

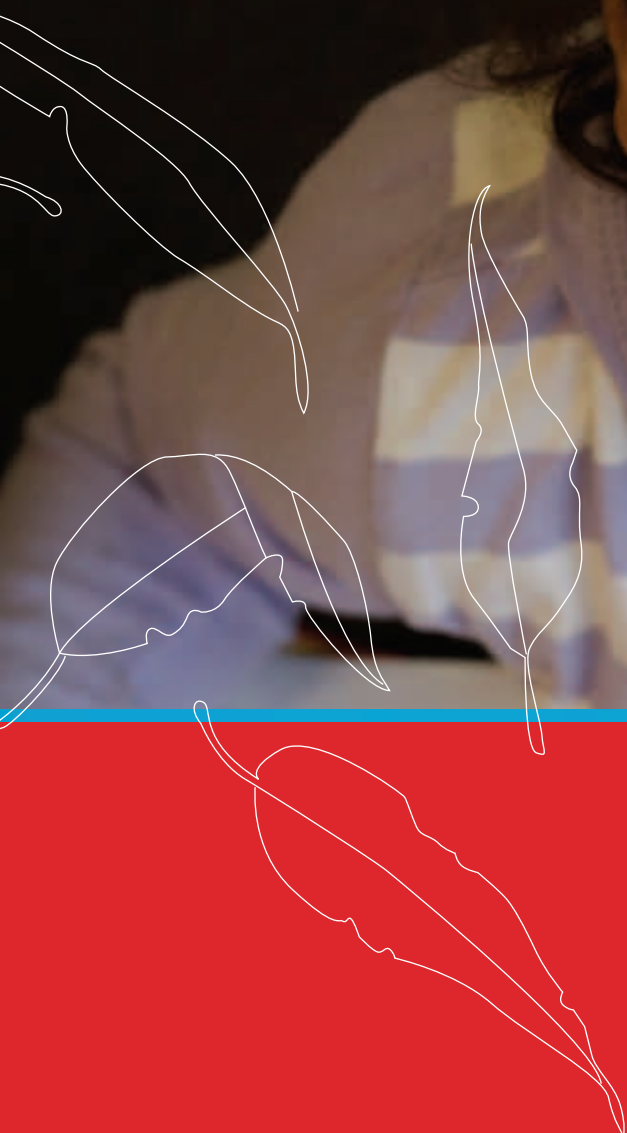


An Australian Government Initiative

CLOSING THE GAP ON INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE: THE CHALLENGE FOR AUSTRALIA

FEBRUARY 2009





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FOREWORD

In 2008 the Australian Parliament and the Australian nation came together for an historic moment in our nation's history, when we formally apologised to the Stolen Generations – those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who were forcibly removed from their families and their communities through the actions of past governments.

We said sorry for the laws and policies of successive parliaments and governments that inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on our fellow Australians, in particular the Stolen Generations – those who suffered the hurt, the humiliation, the cruelty and the sheer brutality of being taken away, often forever, from their mothers and their fathers, their families and their people.

The Apology was about acknowledging a dark chapter in our nation's history. It was also about recognising past wrongdoings and in a modest way righting the wrongs of the past. The Apology is only the first step.

If we are to move forward together as a nation, and build a stronger and fairer Australia in the twenty-first century, we must address the appalling gap between the life opportunities enjoyed by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Throughout the history of European settlement, a baby born to an Indigenous family in Australia has had far more limited opportunities than a baby born to a non-Indigenous family. The Australian Government is resolutely determined to change this reality.

Closing the Gap is fundamentally important to building a fairer Australia. In the later decades of the twentieth century, our nation implemented the important legal reforms that recognised the equality of Indigenous Australians before the law. While legal rights are essential for overcoming entrenched disadvantage, rights alone cannot Close the Gap. They only establish a foundation for making progress.

The challenge we now confront is to work together to Close the Gap in real life outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This is the objective to which the Australian Government is committed, but cannot achieve on its own. As a nation, we must come together around this vision and take substantive action – Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, Commonwealth, state and territory governments, business and the wider community.

The Australian Government is committed to this national effort in cooperation with other governments. In 2008, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to six ambitious targets relating to Indigenous life expectancy, health, education and employment.

We have already begun to put in place the measures that will help to achieve these six targets. The COAG commitment of \$4.6 billion in 2008 provides a framework to mobilise investment in basic health, education and other services needed to put Indigenous Australians on an equal footing with other Australians. This is an historic agreement. It is the first time that a truly national commitment – encompassing all governments – has been made that aims to ensure that Indigenous Australians have an equitable share in the opportunities which our nation offers.

At the same time we must be realistic and acknowledge the size of the task ahead of us. Meeting our targets will not be easy, and at times may be controversial, but we must not be deflected from our goals.

This statement outlines the Australian Government's approach to Closing the Gap. It describes progress in our first year, and sets out our priorities for the future. There is much to be done, and it will require patience, perseverance and a sustained national effort from every part of the Australian community. In the years ahead, we aim to report annually on the progress Australia is making towards this national objective.



Kevin Rudd
Prime Minister



THE GOVERNMENT'S APPROACH TO INDIGENOUS POLICY

THE GOVERNMENT'S APPROACH TO INDIGENOUS POLICY

Addressing Indigenous disadvantage is a national responsibility that will require the energy and commitment of all Australians. Working with all parts of the Australian community, the Government is determined to drive real improvements, focused on outcomes and guided by evidence. Central to the Government's strategy is a new partnership with Indigenous Australians, based on mutual respect, mutual resolve and mutual responsibility.

In the more than four decades since the 1967 Referendum, Australian governments have developed and funded policies and programs to improve the socio-economic status of Indigenous people, and overcome a long history of poverty and marginalisation. Progress has been made. Yet in 2009, despite the formal recognition of equality so many years ago, Indigenous people remain among the most disadvantaged Australians. Many simply do not have the opportunities afforded their fellow Australians, and many are not able to participate fully in our national life.

Too many Indigenous Australians experience unacceptable levels of disadvantage in living standards, life-expectancy, education, health and employment. Rates of chronic disease, mental illness and hospitalisation are significantly higher for the Indigenous population than the non-Indigenous population¹. Literacy and numeracy results for Indigenous students are consistently below the national average, especially in remote areas.²

The gulf that exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in these critical areas remains significant and, in some areas, is widening as the rate of improvement has been greater for other Australians than for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples over recent years³.

In remote areas, successive governments have failed to properly coordinate their efforts and to fund them adequately, resulting in acute and visible need. In urban and regional areas, services provided for all Australians have not been accessed by or effectively delivered to Indigenous people. Blurred responsibilities have allowed Commonwealth, state and territory governments to avoid accountability for their failures.

In more recent times, governments have taken strong action to intervene in Indigenous communities in order to protect children from violence and abuse. While such urgent action has been and may again be necessary in the future, too little focus has been given to the longer term task of building personal and community responsibility – a challenge that must be met if Indigenous life outcomes are to improve.

