

# Summary of Evaluation of The Torch's Indigenous Arts in Prison & Community Program

*"The program helped me and it will help others just like me. You can't underestimate the change that comes when you take part in the program. It changes you once you get to interact with cultural knowledge and start to paint your own stories." (IC)*

## BACKGROUND

### Aboriginal over-representation in the criminal justice system

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders continue to be over-represented in the justice system. First Nations Australians make up less than 3% of the Australian population yet represent 27% of the national prison population<sup>1</sup>. In 2017 in Victoria, Aboriginal people made up 8.5% of the Victorian prison population despite accounting for only 0.6% of the Victorian adult population. They are more likely to be on remand and be serving a shorter prison sentence, with many Aboriginal men and women discharged having spent less than a year in prison.

### Victoria's Prison Population

Since 1977, the prison population in Victoria has continually increased from 1,488 to 7,668 by June 2018. In 2018, 685 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were imprisoned representing 9% of all prisoners. Not only are Indigenous people over-represented in the prison system, their rate of imprisonment is increasing at a faster rate than non-Indigenous prisoners – 11.6% compared to 6.4%. From 30 June 2017 to 30 June 2018, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners increased from 612 to 685 an increase of 11.9%.

Those who have been incarcerated previously are at higher risk of re-offending<sup>2</sup>. In 2016-17, the recidivism rate for Aboriginal prisoners in Victoria was 53.4% compared to 42.8% for their non-Aboriginal counterparts<sup>3</sup>.

### The Torch

The Torch has been delivering the Indigenous Arts in Prisons and Community (IAPC) Program for over seven years. Since June 2011, The Torch has been providing art, cultural and arts industry support to Indigenous offenders and ex-offenders in Victoria.

The IAPC Program accords with research highlighting the significant role cultural and arts program can play in connecting or reconnecting Indigenous prisoners with their culture.

The program supports the development of self-esteem, confidence and resilience to the re-offending cycle through cultural strengthening and artistic expression.



#### The Torch

46 St Kilda Road, St Kilda, VIC 3182  
03 9042 1236

thetorch.org.au  
facebook.com/thetorchproject

(IP) = In-Prison participant (IC) = In-Community participant  
(AWO) = Aboriginal Wellbeing Officer

<sup>1</sup> Aboriginal Social and Emotional Wellbeing Plan, Justice Health and Corrections Victoria, 2015

<sup>2</sup> Sentencing Advisory Council – Statistics, Website [www.sentencingcouncil.vic.gov.au/statistics/sentencing-statistics/victoria-prison-population](http://www.sentencingcouncil.vic.gov.au/statistics/sentencing-statistics/victoria-prison-population) cited November 2018

<sup>3</sup> Corrections Victoria Data Warehouse, ABS 4517.0 Prisoners in Australia, 2017

Participant rehabilitation is assisted through the generation of opportunities for Indigenous offenders to reconnect with family and culture, foster new networks and to pursue educational and vocational avenues upon release.

## Evaluation

From April to December 2018, EMS Consultants completed a process and outcomes evaluation of the Indigenous Arts in Prisons and Community Program (IAPC) delivered by The Torch to assess the implementation, reach, uptake and impacts of the program against its aim and objectives and make recommendations for its continued improvement

The evaluation was intended to build on the initial evaluation of the program undertaken in 2012.

## METHODS

The evaluation process included a mixed method approach to data collection and analysis including a review of program administrative processes, analysis of program data, interviews with In-Prison and In-Community participants, and consultations with a wide range of stakeholders including The Torch Board and staff members, Corrections Victoria staff (including prison staff), funding bodies and partners and TAFE Arts Teachers delivering programs in prison settings. Throughout the evaluation 82 stakeholders were interviewed/consulted.

