

Goldfields Men's Wellbeing Project: What does men's wellbeing look, feel, and sound like in Goldfield's communities.

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Editor Sue Hanson.

Abstract

This paper examines wellbeing for First Nations men in Western Australia's Goldfields following the first year of the Puntu Pirni Palya (PPP) project. The analysis identifies themes from men's discussions in a culturally safe, decolonised environment involving engagement with Cultural Stewards, protocols, artefact creation, language use, and time on Country. Findings show that wellbeing is holistic and strongly linked to Country, kin, culture, language, work, and intergenerational cultural transfer responsibilities.

Establishing a decolonised space empowers men to articulate their needs, priorities, and aspirations that are often overlooked by initiatives grounded in Western frameworks. The paper highlights the significance of decolonised spaces as culturally safe environments for promoting empowerment, leadership, and wellbeing that is rooted in cultural practices. The results indicate that First Nations men's experiences are specific to their local context, and vary across the region. Overall, the paper affirms the importance of culturally-grounded approaches to wellbeing, and critiques deficit-based Western models.

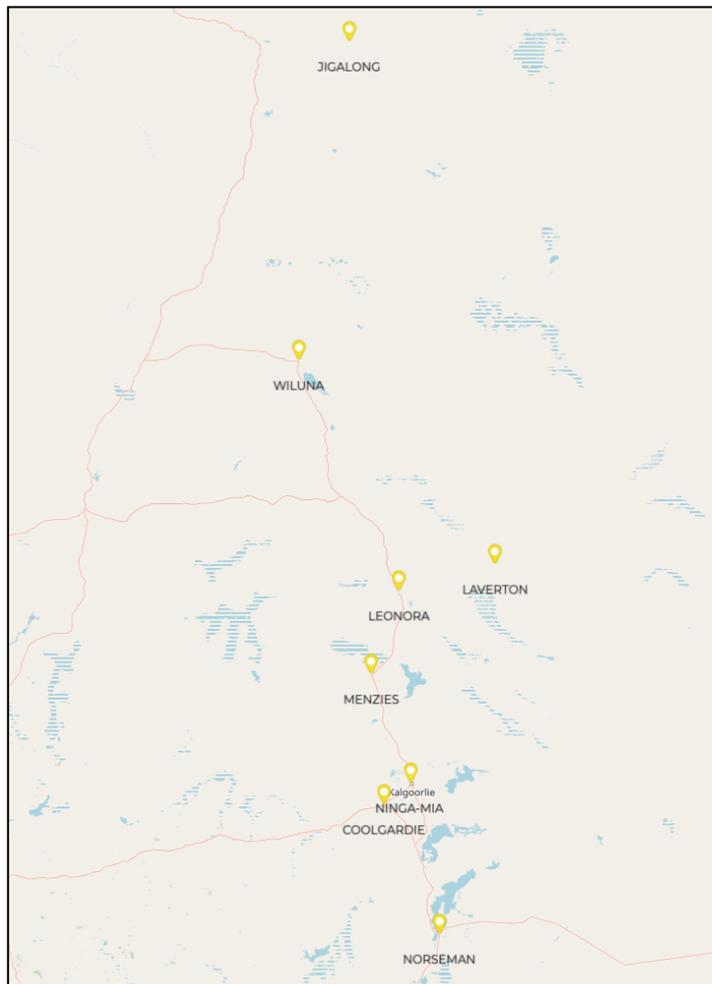
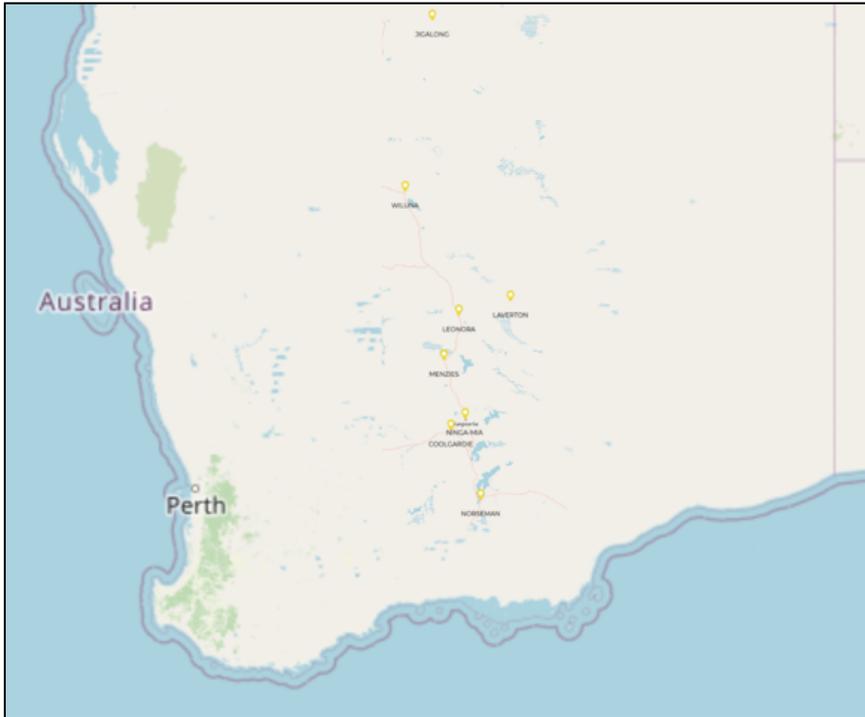