The Australian Government is committed to working in partnership with Indigenous Australians, with state and territory governments, with business, community organisations and all Australians so that Indigenous Australians have access to opportunities that allow for self-respect, independence and better living standards – an education, a job, and a decent home – while still retaining a strong cultural identity and sense of community. It is unacceptable that Australia, a successful, developed nation with a modern economy, should tolerate fundamental inequality between its Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

¹ Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council, 2008, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework 2008 Summary*.

² 2008 National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy, Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, (MCEETYA), 2008.

³ Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council, 2008, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework 2008 Summary*.

Setting clear, measurable targets

For the first time, the Australian Government, together with the states and territories through COAG, has set specific and ambitious targets to address Indigenous disadvantage. The six key targets that form the Closing the Gap objective are to:

1. close the life expectancy gap within a generation
2. halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade
3. ensure access to early childhood education for all Indigenous four years olds in remote communities within five years
4. halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for children within a decade
5. halve the gap for Indigenous students in year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates by 2020, and
6. halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade.

These agreed measures will form the baseline for measuring progress and reforms each year.

Re-setting the relationship with Indigenous Australians

Fundamental to the Government's strategy is a new partnership with Indigenous Australians. This partnership must be respectful and collaborative, and involve open communication with Indigenous Australians. Indigenous Australians have the capacity to bring about lasting change in their lives and those of their communities. Without a strong relationship with Indigenous Australians, based on mutual respect, mutual resolve and mutual responsibility, we cannot hope to close the gap.

This partnership must be defined by clear objectives and responsibilities – a partnership where both parties are determined to make a difference. Recent research by Reconciliation Australia indicates that Australians have a strong desire to better understand Indigenous cultures. Our communities want to learn more about one another and to build mutual respect and trust.

Progress is being made in establishing this new relationship with Indigenous Australians. This began through the extensive consultations in the lead up to the national Apology. Since then, the Government has also held extensive community discussions on the scope and model of a national Indigenous representative body, which will continue through 2009.

Engagement guiding government policy

The Australian Government will establish a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative body to give Indigenous Australians a voice in national affairs.

The Government has undertaken an extensive round of consultations with Indigenous communities across all states and territories to seek views on a proposed model for a representative body. A national workshop of Indigenous leaders, convened by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Mr Tom Calma, will be held in March 2009 to guide the development of a proposed model. The results of the national workshop and further consultations are expected to be presented to the Government in July 2009.

This work supports the Government's genuine commitment to facilitate a collaborative approach to improving outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

The Government's strategy seeks to draw on the strengths of Indigenous cultures. These are the oldest continuing cultures in human history. They should be celebrated and maintained as well as recognised as a valuable basis for potential economic development and for improving the wellbeing and capacity of individuals and communities.

To achieve lasting progress, the Government will work in partnership with Indigenous Australians to address patterns of individual and community behaviour that may contribute to entrenched disadvantage. The Government is committed to finding ways to foster healthy relationships within and across families, peer groups, communities and organisations, and to support Indigenous communities in their efforts to deal with destructive behaviours, establish higher expectations and manage conflict.

In doing so, governments must nevertheless be prepared to respond when manifest failures on the part of individuals or communities place others at risk of harm. Governments have a responsibility to act quickly to provide immediate protection to those in need, but in doing so they must work closely with Indigenous Australians to develop communities and build responsibility and capacity over time.

Improving service delivery

In urban and regional Australia, the Government will work to ensure that services are accessible to and meet the needs of Indigenous Australians. In remote Australia, services will be targeted on a regional basis. In the Northern Territory, the Australian Government will continue to support fragile communities and assist in their longer-term development.

Coordinator General for remote service delivery

Achieving outcomes in remote locations is challenging. COAG's commitment to a \$291.2 million National Partnership on Remote Service Delivery recognises the need for better service delivery in remote areas. This recognises the need for improved coordination, implementation and accountability if investments are to help close the gap.

The Australian Government will appoint a Coordinator General for Remote Indigenous Services to drive implementation of reforms in areas such as remote Indigenous housing, infrastructure and employment. The Coordinator General will ensure remote services work together and are well delivered, removing red tape and bureaucratic blockages where necessary to get things done fast, with opportunities for local Indigenous participation maximised.

The Coordinator General will have a mandate to act, focusing initially on 26 priority communities across the Northern Territory, Queensland, Western Australia, South Australian and New South Wales. The Coordinator General will report to the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs on the performance of government agencies in meeting their commitments to these priority communities.

The Commonwealth Government will work with the states and territories to achieve a unified approach to implementing reform, including the Coordinator General working cooperatively with state and territory Ministers and officials to overcome challenges that arise across jurisdictions.

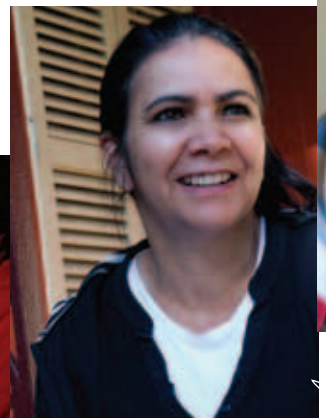
In the important area of housing, COAG's commitment of \$1.94 billion over the next 10 years brings funding allocations to \$5.48 billion, which will be fundamental to improving outcomes for Indigenous Australians living in remote communities. Coordination of housing and infrastructure reform in remote communities will require effective planning and accountability arrangements if these investments are going to deliver the intended benefits. The Government has appointed the National Policy Commission on Indigenous Housing to both contribute independent policy expertise from outside government and to ask the hard questions as we move forward on our ambitious investment and reform initiatives.

A challenge for all Australians

Addressing Indigenous disadvantage is a national responsibility that will require the engagement of the Australian community. The Government is committed to working in partnership with Indigenous Australians, state and territory governments, businesses and community organisations.

A key development during the past year has been the emergence of several corporate and philanthropic partnerships with Indigenous communities that promise to deliver real and sustainable improvements in reducing disadvantage. Under these programs, businesses are actively seeking to increase their employment of Indigenous Australians, and the Government looks forward to further corporate and community initiatives emerging in the future.

The Government recognises that there are long lead times between policy changes and achieving improved outcomes in health, education, employment and life expectancy. It is unrealistic to expect results overnight. But actions and investments can be targeted more effectively, and monitoring progress will be essential to ongoing assessment of the effectiveness of the initiatives taken to close the gap.



Accountability and reporting

All governments must be accountable for improving outcomes for Indigenous Australians. A key element of current Commonwealth, state and territory programs is the adoption of measurable targets. Progress to achievement of the six targets will be measured against agreed milestones, and included in regular reporting.

The COAG Reform Council is monitoring progress in implementing the COAG reform agenda and will review progress against the six targets in its annual report.

It is equally important that, in assessing progress, we establish whether the rate of improvement is sufficient to meet each of the COAG targets. If progress is not sufficient then policy and program settings will need to be reviewed.