There was sufficient program data to identify program growth in terms of number of participants and the financial returns from sales of artworks, license fees and products. Stakeholder feedback enabled the evaluators to confidently also report on the impact of the program on:

- participant connection to culture and community and strengthening of cultural identity
- development of participant creative skills
- participant social and emotional wellbeing

There was insufficient data to accurately identify recidivism rates of participants as defined by Corrections Victoria, however, it was possible to identify “return to prison” rates for current In-Community program participants.

## HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS

There are three main components of the program:

1. The **In-Prison component** is run in 15 Victorian correctional facilities. Incarcerated Indigenous men and women are supported to learn more about their language group, culture and country and provided support with art skills development.
2. The **Post-release (In-Community) component** supports those who have been released from prison and assists in their integration back in to the community. It encourages participants to continue to build their cultural knowledge, confidence and art practice. Support is provided to assist participants to foster new networks, new vocational opportunities and encourage post-release pathways.
3. The **Economic Development component** includes providing participants with opportunities to earn income through the promotion, licensing and sale of artworks. The Torch curates exhibitions and maintains a physical and on-line gallery. Post-release participants are engaged to install and promote exhibitions which develops their arts industry skills and networks. The annual **CONFINED** exhibition has been the key public event of The Torch program since its inception and is the key visual arts component of the City of Port Phillip’s Yalukit Willam Ngargee Festival.

## PROCESS EVALUATION FINDINGS

As at 30 June 2018, there were a total of 267 participants in The Torch programs. These included 188 participants in The Torch In-Prison program (representing approximately one quarter (27.4%) of all Indigenous prisoners in Victoria's prisons) and 79 participants in the In-Community program.<sup>4</sup>

In-Prison program participants were comprised of 164 men (92.6%) and 24 women (7.4%), while In-Community program participants were comprised of 66 men (83.5%) and 13 women (16.5%).

### In-Prison Program Component

The Torch is run in 15 prisons across Victoria. All Arts Officers are Indigenous and attend prisons on average every 4 weeks.

Table 2 depicts prison visits by The Torch Arts Officer in the last 3 years, which overall have increased by 29% despite no increase in staffing during this time.

Women currently make up 13% of participants in The Torch In-Prison program with most of them incarcerated in Dame Phyllis Frost. They received 18% of visits from The Torch Arts Officer (see Table 3).

Typically, In-Prison program participants have been involved in The Torch for between 1-2 years (57%).

**Table 2: Face-to-face visits per prison by The Torch Arts Officer, 2016 – 2018**

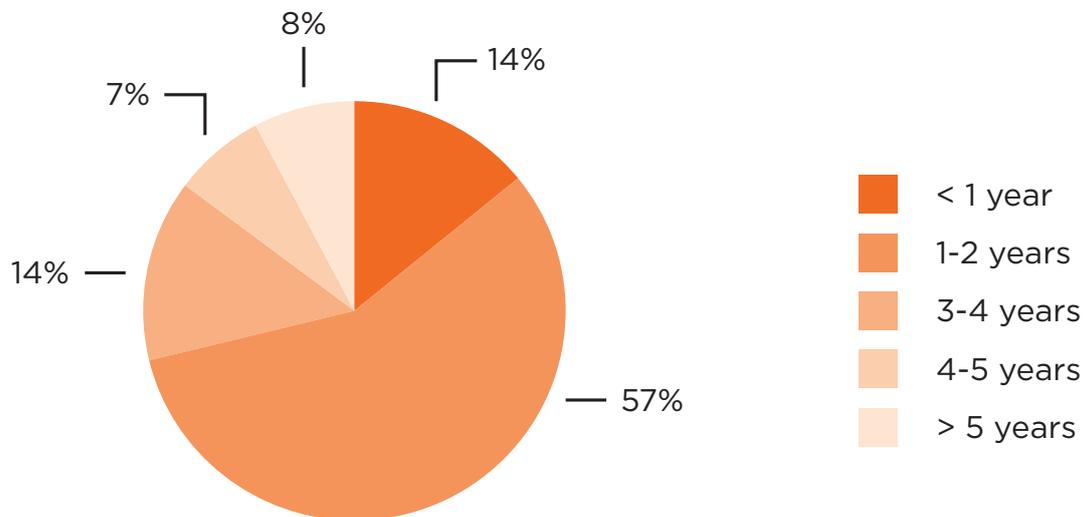
Prison	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Barwon Prison	25	28	35
Beechworth Correctional Centre	8	11	15
Dhurringile Prison	3	5	6
Dame Phyllis Frost Centre	42	79	74
Fulham Correctional Centre	41	32	26
Hopkins Correctional Centre	36	33	63
Kareenga Prison	0	11	23
Langi Kal Kal Prison	11	17	15
Loddon Prison	34	17	24
Marngoneet Correctional Centre	44	10	22
Middleton Prison	21	31	16
Melbourne Remand Centre	12	59	19
Port Phillip Prison	33	46	51
Ravenhall Correctional Centre	0	2	12
Tarrengower Prison	2	5	2
Judy Lazarus Transition Centre	0	2	3
Corella Place	2	3	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>314</b>	<b>391</b>	<b>406</b>

