Proceedings from the NDRP Evidence to Action Event: Exploring the Evidence to Enable the Elimination of Restrictive Practices in Australia

# Acknowledgement of Country

“*As we gather to discuss important issues for people with disability, we acknowledge the strength, resilience, and cultural wisdom of First Nations people with disability. We know we are on First Nations land and respect the First Nations people from this land—where we live, work, play, swim, and dream together. We remember that First Nations people have lived here for many, many years, and we honour and respect all First Nations people and Elders.*” – Clare Gibellini, NDRP Board Chair

# Introduction

## About the National Disability Research Partnership

The vision of the National Disability Research Partnership (NDR) is policy and practice in Australia are transformed by disability-led research. Our purpose is to facilitate collaborative and inclusive disability research that builds evidence for policy and practice to advance the rights of people with disability.

## Mobilising evidence for action

To achieve its vision and purpose, a key strategic objective of the NDRP is to mobilise evidence for action. Mobilising evidence for action means quality research is used to inform real changes that help people with disability. This means making sure findings from research is used to improve policy, practice and programs.

One of our initiatives is to hold ‘evidence to action’ events to discuss what we know about a certain topic related to the [NDRP Research Agenda](https://www.ndrp.org.au/researchagenda), what we don’t know, and what further research is needed. The goal of these events is to work together and inform future research and policy directions.

# This document

This document has:

* overview of key themes and feedback discussed at our first event held on 5th December 2025 to discuss the issue of eliminating restrictive practices,
* speaker insights and quotes,
* next steps identified by attendees,
* key takeaways for all stakeholders,
* research priorities identified,
* resources, supports, and thanks.

# This event

The NDRP hosted its first Evidence to Action event in collaboration with Inclusion Australia and People with Disability Australia, on 5th December 2024 to discuss the issue of restrictive practices and aimed to:

* Identify research and evidence gaps in eliminating restrictive practices.
* Centre lived experiences of people with disability in research and policy.
* Identify gaps and explore actionable solutions and strategies for systemic change.

## Overview of key themes

Speakers and attendees at the event emphasised the urgent need to eliminate restrictive practices, highlighting their harm and violation of human rights.

Key themes discussed included:

* Lived experience in research: People with disability should be at the centre of research as co-researchers and leaders in shaping solutions, not just people who the research is about. Barriers like accessibility, ethics processes which create hurdles for people with disability to be meaningfully involved in research, and power imbalances must be removed to create quality research.
* Evidence gaps: Consistent data collection is critical to understanding the prevalence, drivers, and impacts of restrictive practices. There are major gaps in data and research, especially for marginalised groups and people with disability with high support needs. Research needs to focus on practical alternatives and how to implement them.
* Systemic and cultural change: Restrictive practices are deeply rooted in systems like education and mental health. Change requires addressing the root causes, with a focus on early intervention, workforce training, and supported decision-making. Therefore research must focus on how systems can change to reduce and eliminate restrictive practices.
* Transforming policy and practice: Collaboration among researchers, policymakers, advocates, and service providers is vital. Research must drive reforms, accountability, and better use of existing data and tools.
* Next: The themes raised highlighted the importance of using research to drive action. Prior to the event, the [NDRP announced](https://www.ndrp.org.au/research/2025-research-funding) its first funding round focused on safety, as one avenue for enabling research.

Quote: **“We need to better understand how early access to communication, support, and a sense of belonging in the community are critical to eliminating restrictive practices. An ethics approach led by people with disability, including intellectual disability and families, is needed to ensure that research projects genuinely improve outcomes.” – Catherine McAlpine**

# Speaker insights

See below for a summary of each session, including key speakers and their contributions:

**Session 1:** ***What We Know About Restrictive Practices, Their Impacts, and Harm***

1. **Minister Amanda Rishworth (Australian Minister for Social Services)**

* Emphasised the Australian Government’s commitment to reducing and eliminating restrictive practices as a matter of human rights.
* Highlighted the critical role of research and evidence in driving legislative and service reform to protect people with disability.
* Reiterated the importance of collaboration with researchers, policymakers, and people with disability to address systemic issues.
* Recognised the recommendations of the Disability Royal Commission, particularly in the areas of data collection, accountability, and reform.