The commitment to monitoring and reporting requires that governments improve statistical collection services that are currently not sufficient to allow monitoring of key outcomes. Statistics are often skewed by the under-identification of Indigenous people in administrative data sets and limited sampling of Indigenous people in more general surveys.

These problems are compounded by uncertainties in the underlying Indigenous population statistics, inconsistencies across the jurisdictions and other factors. To give effect to the COAG commitment to accurate monitoring of outcomes, governments will work together to improve the detail and accuracy of information on outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

Further, the Government has undertaken to report to Parliament each year on progress made against the six Closing the Gap targets, assessing improvements in the wellbeing of Indigenous Australians. This is the first in a series of reports to be presented.





THE CHALLENGE FACING AUSTRALIA: THE EVIDENCE

THE CHALLENGE FACING AUSTRALIA: THE EVIDENCE

The challenge ahead of us is significant. Addressing the failures of the past requires taking stock of the true extent of inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia. These gaps are most visible in the key areas of life expectancy, infant and child mortality, early childhood education, literacy and numeracy skills, school completion rates, and employment outcomes.

A snapshot of Indigenous Australia

There are just over half a million Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia today, comprising 2.5 per cent of the Australian population⁴. Although many Indigenous Australians have access to life opportunities and a good standard of living, too many Indigenous Australians experience

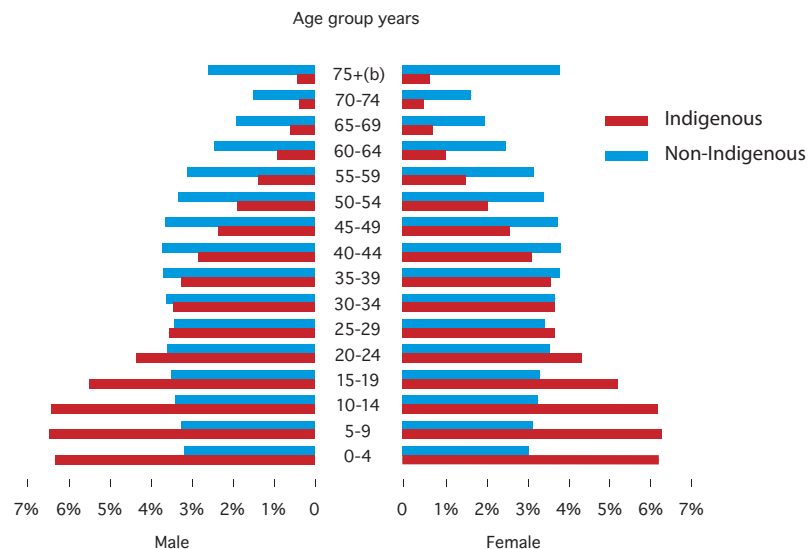
unacceptable levels of disadvantage in living standards, life expectancy, education, health and employment. Current data shows a significant gap in these critical areas between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous population.

Some important differences between the Indigenous population and other Australians are⁵:

- the Indigenous population grew at 12.8 per cent from 2001 to 2006, nearly double the rate of the total population (6.6 per cent). This trend is likely to continue.
- the total fertility rate for Indigenous women (2.4 babies per woman) is considerably higher than the fertility rate for all women (1.9 babies per woman)⁶.
- the median age of the Indigenous population is 21 years (37 years for non-Indigenous).
- thirty eight per cent of Indigenous people are under the age of 15 (19 per cent for non-Indigenous).
- only 3 per cent of Indigenous people are aged over 65 (13 per cent for non-Indigenous).

Figure 1 below illustrates the differences in the age profile between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations⁷:

Figure 1: Age distribution of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous population (a) – June 2006



(a) Preliminary estimate based on the 2006 Census of Population and Housing.
 (b) includes all ages 75 years and over and is not directly comparable to other age groups.

Source Australian Demographic Statistics (3101.0).

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Population Distribution, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 2006* (cat. no. 4705.0)

⁵ Based on final Estimated Residential Population figures (June 2006) in ABS, (2008) *Experimental Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, June 2006* (cat. no. 3238.0.55.001)

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Births Australia 2007*, (cat. no. 3301.0)

⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Year Book Australia 2008, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Population* (cat. no. 1301.0)

While an ageing workforce and funding for retirement are issues confronting all Australians, the demographic profile of the Indigenous population means that areas such as early childhood development, education, housing and the transition to employment are areas of critical need.

Around 75 per cent of Indigenous people live in urban or regional areas of Australia. Only 25 per cent live in remote areas. Socio-economic disadvantage is marked in both remote and non-remote areas, and strategies to combat disadvantage for all Indigenous Australians, wherever they live, are needed.

Life expectancy

Closing the gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is a matter of national priority. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2006 estimates show life expectancy for Indigenous Australians to be approximately 17 years lower than the total population for the period of 1996–2001; for Indigenous males, 59 years compared with 77 years in the non-Indigenous

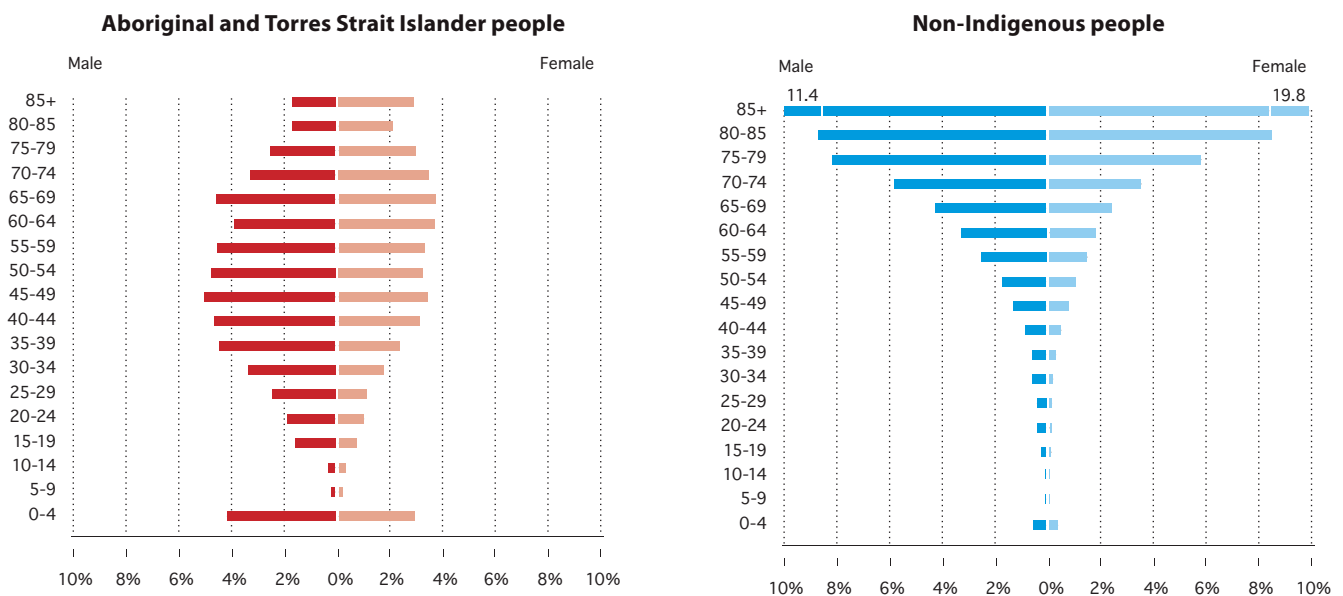
population and, for Indigenous females, 65 years compared with 82 years. However, the statistics on Indigenous life expectancy are subject to a range of data quality issues, and further work is being done to obtain robust estimates that can be monitored over time.

