



FIRST NATIONS COVID-19 PERFORMING ARTS WELLBEING SURVEY

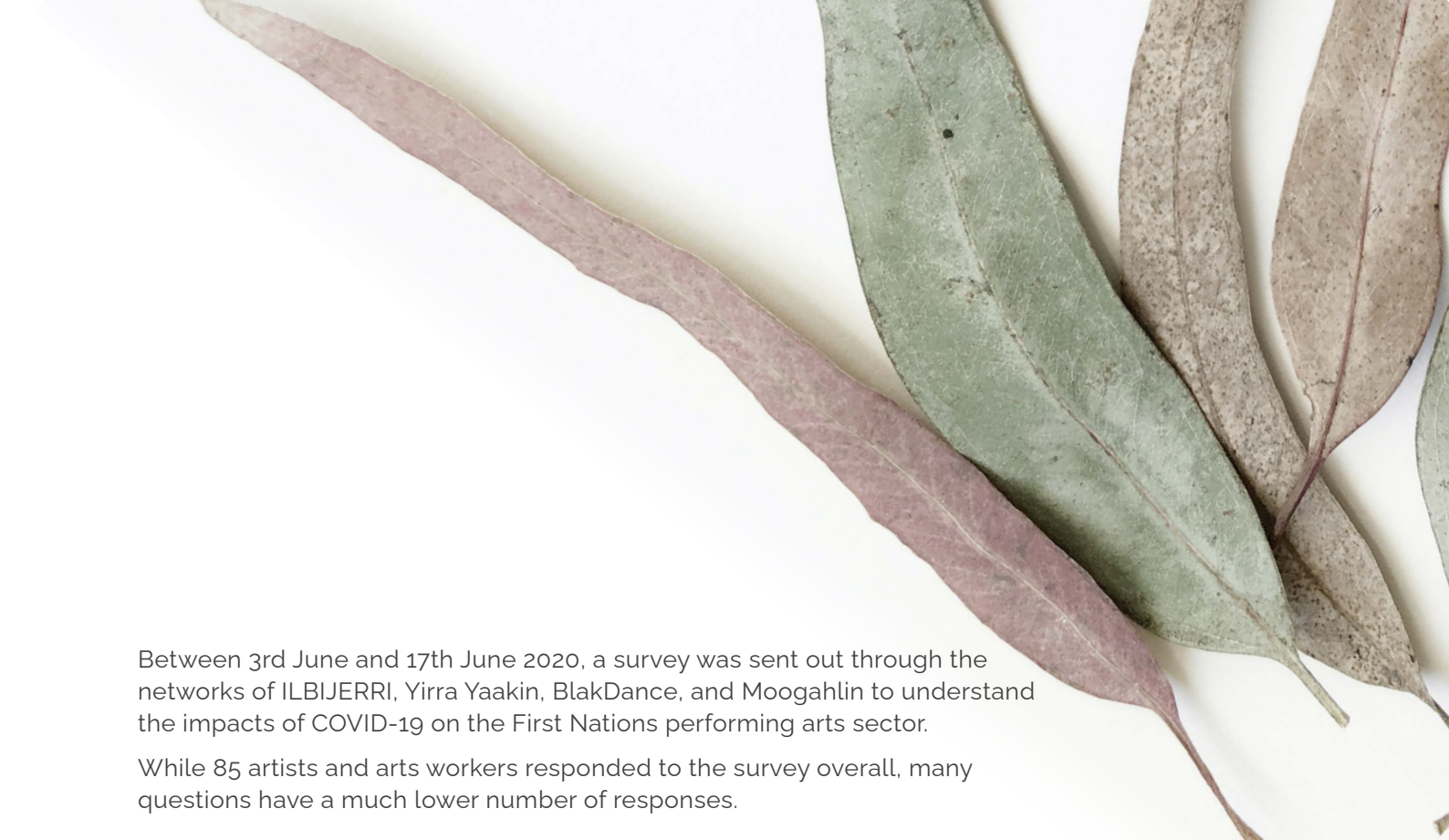
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

ILBIJERRI
THEATRE COMPANY

 **yirra yaakin**
THEATRE COMPANY

 **BlakDance**

 **Moogahlin**
Performing
Arts Inc



Between 3rd June and 17th June 2020, a survey was sent out through the networks of ILBIJERRI, Yirra Yaakin, BlakDance, and Moogahlin to understand the impacts of COVID-19 on the First Nations performing arts sector.

While 85 artists and arts workers responded to the survey overall, many questions have a much lower number of responses.

AREA OF PRACTICE

- **Over half** of First Nations artists surveyed **work in theatre** (53%) followed by multidisciplinary (47%) and dance (39%).
- Within the arts sector, **respondents occupy the role/s of actor (37%), dancer (35%), choreographer (33%), storyteller (33%), and educator (33%).**
- **As independent First Nations artists, most respondents generate their own work (73%)** or are engaged as contractors (61%).
- For **a third of artists, their main source of income is presentation** (i.e. tour as part of festival or programmed work (33%) followed by **schools or workshops (28%).**

COVID-19 IMPACTS

Financial

- As a result of cancellation or closure due to COVID-19 restrictions between March-December 2020, **two in five** First Nations artists surveyed **lost an estimated or confirmed income of between \$10,000 and \$29,999** (39%). In addition, 26% lost between \$5,000 and \$9,999, 20% lost between \$1,000 and 4,999 and 7% lost \$1,000 or less.
- For First Nations respondents, the financial impact of COVID-19 has resulted in the inability to:
 - **purchase equipment/materials for job** (30%)
 - **pay bills** (21%)
 - **pay rent or mortgage** (16%) and
 - **support family** (14%).
- Just **35%** of First Nations respondents **feel they have enough income/savings to support themselves** during COVID-19 and to December 2020.
- **Half** of First Nations artists surveyed **are currently looking for work (50%).**

Wellbeing

- **First Nations artists are profoundly concerned about the social and cultural impacts of Covid-19** on their lives, especially on gathering to practice culture (78%) and caring for elders (72%).

