attitudes and beliefs.

Aboriginal protocols

Having an understanding and respect for protocols help us build respectful relationships and partnerships with Aboriginal people.

" When I go to a meeting and someone does an Acknowledgement of Country, I immediately feel relaxed. It also makes me feel like other people are starting to lead the way, and that feels good.

People who speak other languages have volunteered to do an Acknowledgment of Country in our all-staff meetings. It's really special to share different cultural experiences in that way. **"**

Read more in First Peoples' – State Relations Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners

Cultural capability training

To support culturally safe workplaces, we recommend all public sector employees complete Aboriginal Cultural Capability training.

It's good practice to partner with local Aboriginal communities to run it for your organisation.

Offer tailored support and Aboriginal networks

Public sector organisations need to offer the right kind of support and find ways to connect Aboriginal employees across the public sector. The public sector should look to create a strong Aboriginal Staff Network that's open to all Aboriginal employees who choose to join.

" We need Aboriginal networks and support like mentoring and the ability to reach out and talk to someone when we need to.

Some people choose not to identify, but they still need a safe way to access support anonymously.

I really enjoy 'coffee roulette' catch-ups. It feels good to have open and honest conversations with people you can relate to.

Aboriginal staff networks are a safe supportive place to connect. "

We're here to help

Our Aboriginal employment unit is here to help.

Get in touch with us at aboriginal.employment@vpsc.vic.gov.au.