Image 1 & 2: Map of Communities visited by PPP project in 2025

(Mapline, 2025)

1. Introduction

First Nations men are often framed within western deficit discourse as experiencing ‘entrenched disadvantage’, a term referring to multiple and complex disadvantages that are experienced by an individual or community applied against a western evaluation system (Weldon et al., 2025). The critique of Western deficit frameworks is sustained and well-supported by literature. Determination of ‘entrenched disadvantage’ is measured against western criteria such as educational outcomes, employment rates, housing, social exclusion, life expectancy, income levels, disability, trauma, and place base factors. Whilst these indicators reveal structural inequities, they also evaluate First Nations peoples through a deficit lens (Weldon et al., 2022). These Western definitions capture only a small piece of First Nations lived realities and overlook culturally grounded understandings of what wellbeing *actually is* for First Nations communities.

First Nations identifiers of wellbeing are holistic, relational, and grounded in culture, encompassing physical, social, emotional, cultural, and spiritual aspects (Meldrum et al, 2022). The identifiers include connection to country (*Ngurra*), opportunity to speak in heritage language (*Wangka*), connection to social networks (*Yanangu*), and the ability to undertake cultural obligations (*Jukurrpa/Tjukurrpa*) (Weldon et al, 2025). The First Nations identifiers of wellbeing are disparate to the Western identifiers, and reflect a strength-based, culturally-embedded understandings of what it means to live well as a First Nations person.

Systemically, Western interventions have been implemented in an attempt to improve wellbeing for First Nations peoples based on the perception of entrenched disadvantages as identified in the Western frameworks. Such interventions are often ineffective or damaging due to their culturally inappropriate, and culturally unsafe nature (Summerton & Blunden, 2022). Western approaches overlook that wellbeing for First Nations is holistic, interconnected and inseparable from Country and community (Meldrum et al, 2022). A systemic review into cultural interventions targeting mental health and wellbeing for First Nations Australians found that *culturally grounded* approaches are effective and of benefit to First Nations. Such interventions include First Nations peoples in the design, delivery and evaluation process. Interventions are not one-size-fits-all, rather based on local knowledge, lived experiences and cultural knowledge of where the intervention takes place (Summerton & Blunden, 2022). These approaches typically occur in *decolonised spaces*.

A *decolonised space* is one free of all Western programs, influences and ideologies. A space wiped free of Western evaluation, judgement, referrals, theory and processes, which therefore eminences First Nations language, culture and world view. It is a space that is culturally and linguistically safe for First Nation cultural stewardship to be undertaken (Weldon et al, 2025). Research undertaken in New South Wales in which First Nations peoples attended on-country, cultural bush camps indicated that connection to culture was a major positive impactor on wellbeing. Results of the study indicated that engaging in cultural practices improves outcomes at many points for First Nations people (Yashadhana

et al., 2024). This study demonstrates the significance of providing a decolonised spaces to support First Nations wellbeing.

In 2025, the Goldfields Aboriginal Language Centre launched the Yanangu Yarning project, *Puntu Pirni Palya* (PPP), meaning *Many Good Men* in several Goldfields languages. PPP is a mobile workshop led by two experienced First Nations men, providing a *decolonised space* for gathering, sharing, and connecting through the medium of artefact making. Each site features a Cultural Steward to guide traditional practices and support men's wellbeing, aiming to empower Stewards to reclaim and decolonise community spaces. The project aligns with *culturally grounded* approaches as it is *by* First Nations men, *about* First Nations men, and *for* First Nations men.

This paper sets out to explore how wellbeing is experienced and expressed within Goldfields First Nations communities, focusing on themes identified when First Nations men participated in PPP workshops within a culturally grounded, decolonised environment. It further illustrates how such spaces allow First Nations men to share their wellbeing needs, priorities, and aspirations in ways that Western frameworks do not typically capture.

2. Method – Approach and Ways of Working

2.1 Communities and Participants

As of November 2025, a total of 14 trips by the PPP were completed through the Goldfields region (see image 1 & 2). Eight communities have been visited: three once, four twice, and one three times. Typically, each visit runs for one week, Monday to Friday, 8.30-4.30. Across all trips there has been 330 participants, noting these are not all unique individuals, some men participate in several workshops. The demographic is First Nations men from the Goldfields region, over the age of 18, representing generations from Z to Interwar.

2.2 Data Collection

Data is collected throughout the workshops by the workshop coordinators. The purpose of the data collection is to understand how wellbeing is experienced and expressed by men in each community. At the start of each workshop the workshop coordinators inform the participants that notes will be taken during the day.