Life expectancy is affected by many factors, including socio-economic status, quality and accessibility of the health system, risk factor behaviour (tobacco, alcohol, nutrition, exercise), social factors and environmental factors (e.g. over-crowded housing, poor drinking water and sanitation).

Improvements to health outcomes will directly contribute to Indigenous life expectancy, and are a priority for this Government. Chronic and preventable diseases are the areas requiring the greatest action.

Figure 2 shows the difference in overall mortality rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is most apparent in the early and middle years.

Figure 2: Mortality rates by age group and sex by Indigenous status, Qld, WA, SA and NT, 2002–2006



Source: Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council, 2008, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework 2008 Summary*.

Improvements to Indigenous child and infant mortality rates

In Western Australia, the Northern Territory and South Australia, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infant mortality rate declined between 1991 and 2006 by 47 per cent, compared with a reduction of 34 per cent for non-Indigenous infants. Over this period there has been a significant closing of the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous infants. This decline has a strong correlation with improved life expectancy.

Evidence has shown that increasing the uptake of antenatal care (starting in the first trimester) would contribute to halving the gap in infant mortality rates, reducing the incidence of low birth weight (which is twice as common for babies born to Indigenous mothers), and improving early childhood and later life outcomes. Australian Government funding for additional maternal and child health services is already making an important contribution to halving the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade. The percentage of eligible Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0–4 years receiving a comprehensive child health assessment increased from 5.94 per cent to 16.5 per cent in the period November 2005 to November 2008.

The Government has committed a total of \$90.3 million over four years to child and maternal health services, which will continue to support improvements to Indigenous child and infant mortality rates.

Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2008

Child and infant mortality

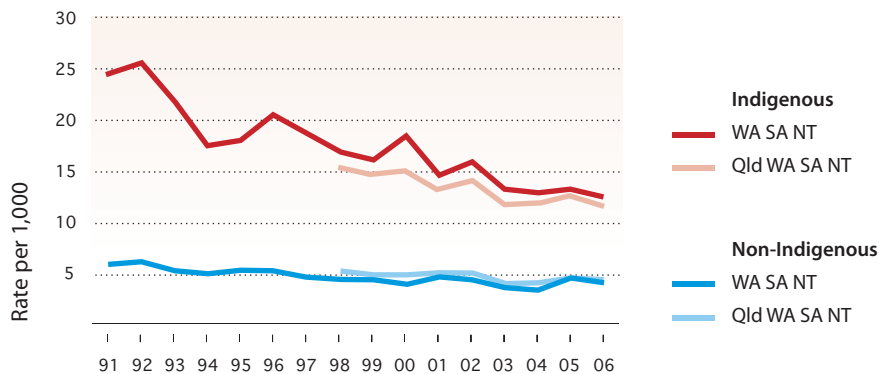
Approximately 83 per cent of Indigenous deaths below age 5 occur within the first year of life and, of these, nearly half occur within the first month. Infant mortality (less than one year) largely stems from problems during pregnancy and birth. Infant mortality for Indigenous infants in the 2002–06 period was 12.3 deaths per 1000 live births, compared with 4.2 deaths for non-Indigenous infants⁸.

The most common causes of Indigenous infant mortality are conditions originating in the perinatal period (46 per cent)⁹, such as birth trauma, foetal growth, complications of pregnancy and respiratory and cardiovascular disorders specific to the perinatal period¹⁰.

The mortality rates of Australian infants are declining and it is encouraging that with this overall decline in infant mortality, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous infant mortality is also declining. There is much work to be done, however, to continue this momentum, and the gap that remains is still unacceptable.

These outcomes highlight the need to focus on improving the quality and accessibility of child and maternal health services to Indigenous Australians to achieve the objective of Closing the Gap.

Figure 3: Infant mortality rates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants and other Australians, WA, SA and NT, 1991–2006, Qld, WA, SA and NT, 1998–2006



Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Analysis of National Mortality Database

⁸ Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council, 2008, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework 2008.

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ *ibid*

Early childhood development

Indigenous children currently experience much poorer outcomes than non-Indigenous children, with high levels of disadvantage in early childhood associated with poorer outcomes in health and education. Without preschool learning opportunities, Indigenous students are likely to be behind from their first year of formal schooling. Figure 4 shows the rates of participation in 2003 and 2005 for Indigenous children aged four across all states and territories.

Whilst children aged 3 to 5 years of age living in very remote areas are significantly less likely to attend a preschool than those living in other areas of Australia, those living in major cities are in fact only slightly more likely to attend preschools than those who are living in regional or remote localities. Preschool education accessibility for Indigenous children must be improved in all areas – urban, regional and remote – to have a chance at improving outcomes for young Indigenous Australians.

Figure 4: Participation rates for Indigenous children in preschool^a for 2003 and 2005^b

	Four-year-olds in 2003	Four-year-olds in 2005
	Indigenous children (%)	Indigenous children (%)
NSW	39.1	41.2
Victoria	54.5	41.9
Queensland	11.8	11.3
WA	99.7	93.0
SA	88.4	91.3
Tasmania	36.2	36.9
ACT	22.3	66.7
NT	68.2	70.3
Australia (total)	46.9	46.2

(a): Does not include preschool services provided in long day care services

(b): The participation rate is derived by dividing enrolments for four-year-olds by respective population in the relevant jurisdictions.

Source: *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2005; 2007.*

Literacy and numeracy

While most Indigenous students in metropolitan and regional areas meet the minimum reading standards, the percentage of students achieving at least the minimum standard of literacy and numeracy skills decreases as the level of remoteness increases.

The table below shows the 2008 National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results in reading, writing and numeracy for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 and the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous outcomes.