<sup>4</sup> Final estimates of program participants as at 31/12/18 are 220 In-Prison participants and 90 In-Community participants. (Strategic Plan – 2018-2021).

**Table 3: In-Prison participants and face-to-face visits to participants by gender**

Gender	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Number of men visited	143	126	164
Number of face-to-face visits to male participants	275	307	332
Number of women visited	13	27	24
Number of face-to-face visits to female participants	39	84	74
<b>Total number of participants visited</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>188</b>
<b>Total number face-to-face visits to prison</b>	<b>314</b>	<b>391</b>	<b>406</b>

## TIME IN IN-PRISON PROGRAM



*“Art is a cultural key that can help reintegrate the prisoners back into community in a positive way and they can then contribute to their community and they can pass on the cultural knowledge, connections and art skills onto their kids.” (AWO)*

## In-Community Program Component

Arts Officers support program participants who have transitioned from the In-Prison program to the In-Community program upon release from prison. Community contact/visit numbers include physical visits from Arts Officers as well as phone calls and electronic communication across various platforms providing advice on art production and cultural resources. In reality, the Arts Officers supporting the In-Community program engage more often with each participant and this may take the form of a general catch-up or checking-in chat, and/or helping artists link to other community services.

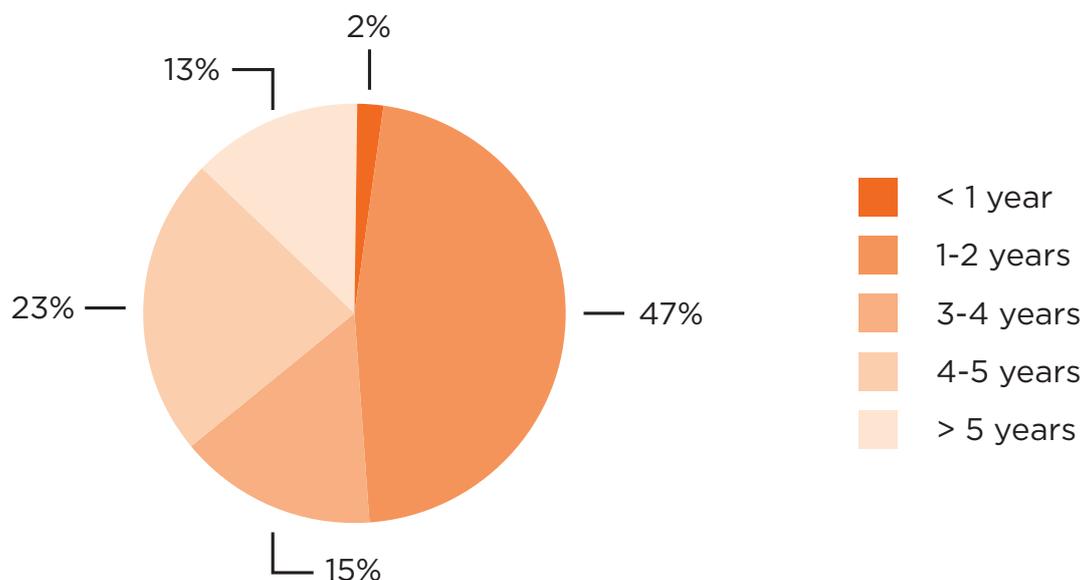
Women made up 18% of In-Community participants in 2018 and received 17% of the total visits from Arts Officers.