Data is collected in three main forms:

1. Letterbox Feelings System

As participants arrive, they are invited to indicate how they feel using a five-point scale: *very unhappy*, *somewhat unhappy*, *ok*, *happy*, or *very happy*. Participants then repeat the same process when they leave the workshop. The process provides an indicator of mood change throughout the day which is measured from the morning and afternoon score (see table 1).

Name	Age Demographic					Morning Tally					Afternoon Tally					Score
	Z	M	X	B	I	-	-	0	+	+	-	-	0	+	+	
Key Descriptor						2	1	0	1	2	2	1	0	1	2	
Participant 1 (CS)			x				x						x			+1
Participant 2	x					x						x				+1
Participant 3	x					x									x	+4
Participant 4		x					x						x			+1
Participant 5		x					x						x			+1
Participant 6				x			x							x		+2
Participant 7			x				x							x		+2
Participant 8	x							x						x		+1

Table 2- Letterbox Feelings System (example data)

2. Yarning and Observational Notes

Coordinators engage in informal yarning sessions with participants that naturally occur during the workshops. They listen to men’s conversations, stories, and reflections, rather than asking structured questions in an interview-like setting. Notes are recorded based on a set of wellbeing categories (see table 2). Workshop coordinators *do not* record their interpretations of the men’s conversations. Recording exactly what the men say ensures that First Nations men’s voices and lived experiences remain central.

Men's Wellbeing Project GALCAC Data Collection (*example only*)

Date: 01/01/2025

Location: Fantasy Town

Topic	Data (<i>example only</i>)
Number of people attended workshop	8
Hour's workshop ran	8.30-4.30
Wellness or wellbeing discussion	<i>Yarning in general about hunting being good for the soul. Men spoke about music helping with their mood.</i>
General issues discussed	<i>New gun laws making it difficult to go out bush for hunting.</i>
Community issues discussed	<i>Road conditions after recent weather. Limited youth programs running during school holidays.</i>
Family issues discussed	<i>Balancing work and family life.</i>
Personal issues discussed	<i>Stress related to finding a job. Wanting to reconnect with family.</i>
Legal issues discussed	<i>Questions about licensing and fines.</i>
Healing discussions	<i>Yarning about grief. Talking about importance of time out bush for healing.</i>
Cultural discussion	<i>Conversations about traditional tools and how they were used in daily life.</i>
Artefact discussion	<i>Men discussing selling artefacts. Talking about the correct woods for making Digeridoos.</i>
Men's wellbeing project discussion	<i>Feeling like being at the workshop helps them get things off their chest and relax for a while.</i>
Language discussion	<i>Language was spoken throughout the day. Talks of concern about language being lost with the older fellas.</i>
Comments by external agencies, organisations, people, etc.	<i>Local council stopped by and said they were really happy the truck is in town. They took posters to spread around town.</i>
Incidents	<i>Heated discussions about religion.</i>
Disclosures	<i>One man disclosed on going fighting at home and feeling overwhelmed.</i>
Cultural Steward matters	<i>Spoke about passing their cultural knowledge on to students at the school.</i>

Table 2- Daily notes taken during workshops (*example data*)

3. Cultural Stewards

In workshops where a Cultural Steward was present, they were invited to respond to four questions about outcomes they hoped to see. The questions include personal, community, and project and an option to share suggestions for strengthening the project (see table 3). The input of Cultural Stewards offered insight and guidance from local leaders and knowledge holders.

Cultural Steward Notes (example only)

Cultural Steward	Personal outcomes you are working towards.	Outcomes you would like to see for your community.	Feelings on the project outcomes being met or not.	Suggestions of outcomes they would like to see.
Mickey Duck	Would like to be recognised as a leader for my community.	Would like all men involved to reflect positively after the workshops.	Very pleased with the way the men like being involved and we all love it.	A similar project for high school kids and women.

Table 3 - Cultural Steward notes recorded at the end of visit (example data)

2.3 Setting

All data collection occurred during the workshop; the truck being the primary setting. Locations varied by community, typically, the truck was in central town spaces; in some cases, bush settings are chosen when access and community preference allowed. Each site provided a decolonised and culturally safe space (see image 3).



Image 3: PPP truck set up

2.4 Analysing Data

All notes and observations made by the workshop coordinators were read several times to gain an accurate understanding of what men were expressing during the workshops. Prominent themes were identified through this process and used to guide further analysis. Each theme was visually coded to represent key ideas that occurred across communities. Notes or quotes that did not fit within a theme but still carried meaning or reflected important insight were also kept and considered in the findings. Such processes ensured all voices and experiences remained visible, rather than limiting them to predefined categories. The analysis allowed the data to speak for itself; themes emerged naturally from the voices of First Nations men within the decolonised space. These themes will be discussed below.

3. Findings

3.1 Letterbox system

In all cases but one, the letterbox system showed that participants perceived happiness, either improved at the end of the day or remained the same. The individual who did not improve was due to external factors unrelated to the workshops, that were troubling the man. Measurements of wellbeing through the letterbox system only records feelings at that period in time. It does not record a continued perception of wellbeing after the workshop ceases.

