

September 2022

Yarning for **Change**

Listen to my voice

Conversations
with Aboriginal
and Torres Strait
Islander Peoples



Queensland
Family & Child
Commission



Queensland
Government



The Queensland Family and Child Commission acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians across the lands, seas and skies where we walk, live and work.

We recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as two unique peoples, with their own rich and distinct cultures, strengths and knowledge. We celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures across Queensland and pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

We acknowledge the important role played by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and recognise their right to self-determination, and the need for community-led approaches to support healing and strengthen resilience.



Acknowledgement



The Queensland Family and Child Commission (QFCC) extends its utmost respect to all the young people and their families whose stories and voices are captured within this study. We thank you for gifting us the privilege of sharing your stories. QFCC does not take that privilege lightly. You are not just a number or statistic and your life matters. *Yarning for Change* is a testament to you and your journey. Within this report, your voices and stories have been reflected with the same honesty and respect you showed us during our yarns.

QFCC extends its thanks to the following community organisations who generously gave their time and resources to inform young people and community of the opportunity to share their stories. Your continual commitment to community was highlighted in your willingness to assist while managing competing priorities.

- Jabalbina Aboriginal Corporation
- Nintiriganyi Cultural Training Centre
- Wuchopperen Health Service
- Youth Empowered Towards Independence (YETI)
- Gidgee Healing
- Injilinj Youth Service
- MONA Aboriginal Corporation — On Country program
- Young People Ahead
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Health Service (ATSICHS) Mackay, Social and Emotional Wellbeing Unit (SEWU)
- PCYC Mackay
- Save The Children Mackay
- YuwiYumba — Murri Court
- Ipswich Community Youth Service
- Youth and Family Services

QFCC is grateful for the support of frontline staff from the following Youth Justice Service Centres (YJSC) and Youth Detention Centres (YDC) in facilitating the voices of children and young people to be heard.

- Atherton YJSC
- Caboolture YJSC
- Cairns YJSC
- Ipswich YJSC
- Logan YJSC
- Mackay YJSC
- Mt Isa YJSC — Transition to Success (T2S)
- Townsville South YJSC
- Redcliffe YJSC
- Brisbane YDC
- Cleveland YDC
- West Moreton YDC

A message from the Commissioner



The QFCC takes its commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families seriously. We recognise the rich and resilient cultures that continue to sustain and strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and respect the right to self-determination and the critical importance of continuing connection to kin, Country and culture in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

We remain concerned about the persistent and increasingly disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in statutory systems. We recognise that this is a reflection of the inequity experienced by far too many children, young people and families, particularly those experiencing significant vulnerabilities as a result of poverty, a lack of safe, stable housing, disconnection from education, disconnection from family, disconnection from culture.

The rights and aspirations of First Nations children and young people with a lived experience of the youth justice system are largely rendered invisible in the discourse, in the policy and practice of ‘justice’. There’s been a lot of talking about young people, less talking to them and less still, listening to them. The *Yarning for Change: Listen to my voice* report highlights their voices, experiences and stories of their interactions with the youth justice system. Young people talked about the things that matter to them and things that they wish were different. They emphasised the importance of relationships, of what it means to have people who care and show up for them. What is clear – it’s people not programs that makes a difference.

In my capacity as Commissioner and as a proud Aboriginal woman, I will continue to fiercely advocate for the rights of children and young people in the youth justice system. We are committed to continuing to yarn and listen to children and young people and will work in partnership with all those committed to transformational change, in the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities. We must cultivate a critical consciousness and see the opportunities that exist to challenge and transform the systems and services that interact in the lives of children and young people and to actively change the way that we think about, talk about and respond to young people and the challenges they face.

We have started the process by asking and listening and now it is time to act.

Natalie Lewis

Commissioner

Queensland Family and Child Commission

Phase 1

Yarning and listening

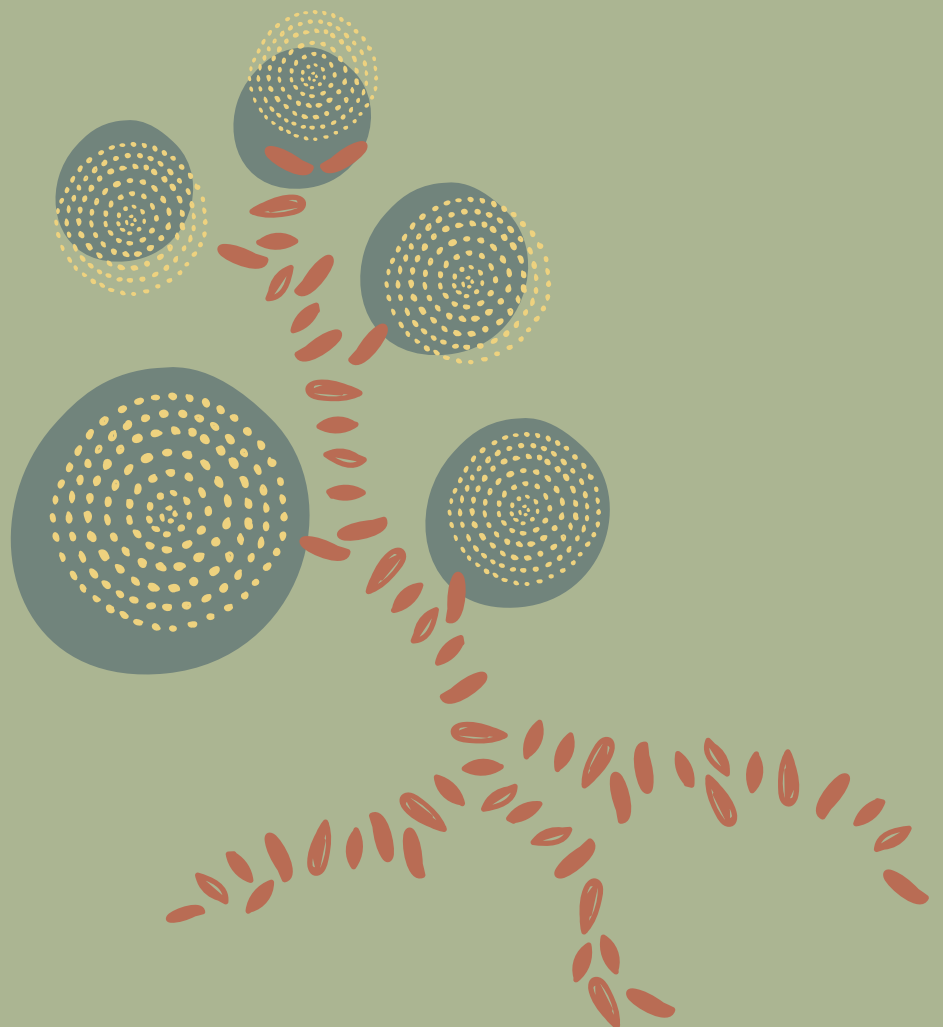
Yarning for Change: Listen to my voice was honoured to have yarned and listened to children, young people and their families.