1. **Alastair McEwin AM (Disability Rights Advocate and Former DRC Commissioner)**

* Stressed the need for accurate and consistent data collection to understand and address the use of restrictive practices.
* Noted that without evidence, it is difficult to monitor progress towards eliminating restrictive practices.
* Highlighted that the most marginalised voices are often missing from data and research, which worsens inequalities.
* Called for accountability mechanisms to ensure the recommendations from the Royal Commission are implemented effectively.

**Quote: “Restrictive practices are often justified by the ‘behaviours of concern’ they are meant to address, but these behaviours are better understood as ‘adaptive behaviours to maladaptive environments.” – Alastair McEwin**

1. **Poppy Mullins (Self-Advocate and Person with Lived Experience)**

* Highlighted the need for choice, autonomy, and respect in decision-making processes for people with disability.

**Quote: “Feeling safe comes from being treated like an adult by those I trust. It’s not just about physical safety; it’s also about emotional and social safety—being listened to, respected, and included in decisions about my life.” – Poppy Mullins**

1. **Dr. Linda Steele (University of Technology Sydney)**

* Challenged the lack of critical investigation into restrictive practices, noting that they are often normalised and underexplored in research.
* Highlighted the systemic and cultural drivers of restrictive practices, including environments that enable segregation and exclusion.
* Highlighted the need for research to examine how unfair systems and power imbalances harm people.
* Called for a shift towards a human rights-based approach, focusing on dignity, agency, and inclusion for people with disability.
* Acknowledged the intersectionality of experiences, urging research to explore diverse and marginalised voices.

**Quote: “Research and policy must focus on how to eliminate restrictive practices rather than thinking about how we can justify, regulate, or even simply reduce them.” – Linda Steele**

**Session 2:** ***The Research and Evidence to Action Gaps on How to Eliminate Restrictive Practices***

1. **Rod Carracher (NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission)**

* Highlighted gaps in understanding the lived experiences of those subject to restrictive practices, particularly individuals with intellectual disabilities and complex communication needs.
* Noted the overprescribing of psychotropic medications and the workforce challenges in embedding positive behaviour support.

**Quote: “Casual and agency staff rotations make consistent application of behaviour support and the successful reduction and elimination of restrictive practices a significant challenge. A stable and predictive environment is critical to success.” – Rod Carracher**

1. **Catherine McAlpine (Inclusion Australia)**

* Shared the [‘Polished Pathway’](https://www.inclusionaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/The-Polished-Pathway-Final.pdf?ref=disabilitydebrief.org) provocation, where systemic segregation normalises restrictive practices.
* Called for research into early intervention, communication access, and trauma-informed approaches.

1. **Siobhan Campbell (Department of Social Services)**

* Outlined government commitments to data improvement and national action plans for reducing restrictive practices.
* Emphasised collaboration across systems as essential for reform.

**Session 3:** ***Building the Evidence Base for Policy and Practice to Enable Elimination***

1. **Megan Spindler-Smith (People with Disability Australia)** Emphasised the need for co-designed and led research, highlighting the importance of research:

* Focusing on systemic drivers of restrictive practices e.g. workforce issues, funding limitations, inconsistent policies, attitudes and service models.
* Addressing barriers to disabled researchers’ participation.
* Prioritising solutions, not just identifying impacts.

**Quote: "Co-designed and led research is key to ensuring solutions are focused on real outcomes. Research and advocacy must focus on systemic drivers, not medicalising behaviour" – Megan Spindler-Smith**

1. **Professor Sally Robinson (Flinders University)**

* Highlighted the personal costs of participation in research for disabled people.
* Confirmed that [NDRP Guiding Principles](https://www.ndrp.org.au/principles) draw attention to work being driven by a commitment to inclusion, ensuring that people with disability are actively involved in co-designing and shaping the research agenda and outcomes.
* Challenged whether there is truly a “lack of evidence” or a failure to listen to people’s lived experiences.
* Called for a framework to ensure research is inclusive, collaborative, and solution focused.