3.2 Connection to Country

3.2.1 Land

In all communities but Leonora, men consistently described time in the bush and staying connected to Country as central to their wellbeing. Men spoke of bush trips as healing, grounding, and spiritually strengthening, with statements such as ‘bush trips help with connection to Country’ (Menzies and Norsman), ‘working on Country makes me feel happy’ (Norseman), and ‘Country heals [our] spirit’ (Wiluna). Men highlighted the significance of going out bush whether hunting, passing on cultural skills, or doing business. Hunting was described as ‘good for the soul’ (Menzies). Men in Laverton expressed a desire for organised community bush trips.

In Wiluna, intergenerational teaching, artefact making, and cultural practices occurred naturally on Country when the truck was there. Men in Norseman explained they swim in the salt lake or ocean to ‘heal’. Overall, men articulated that their wellness depends on regular time in the bush, where they can connect with land, heal their ‘body, mind and spirit’ (Wiluna), and sustain cultural practices that ‘make [them] feel like being home again with [their] people’ (Wiluna).

3.2.2 Kin

All communities apart from Ninga-Mia spoke about family. In Coolgardie and Menzies men reflected on the value of family togetherness saying they were looking forward to time with their families on the weekend ‘away from town’. Coolgardie also felt there was ‘a lot of heart break and fractured families in and around Coolgardie, no one is willing to forgive or forget about their own pettiness’. Menzies felt mining was ‘a positive thing to keep families together’.

In Norseman, men discussed the pain of not knowing both parents and the sense of being lost that comes with it. There were also stories of men trying to reconnect with family, avoid returning to harmful relationships, and build stronger family units (Norseman). In Wiluna and Jigalong strong family life and time at home was observed as central to wellbeing. In Wiluna families often hunt together to keep traditional foods in their diets.

3.2.3 Language

Across all communities men spoke traditional language. In some communities the language men speak is a traditional mother tongue (Wiluna, Laverton, Jigalong). In other communities it is several languages, or Aboriginal English. In Ninga-Mia men were switching between four languages so everyone could understand. In Laverton, sign language was used at times due

to personal needs of a participant. In other communities, the presence of different languages means the language is not used as fully or consistently.

In Coolgardie, men spoke with concern that their language is ‘mostly gone with the old people’, highlighting a sense of loss and urgency around preservation. In Norsemen men spoke of wanting to ‘pull their language back into the homes and speak it’. In Menzies, some men were disappointed language has stopped being taught at the school.

3.3 Health

Health was not a dominant topic but still brought meaningful insight to understand wellbeing. Coolgardie, Menzies, Norseman, Laverton, Wiluna, and Jigalong spoke about health-related topics at some point. Coolgardie, Norseman, Laverton, and Wiluna expressed concerns about alcohol and drug use and the impact these issues have on men, families, and community. Some men in Wiluna spoke about their mental health and shared that attending the workshops helped to ‘lift stress for a few hours’ another was ‘happy to do something practical’. The men in Jigalong felt happy with the health system in town. The men there also talked about being more conscious of what they eat, choosing natural sugars only as they were concerned about the decline in men’s health due to sugars.

3.4 Community Support

Across sites, men reflected on the varying levels of support they experience within their communities. In Ninga-Mia, concerns centred on ‘broken promises of housing’, and ongoing housing insecurities. Men in Menzies and Coolgardie described persistent racism and segregation, including experiences in workplaces, with police and community members, summarised as ‘one law for the blacks and one for whites’. These men spoke of feeling ‘disengaged’ from the community and having minimal support from town officials. Similarly in Norsemen, men felt unsupported by the local council, mentioning a lack of employment for locals, poor communication, low wages, and insufficient services. Jigalong and Norseman both reported a lack of accessible services. In Laverton men spoke of feeling the need to ‘have weapons to feel safe at night’.

In contrast, men in Wiluna spoke positively about strong community cohesion. The new town CEO was described as inclusive and committed to ‘develop the town with everyone’s input’, including children. During the PPP visit, the CEO, school deputy, police and other community organisations engaged with the project at the invitation of the men and Cultural Steward. Some were sitting for a yarn, others joining artefact making. Police noted appreciation for the opportunity to ‘positively engage with the men in town’. The proactive governance environment in the town had a clear impact on the First Nations men’s sense of wellbeing.

Some towns displayed support for culture. In Laverton, local organisations occasionally joined in the workshops at the invitation of the Cultural Steward. In Norseman, a service station donated water and hot drinks for the men. In Menzies and Leonora, visiting organisations, police and council staff expressed encouragement for the PPP and said they would help spread the word throughout town.

3.5 Employment

Coolgardie, Menzies, Norseman, Laverton, Wiluna, and Jigalong all reported limited and unstable employment opportunities. Participants in Coolgardie and Jigalong reported inconsistent or unreliable work. In Menzies the men expressed hope that the new mining projects might give work opportunities, tempered by concerns that it would prioritise FIFO positions over local employment. In Norseman, several men had a strong desire to support their families and ‘start fresh again’ but felt the shire was reluctant to hire locals, expressing the difficulty of obtaining work outside the ranger program. Laverton men highlighted the lack of opportunities available to young people, and Wiluna men spoke of the challenges in accessing roles not specifically designated for First Nations applicants.