Our yarns with young people brought this imagery to mind.

This image represents the cultural connection that young people have with land, place and space. The roots identified in this image are what young people advised kept them strong and growing:

- Family • Culture • Self • Community

Yarning for Change: Listen to my voice is an opportunity to enhance our perspectives and understandings, and to uphold the rights of children to participate in the decision-making processes.



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Introduction



Purpose

This report, *Listen to my voice*, describes the stories and data gathered during the first phase of the *Yarning for Change* study, being led by the Queensland Family and Child Commission (QFCC).

Yarning for Change is exploring the lived experiences of children, families and young adults aged 8–25 years who are in contact with the Queensland youth justice system. The first phase of this study involved yarning with young people — primarily Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people — and their families and communities in priority locations around the state. *Yarning for Change* did not exclude any young people who wanted to participate during phase 1. The second phase will continue yarns with young people and consider the effectiveness of the current youth justice reforms.

The purpose of the study is to:

- ensure the voices of children, young people, their families, their communities and those who support them are heard and considered when informing and evaluating changes to the youth justice system in Queensland
- assess the impact of current youth justice reforms on the wellbeing and rights of children and young people, and consider the effectiveness of existing responses in addressing the causes of recidivism (repeat offending).

Children, young people, families and the community have a right to lead and be included in decisions that affect their lives and future. Young people are capable and are willing to share insights with those willing to listen. The QFCC is honoured to have the opportunity to listen and champion the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and their families through the *Yarning for Change* study. We submit this report as part of our commitment to ensuring that:

‘Every Queensland child is loved, respected and has their rights upheld’¹.

Background

The QFCC was established under the *Queensland Family and Child Commission Act 2014*² to:

- promote the safety, wellbeing and best interests of children and young people
- promote and advocate the responsibility of families and communities to protect and care for children and young people
- improve the child protection system³.

In the lead-up to the 2020 state election, and in response to the Queensland Law Society’s Call to Parties Statement⁴, the Queensland Government gave an election commitment — it tasked the QFCC to undertake conversations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people about their experiences with the justice system, as part of the *Growing up in Queensland* survey.

After careful deliberation, the QFCC concluded that this work required more than a survey to deliver on the election commitment. The *Yarning for Change* study was established to ensure that engagement was authentic, appropriate and flexible to the needs of children and young people, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It was also imperative that research processes were respectful and undertaken with cultural integrity.

On 12 August 2022, the study released an interim report with experiences of children and young people from the state’s three youth detention centres: Brisbane Youth Detention Centre, Cleveland Youth Detention Centre and West Moreton Youth Detention Centre. The report provided a snapshot of the stories and voices of young people in youth detention and the factors that impact their wellbeing.



How we worked



IN NOVEMBER 2021, THE QFCC RECEIVED ETHICS APPROVAL FROM THE CHILDREN'S HEALTH QUEENSLAND HOSPITAL AND HEALTH SERVICE TO COMMENCE THE *YARNING FOR CHANGE* STUDY.

The study's primary objectives were to understand the perceptions of:

- children and young people who have had contact with, or are at risk of entering, the youth justice system about the extent to which institutions, services and individual, family, cultural and community circumstances divert them from offending or reoffending
- their families, members of their community and service providers about the individual, family, community and structural circumstances that divert young people from offending (or contribute to youth offending)
- all groups about the characteristics and types of solutions they believe would be most effective to protect children's rights and keep children and young people happy, healthy, safe, successful, and out of court and custody.

In this first phase of the study, we consulted with community members and stakeholders in Redcliffe, Logan, Caboolture, Ipswich, Inala and regional areas of Townsville, Cairns, Mackay and Mt Isa. These locations were prioritised using data from the Serious Repeat Offender Index (SROI)^a.

All researchers were equipped with the necessary accreditation and supervision to maintain cultural integrity and observe cultural protocols whilst engaging with children, young people and communities. We established strong working partnerships and used existing networks to help children, young people and their families engage with the study.

Participation in *Yarning for Change* was voluntary.

^a Serious Repeat Offender Index (SROI) is a point in time score assigned to young people based on three factors: (1) their offending, (2) the amount of time they have spent in custody, (3) their age, allowing youth justice to quantify and compare the offending behaviours of young people.

How did we do this work?

Yarning for Change used structured one-on-one interviews (yarning) and small focus groups (yarning circles) to gather stories from children and young people aged 8–25 years, families and communities who were assessed to be:

- at risk of contact with the youth justice system — identified through school suspension and exclusion data, or coming to the attention of police but not charged with any offence
- currently in contact with the youth justice system — in detention or under community supervision orders
- previously in contact with the youth justice system
- repeat offenders and high-risk offenders.

The yarns were designed to encourage respectful and trusting interactions, and participants had the option of withdrawing or taking a break. We undertook pre- and post-yarn evaluations to minimise any emotional harm to participants and identify any supports that participants may need after their yarn.

Staff from youth justice services centres, youth detention centres and community organisations helped researchers identify participants, gain the necessary consent and facilitate access to young people. The project team met with children, young people and families face-to-face in their community, to share food and share stories. This helped to establish positive relationships and provided opportunities for participants to share their experiences in comfortable surroundings.

What did we yarn about?

Young people were asked to talk about various topics related to their situation and experiences with the justice system.

With a focus on the voices of children and young people, *Yarning for Change* is underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The convention proclaims not only a child's right to appropriate health and education but also their rights when they break the law and are held in detention. It also proclaims their right to be involved in decisions affecting them and to have their opinions considered. This includes during judicial or administrative proceedings. Under the principles of the convention, governments have a duty to act in the best interest of children, ensuring practices and policies are not discriminatory⁵.

Where are you from?

Where do you fit in your family (oldest, youngest or middle)?

Where's your mob from?

Who are you?

Questions included

What was happening when you first had contact with police?

What keeps you strong when you are in detention?