Figure 5: Percentage of students at or above the national minimum standard, 2008

		Indigenous %	Non-Indigenous %	Gap in percentage points
Year 3	READING	68.3	93.5	25.2
Year 3	WRITING	78.8	96.4	17.6
Year 3	NUMERACY	78.6	96.0	17.4
Year 5	READING	63.4	92.6	29.2
Year 5	WRITING	69.7	93.9	24.2
Year 5	NUMERACY	69.2	94.0	24.8
Year 7	READING	71.9	95.4	23.5
Year 7	WRITING	67.9	93.2	25.3
Year 7	NUMERACY	78.6	96.4	17.8
Year 9	READING	70.7	94.2	23.5
Year 9	WRITING	59.7	88.8	29.1
Year 9	NUMERACY	72.5	94.8	22.3

Source: 2008 National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy, MCEETYA 2008

¹¹ NAPLAN Results 2008: Percentage of Students At or Above National Minimum Reading Standard by Geolocation



Achievement is lower for Indigenous students across all year levels¹¹. Results for Indigenous students in very remote Australia are extremely poor. The majority of Indigenous students in very remote Australia currently do not meet the national minimum standard in reading, writing and numeracy.

Figure 6: Percentage of Indigenous students at or above the national minimum standard by remoteness, 2008

		Metro	Provincial	Remote	Very remote
Year 3	READING	78.6	76.2	53.9	30.5
Year 3	WRITING	86.9	86.2	69.0	45.0
Year 3	NUMERACY	85.9	85.5	70.4	47.5
Year 5	READING	74.4	71.0	47.8	21.7
Year 5	WRITING	79.7	76.0	58.1	31.6
Year 5	NUMERACY	78.5	75.7	56.3	32.9
Year 7	READING	83.0	79.6	56.6	28.0
Year 7	WRITING	78.7	73.8	54.0	28.5
Year 7	NUMERACY	87.0	83.9	67.8	46.4
Year 9	READING	78.4	75.3	57.4	29.0
Year 9	WRITING	67.9	62.6	44.4	23.8
Year 9	NUMERACY	78.9	76.2	60.4	38.2

Source: 2008 National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy, MCEETYA 2008



Year 12 attainment

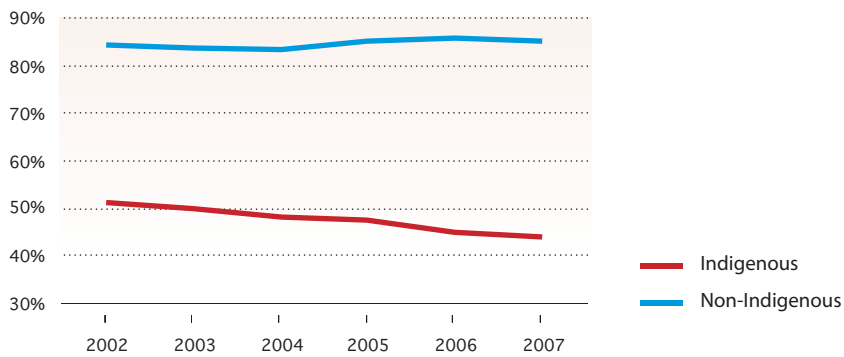
There is a considerable gap in both attainment and attendance in year 12 and equivalent¹². In 2007, only 42.9 per cent of Indigenous 17-year-olds attended secondary school, compared with 65 per cent of non-Indigenous 17-year-olds .

Evidence indicates that young Australians who do not complete year 12 are less likely to have the same opportunities as those who do.¹³ In 2006, year 12 completions¹⁴ for Indigenous Australians were 45.3 per cent, compared to 86.3 per cent for non-Indigenous.¹⁵ Based on current trends, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous is widening. To halve the gap by 2020, Indigenous year 12 completion rates (or equivalent) would need to increase by up to 2 percentage points each year.

Figure 7 illustrates the marked difference in outcomes for Indigenous students when compared to non-Indigenous students.

Completing school is a vital foundation for individuals, their families and communities and the country. A fulfilling and successful education is the means to employment and economic independence, and can form an important basis for long-term intergenerational change by providing individuals with the skills necessary to participate fully in society.

Figure 7: Year 12 attainment from year 11 student base



Source: Indigenous Education Program performance reports and National Schools Statistics Collection; 2002-2007



¹² Completion of Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) certificate II

¹³ Source: Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth – Research Report 16

¹⁴ As a proportion of year 11 enrolments the year before

¹⁵ National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training 2006

Employment

Indigenous Australians experience much higher levels of unemployment than non-Indigenous Australians. At the time of the last Census (in 2006), around 48 per cent of the Indigenous workforce-aged population was in employment. This compares to 72 per cent for other Australians – a gap of 24 percentage points.

To halve this gap to 12 percentage points within 10 years, around 100,000 more Indigenous Australians would need to be employed. This represents a more than 60 per cent total increase in the number of Indigenous people employed at mid-2006.

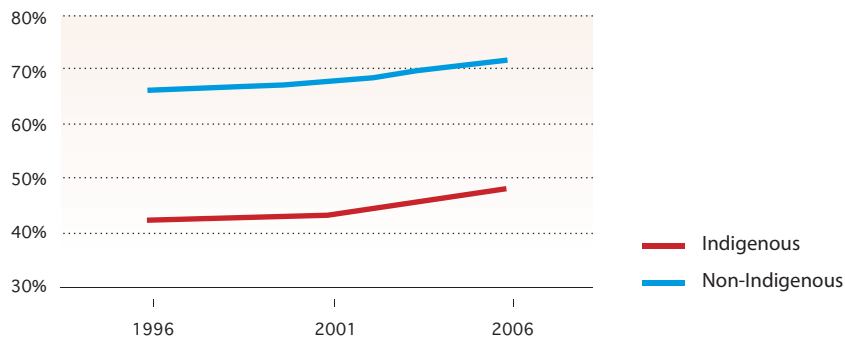
Significant determinants of employment include educational attainment, literacy and numeracy skills, location, and the employment status of family members. Energies must be focused on these areas to increase employment and create better opportunities for Indigenous Australians more broadly.

Being employed leads to improved wealth and asset creation for families and communities, which in turn has a positive influence on the health and education of children. Finding ways to increase the economic participation of the Indigenous working age population is a priority.

Foundations for change

These are sobering statistics that underline the depth and complexity of the challenge ahead. Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage will require a long-term, generational commitment that sees major effort directed to a range of priority areas or 'building blocks' to support Closing the Gap. These building blocks complement each other; for example, a failure to ensure secure tenure prevents investment and construction in healthy housing. These building blocks work together, with outcomes in one area supporting outcomes in others.

Figure 8: Rate of Indigenous and non-Indigenous employment to 2006



Source: ABS Cat No 4713.00, *Population Characteristics, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 2001*; 2006 Census Community Profile



**COAG – A NEW
PARTNERSHIP
WITH ALL
GOVERNMENTS**

COAG – A NEW PARTNERSHIP WITH ALL GOVERNMENTS

Through COAG, all governments have pledged to develop and implement coordinated strategies to address the key causes and determinants of Indigenous disadvantage, underpinned by a new approach to governance and shared accountability.

The platform for change

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) is the principal forum through which Australia's Commonwealth, state and territory governments are advancing their collaboration towards Closing the Gap.

Through COAG, governments have committed to the six Closing the Gap targets to address Indigenous disadvantage across urban, rural and remote areas. To support this work, COAG has also agreed to seven strategic platforms or 'building blocks' as a means of meeting these targets:

- early childhood
- schooling
- health
- economic participation
- healthy homes
- safe communities, and
- governance and leadership.