3.6 The Next Generation

In some communities men spoke of their worries about today’s youth as well as their hopes for passing on knowledge and skills. The communities expressed concern that young people were losing connection to culture and respect for Elders. The men in Menzies felt unrest about ‘a growing issue of kids not developing into adulthood correctly’. The Cultural Steward from Laverton was concerned about youth ‘having no respect for Elders’. This was supported by elder men from that community saying they ‘just walk away and don’t get involved with the younger ones’.

Some men talked about ways to re-engage with young people through culture. In Laverton, men discussed the need to ‘sit with younger fellas’ to pass on traditional tool-making skills and cultural teachings. The Cultural Steward from Wiluna reflected, ‘I want my children to follow in my footsteps’ and felt that ‘younger kids from 14 need to start learning the artefact skills’. The Cultural Steward from Jigalong wanted to see schools ‘allow for cultural teaching for 13–15-year-old boys to learn spear crafts and first woomera before business’. The men indicated that the school needed a bicultural curriculum.

Some men had ideas on how to connect youth wellbeing to opportunity and purpose. Men in Norseman suggested a centre for older teenagers could help reduce ‘the drug scene’. Men in Laverton felt it would be better if young people had more work opportunities in and around town. In Wiluna, men shared ideas to have a mobile workshop similar to the PPP for Ranger trips as a way to ‘pass on knowledge to younger fellas’ and keep culture strong.

3.7 Leadership

This category captures moments where Cultural Stewards (CS) demonstrated leadership and responsibility. In every location, Cultural Stewards were ready, willing and capable of stepping up. The opportunity for genuine cultural stewardship was grasped as many Cultural Stewards stated they had been waiting for an opportunity to be resourced to undertake their important role. Not every community has a CS, and while all CSs step up in their roles, the following examples stand out.

1. An incident occurred in Coolgardie where a Council worker in uniform walked past the workshop making a racial remark. The following day the CS decided to move the truck to bush, a culturally safe location, to protect his people from any further racism. He later reported the worker to the council.

2. In Laverton the CS spoke with the younger men about respect, drinking, drugs, and their impact on the community. On the next visit to this community the CS suggested a young man visit the clinic for an ongoing headache and towards the end of the week he invited local organisations in the town to come and have a yarn with the group.
3. In Wiluna the CS recommended a troubled man to visit the PPP. Later in the week, the two Cultural Stewards organised a BBQ to support the men in the workshop and the workshop coordinators.
4. In Jigalong, the PPP team was invited into the community by Elders. On arrival, the PPP team was directed, and the project managed, purely by Elders with no European management contact. The Elders demonstrated capable leadership in organising the PPP visit, the engagement of men, collection of correct artefact wood, and management of the 5 days of the workshop visit. One Elder rang up the GALCAC CEO after the visit to personally thank GALCAC for the visit and book the next PPP visit. It was clear the PPP project met the Elder's needs.

3.8 Empowerment and wellbeing

This category captures moments where men gave signs of empowerment or wellbeing as a result from the PPP space. Many men associated the PPP with 'feeling good', increased 'self-belief', and a sense of 'self-worth'. In Ninga-Mia, one man explained that 'all us men have been in a revolving door to jail, and the PPP is offering a space for change'. Many men across Ninga-Mia, Norseman, Laverton and Wiluna spoke about wanting to continue artefact making beyond the workshop. Others expressed hopes for a permanent shed in their communities or ranger programs. In Wiluna, participants described the PPP as 'helping men feel more confident to stand up and talk in the community' and valued being able to 'sit without judgement'. On the final day in Wiluna the group chose to continue past the scheduled finish time because 'no one wanted to end the day'. Men in Norseman and Laverton described the space as 'mentally relieving', 'relaxing', and free from judgement, enabling them to 'take the load off' and feel 'safe'.

Men from Roebourne, who visited the PPP project when in Kalgoorlie, returned to Roebourne and immediately set about establishing a men's project along the same lines as the PPP project. The sense of cultural safety provided in a decolonised space, along with the wording to articulate what a decolonised space was, behaved like, felt like, and was managed, empowered the men to action.

Community								
Theme	Ninga Mia	Coolgardie	Menzies	Norseman	Leonora	Laverton	Wiluna	Jigalong
✓ = 1-2 ✓✓ = 3-5 ✓✓✓ = 5+	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	-	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓
Land	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	-	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓
Kin	✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	-	✓	✓✓	✓✓
Language	✓	✓	✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓
The Next Generation	-	-	✓	✓	-	✓✓	✓✓	✓
Community Support	-	-	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓
Community Barriers	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓✓✓	-	✓	✓	✓✓
Employment	-	✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Health	-	✓	✓	✓✓	-	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
Leadership	-	✓✓	-	-	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	-
Empowerment & Wellbeing	✓✓	✓	✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	-

Table 4- Frequency of wellbeing themes discussed during workshops, using 'ticks' to represent how often each theme recurred.