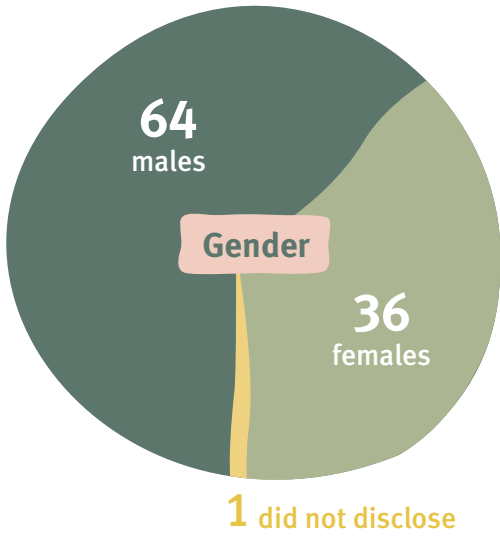
What keeps you strong?

What helps you stay out of trouble? Who helps you stay out of trouble?

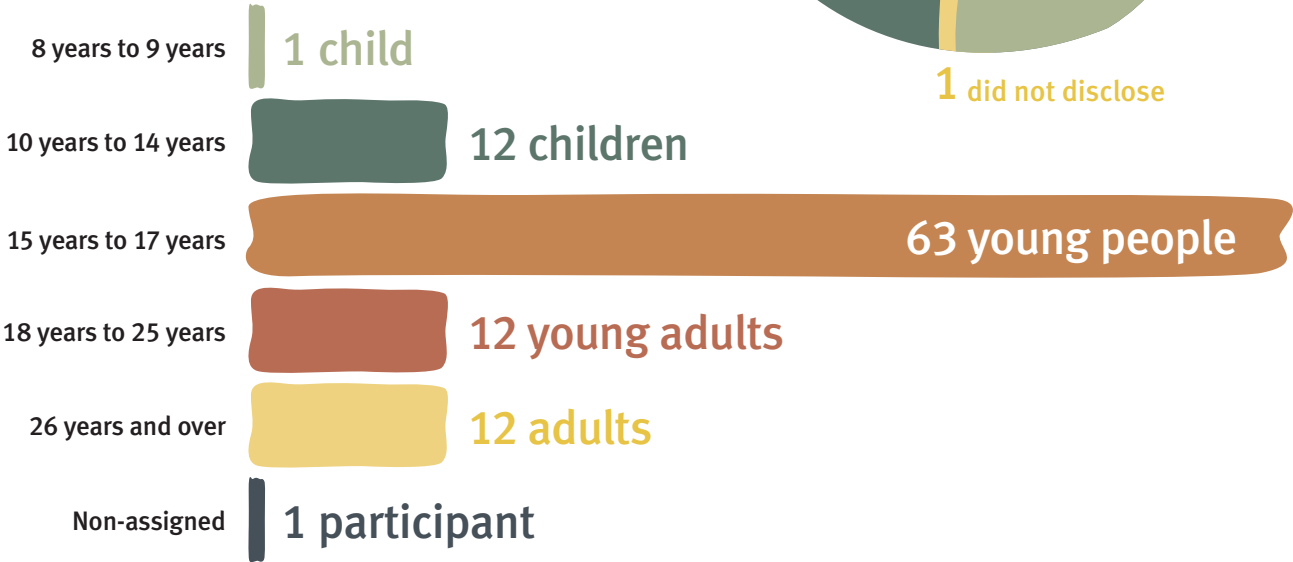
Are you going to school? What is this experience like for you?

RESEARCHERS YARNED WITH A TOTAL OF **101** CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND ADULTS.

Who did we yarn with?



Age



Heritage



What we heard



This report is written for children,
young people and their families
because it is their stories being shared.

That is why this report is titled
Yarning for Change: Listen to my voice.
The format of this report and its findings
follows the rhythm and flow of the yarns
with children, young people
and their families.



Yarning about me



Who am I?

When asked who they were, young people overwhelmingly responded with their name and who they felt they belonged to: their family and their culture. Young people were generally open, honest and more than willing to share where they were from.

Of the 76 young people...

- 7 were the first born or the eldest in their family
- 2 were the only child in their family
- 3 had 1 other sibling
- 9 had 2–3 other siblings
- 47 had large families – ranging from 4 through to 15 siblings
- 8 did not advise how many siblings they had

Female participant, 18 years

My background. I'm Indigenous, yeah. Don't know too much about it because I'm in care.

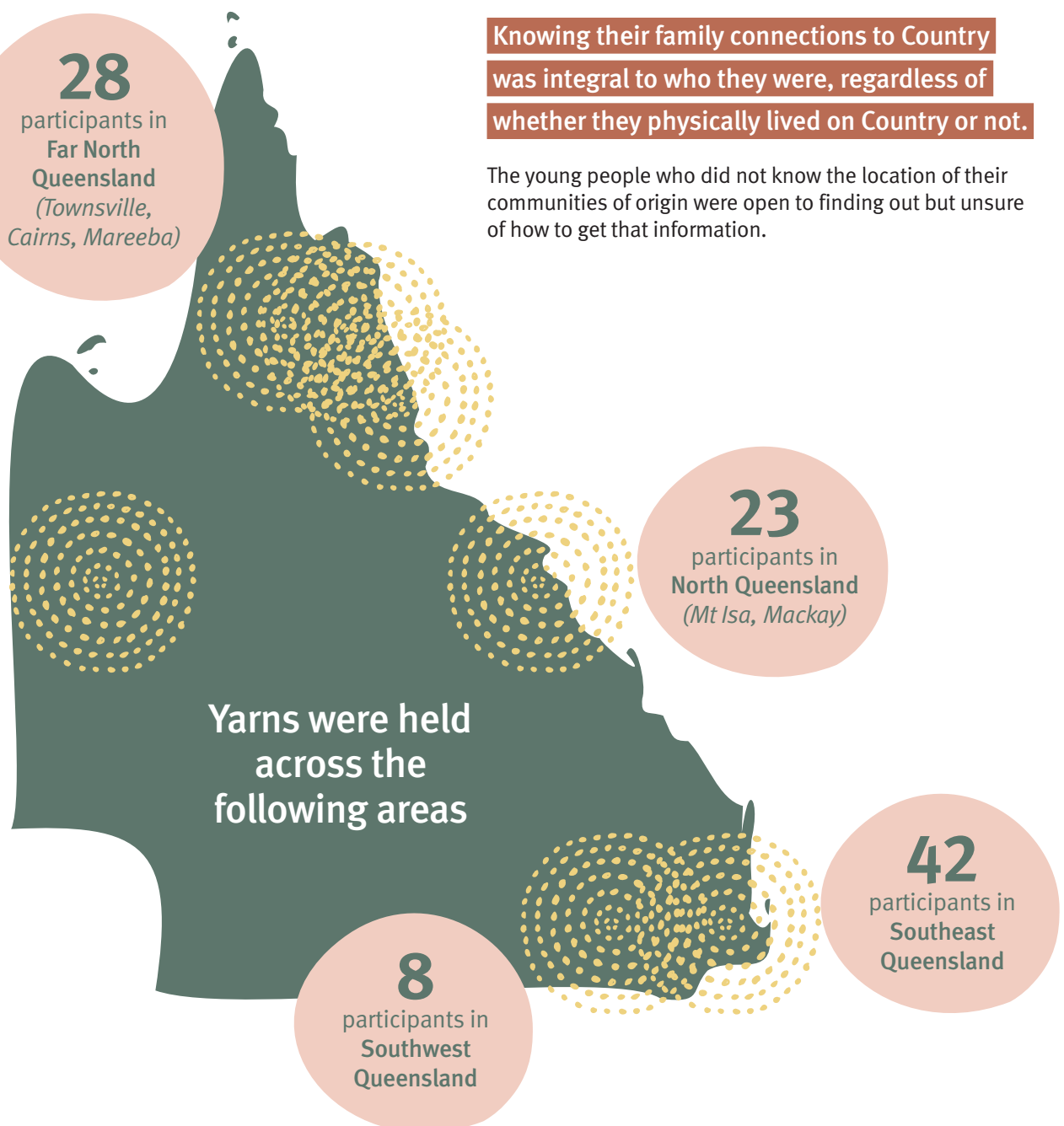
93%
of participants were people of colour