Typically, In-Community program evaluation participants have been involved in The Torch for between 1-2 years (47%) with a further one in five (23%) having been in the program for 4 to 5 years.

**Table 4: In-Community participant visits by gender**

Gender	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Number of men visited	44	59	66
Total number of visits to male participants	115	129	199
Number of women visited	6	9	13
Number of visits to female participants	12	13	40
<b>Total number of participants visited</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>Total number of visits to all participants</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>142</b>	<b>239</b>

## TIME IN IN-COMMUNITY PROGRAM



## Return to Prison

The majority of In-Community participants (92%) confirmed that being part of the program has helped them stay out of the justice system. Importantly, data gathered on 2017-18 participants who had been in the In-Community program for over 12 months indicated only 11% had returned to prison. Compared to the 2016-2017 recidivism rate in Victoria of 53.4% for Indigenous prisoners and 42.8% for non-Indigenous prisoners, this result is impressive.

**Table 5: Return to prison rates, In-Community program participants 2017-18**

Time in In-Community Program	Number of participants	Number returning to prison 2017-18	% Returning to prison 2017/18
1-2 years	23	3	13%
3-4 years	13	1	8%
4-5 years	15	2	13%
5 years+	15	1	7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>11%</b>

These results are very positive with 89% of cohort participants remaining out of prison during this time period with the return to prison rate for men being only 9% and women 20%.

Even more encouraging is that when only those participants that had been in The Torch In-Community program for over 2 years are considered (n=43), the percentage who returned to jail in 2017-18 was only 9%.

## Economic Development Program Component

The Torch promotes, markets and shares artwork created through the program through a range of annual and one off exhibitions and events. Annual exhibitions include CONFINED, Dhumbuda Munga: Talking Knowledge and Deakin University Downtown gallery exhibitions. The Torch is proactive about creating opportunities for artists to engage with the broader community. All proceeds from the sale of art go to the artists. There has been a significant increase in the number and value of all sales types since 2015.

**Table 6: Economic benefits for participants 2015-2018**

	2015	2016	2017	2018
Exhibitions	1	4	6	6
Artworks sold	20	84	207	240*
Sales figures	\$16,200	\$120,000	\$225,404	\$256,000*
Artworks licensed	4	20	50	31*
Artwork license fees	\$3,850	\$10,500	\$22,985	\$30,000*

Source: Torch Strategic Plan 2018-2021

\* Estimated at end of December 2018

# IMPACT EVALUATION FINDINGS

## Participant experiences in The Torch Program

### Extent to which The Torch Program meets participant expectations

The Torch program has overwhelmingly met participant expectations. All In-Community evaluation participants (100%) indicated the program has met their expectations while almost three quarters (77%) of all evaluation participants currently in the In-Prison program felt the same.

The most commonly cited reasons for participants indicating the program had met their expectations included:

- Learning about art and culture
- Helps with improving health and spiritual and emotional wellbeing
- Helps to manage negative thoughts and behaviour, building confidence
- Support provided by The Torch – advice on art, provision of supplies, no judgement, welcoming attitude of The Torch staff
- Opportunities to sell paintings and make money
- Makes things a little easier in prison

### What participants liked about the program

Participants were asked what they liked about the program. Answers from In-Prison and In-Community program evaluation respondents were similar.