The evidence indicates that these are the areas requiring priority investment, and improvements in these areas will have the greatest impact.

Additional investment

In 2008, COAG reached agreement on a \$4.6 billion program of targeted reform measures and national payments to address gaps and shortfalls in existing Commonwealth, state and territory initiatives. The \$4.6 billion program of measures for National Partnerships between the Commonwealth and the states and territories in areas of key reform include:

- National Partnership on Indigenous Health Outcomes
- National Partnership on Remote Indigenous Housing
- National Partnership on Indigenous Early Childhood Development
- National Partnership on Indigenous Economic Participation, and
- National Partnership on Remote Service Delivery.

National Partnership on Indigenous Health Outcomes

Governments have committed \$1.57 billion over four years through COAG to reduce the biggest risk factors, such as smoking, to improve chronic disease management and follow-up, and to expand the capacity of the health workforce to tackle chronic disease in the Indigenous population.

Over the next four years, this investment will result in more than 133,000 additional health checks and 400,000 additional chronic disease management programs for Indigenous people with a chronic condition, support for more than 160 new Indigenous outreach working positions, 75 extra health professionals and practice managers in Indigenous healthcare services, 38 new GP registrar training posts in Indigenous health services and expanded nurse scholarship and clinical placements.



Implementation will commence from 1 July 2009 and in the first year over 40 Indigenous outreach working positions will be supported, as well over 15 new health professionals and practice managers. In addition, from 1 November 2009, the number of Aboriginal health worker and practice nurse follow-up care services available to Indigenous Australians with a chronic disease will be increased through changes to the Medicare Benefits Schedule.

National Partnership on Remote Indigenous Housing

COAG has committed \$1.94 billion over ten years, commencing this year, to reform housing and infrastructure arrangements in remote Indigenous communities. This will address significant overcrowding, homelessness, poor housing conditions and severe housing shortages in remote Indigenous communities. Improving housing conditions will provide the foundation for lasting improvements in health, education and employment and make a major contribution towards closing the gap in Indigenous disadvantage.

This will bring a total investment of up to \$5.48 billion over ten years, allowing for the construction of up to 4,200 new houses to be built in remote Indigenous communities, upgrades and repairs to around 4,800 houses in remote communities with a program of major repairs starting in 2008-09, improved tenancy management services, increased local training and employment opportunities in construction and housing management (providing up to 2,000 new jobs) and access to affordable accommodation options in regional centres to support employment, education, training opportunities and access to support services in regional areas of high employment. This investment will support up to 9,000 families in accessing safe and healthy housing.

National Partnership on Indigenous Early Childhood Development

COAG has also committed \$564.6 million over six years, commencing this year, to improve Indigenous early childhood development by providing funding for 35 children and family centres to provide early learning, child care and parent and family support services to Indigenous children and families. This investment will also fund increased access to antenatal care services, sexual and reproductive health services for Indigenous teenagers, and maternal and child health services for Indigenous children and their mothers.

National Partnership on Indigenous Economic Participation

Funding of \$228.8 million over five years has been committed to create sustainable Indigenous employment opportunities. Up to 13,000 Indigenous Australians will be assisted into employment over four years through the creation of waged market jobs from Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) program positions that have subsidised government service delivery, public sector recruitment drives to increase Indigenous employment, strengthened procurement policies and the development of COAG Indigenous workforce strategies across other priority reform areas. Implementation will commence in 2009, with the roll-out of jobs converted from CDEP to be completed by 1 July 2009.

National Partnership on Remote Service Delivery

Commencing this year, funding of \$291.2 million over six years will support improvements to the delivery of services across 26 remote locations across the Northern Territory, Western Australia, Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia. These locations represent some of the largest concentrations of Indigenous Australians in remote Australia.

The measure will improve the coordination and delivery of services in these major remote townships by all levels of government. There will also be a focus on driving reforms to service delivery including early childhood, schooling, housing and health. Importantly, engagement with local communities will be front and centre, including attention to governance and leadership within Indigenous community organisations.



Substantial investment to achieve real progress

The Australian Government has made substantial financial commitments to support the objective of closing the gap on Indigenous disadvantage. Since coming to office, the Government has committed \$4.9 billion in additional and re-targeted funding.

The Government's commitments in 2008 began with a \$580 million investment announced in February 2008. This was followed by \$425.3 million of new funding allocated in the 2008–09 Budget to improve the lives of Indigenous Australians, complemented by the redirection of \$222.5 million to address key priorities for Closing the Gap.

In late 2008, COAG agreed to a \$4.6 billion package of measures. Of this commitment, \$3.6 billion is Commonwealth funding, including over \$3.5 billion of new investments.

Since COAG, over \$100 million in additional funding has been committed by the Commonwealth for priority areas.

These agreements are designed to ensure that all governments are held accountable for their performance in these key areas. This commitment to a common framework of outcomes, progress measures and policy directions will guide Indigenous reform and build on current initiatives. Indigenous people will be involved in the implementation of each of these agreements through consultation on the implementation plans, as set out in the COAG communiqué.

A strong focus on better Indigenous outcomes has also been incorporated into the new National Agreements for mainstream funding and service delivery agreed through COAG. This will help to ensure that Indigenous Australians living in urban and regional areas also benefit from the reformed arrangements.

For instance, Indigenous Australians living in urban and regional Australia will be significant beneficiaries of the Government's recent \$6.4 billion allocation for social housing as part of the Nation Building and Jobs Plan. The allocation will allow the states and territories to make major improvements to the provision of public and community housing in urban and regional areas, and target people identified as at risk, including Indigenous Australians.

Likewise, Indigenous Australians will benefit from a new National Partnership on Early Childhood Education, agreed by COAG in November 2008. This National Partnership is a major step forward in supporting universal access to quality early childhood education, and a key national objective is to ensure access for Indigenous four-year-olds. A number of different approaches will be taken by the states and territories to ensure better access and greater participation for Indigenous children, including addressing barriers such as distance, cost, cultural appropriateness and convenience for working families. The Commonwealth is working closely with the states and territories to support this work.



Future reform

The commitments made to date by all governments are a first step towards a new partnership between the Commonwealth, the states and territories, and Indigenous Australians, in meeting the Closing the Gap targets. Governments must continue to work together to sustain this partnership and achieve real results measured against the targets.

Later this year COAG will hold a meeting with a focus on Closing the Gap. This meeting will discuss how we will work together to improve service delivery, how we will harness the private and community sectors to maximise change and continue to improve the lives of Indigenous Australians, wherever they live. At this meeting, COAG will consider additional reform proposals, including nationally consistent benchmarks and indicators for improvements in services and related outputs relevant to family and community safety.





HARNESSING THE CORPORATE AND COMMUNITY SECTORS

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The experience of previous efforts to Close the Gap demonstrates that achieving our targets in this area will require commitments from the broader corporate and community sectors. The forging of corporate and philanthropic partnerships with Indigenous communities will help to deliver real and sustainable results.