Where am I from?

Young people spoke about their communities of origin, an important topic amongst all participants.

Knowing their family connections to Country was integral to who they were, regardless of whether they physically lived on Country or not.

The young people who did not know the location of their communities of origin were open to finding out but unsure of how to get that information.



Yarns were held across the following areas

Who is around me?

Young people spoke at length about their relationships with families and friends. Young people offered many insights about their friendships.

Before I met my mate, you know, I used to be a little good boy, you know. Go to school, do my work, come home, do boxing, and come home and have dinner. I didn't steal, like go home, I'd ask my parents for money, you know?

Male participant, 13 years

“

Young people discussed the impacts of their friendships and continuing those connections despite the impacts.

Don't know, cause I've known them since I was young.

Male participant, 16 years

30/76

spoke about their early childhood experiences with Child Safety and the impacts of that on their daily functioning.

So, growing up, when I was younger, when I was in primary school, I was with the foster family, and I would look at everybody. I would think, you know they're so lucky to have their parents, you know they're so lucky to have their family and all their friends and they can go hang out with their friends and what not. Well whereas I couldn't, I had to go back to this house. Like it was a good foster family, I still love them, I appreciate everything they did for me, but it was just the fact of not having a normal life.

Female participant, 18 years

“

Young people spoke about the impacts of being disconnected from their families.

Like once you're taken away from your family you just lose all that respect for everyone I guess. And so, I don't know, you just don't listen to anybody anymore.

Female participant, 18 years

Young people were aware of their family circumstances and how this led to not living with their family. However, this did not discourage or deter them from remaining connected with their family. Young people were often not supported to maintain a meaningful connection with their family, and this led to them finding their own ways to remain connected.

“

I used to have Resi Care. But once you, like once you stay away from a Resi Care for more than a week they have to kick you out.

Male participant, 15 years



Youth Justice and me



YOUNG PEOPLE WERE ASKED TO SHARE THEIR STORIES REGARDING THEIR EXPERIENCES WITH THE YOUTH JUSTICE SYSTEM IN QUEENSLAND.

Initial contact

Young people advised their age of initial contact with police.

1 young person was 7 years of age

when police presented at their home to respond to a domestic disturbance.

30 young people were 8–14 years of age

The reason for their contacts included street checks and offending behaviour.

1 young person was 15 years of age

when police responded to their substance use behaviour.

Some can be helpful, like, some can be very mindful and respectful, community orientated, but then you get some assholes who don't really give a shit.

Participant's mother

Police bullying, harassment and use of violence was a persistent theme throughout yarns.

Over
1/3

of participants yarned at length about this experience.

School

Given their contacts with the youth justice system, young people were asked about their school experiences. 51 young people spoke about their education experiences in depth.

Young people acknowledged that school was important for their growth. However, they spoke about experiences and feelings of shame when attending school due to:

- racism
- treatment by teachers
- low attendance due to sorry business and other cultural obligations
- mental health issues
- basic needs not being met (such as no food or money)
- lack of transport.

*I loved school.
School was amazing.
There was at a point where
I didn't like going to school,
I actually wanted to give up
and just drop out, but I stuck
it through because I wanted
to finish it for my family.*

Female participant, 18 years

“

I didn't have that support after school like most children have. I didn't know any youth hubs that could've helped me.

Female participant, 18 years

But I would go to school, again I'd be like oh yeah, look at all these kids and think oh yeah you are lucky, what-not. And they'd have all this stuff, they would have all this nice stuff and I never got any of that, never got anything as a kid. I just got what I was given and put up with it. I just... I don't know. It just made me not wanna go to school too 'cause it just, you know I'd just look at other kids and think, fuck, you know, they have such a good life, I don't wanna be, you know goin' somewhere where everybody else is having a good time and I'm sitting here watching it. And so I just stopped going to school.

Female participant, 18 years

“

It was good, but I don't know, just got caught up in the wrong crowd.

Male participant, 15 years

Being kicked out of school from Grade 2 and then just not wanting... wanting him back at school really affected my son from an early age.

Participant's mother

Court

Young people said that their court experiences were negative due to not fully understanding the court processes and the long time it took to resolve their matters.

“

They don't let me like, they don't let me explain what I want them to say to the Judge. They just say what they wanna say.

Male participant, 16 years

...cause my lawyer wasn't there that day, and she came in to take over for him, and she looked at me, and she was like, 'Tell me your side of the story,' but she wasn't believing my side of the story, so I was like ... I was trying to tell her, but she was saying to me, 'But did you do this to the police? Did you do that?' but I was saying that I didn't do that, and she was like, 'But this is what they're saying'.