**Table 7: What evaluation participants like about The Torch program (multiple responses allowed)**

What participants like about The Torch	In-Prison %	In-Community %
Talking with, and spending time with the Arts Officer	86	100
Getting involved in cultural activities	95	92
Something interesting/meaningful to do	95	85
I learned a lot about my culture and art	86	100
I developed/discovered my art skills	86	100
Helps me relax	100	100
Helps me feel better about myself	95	100
Helps me feel more connected to my culture	90	92
Helps my mental health/social and emotional wellbeing	86	100
I was able to exhibit /sell my art	90	92

*“When I do my art it’s like a mood stabilizer. It helps me stay focused and I feel more settled. I’d rather do my art than see a Counsellor.” (IP)*

## The importance of being part of the CONFINED exhibition

Being part of The Torch art exhibitions, particularly CONFINED, is hugely important for participants. While making money is an important result of exhibiting (mentioned by 77% of evaluation participants), it was the least important reason cited. Other impacts cited more frequently included:

- Builds confidence
- Being recognised as an artist
- Feeling pride
- Feeling strong as an Aboriginal person

*“I’ve gained strength of courage and I look at life differently. I’m not just a number, I am a person. Confined helped me shift my thinking. It helps me to connect to my culture, it’s a big thing and is what I paint about – my culture.” (IC)*

*“When I get the Confined book and I see my mob at the exhibition it makes me feel proud even though I can’t attend. Just knowing they are there makes a big difference.” (IP)*

## PROJECT ACHIEVEMENTS AND OUTCOMES

### Growth of the Program 2015-2018

There has been significant growth (approximately 30%) in the IAPC Program since 2015. As at 30/6/18, there were a total of 267 participants in The Torch program. These included 188 participants in the In-Prison program (representing 27.4% of all Indigenous prisoners in Victoria’s prisons) and 79 participants in the In-Community program.

The annual CONFINED exhibition, the key exhibition of the program, has also grown significantly in size compared to previous years.

Participation in The Torch IAPC Program has grown significantly since 2015 as shown in Table 8.

**Table 8: Growth of the program 2015-2018**

Program Participants	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	Growth %
In-Prison	156	153	188	<b>21%</b>
In Community	50	68	79	<b>58%</b>
Total participants	206	221	267	<b>30%</b>
Confined Exhibition				
Confined Exhibition artworks	147	165	192	<b>31%</b>
Confined Exhibition participants	113	145	172	<b>52%</b>

\* Financial year figures provided by The Torch

## Participant Outcomes

### Benefits of participation in the In-Prison and In-Community programs

Program participants indicated that the benefits they gained from being part of the programs were:

- Improvements in social and emotional wellbeing
- Cultural connection and strengthening
- Development of artistic skills
- Creating hope for a different/positive future away from prison
- Financial gain

### Improving relationships with family and community

The major themes emerging from consultations with evaluation participants in relation to how their involvement in TheTorch programs helped improve their relationships with family and community included:

- Being recognised as an artist
- Knowing and connecting to family
- Building relationship skills

### Changes to participants as a result of being part of The Torch

Program evaluation participants were asked about what had changed for them as a result of being part of The Torch programs.

The most frequently cited change was “seeing a future without prison” followed by “being more connected to culture”.

*“It’s good to feel like you belong, a sense of belonging is a big thing for me. I’ve never felt like I belonged anywhere up until now.” (IC)*