**Quote: "Is there really a lack of evidence about restrictive practices, or is there a lack of us listening to people talk about what constitutes restrictive practices in their lives, even if they don’t use that terminology?" – Sally Robinson**

1. **Professor Helen Dickinson (UNSW Canberra)**

* Reinforced the need for high-quality, disability-led research that identifies alternatives and systemic enablers for eliminating restrictive practices.
* Highlighted the role of trust and collaboration in ensuring research is impactful and actionable.

**Quote: "We don’t just need evidence on the harms, but on practical alternatives" – Helen Dickinson**

1. **Closing Remarks: Clare Gibellini and Jane Britt**

* Emphasised that safety is the NDRP’s first funding priority, with a focus on supporting PhDs and early career researchers with disability.
* Called for ongoing collaboration, action-driven research, and prioritising lived experience to create systemic change.

# Research priorities identified

Throughout the event, both speakers and attendees identified critical research areas needed to enable the elimination of restrictive practices. Speakers highlighted key gaps based on their expertise and lived experience, while attendees shared additional priorities through interactive discussions, the Zoom whiteboard, and post-event feedback.

Together, these insights provide a comprehensive view of the evidence gaps and opportunities for future research, ensuring that lived experience, practical solutions, and systemic change remain at the forefront.

1. Data collection and consistency:

* Standardise definitions and reporting of restrictive practices across states and systems
* Develop consistent longitudinal data collection to track the impact of interventions and progress toward elimination
* Address gaps in data collection, performance indicators, and the role of oversight bodies in driving cultural and systemic change

**Quote: "There is already significant data about restrictive practices—what’s missing is more listening to individuals, their needs, and the supports they require to thrive. We need perspectives from the inside rather than the outside." – Attendee**

1. Lived experience:

* Co-design and research led by and with people with disability to ensure relevance and actionable outcomes
* Include voices often underrepresented in research, such as non-verbal individuals, those with complex communication needs, and people in segregated settings
* Investigate barriers families face in accessing alternative supports and how these contribute to the use of restrictive practices

1. Trauma-informed alternatives and systemic drivers:

* Explore systemic drivers of restrictive practices in schools, group homes, employment, health and service provider models in services funded by the NDIS and others.
* Identify trauma-informed and culturally safe alternatives to restrictive practices
* Address gaps evidence-based alternatives to restrictive practices, including tools for environmental adjustments, communication support, and positive behaviour strategies
* Research economic impacts of restrictive practices, systemic pressures (e.g., workforce shortages, funding limitations), and while identifying sector specific solutions
* Identify enablers to facilitate collaboration across sectors. carrots (incentives) and sticks (enforcement) should be used in tandem to encourage compliance

1. Workforce development and training:

* Examine how workforce skills, ratios, and stability affect the use of restrictive practices
* Develop tools and training for service providers on positive behaviour support
* Create accessible and user-friendly guidelines, training, and decision-making frameworks to encourage the adoption of alternatives

**Quote: "Bridging the gap between evidence and practice is key. Proven strategies like Positive Behaviour Support and trauma-informed care are underutilised because of barriers like limited training, resource constraints, and resistance to change." – Attendee**

1. Practical implementation of solutions:

* Identify barriers to applying existing evidence in practice
* Develop tools, incentives, and supports to facilitate evidence-based decision-making for policymakers and regulators
* Provide real-world case studies showcasing effective non-restrictive practices to motivate change and inspire confidence among service providers and families

**Quote: "Turning what we know into meaningful change is our goal – no more talk, action" – Clare Gibellini**

# Attendee contributions

## Event engagement

* Attended: 43% of registrants attended (365 attendees out of 850 registered for the event)
* Feedback: 24% of attendees responded to the survey (87 out of 365)

## Event and presentations ratings

The event received overwhelmingly positive feedback with 81% rated the event as Excellent or Very Good and 85% rated presentations as Excellent or Very Good. Attendees highlighted Jane Britt’s event facilitation, and the value of Poppy’s session with Jane sharing her experience, and the overall delivery as exceptional.