- They are also concerned about their **wellbeing and mental health**, with many experiencing **depression, anxiety, isolation, and stress**. As one person shared:

"My mental health has been greatly affected by the disruption of what was going to be a secure, exciting and very full year. The added workload of rearranging projects, and finding more opportunities to replace those lost has put an immense amount of pressure on my personal life therefore also affecting my ability to deliver at a high level."

- Other respondents mentioned the **negative impacts of disconnection during this time**, especially not being able to practice their art or collaborate with other people: *"I'm missing dancing. Missing being able to perform and rehearse"* and *"The isolation from my peer group and developing work in a cooperative way."*

Practice

- **Many** First Nations artists have **had to change the way they make or present works online during the pandemic**, primarily turning to Zoom or YouTube to create digital content or to teach classes:

"I am using mostly Zoom and sometimes Microsoft Teams and FaceTime for meetings and teaching classes, workshops and for early stages research and developments of new works."

- **Other** First Nations artists, however, **have not turned to online platforms during this time because they do not have the skills** or desire to do so, as one person shared:

"I am not an online artist, and believe I should leave that online world to those who have always specifically created content and art for that medium I long for live theatre."

Future plans

- Many First Nations artists surveyed feel the **decreased budgets in 2020 and 2021** (for venues, programmers, organisations) **will gravely impact their plans for presenting work in the future**. As one respondent said:

"It will have a considerable impact. If orgs don't employ me to do incursions or online work due to reduced/cancelled group workshops my contract work will be considerably depleted...."

Another respondent shared a similar sentiment:

"My work will not be produced. My work will not have avenues to be produced and the skills developed will be absorbed into other areas of artistic endeavours. It will be absorbed into screens."

Avenues for support

- Going forward, respondents would like companies like ILBIJERRI, Yirra Yaakin, BlakDance, or Moogahlin to **provide more employment opportunities** for First Nations artists through workshops or training courses, as one person shared: *"Prioritise two way win win employment of deadly First Nations peoples in your employment policies that include mentorship and training opps."*
- Other First Nations artists mentioned the need for these companies to **continue sharing resources, offering mental health support and services**, and **lobbying local, state and federal governments** on behalf of the sector.

EXTRA NOTES FROM AUSTRALIA COUNCIL BRIEFING PAPER - IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON FIRST NATIONS ARTS AND CULTURE

General

- There is an urgent need to ensure impacts of the virus on First Nations Elders are minimised to ensure ongoing cultural leadership, to maintain the arts as a key source of economic empowerment for First Nations people, and to ensure survival of the world's longest continuously living culture.
- There are concerns about mental health and increased risk of suicide and self-harm. Support Act and like organisations should be encouraged to specifically reach out to First Nations artists and art workers.
- The greatest future concerns relate to potential loss of life and cultural knowledge if communities lose their Elders, negative impacts on young people, and the loss of income and art economies. It is clear that the impacts of COVID-19 will be felt for a long time to come. Immediate support, cross-portfolio advocacy and long term planning are needed.
- It is vital that support for First Nations culture remains central across portfolios in the policy response. Culture is the foundation of First Nations health and wellbeing and is now more important than ever.
- There is also an opportunity for cross-portfolio engagement and advocacy to ensure that support for culture is a priority in the \$123m the Australian Government has announced for targeted measures to support First Nations communities in COVID-19.

Performing arts

- Across art forms, the cancellation of festivals, literary events, live performances and art fairs is already having a devastating effect on First Nations artists' livelihoods, and on these artists' ability to support their families.
- The First Nations dance and theatre sectors are bracing for long term impacts and will need long term financial support after the shutdown is lifted.
- Before COVID-19, the First Nations performance sector was experiencing unprecedented demand. Financial constraints could mean programming is more conservative in future and First Nations arts will lose hard won visibility as a result of COVID-19. It is important that First Nations arts continue to develop, challenge and contribute to the ongoing maturation of Australian culture.
- With so many works stalled at the development stage there may be an oversupply of work and an undersupply of audiences when the shut-down lifts.
- The financial desperation during recovery from COVID-19 could result in cultural protocols being disregarded.
- The First Nations dance sector is the oldest in the world but is still 'emerging' in regards to embedded multi-year funding for First Nations-led companies aside from Bangarra. Except for Marrugeku intercultural dance company and the peak body BlakDance, there are no multi-year funded small to medium First Nations dance companies.
- There is an opportunity for the development of an online network to enable First Nations artists to connect with their peers and international colleagues outside of forums such as the Australian Performing Arts Market (APAM).
- Many First Nations' artists and organisations are exploring online opportunities. However, digital adaptation poses unique challenges for First Nations arts, including the need to uphold Indigenous rights and sovereignty in the digital environment and to protect against unethical dealing and digital disadvantage.