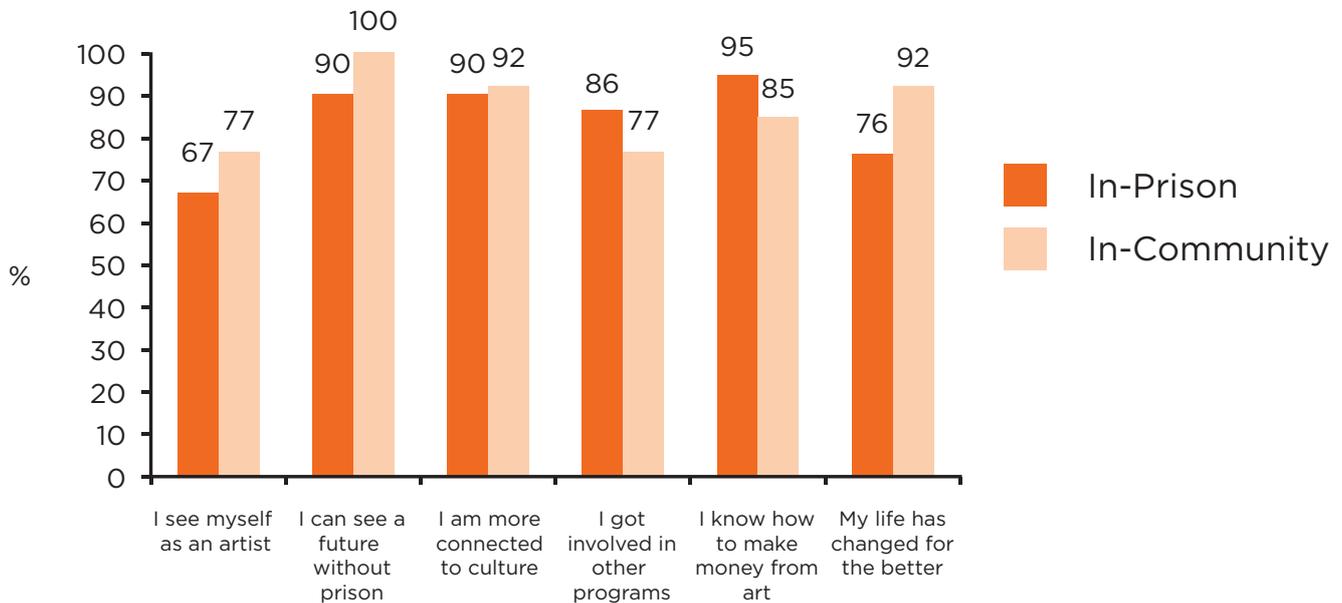
*“It’s picked up my self-esteem and stopped me being a loner. I want to talk about my art and images and be able to tell people the stories about my art. This helps me realise my path and journey.” (IP)*

*“I’ve been able to develop my own style of painting and I’ve sold some work. It makes you feel good about yourself. Doing art is therapeutic. I start in the morning and before I realise it the day is over. If I had known about this years ago, I would have started a long time ago and may not have gone to jail. Painting is a lot to do about the journey.” (IC)*

*“Painting through stories brings people closer together, it’s about connections, closer to family. It keeps you in touch with your past and the present. Building the connections is part of healing.” (IC)*

*“I’m able to show my son I can do this, can sell my work and send money back home to support the family.” (IP)*

## CHANGES AS A RESULT OF BEING PART OF THE TORCH



### Reducing Recidivism

The majority (92%) of participants in the In-Community program confirmed that being part of the program has helped them stay out of the justice system. Comments provided included:

*“It’s because of the support that you get from Uncle Ray and Kent, it’s a big deal. The guidance they give you to help with your art is really good. The program helps you stay out of prison. If I didn’t have it, I’d be back in jail.” (IC)*

*“It gives me something to think about and plan for when I’m doing my art, it shifts my thinking away from other distractions.” (IC)*

It was generally felt that if In-Prison program participants continued with the program after they were released from prison and they were able to continue to make money from their art and/or gain employment in other fields they were much more likely not to re-offend. Learning patience and planning while in the In-Prison program was also thought to help participants post-release to work more successfully with Koorie service providers and Koorie organisations were more likely to work with them to help them reintegrate into community because of the positive attitude they had developed.

### How participants felt about reintegrating into community

Three quarters (77%) of In-Community participants also mentioned that through The Torch they had been able to connect into services they needed to reintegrate into the community and build a network with other artists.