* Key learnings: 47% learnt about NDRP; 28% on evidence mobilisation; 23% on restrictive practices.
* Accessibility: 90% praised inclusivity, with strong feedback on Auslan, captions, and speaker descriptions.
* Improvements: Suggestions for hybrid options, shorter sessions, and more interactive formats.

## Participation and accessibility options

This table shows the roles people identified during registration, the percentage of people in each role who requested accessibility options and the percentage of attendees by role who provided feedback on the event.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Main role nominated at registration** | **% of total registrations** | **% requesting accessibility options** | **% of people providing feedback** |
| Person with disability | 14% | 17% | 23% |
| Research role | 12% | 23% | 11% |
| Advocacy role | 12% | 34% | 14% |
| Government or regulator role | 27% | 6% | 18% |
| Family member of a person with disability | 8% | 6% | 9% |
| Service provider | 20% | 6% | 14% |
| Other | 7% | 9% | 10% |

# Next steps identified by attendees

When asked what actions they would take following the event, attendees provided the following responses:

* A group of people with speech bubbles

  Decoration only45% (39/87) will focus on addressing key research gaps and seek new connections and partnerships.
* 44% (38/87) aim to inform the broader sector about existing work and cross-sector coordination efforts.
* 34% (30/87) will advocate for interim policy changes based on current evidence while pushing for further research.
* A blue circle with a white eye and a black background

  Decoration only20% (17/87) expressed interest in participating in focus groups or addressing family support gaps.
* 17% (15/87) will sign up for new research or policy discussions to share their stories and experiences.
* 16% (14/87) plan to trial non-restrictive practices on a small scale in specific areas or locations.
* A hand holding a key

  Decoration only15% (13/87) aim to collect short-term outcome data from trials to contribute to the evidence base.
* 13% (11/87) will share their stories with advocacy groups to assist research.
* 13% (11/87) plan to draft position statements calling for immediate trials or pilots of alternatives to restrictive practices.
* 14% (12/87) indicated they would not take any of the listed actions.

**Quote: "Restrictive practices happen when families are under-supported. A holistic approach that includes families and communities is key to creating real change." – Attendee**

# Support and resources

For this event, we asked Associate Professor Linda Steele (University of Technology Sydney) and Associate Professor Dinesh Wadiwel (University of Sydney) to write about what we still need to learn to stop using restrictive practices. [Read the report](https://71443a6b-0710-40a6-8fa4-ad018a8e2999.usrfiles.com/ugd/71443a_e1033c9b296648849c91af50a0fa064f.pdf). This report builds on a 2023 report called Restrictive Practices: A Pathway to Elimination. It also includes ideas from the Disability Royal Commission.

**Further reading:** A model for eliminating the use of restrictive practices against people with an intellectual disability (Inclusion Australia) [Access the model here](https://www.inclusionaustralia.org.au/resource/a-model-for-the-elimination-of-restrictive-practices/).

### Talking about trauma

Discussions about restrictive practices might be upsetting or bring back difficult memories. Please take care of yourself and your wellbeing during these conversations. If you feel upset or need support, [click here for services that can help](https://www.ndrp.org.au/resources/find-support).

# Acknowledgments and thanks

The NDRP Board and Staff would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to our collaborators, all speakers, panellists, our access and inclusion partners, and attendees who made this event a success.

# Contact information

**National Disability Research Partnership**

Email: [info@ndrp.org.au](mailto:info@ndrp.org.au)

Phone: 03 9000 3813

[www.ndrp.org.au](http://www.ndrp.org.au)

* [Evidence to Action page](https://www.ndrp.org.au/resources/evidence-to-action)
* [YouTube playlist](https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLUcd97LtYOwpSf9f_RFVEQEHoL1nnmL9g&si=xkA3FrJxaD_T0x58)