Female participant, 16 years

Many young people felt that their legal representation did not listen to them during the process.

Families spoke about their experiences when supporting their children through court. Parents wrestled with balancing their parental instincts and ensuring their children understood consequences.

Parents and young people both spoke about the frustrations they felt when waiting at court houses for hours only to have their matters adjourned.

I, as a strong person, I'm over being judged when I go to the court house. I've had enough of it, because at the end of the day, the judges point the finger straight back at the parent and say ... you're all, you know, you don't really care... So, as a strong person, I punish my son to do his full time, to get it all out the way.

Participant's mother

I hate it, I'll tell you why. I hate it cos first of all, you know, there's like, like let's say I go in at nine o'clock, there's no kids, like I'll ask them first if there's any people in the watchhouse, you know I ask them for stuff like that. But, you know, we have to wait at least, the minimum time I've waited there was four hours, five hours and there was another the first person there and that was only the last two, the last two weeks ago.

Male participant, 16 years



Youth justice orders

Young people spoke about their youth justice orders and the programs that were part of their orders. Young people felt that they were not meaningfully engaged in the decision-making process (for example, being given limited choices of programs and ‘having to’ do certain programs).

Programs that mattered to young people included:

- cultural programs
- activity-based programs (like trade certificates, landscaping, physical activity or activity-based learning)
- programs they had a say in or were meaningful to them.

Young people who were currently involved in Transition to Success (T2S^b) at the time of their yarn spoke about it being a positive experience for them.

Youth justice workers were important to young people and families. Young people spoke about the positive influence youth justice workers had on them to make a change.

The worker qualities that mattered to families were:

- First Nations staff working with First Nations young people
- consistent workers for young people
- workers who could relate to the lived experiences of young people
- workers with the ability to connect with young people
- workers who made a real effort.

I dunno, they say they're going to help me ... like, help me get a job, but they don't, they're like, 'Oh, we'll just help you do your resume, and you take it into places,' like, well, 'Aren't youse meant to help me do that?' and they're like, 'Well, yeah, but no,' and it's like, 'What do youse mean?'

Male participant, 17 years

Young people advised that some of the support that they received from youth justice involved:

- access to community supports and activities (such as youth workers and sports clubs like rugby league and boxing)
- opportunity to complete a short course (such as a barista course)
- access to cultural programs.

Young people also expressed their desire to engage in more cultural programs but advised that this was not always available due to lack of community resources and staff.

Young people spoke about attending youth justice ordered programs based on the facilitator rather than the program content.

^b Transition 2 Success (T2S) is a training program for young people aged 15 and over who are involved in the youth justice system or at risk of entering it.

Watchhouse

Young people's length of stay at a watchhouse ranged from 1 day to 35 days. Seven young people were in a watchhouse for a week or more.

When I first got there it was very, I got very irritated by the noise, like noises because people were making like loud noises and I couldn't sleep properly and it was just very... and I got very frustrated. Started telling everyone to shut up because I got so annoyed by them. And then for the next day I started crying, worrying about my... worrying about my family and stuff like that. And I told them to take me out to the yard, there's this yard thing there where you go out. And like it's out in the like heat and it does have big walls around it, you can't really see, big walls and stuff like that.

Female participant, age undisclosed

Yeah, but they like, give you a blanket. Like, I'm telling ya, you know how those blocks in the watchhouses ... you know you get those cushions? There was no cushions at all. Just had to lay on a block. It was fucked.

Male participant, 17 years

27 YOUNG PEOPLE
SPOKE ABOUT
THEIR WATCHHOUSE
EXPERIENCE.

“

It was five days in one watchhouse and then I got transferred and I was in another watchhouse for like 30 something days.

Male participant, 17 years

If you come on weekends, they don't give you showers, they make you wait until Monday ... if you're locked in on Friday, you've got to stay in there in your same clothes. And don't have a shower until Monday and they make you drink a tap on top of the toilet ... the tap on top of the toilet.

Male participant, 18 years



Detention

51 YOUNG PEOPLE PARTICIPATED IN YARNING FOR CHANGE FROM YOUTH DETENTION CENTRES ACROSS QUEENSLAND. THEY SAID THEY MANAGED BEING IN DETENTION THROUGH THE RELATIONSHIPS THEY FORMED WITH PEERS AND STAFF.

Young people said that access to programs while in detention depended on factors such as peer conflicts, resourcing and staffing. They advised that the programs they had participated in, or enjoyed, were cultural programs and physical activities, such as hospitality training, bricklaying, football, gym, pool and landscaping.

Young people identified factors that kept them strong while in detention:

- contact with family members in the community
- peer support
- family members in detention
- detention centre staff.

Young people advised that being sentenced helped to ease their minds in detention — they knew what they were working with and working towards. However, being on remand was mentally hard. Uncertainty around transitioning to community was also a frustration for young people.

“

I'm getting transferred for 9 days.

Male participant, 18 years

“

Stayin' connected to my family. My mum.

Male participant, 15 years



young people in detention were able to recall the number of times they had been admitted to a Queensland detention centre.

Admission	Number of young people
1st	3
2nd	5
3rd	1
4th	4
7th	5
8th	3
9th	1
10th	1
28th	1

Young people mentioned that turning 18 in youth detention worried them due to the uncertainty of finishing their sentence in adult correctional facilities.

Young people spoke about staff at youth detention centres and the impact that they made to their experience. Young people felt that workers who could relate to their lived experiences were more respectful, engaging and caring.

Male participant, 17 years

I was meant to do TAFE when I got out but... I don't know. The first day I got out, that night, stayed up all night, meant to go, I forgot about it, meant to go to sleep early and then the next morning apparently, they came around and I was just, I was asleep, knocked out. I was asleep 'til like four o'clock in the afternoon. I woke up, dad said, 'Oh they came, someone came here lookin' for you'. I said, 'For what?' Dad said, 'Oh for Centrelink, 'cause I had to go to Centrelink, get my payments and stuff done and stuff like, 'Oh what the hell'. 'I had 'em come pick you up next week'. 'Yeah, righteo', and they didn't come. What the hell.

Policing

Families shared their experiences of being harassed by police knocking on the door late at night and searching the premises without a warrant or a body camera. This was a common theme talked about by families. They expressed the stress and anxiety this caused them and their children.

A small number of young people spoke about positive experiences with police, when police officers showed them respect, compassion and empathy.