Nearly all (84%) also spoke about being better able to connect into community events, feeling more positive about getting a job, and having improved social and emotional and wellbeing. Most importantly, 92% of participants spoke about feeling positive about their future.

### **Art on the outside**

All In-Prison evaluation participants were keen to continue their art once released from prison.

Overwhelmingly, 95% said they would continue with The Torch. Other sources of support that participants thought they would access commonly included local Aboriginal Co-ops, family and friends and Aboriginal arts organisations.

*“I look forward to painting each day and it keeps me focused and grounded, otherwise I think I’d look for other distractions. I’ve got a family now and I’m too old to be going in and out of jail. I’m done.” (IC)*

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PROGRAM**

The Torch Indigenous Arts In Prison and Community Program is an important program, having positive impacts on participants and making a real difference to participant lives.

The results of this evaluation have confirmed the findings of the previous evaluation including that the Torch continues to contribute to:

- improved social and emotional well-being – building self-esteem, confidence and hope in a more positive future
- enabling participants to reconnect to culture and strengthen cultural identity
- some participants being enabled to pursue a career in art
- raising awareness amongst prison staff and the broader community about Indigenous incarceration and the role that cultural strengthening through art can have in making a difference and changing lives

### **Social and Emotional Wellbeing**

All evaluation participants confirmed that participation in the Torch program improved social and emotional wellbeing.

Participants in both programs overwhelmingly indicated that the program helps them relax, helps them feel better about themselves and helps with their mental health and social and emotional wellbeing. Some spoke about art taking them to another place where they could forget about being in prison, that it filled the time in a positive way and stopped them thinking negative thoughts.

*“It builds stronger people. It helps a lot of people inside and out.” (IC)*

*“It makes a difference to the guys lives. Most of the men are lost and then when they are connected to their culture through art, positive things happen, you build pride and makes you feel good.” (IC)*

## **Cultural strengthening and social connection**

*“Without The Torch you become disconnected. The program provides opportunities to talk about art and share stories, helping to connect to the outside world and helping to connect back to culture and community.” (IC)*

## **Economic development**

*“It provides me with more opportunity to think about things I can do that links to the arts. I can now see if I apply myself, I can work in this space and make a living.” (IC)*

# **CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTION**

The evaluation project concluded that:

- The Torch program is clearly effective in providing participants an opportunity and forum for cultural exploration, expression and strengthening.
- The Torch program is effective in supporting the development and strengthening of participant creative skills.
- The Torch program is clearly effective in improving the social and emotional wellbeing of participants.
- The Torch program is effective in increasing the understanding of participants about the arts industry and arts opportunities.
- Participation in The Torch IAPC Program has the potential to improve the financial stability of participants.

The Torch IAPC Program is experiencing significant growth with expanded funding reflecting the increased recognition from stakeholders that it makes a positive contribution to offender outcomes.

The learnings from The Torch journey to date and this evaluation have highlighted the need to keep building on and improving the existing program activities and finding new opportunities to develop additional program activities in both the In-Prison and In-Community program components. A key focus for the organisation needs to be ensuring there is significant resourcing available to support the anticipated growth in participant numbers, program scope and program reach throughout the prison system and to support In-Community participants across Victoria.

Continuing the work already underway within The Torch to strengthen the way the program impacts are measured is an important piece of work to ensure The Torch can confidently demonstrate that participants can walk out of prison with a stronger cultural identity, developed arts practice and capacity to reform themselves and lead more positive lives.

The evaluation report identified some recommendations that The Torch could make to further strengthen the IAPC Program. In particular, The Torch has prioritised the following:

- Further staff training for Arts Officers in trauma informed practice
- Formally documenting the In-Prison and In-Community programs
- Developing an information kit for program participants
- Increasing promotion and marketing activities
- Developing a staff wellbeing program

*“The Torch program creates a safe space for us to gather and do our art and connect to each other and our culture.” (IP)*