The Australian Government is committed to working with the corporate sector to improve Indigenous outcomes. In consultation with Indigenous communities, business and community organisations, the Government is directly supporting a range of initiatives that aim to improve employment, education and health outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

Corporate Australia

The Government has welcomed the initiative of the Business Council of Australia (BCA) to lift the role of corporate Australia in actively supporting Indigenous economic development. The BCA will establish an Indigenous business network across member companies to help share information and experiences, build new partnerships and explore opportunities.

The BCA will also develop a Reconciliation Action Plan and work with Reconciliation Australia to develop a tool kit for BCA members looking to develop such plans in the future.

The BCA has recognised that strengthening Indigenous communities is essential. It is working with the Koori Resource and Information Centre to gain a better understanding of the challenges confronting Indigenous communities in order to participate in the development of strategies to secure a better future.

To oversee these initiatives, the BCA is forming an Indigenous Engagement Task Force and will report on the Indigenous engagement strategies, outcomes and experiences of member companies each year from 2009.

Corporate Australia commits to long-term action

Qantas, Australia's largest airline and member of the Business Council of Australia, is implementing a range of long-term measures that will contribute to overcoming Indigenous disadvantage.

Since the establishment of its Reconciliation Action Plan in 2007, Qantas has increased its number of Indigenous employees by 30 per cent. Several targeted trainee and cadetship programs will contribute to enhanced Indigenous employment into the future.

These achievements sit alongside broader strategies to foster genuine reconciliation and change, including the promotion of Indigenous heritage and culture and equality of access to Qantas services.

Qantas has given strong public support to the objective of closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and its ongoing commitment to a Reconciliation Action Plan is an excellent model for corporate Australia.

Source: Qantas Indigenous Programs, <http://www.qantas.com.au/info/about/community/indigenous>



The Australian Government has committed \$20 million to the newly formed Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF) to improve the educational outcomes of young Indigenous people around Australia.

One of AIEF's key strategies is to provide scholarships for Indigenous secondary school students from rural and remote areas to attend boarding schools in major cities around Australia. Secondary school options for many Indigenous students, particularly in remote areas, can be limited. This initiative will provide families with the choice of sending their child to a high-performing secondary school, which will bring with it access to quality learning environments and educational opportunities that might not otherwise be available.

The AIEF aims to match the Australian Government's \$20 million by raising funds from business. This will be invested in an endowment fund, and combined with investment revenues, will fund up to 2000 scholarships over the next two decades. These scholarships will cover tuition and boarding fees, as well as other expenses that families may not be able to meet, such as uniforms and sporting equipment.

The Australian Employment Covenant (AEC) is a major and practical commitment from members of the business community. This initiative has the potential to significantly broaden job opportunities for Indigenous Australians and make a major contribution to the objective of Closing the Gap. The AEC has set the ambitious target of working with corporate Australia to create 50,000 jobs for Indigenous Australians. The initiative builds on the great efforts of many Australian companies which have committed to Indigenous employment and challenges other Australian companies to commit to creating more opportunities for Indigenous Australians.

The AEC was signed on 30 October 2008 between industry, the Indigenous community and the Australian Government. To support the implementation of the AEC, the Government has committed \$400,000 to enable the AEC to establish a call centre to take inquiries from interested employers and to develop a communication and marketing strategy, and will make resources available to facilitate training and provide post-placement support and mentoring.

The Australian Government has also provided an additional \$10 million to support the expansion of Clontarf Academies – the first stage of a long-term commitment to support the Clontarf Foundation. The Clontarf Foundation currently operates 23 academies in 18 locations. The additional funding will allow the organisation to extend its activities in Western Australia and the Northern Territory and expand to other interested States, increasing Clontarf's reach from around 1400 young people to 2100. This will allow an additional 500 Indigenous young people to benefit from the program in 2009 – increasing to 700 in 2010 – gaining the confidence and skills to achieve at school and make a successful transition to work.

The Clontarf Academies have been successful in engaging young Indigenous men in particular, encouraging them to engage with school education and to seek employment or undertake further education. Clontarf currently has 280 students participating in Darwin and surrounding locations. Results show that around 90 per cent of the students have improved their literacy and numeracy levels, demonstrating the value of the Clontarf approach.



Community sector involvement

The community sector also has a critical role to play in making progress towards Closing the Gap. Community-based organisations in all states and territories are making a significant contribution through a range of practical initiatives.

Reconciliation Australia is promoting and building better relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, working with corporations, Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations, government and community groups, as well as individuals, to form positive, mutually beneficial partnerships. Reconciliation Australia has helped broker a number of significant partnerships to foster reconciliation and social participation, educating, involving and encouraging the community to take responsibility for reconciliation by highlighting examples of success.

Reconciliation Australia's Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) program is a significant initiative linking the community sector with corporate Australia. A Reconciliation Action Plan provides organisations with a framework for detailing practical steps and priorities to achieve Indigenous equality, facilitating good relationships, respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the contribution their unique cultures can offer, and co-operation to ensure Indigenous children have the same life opportunities as other children in this prosperous country.

To date, more than 30 leading community-sector organisations have engaged in the RAP program. They include Oxfam Australia, Mission Australia, World Vision Australia, the Fred Hollows Foundation and Amnesty International Australia. An increasing number of Australian businesses have in place or are developing Reconciliation Action Plans, including BHP Billiton, the ANZ Bank, the National Australia Bank and Qantas, demonstrating the growing sense of cooperation and goodwill across both the community and corporate sectors in Australia.

It is encouraging to see young people taking part in the RAP program, with a number of schools and universities participating in these efforts to promote positive and beneficial relationships with the Indigenous community. A number of schools from across Australia have already developed a Reconciliation Action Plan, with a particular focus on education and helping students shape better relationships for the future.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community health in the ACT

Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Services is a primary health care service initiated and managed by the local Aboriginal community to provide an holistic health service to the Aboriginal people of the ACT and surrounding areas.

Winnunga Nimmityjah contributes to closing the gap in life expectancy by offering a comprehensive model of health care encompassing not only medical care, but a range of programs to promote good health and healthy lifestyles.

The Aboriginal Midwifery Access program, administered by Winnunga Nimmityjah, originated in response to the identified need to improve Aboriginal women's access to antenatal care in the ACT and surrounding areas. The program provides culturally appropriate and timely pre- and post-natal care to Indigenous women, including outreach clinical and non-clinical assessments at home, referrals to and support in accessing mainstream and specialist services, and the provision of information on mainstream health and community services.

The program has progressed significantly since its inception in 2000 and is strongly supported in the community.



**AUSTRALIAN
GOVERNMENT
PRIORITIES
FOR 2009**

AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES FOR 2009

In 2009 the Australian Government will continue the important work commenced in 2008. The Government will continue to strengthen and deepen its relationship with Indigenous people, and continue to make progress through COAG to expand education and employment opportunities, improve service delivery and improve data as a basis for tracking progress.