Participant's father

They're very disrespectful, the police around here, to all the Indigenous children who have been getting ... who are in the Youth Justice, and then they are doubting them all the time. That's the ... that's a big thing about this place, they're always attacking these little kids ...

There's never been a time at home that he's been aggressive to the police but the police are always aggressive. A couple of months in January, they came ... because (family member) was in jail in (YDC) and they've come through and they're like, 'Where's (young person)?' I was like, 'Are you for real? This is 11 o'clock at night. Are you for real? You know where he is. He's in (YDC).' They'd act dumb and then about 20 minutes later, we've had coppers come through looking for (young person) because he was wanted for jumping in a car with the other brother in December, but it was like, 'Are you for real? You just come in'.

Participant's mother

Who gives them the right to putting his hand on other people's children when there are no adults around. That's what I don't like, and then every time, they're always attacking my kids, even my youngest boy, he tried to help a disabled person look for their key up at Coles, and they turned around and got the police and said he was stealing off them, and then they chucked him in the paddy wagon and took him to the police station and I went off. I said, he's hardly a minor, you shouldn't even be taking him to the police station, they didn't bother pulling him up and asking him what he was doing or asked that disabled person what's happening.... what's going on. They just accuse my kids because they've got a record.

Participant's mother

But care, being in care, makes you lose faith and makes you lose hope for anything. So, you just kind of don't bother with it because like it's not around and our mindset's have changed, I guess. And you're just like if you were around your family, you were around, you know the people you were meant to be around in the first place, then maybe you would have taken the interest. But you weren't brought up around it, so you're brought up around other things and you find interest in other things. So, I don't know. It's just... I don't know how to answer that when we were young.

Female participant, 17 years

Child Safety and me



Children, young people and families expressed concern about the child safety system, in particular the impacts of removal and entering the foster care and residential care systems. Most young people had been on a long-term guardianship order with the Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs (Child Safety).

23 young people disclosed that they were in the care of Child Safety from a very young age. All of these young people entered the youth justice system.

Some young people commented that Child Safety did not contact kin or extended family for placement, but instead placed them with a white family or the foster care system. This in turn impacted their ability to know their culture and further removed them from Country and family.

They should be more interested in getting, especially young mob, since they're separating them from their culture, anyway, they should be more invested in teaching them their culture.

Male participant, 25 years



And since then, I've just always had an order. I went back to my mum and dad when they had the boys, like my little brothers, but then we got taken not long after as well.

And so we've just always been in care from there. It was foster care but that's only for when kids are younger. You know, you get your troubled teens and they're not going to take you, like no family's gonna take you when you have your troubled teens, you know you're fuckin' up and you wanna go out and hang out with your friends. They're gonna try and make you a new person while you're young.

And so, once you get older you go to a thing called Resi Care and it's where you get put into houses with other kids and youth workers and depending on how many kids, it depends on how many youth workers there are. And yeah.

Female participant, 17 years

The young people involved with Child Safety knew the system well, to the point where child safety workers would ignore or delay their requests for support. One young person disclosed that he had an accident while visiting his mother, but his mother could not take him to the hospital as she was not his legal guardian and had to call Child Safety's after-hours service to seek permissions and approvals. The young person could not wait and decided to call the ambulance until they could get the after-hours service to provide support.

What keeps me strong?



Cultural connection

The yarns reinforced the importance of connecting to culture and Country for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is vital to their identity and understanding who they are. Knowing and understanding cultural heritage may involve cultural teachings, cultural intelligence and identifying specific aspects of lore. Culture that is instilled into a young person's life at an early age will give them the capacity to understand the consequences of their actions and behaviours.

Some of the young people we spoke to had limited knowledge of their specific culture. When questioned about their culture and connection to their mob, very few young people knew details about their cultural connection, language and lore.

One young person with a very strong cultural identity had their first contact with police at the age of 16 and first contact with the youth justice system at 17, resulting in a probation order of 6 months. On the other hand, children and young people who did not have strong cultural connections or who struggled with their cultural identity were more likely to come to the attention of police and become involved with the youth justice system at an earlier age. If they were removed from family, their cultural connection was more likely to be broken and lost. Many young people only found out about their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander connections later in life when they reconnected with family.

Female participant, age undisclosed

Maybe try my best to get off the drugs and actually take the opportunities that are out there for me, instead of letting it pass.

Community support

From the yarns with young people, it was evident that community support is key to achieving positive life experiences and avoiding the youth justice system. In areas like Mt Isa, Cairns, Mareeba and Atherton, there is a collaborative community response to young people in the youth justice system. Community organisations such as PCYC, Mission Australia, Youth Empowered Towards Independence (YETI) and Wuchoppenn were identified as providing meaningful support for children, young people, and families throughout their time in the youth justice system. Young people said they received meaningful, respectful and non-judgemental support about their situations. YETI was highlighted as providing excellent support due to having great programs and consistent staff, who were committed to a young person's life.

During the yarns with families, an Elder spoke about the importance of cultural programs. There is a need for more in the community, as cultural knowledge is available to share with young people, but lack of funding had a huge impact on the completion of on-Country programs. One of the barriers Elders face in community is not having access to a bus or other transport to visit Country and deliver cultural learnings.

As a strong person, I punish my son to do his full time, to get it all out the way. With the time, I do have some support from some of our Youth Justice support workers that can hear and understand us how we feel because they experienced those values too, like, how we do it. It doesn't need to be Indigenous ... there's various varieties of families in the world that, um, you know, experience the slide factor with our young people who doesn't have a good upbringing.

Participant's mother

My totem on my dad's side is bush turkey.
But I think on my mum's side,
I think it's an owl. Owl, yeah.

Thaayore Clan and Mungkun Clan
from Pormpuraaw.

Yeah, my totem is a ... what is it?
Sugar gliders.

My dad's mob's from Cherbourg,
And my mum's mob from Mareeba.

Townsville and Palm Island.