Community									
Theme	Ninga Mia	Coolgardie	Menzies	Norseman	Leonora	Laverton	Wiluna	Jigalong	
Land	Spiritual healing.	Men at ease in the bush. Happy to have a lazy day yarning in the bush.	'Hunting is good for the soul'.	Bush trips, working on country makes me feel happy'. Swimming in Salt Lake and ocean to heal.	-	Hunting with family helps wellbeing.	Need time in bush to stay connected to Nigarra (country) and to heal body, mind, and spirit. Keeping traditional foods in their families' diets.	Hunting and gathering. Men yarning about being up all-night singing to the stars.	
Kin	'Heartbreak and fractured families'.	Looking forward to time with families on the weekend.	Mining being a positive thing to keep families together Family cultural obligations.	Some men not sure who their parents are leaving them lost in knowing who they are.	-	Family fighting.	'Time at home with family is valued when we can get it'.	Trying to build stronger families.	
Language	Language switching between Ngadjju, Wangkajata, Nganayjarra and English for all to understand.	'Language is mostly gone with the old people'	Disappointed language has stopped being taught at the school.	Naming weapons and trees in Ngadjju. Want to put language back in homes.	Some language spoken.	Language spoken. Signing was used due to personal needs of a participant.	Most days spent entirely speaking Martu. Sign and hand language used.	Martu Wangka spoken most days.	
The Next Generation	-	-	'Kids not developing into adulthood properly'.	Men would like a centre for teenagers, which they feel would also help reduce the local drug scene.	-	Elder men don't want to get involved with the young generation. Elder going to pass on tool making skills to younger men.	Want to pass on knowledge to younger generations. 'Kids at school need to learn artefact making'.	Cultural Steward would like to pass on learnings to younger generations.	
Community Support	-	-	Community Council officer visited. PPP given power and facilities by M.A.C.	Council workers happy to see PPP in town. Men happy with support from Meeadac.	Police putting the word out for PPP.	LCCA purchased all produced artefacts and helped PPP while in town.	Police, school deputy, town CEO invited to join in workshops. CEO wants to develop town with everyone's input.	Happy with a good health system in town.	
Community Barriers	Minimal community support. Racism. Broken promises of housing.	Segregation. Racism from community, police and workplaces.	'No crime in community'. Racism. Segregation.	Not feeling supported by local council. Current services don't support cultural needs.	-	Disrespect from police during a workshop. Homelessness.	Not enough support.	Lack of services in town.	
Employment	-	Inconsistent work.	Hoping new mine brings local jobs. Some men are job sharing	'Need work to look after our families'. Difficult to get jobs outside of the ranger program. Men want jobs to start fresh again.	Yarns about income opportunities.	Yarning about lack of work opportunities.	Hard to get work outside positions allocated for First Nations peoples only.	Hard to access work as jobs aren't reserved for community members only.	
Health	-	Concerned about drinking problems rising.	Liver and kidney health discussions. Wanting to learn bush healing.	Workshops 'lifting stress' Concern about drug use in town. Suicide.	-	Drugs spreading in community. Drinking.	Dealing with mental health. 'Too much drinking'.	Declining men's health due to sugars. Yarning about only having natural sugars when needed.	
Leadership	-	CS decided to move truck to the bush to protect his people from further racism.	-	-	Advice on where to park truck.	Cultural Steward spoke to young men about showing respect in the community. CS invited organisations to sit in on workshop.	Cultural Steward organised BBO for everyone at the workshop.	-	
Empowerment & Wellbeing	'PPP offering a space for change'. Plans to make artefacts in the future. 'Happy to have found my skills'.	Want PPP set up in town permanently.	Looking forward to PPP return.	PPP making men feel 'relaxed and not being judged'. Mentally relieving environment.	Hoping for PPP to be going to Ranges.	Good to be away from drink and smoking while PPP is in town. 'PPP space is mind relaxing'.	Thankful for space to sit without judgement. PPP helping men to feel more 'confident to stand up and talk in the community'.	-	

Table 5: Yarns and observational notes illustrating how men described what wellbeing looks, feels, and sounds like in their communities, corresponding to themes discussed in findings.

4. Discussion

This report aims to capture what wellbeing looks, feels, and sounds like in Goldfields communities through the voices and experiences of First Nations men. The letter box data collection system clearly indicates that First Nations men's wellbeing improved when they were in a decolonised space.

4.1 Significance of a decolonised space

The decolonised space created through the PPP project functions as a culturally safe environment. The space actively challenges dominant Western approaches and creates conditions where the impacts of colonisation could be acknowledged and resisted (Milligan et al., 2021). Cultural safety was determined by the men themselves through overwhelming statements of feeling safe, relaxed and empowered. Research literature consistently demonstrates that being on Country and engaging in culturally grounded practices supports trust and emotional openness (Dudgeon et al., 2014). The findings align with the evidence gathered through the PPP workshops, as men openly shared personal experiences and priorities that may not surface in mainstream settings.

