
Malcolm Turnbull hands down Closing the Gap report showing Indigenous life expectancy has not improved

By Bridget Brennan
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The annual report card on Indigenous disadvantage has been handed down, and the results, in the words of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, are mixed.

There has been no progress in raising the life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the 2016 Closing the Gap report shows.

"The life expectancy gap is still around 10 years, an unacceptably wide gap, and this target is not on track," Mr Turnbull told Parliament on Wednesday. The Prime Minister said his government would redouble its efforts to engage with Indigenous Australians.

"Under successive governments, under both sides, progress against the Close the Gap targets has been mixed - we have to be honest," he said.

"We cannot sugar-coat the enormity of the job that remains."

The eighth annual Closing the Gap report said progress had been varied across the seven education, employment and health targets.

The report cautioned that meeting the target to close the life expectancy gap by 2030 remained "a significant challenge".

But Mr Turnbull said there was reason to be optimistic, given that two objectives were on track: the target to halve the gap in child mortality by 2018, and a target to improve Year 12 attainment by 2020.

"We should not overlook or fail to celebrate the many successes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people," he said.

Opposition Leader Bill Shorten said Australians must face up to the entrenched unfairness Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face.

"When one life changes, that changes the life of a family," Mr Shorten said.

"If we can change the life of a family we can change a community. If we can change a community then we can change a nation."

Between 1998 and 2014, Indigenous child death rates declined by 33 per cent. Year 12 attainment rates have improved, even though the number of Indigenous students finishing high school is still relatively low, about 60 per cent.

But in other areas, the report showed there had been little or no progress - particularly when it comes to plans to half the gap in employment outcomes. The Indigenous employment rate has fallen from 53.8 per cent in 2008 to 47.5 per cent in 2012-2013.

A goal towards improving literacy and numeracy achievements for children within a decade had also shown mixed progress. Mr Turnbull also told Parliament he was committed to encouraging the preservation of Indigenous history.

"For more than 40,000 years Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have cared for this country... yet we have not always shown you, our First Australians, the respect you deserve," he said.

"Their history is our history."

He also pledged \$20 million to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, which would digitise languages and stories. While some Indigenous leaders have given the report cautious praise, some have said the Closing the Gap commitment should be scrapped altogether. Yaruwu leader Patrick Dodson has questioned whether the Closing the Gap campaign was worth pursuing.

"We are basically just changing the tablecloth on a table without really realising that the white ants are eating the legs out of the table," Mr Dodson said.

Close the Gap campaign co-chairwoman Dr Jackie Huggins said she understood there was growing frustration among Indigenous people, who were disappointed by a perceived lack of progress.

"Aboriginal people, let me tell you, we're the most patient people I'm sure on the face of this Earth, in terms of knowing the troubles we have in our communities and what it takes to address them," she said.

Calls for clearer justice targets

Mr Shorten used his Closing the Gap parliamentary address to mount a renewed push to convince the Government to commit to a target for reducing Indigenous imprisonment rates.

He said Labor would make a justice target its key item on the agenda at its first Council of Australian Government meeting.

The Coalition has not committed to a justice target, but has announced plans for a new program to transition people leaving prison into work. Indigenous Australians make up about 3 per cent of the Australian population but 26 per cent of the prison population. Given the massive overrepresentation of Indigenous people in jail, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Mick Gooda called for the Federal Government to adopt a new justice target.

He said it was "totally frustrating" the Government had repeatedly ignored the Close the Gap Campaign's recommendation.

"Seeing as [the Federal Government] made an election commitment about it as well, if I can be unkind, [it's] another election commitment broken," Mr Gooda said.

The Indigenous-led Close the Gap campaign began a decade ago, aiming to reduce disparities in health, education and employment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Dr Huggins said the 2016 Close the Gap Progress and Priorities Report, which coincides with the Prime Minister's annual report card, called for all political parties to renew their commitment to closing the gap before this year's election.