Meeting the challenge of remote Australia

In 2009 the Australian Government will continue a strong focus on the needs of remote Indigenous communities. The Government recognises that its approach needs to be flexible. It is committed to assessing the level of need and type of services required on a community-by-community basis.

Experience in the delivery of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) has confirmed the importance of a 'hands on' role in the delivery of services, particularly in remote areas and where services are the responsibility of more than one agency or level of government.

To achieve this, the Government is creating the new position of Coordinator General for Remote Indigenous Services to drive implementation of reforms. The Coordinator General will focus initially on 26 communities in priority areas across the Northern Territory, Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and New South Wales. The Coordinator General will work closely with heads of agencies, reporting to the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and acting as a circuit breaker to solve problems in the provision of services and programs for Indigenous Australians and priority communities.

In the Northern Territory, the Government will also continue to work to support fragile remote communities involved in the NTER, with a view to helping them transition to a longer-term development phase.

Improving health outcomes for Indigenous Australians

As part of the Government's commitment to improve health outcomes for Indigenous Australians, the Australian Government is continuing efforts to lift the standard of Australia's Indigenous health and aged care services, above and beyond those commitments agreed in COAG.

Many Indigenous children suffer from significant hearing loss, which is commonly linked to poor school attendance and educational outcomes. The early onset of middle ear infection, which results in fluctuating hearing loss, can prevent active participation in education and limit future employment opportunities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are also at increased risk of developing avoidable blindness and vision loss and are less likely to access eye health care practitioners than other Australians.

The Australian Government has committed \$58.3 million over four years to expand eye and ear health services for Indigenous Australians. The measure includes expansion of the Visiting Optometrist Scheme; increased services to address trachoma, training of health workers, medical equipment for hearing screening, additional ear and eye surgery and hearing-health promotion. Through improved hearing and eye health, children will have a better start to education resulting in improvements in literacy and numeracy. These have flow on effects to improved employment outcomes.

Additionally, in 2008 the Australian Government announced a \$46 million Indigenous Aged Care Plan to support a number of programs, plans and measures to improve Indigenous aged care, including the first quality framework for Indigenous-specific services.

The Government is committed to taking practical and commonsense measures to improve the care and welfare of older Indigenous Australians, and will establish an Indigenous Aged Care Taskforce this year to oversee the implementation of this Plan.



Indigenous economic development

Improving employment opportunities and the job readiness of Indigenous Australians is crucial to building pathways out of poverty and disadvantage. Reforms to the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) Program and the Indigenous Employment Program (IEP), beginning 1 July 2009, will ensure more Indigenous Australians have the skills they need to get and keep a job.

Two thousand jobs will be supported through previously CDEP-subsidised positions in government service delivery, and these will attract mainstream benefits such as access to superannuation, training and professional development. The Australian Government will also provide \$203 million for the continuation of more than 1,500 jobs already created in the Northern Territory from CDEP activities, and 40 jobs in four Cape York welfare reform trial communities.

Four hundred new traineeships across the government services sector and 60 full-time additional ranger positions in remote communities will also be supported through the new Indigenous remote workforce strategy.

These reforms will build on recent improvements to Universal Employment Services and contribute directly to the Government's aim of halving the employment gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade.

2009 will also see steps taken towards achieving long-term economic independence for Indigenous Australians through the development of an Indigenous Economic Development Strategy (IEDS).

This will promote economic participation and wealth creation by Indigenous communities and individuals and seek to build on partnerships with the corporate sector. Fresh ideas and a long-term commitment have the potential to broaden job opportunities for Indigenous Australians in an environment where many Australian companies are willing to expand their engagement with Indigenous people.

In addition, the mainstream Universal Employment Services (UES) program – the major employment program operating in urban and regional centres – has been reformed to give greater weight to the needs of disadvantaged jobseekers, including Indigenous Australians.

The Government is working to improve the native title system to help encourage economic development. Properly structured property rights to land are a key component in expanding commercial and economic opportunities. The number of agreements reached with native title parties to allow mining and other development to proceed is increasing, as are the income streams and other benefits which form part of those agreements.

There is the potential for these significant payments to be better harnessed for the economic and social advancement of native title holders, claimants and their communities. We must not allow this potential to go unrealised.

The Government will continue to work with the states and territories through COAG to drive further improvements, with a particular focus on service delivery to all Indigenous Australians, wherever they live. This will include a meeting of COAG later in 2009 with a focus on the Closing the Gap targets, including:

- further development of the national strategy for Closing the Gap, building on the work of COAG to date including further data collection improvements, an Indigenous consultation strategy and the identification of further policy reform priorities
- a strategy for closing the gap in regional and urban areas
- an agreement on the infrastructure needs of the 26 remote Indigenous locations identified in the Remote Service Delivery New Partnership agreement, and
- development of a reform proposal to improve family and community safety services to Indigenous Australians.

In its first year the Government has set important directions for the future. The Australian Government's strategy to Close the Gap has been clearly established and adopted across Commonwealth, State and territory governments. The Government has clear, ambitious targets to drive real change. The Australian Government has worked hard to improve relationships across all levels of government, end the blame game and establish genuine accountability for progress and results.

In the year ahead the Government will work with Indigenous Australians to establish a national Indigenous representative body. In 2008 the Government held consultations that involved listening to local people all around the nation about their aspirations and vision for this body. The Government has now asked the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner to appoint an Indigenous steering committee to complete the consultation process and bring forward a proposal to Government in mid 2009.

The Government will also continue to address the needs of the Stolen Generations, and assist healing in the Indigenous community more generally. The Indigenous Healing Forum, held in September 2008, was the first in a series of practical measures to improve the health and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians affected by past policies of forcible removal, recognising that healing has many dimensions and that the healing journey can take people along different paths. For this reason we are continuing our efforts to work with Indigenous Australians, in particular members of the Stolen Generations, in the development of targeted programs to support national healing.

The Australian Government recently appointed eminent Australians Professor Lowitja O'Donoghue and Mr Gregory Phillips to establish a Foundation for the Stolen Generations to address trauma and healing in Indigenous communities, with a strong focus on the unique needs of Stolen Generations. The Foundation will provide practical and innovative healing services, as well as training and research.





CONCLUSION

Closing the Gap is a great national challenge, but also a great national opportunity to achieve lasting change and ensure that future generations of Indigenous Australians have all the opportunities enjoyed by other Australians to live full, healthy lives and achieve their potential.

All sections of the Australian community have a role to play in rising to this challenge – governments, Indigenous Australians, the corporate and community sectors, and the wider community. A long road lies ahead, but the new partnerships emerging between governments, business and the wider community have the potential to achieve results where previous efforts have failed.

Closing the Gap will require practical, determined and sweeping measures in Indigenous life expectancy, health, housing, education and employment. The significance of the National Apology will now be matched by the substance of sustained action and real progress.