The decolonised space facilitated yarning and shared story telling which empowered men to express what wellbeing looks, feels and sounds like in their communities, on their own terms. This approach ensures discussions are authentic rather than a structured interview process which can shape what researchers expect or hope to hear (Scribbr, 2025). In the decolonised space men discussed wellbeing in ways that extend beyond Western concepts of wellbeing. Wellbeing was expressed relationally through connection to Country, kinship, and cultural responsibility. First Nations wellbeing is interconnected with many dimensions of experiences which include cultural, social, historical, and political (Gee et al., 2014).

Leadership and empowerment emerged naturally within the decolonised space as cultural leaders exist and are empowered. Men were taking on mentoring, teaching, and decision-making roles with very little encouragement. Some Cultural Stewards expressed the opinion that they had been waiting for an opportunity to step up and lead their fellow men, and the PPP project provided this. It was very clearly expressed in every location that there are capable cultural leaders who need to be resourced to undertake their role. The PPP project provides this, and many men felt emboldened by the opportunity and expressed that they will carry on their leadership when the PPP truck left. These men are often disempowered and unrecognised by Western programs and lose hope with the deluge of Western programs introduced each year.

Decolonised spaces redistribute power and recognise First Nations men as knowledge holders rather than service recipients (Weldon et al., 2025). The decolonised space contributed to men's sense of agency and purpose by supporting self-determination and strengthening cultural authority. The findings reflect existing evidence that culturally grounded interventions led by First Nations foster empowerment and collective leadership (Summerton & Blunden, 2022) (Dudgeon et al., 2014).

4.2 First Nations men are not homogeneous

Western research has a long history of homogenising First Nations peoples by treating diverse communities as a single, undifferentiated group (Lyeo et al., 2024). This is reinforced by constant comparisons between First Nations and non-Indigenous populations which position First Nations through a deficit lens of experiencing ‘entrenched disadvantage’. Such framings overlook the profound diversity, capability, and strength that exists across First Nations communities (Lowitja Institute, 2018).

A recent scoping review identified how First Nations were represented in research on COVID-19 related outcomes. The review critiqued 35 relevant studies and found, diversity across First Nations communities in Australia were severely underrepresented (Lyeo et al., 2024). The review found that First Nations were categorised into one group as ‘Indigenous Australian’ or ‘Aboriginal’ regardless of which nation they identified with (Lyeo et al., 2024). While the review focuses on one category it highlights a broader issue in Western research where First Nations are treated as a uniform population. Such homogenisation erases community-specific realities and limits the usefulness of research for policy or practice.

The findings of this report reinforce that Goldfields First Nations men are not a homogenous group. Despite communities being located within the same region, expressions of wellbeing are localised, contextual, and community specific. Men’s descriptions show that wellbeing is shaped by relationships within community, connection to Country, kinship, access to services, the presence or absence of support from external agencies, and the strength of cultural practices. Understanding wellbeing requires attention to each community’s unique context, history and relationships, rather than homogenising diverse communities under a single narrative (Anderson et al., 2025).

4.3 Coexistence of Western and Traditional Wellbeing Domains

The men’s discussions reinforce a well-established body of research, that First Nations wellbeing is holistic and deeply connected to Country. Bush trips, hunting and cultural teaching were consistently described as healing, grounding and identity-affirming. Country functioned not only as a place of connection, but as a site for intergenerational teaching, cultural responsibility and reconnection for men who felt disconnected or unsettled. The findings also show that men value employment, but not in ways typically framed within Western notions of productivity or individual success. Work was discussed in relation to caring for family, meeting cultural responsibilities and creating opportunities to ‘start fresh’. However, men identified significant barriers to employment, including limited roles outside designated First Nations positions, experiences of racism, culturally unsafe workplaces, and restricted access to local meaningful work. These barriers undermine men’s ability to fulfil both cultural and family obligations, with direct consequences to wellbeing.

The findings demonstrate the lived realities of First Nations men as bicultural people who are required to navigate Western systems alongside cultural obligations. While employment was the most frequently discussed Western system, men also raised issues related to housing, accessing services, and engagement with the digital world. A recent qualitative report from the United States, surveyed and interviewed First Nations people working in

Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Medicine (STEMM) fields. The report found that participants faced unique cultural, spiritual and ethical conflicts and as a result, participants discussed strategies they create to navigate those conflicts (Castagno et al., 2022). The study reflects challenges described by men in the Goldfields which highlights the wellbeing impacts of living within an intercultural space.

5. Limitations

A limitation of this first-year dataset is the uneven number of visits to each community. As some communities had more opportunities to engage in a culturally safe, decolonised space, they naturally contributed more material to the dataset. For example, Ninga-Mia and Leonora had only one visit each, whereas Norseman had three. The results in *table 4* demonstrates the variation in the volume of notes through communities.

It is also important to note that the absence of a topic in a particular community's data does not indicate that the issue is not relevant. It may have not surfaced during the workshops. As the project continues and relationships deepen, it is envisaged that a broader range of wellbeing themes will emerge.