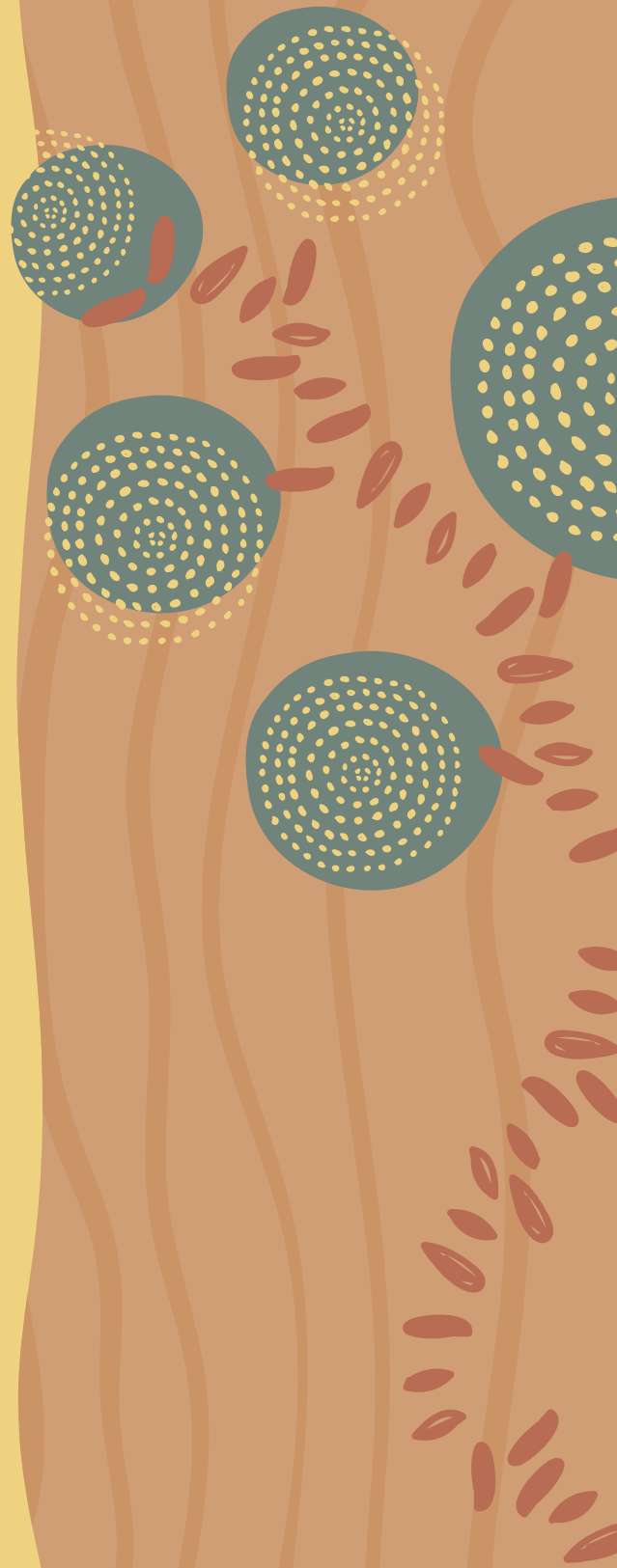
My totem is a cassowary,
owl, and a um, my one
with the dugong.

Cunnamulla.

From Cherbourg and...
so my dad's mum from Cherbourg,
and my mum's mobs from Cairns.

Beauesert, Mununjali.

I was born in Ayr, so like, I'm from Ayr, WA,
Broome, Dalby, Darwin, Bowen, Townsville
... yeah, everywhere, and our tribe is ...
we have two tribes, Bardi and Djiwali
from Broome.



What YOU need to know



Messages from children and young people

Yeah, sit down and talk to them more, you know? Get more experienced boys, you know, who have been in and out, they have done that.

Male participant, 18 years

... you know what would really be good for the young youths, like, to stop them from getting into like ... is something for night time, 'cause when it comes to day time, we've got everything, we've got YETI, we've got all the support that we need ... we've got stuff during the time, and during the day time we hardly do crime in the day time, but when it comes to night time, it's more openly available, where there's not much stuff there out there for us. So, things like maybe YETI, maybe, but a night time YETI, where like there's a big basketball in the middle, and then onto the side you have like a little gaming room with ... what's that ... you know, like garage band or something.

Female participant, 18 years

“

They should be more interested in getting, especially young mob, since they're separating them from their culture, anyway, they should be more invested in teaching them their culture.

Male participant, 19 years

Messages from families

I don't know, just the government should have more courses for the younger kids you know. Yeah, from 16 to 21, like back in my day, 16 to 21 we had courses for six months and it improved every child that was on that course. They just went from low to very very high motivation. They all got jobs.

Participant's father

“

**So more Aboriginal and Torres...
and Torres Strait Islanders staff
in those roles to support our own mob.**

Participant's mother

No one ... no one would help me, I was crying out for help for years and years. I even went to this Indigenous health thing, because my grandson and my boy, they were sniffing a lot, and no one would help me, and I was walkin 24/7, and then everybody was looking at them, but no one didn't want to help, but everybody liked to talk and say, 'Oh, that's a naughty kid.' These things need to change. People need to change their attitude and stop treating them like rubbish. They need some respect, and if they want respect off these kids they need to give them kids some respect, too.

Participant's mother

Talking down to children; they are human beings, they need better respect, but I don't know, you can't change people unless the people want to change them self, but that's very ... I grew up around a lot of mongrel people, and I know what people are like, and that's why I try and listen to little children, and respect them, and then they come back and they give you the respect, but that's where you've got to make the change there with the kids ... you respect them and they'll turn up a better person, a different person, if you show them love and respect, but if you don't do that, they're just going to stay the same person who they are, because people is not trying to change things.

Participant's mother

Conclusion



Observations

***Yarning for Change* is focused on ensuring the voices of children, young people, their families, communities, and those who support them are heard and considered when informing and evaluating changes to the youth justice system in Queensland. We have started the process by asking and listening and now it is time to act.**

Children and young people have a right to participate in the decision-making around matters that directly affect them. It is evident from the yarns we had with children, young people and their families that they are willing and able to share their experiences when they feel seen and respected. Being seen and treated with respect resulted in young people's active and positive engagement. Active and positive engagement is the cornerstone of meaningful empowerment for children, young people and their families. When decisions are made 'about them' but not with them, there is a low likelihood there will be any positive outcome. Young people want to be heard and want to be part of the decision-making around their lives and future.

The children, young people and families we spoke to displayed resilience. We heard that relationships are foundational to young people's wellbeing. Relationships kept them strong; relationships influenced their behaviours; relationships sustained them when incarcerated or removed from their families. Relationships impact their motivation and participation with supports around them. Transformation is relational and not transactional. Their connection to Elders, culture, family, kinship and community support was critical to keeping them out of the youth justice system.

The young people's voices in this report need to be heard and valued, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

We cannot unhear the stories of systemic racism and discrimination – it must be acknowledged and addressed.