5.1 Community Administration Capability

A significant limitation to the project operating over the entire Goldfields region is the Ngaanyatjarra Council's refusal to allow the project to run in the seven NG Lands communities. Written requests for the PPP project have been received from Tjukurla, Irrunytju, Papulankutja, and Wanarn communities in the Ngaanyatjarra Council region, but as permission was required from the Ngaanyatjarra Council, the PPP project has not been able to extend to include these communities. The reason given by the Ngaanyatjarra Council was that a men's wellbeing project was not required.

Similarly, Tjuntjuntjarra Community staff initially refused the project in early 2025 without providing opportunity for the community council to meet with PPP project team members about the project. However, a staff changeover late in 2025 has resulted in the incumbent CEO requesting the PPP project be extended to the community. Tjuntjuntjarra will be visited twice in 2026. The CEO is very excited about the project and has stated the men in the community are also very keen.

The project has been limited by the experience, knowledge and capability of community staff to support genuine First Nations created and led projects. In the vast majority of Goldfields First Nations communities, staff and community councils have welcomed the project, and an opportunity to resource community Elders and Cultural Stewards to undertake their role. The chance to engage men with a wellbeing project has also been welcomed.

In a few locations, it has been difficult for the PPP project to gain traction as community staff are overwhelmed with tasks, do not understand the importance of creating genuine First Nations decolonised spaces, perceive wellbeing as being a health matter, or do not believe the PPP project meshes with community strategy, planning and direction. The clash

between the Ngaanyatjarra Council's opinion that the PPP project is not needed, and the written request from the four NG Lands communities for the project illustrates a limitation the project is working to address. Men's wellbeing through culture is limited by community staff's engagement with the project.

5.2 Wellbeing Perceived as a Health Matter

A further limitation to the project has been the Western perception that wellbeing is a health-related construct. This has been evidenced by contact with the project by health personnel and organisations with the expectation that the space is for health-related matters. For example, a doctor wanted to use the space to talk about physical wellbeing, a needle exchange project also wanted to use the space to deliver a program.

The PPP project addresses First Nations wellbeing through creation of a decolonised space to emphasise language and culture, and to empower cultural leadership. The project is a space which provides opportunity for cultural stewardship by clearing away all Western ideology and programs. A space where traditional processes of wellbeing can be practiced. The project is about providing a space for First Nations men to make decisions about their own wellbeing. This report illustrates that very few men discussed wellbeing as a health-related topic in the PPP space. Overwhelmingly, wellbeing is perceived as cultural and family connection.

5.3 The Invisibility of Cultural Responsibility and Law

A limitation to the project has been the invisibility of the Cultural Stewards and Elder's responsibilities to their communities, by wider society. These men undertake their critical role with little to no support, resourcing, and visibility. Their role is not only cultural stewardship but Law keeping. In one instance of a workshop, police entered the PPP project space in Laverton and removed two men. There was no discussion either with the Cultural Steward nor the PPP project staff before removing the men. The Cultural Steward was in control of the environment, and his authority was completely usurped by the police. The action completely devalued First Nations Law and First Nations Law keepers.

The matter was addressed by a PPP project staff member attending the police station to speak to the officer in charge, who was rightfully concerned about the actions of his team members.

6. Conclusion

At the end of the first-year of operation, the PPP project has demonstrated overwhelmingly that Goldfields First Nations men's wellbeing is greatly enhanced through the provision of a *culturally safe, decolonised space* to gather and engage with language, culture and one another.

The project has demonstrated that cultural leaders are not only available and willing to step up into the role, but that these leaders have been waiting for an opportunity to do so, and resources to successfully steward culture. The Cultural Stewards have the skills, knowledge

and capability to address men's wellbeing using cultural processes that are eons old. And that the men are very keen to work with a cultural leader to engage with culture in a safe and correct manner. That men believe in the cultural processes and they work for them. In some locations, more than one Cultural Steward was engaged to ensure correct cultural protocols were abided by. Once Cultural Stewards realised the PPP project was a culturally safe space, cultural protocols occupy the space and participants can relax and engage.

Across the Goldfields communities, men described wellbeing in ways that reflect lived experience grounded in family, community, employment, culture, language, positive processes of raising youth, and the continuation of cultural knowledge. Central to these outcomes is the guidance of local Cultural Stewards, whose leadership supports cultural safety and strengthens men's sense of responsibility. The presence of Cultural Stewards ensured the space remained community-led and responsive to local priorities.

The findings in this report align with existing research demonstrating that First Nations men's wellbeing is framed through a cultural lens rather than a Western biomedical or deficit-based health lens. Communities are capable of articulating their wellbeing needs, strengths, and aspirations when provided a *culturally safe, decolonised space*. The outcomes achieved in this first year ratify the PPP process and provide a strong foundation for future years. A process where First Nations have been involved in the design, delivery and ongoing development. The PPP project demonstrates the ongoing value of culturally grounded, decolonised spaces in supporting First Nations men's wellbeing and cultural continuity.

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