... nah, I don't get the say in anything 'cause they just make it up for me. Like before all this last time I was really pissed off because they said they gave me curfew and they... and I said to them, like 'What gives youse the right to give me curfew when the Judge said he didn't want to put me on curfew'. Like doesn't wanna give me bad because he knows that I'll breach it. And every day that I was out I wasn't even home 'cause I didn't wanna stay home because I had curfew and I did not like curfew.

Male participant, 17 years

We cannot ignore the significance of cultural connection and continuity of relationships.

This must be applied to all areas of policy, program and practice development.

We must view children and young people as rights holders and sustain our responsibility to enable participation. We cannot dismiss our obligation to provide quality education, health, disability and other universal supports and services because a young people has committed an offence.

Only by listening to young people about their needs, and what they believe would make a positive difference in their lives, can we be confident that we are designing and delivering services for impact.

Yarning for Change is the critical first step to achieving transformational change in this space.

...just everyone making all of the decisions for me without like, letting me have a say as well. Like, I would like to know more about what's going on around me so I'm not left stressing out and over thinking in myself.

Female participant, age undisclosed

Where to from here?

Yarning for Change is not finished.
It will expand on its work in Phase 1, focusing on:

- Returning to communities to share what we have heard with young people and their families
- Consulting young people regarding future opportunities to build on what we have heard so far
- Continuing to yarn with all children and young people who are or who have been engaged with the Queensland youth justice system
- Yarning with families and community members
- Yarning with service providers involved with youth justice
- Understanding the true impacts of youth justice reforms
- Identifying opportunities for change

Yarning for Change will continue to advocate for the rights and wellbeing of children, young people and their families, whilst enabling the voices of those most impacted by youth justice to be heard.



References

- 1 Queensland Family and Child Commission, *Strategic Plan 2022 – 2026* (qfcc.qld.gov.au)
- 2 *Family and Child Commission Act 2014* (legislation.qld.gov.au)
- 3 *Family and Child Commission Act 2014* (legislation.qld.gov.au)
- 4 Queensland Law Society, *Call to Parties Statement Queensland State Election 2020* (qls.com.au)
- 5 United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (ohchr.org)



About the Queensland Family and Child Commission (QFCC) and this document

The QFCC is a statutory body of the Queensland Government. Its purpose is to influence change that improves the safety and wellbeing of Queensland's children and their families. Under the *Family and Child Commission Act 2014*, the QFCC has been charged by government to review and improve the systems that protect and safeguard Queensland's children. The QFCC also hosts the Child Death Review Board which undertakes system reviews and makes recommendations for systemic improvement following the death of a child connected to the child protection system.



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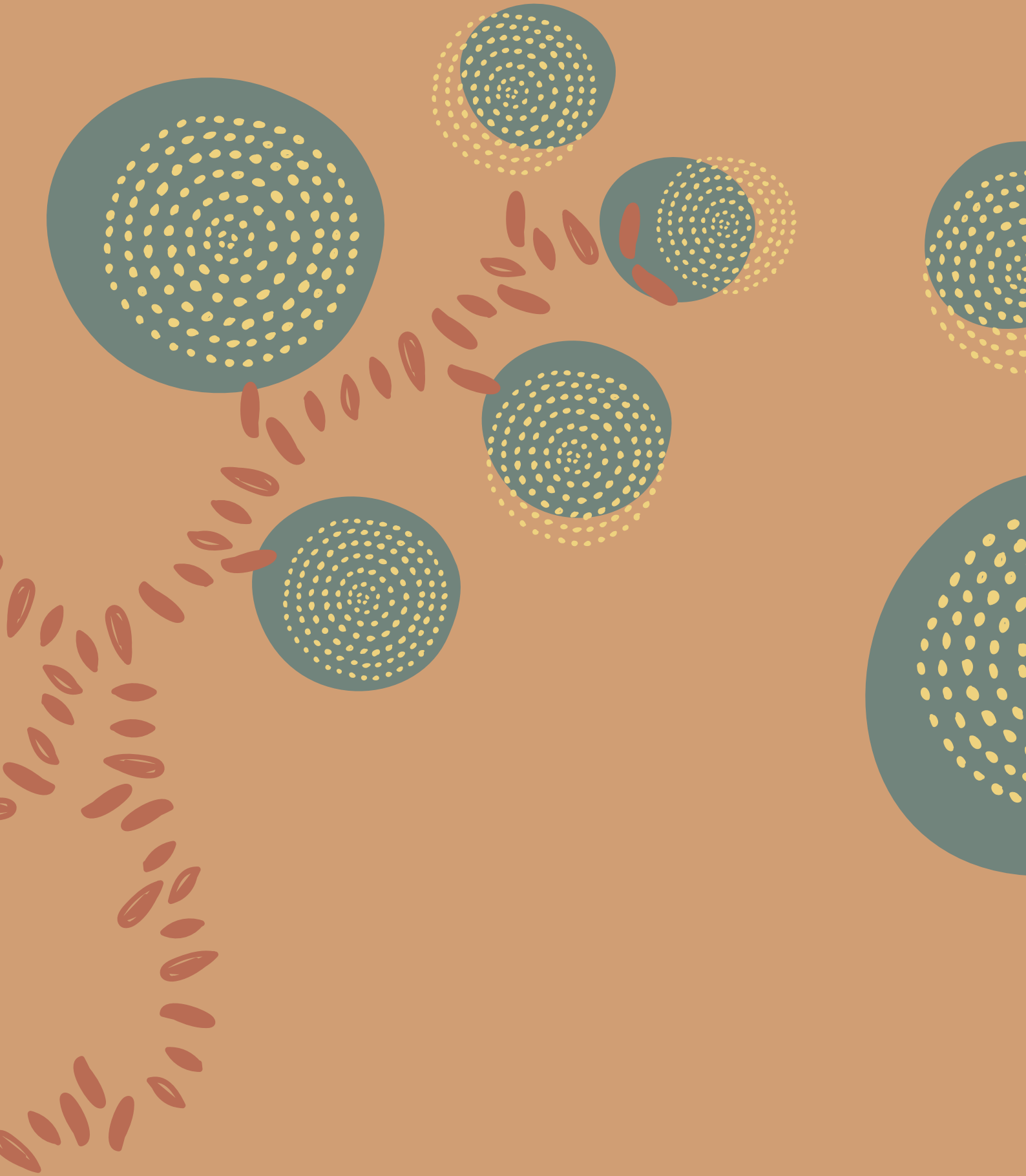
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