

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For ten years Closing the Gap has lifted the expectations of what we can achieve. It has harnessed our resolve and focused our efforts, and enabled us each to play a role in creating our shared future. Our task is not done, but we turn to the future with hope, optimism and purpose.

In 2018, Closing the Gap remains a shared commitment. It is the story of a shared journey to continue to work together and enable and empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to live healthy and prosperous lives.

This journey continues to draw on the enduring wisdom, strength and resilience learned over thousands of years of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander civilisation. The past 10 years of Closing the Gap have also provided governments with valuable lessons.

One of the key lessons we have learned is that effective programs and services need to be designed, developed and implemented in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Governments have also recognised the importance of taking a far more holistic approach involving agencies from across government to develop policies and deliver services to First Australians.

The Closing the Gap framework was established in 2008 to address Indigenous disadvantage. Ten years on, the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have improved but more gains need to be made.

It is clear that continued effort and action is required.

The Closing the Gap framework provides an annual national snapshot of progress made against the targets – and helps maintain our collective focus.

While acknowledging this, it is important to recognise the success and achievements of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, demonstrating that when equal opportunities are provided, disadvantage can be overcome.

The chapters in this report detail the progress made against the seven Closing the Gap targets – and focus on health, education, employment and community safety. They also showcase a range of Indigenous success stories – from inspiring individuals, to growing businesses and organisations making a positive difference to their communities.

All of the Closing the Gap targets are interconnected. Progress in one area helps progress to be made in others.

For instance, improving education standards helps to increase employment rates and levels of health. And community safety is fundamental to ensuring children attend school and adults maintain employment.

PROGRESS AGAINST THE TARGETS

The latest data indicate that three of the seven Closing the Gap targets are on track to be met.^[1] The last year in which at least three targets were on track was in 2011.

- The target to **halve the gap in child mortality by 2018** is on track. Over the long term (1998 to 2016) the Indigenous child mortality rate has declined by 35 per cent, and there has been a narrowing of the gap (by 32 per cent). Improvements in key drivers of child and maternal health over the past few years suggest there are further gains to be made.

- The target to have **95 per cent of all Indigenous four-year-olds enrolled in early childhood education by 2025** is on track. In 2016, around 14,700 Indigenous children (91 per cent) were enrolled in early childhood programs.
- The target to **close the gap in school attendance by 2018** is not on track. In 2017, the overall attendance rate for Indigenous students nationally was 83.2 per cent, compared with 93.0 per cent for non-Indigenous students.
- The target to **halve the gap in reading and numeracy by 2018** is not on track. In 2017, the proportion of Indigenous students achieving national minimum standards in NAPLAN^[2] is on track in only one (Year 9 numeracy) of the eight areas (reading and numeracy for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9). However, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students has narrowed since 2008 across all the NAPLAN areas, particularly reading in Years 3 and 5, and numeracy in Years 5 and 9.
- The target to **halve the gap in Year 12 attainment by 2020** is on track. Nationally, the proportion of Indigenous 20-24 year-olds who had achieved Year 12 or equivalent increased from 47.4 per cent in 2006 to 65.3 per cent in 2016. While the attainment rates for non-Indigenous Australians also improved, the gap has narrowed by 12.6 percentage points over the past decade (from 36.4 percentage points in 2006 to 23.8 percentage points in 2016).
- The target to **halve the gap in employment by 2018** is not on track, with Indigenous employment rates falling slightly over the past decade. However, progress is being masked by a change in remote employment programs during this period. If this effect is removed, the employment rate has improved by 4.2 percentage points over the past 10 years. In 2016, the Indigenous employment rate was 46.6 per cent, compared with 71.8 per cent for non-Indigenous Australians.
- The target to **close the gap in life expectancy by 2031** is not on track. Between the periods 2005-2007 and 2010-2012 there was a small reduction in the gap of

0.8 years for males and 0.1 years for females. Over the longer term, Indigenous mortality rates have declined by 14 per cent since 1998.

PROGRESS ACROSS STATES AND TERRITORIES

Progress against the targets for each state and territory varies and is summarised in Table 1, which indicates where targets are on track. More detailed analysis of progress in each of the target areas is found in the chapters of this report.

Table 1: Progress against the targets^[A]

Target	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA
Child mortality ^[B]	*	*	*	*
Early childhood education	✓	✓	✓	✓
School attendance				
Reading and numeracy ^[C]				
Year 12 or equivalent attainment ^[D]				✓
Employment ^[E]	✓			
Life expectancy (proxy: mortality) ^[F]		*		

[A] A tick ✓ indicates the target is on track. An asterisk * indicates the data is either not published or there is no agreed trajectory. Remaining targets are not on track.

[B] Due to the small numbers involved, state and territory trajectories were not developed for the child mortality target. The national target reflects results for New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory combined, which are the jurisdictions considered to have adequate levels of Indigenous identification suitable to publish.

[C] For the purposes of this summary table, states and territories are considered on track if more than half of the eight NAPLAN measures are on track in each jurisdiction (in Years 3, 5, 7, and 9 reading and numeracy).

[D] Although New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and Tasmania were below their trajectory points for 2016, New South Wales and Tasmania were very close (within one percentage point).

[E] Progress against trajectories for the employment target was assessed using the ABS 2014-15 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey data, published in last year's report. While the 2016 Census employment data is published in this year's report, it is not the agreed data source for the trajectories.

[F] Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life expectancy are published every five years with the next update due to be published by the ABS in 2018. As an annual proxy, overall mortality data are reported for New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory only, which are considered to have adequate levels of Indigenous identification suitable to publish. However, as indicated in the table, only four jurisdictions have agreed mortality trajectories to support this target.

View the [text alternative](#) for Table 1.

CLOSING THE GAP - THE 10 YEAR STORY

In March 2008, Australian governments agreed to work together to achieve equality in health and life expectancy between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous Australians by the year 2030.

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) implemented the Closing the Gap strategy, setting six ambitious targets across the areas of health, education and employment to drive progress.

The strategy recognised that closing the gap in Indigenous disadvantage would require long-term, generational commitment, with effort to be directed across a range of priority areas: early childhood, schooling, health, economic participation, healthy homes, safe communities and governance and leadership.

The approach was designed to be holistic, with the building blocks fitting together through the integration of policy ideas and implementation strategies.

WHAT HAVE WE ACHIEVED?

The sustained effort over the past 10 years to close the gap in the areas of health, education and employment has delivered better outcomes.

For instance, Indigenous child mortality rates have fallen significantly over the longer term – down 35 per cent between 1998 and 2016. And smoking rates fell 9 percentage points between 2002 and 2014-15 and, as reported last year, drinking during pregnancy halved between 2008 and 2014-15.

The target to halve the gap for Indigenous Australians aged 20-24 in Year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment by 2020 is on track to be met – and there has been a surge in

the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students going on to higher education.

The Australian Government is implementing a range of measures to encourage Indigenous students to complete their university studies – because of the wider range of opportunities it provides to participate in the economy and contribute to community life.

Indigenous businesses are thriving – and the Government is supporting them to be even more successful through measures such as the Indigenous Procurement Policy and the Indigenous Business Sector Strategy.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

The Australian Government is committed to continuing to build the evidence base to show what works and what does not. This is critical to ensuring investment is focused in areas that make the biggest difference.

Research undertaken over the past 10 years has shown us that keys to successful outcomes include:

- holistic approaches that work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in ways that take into account the full cultural, social, emotional and economic context of Indigenous people's lives – including an awareness of the ongoing legacy of trauma, grief and loss associated with colonisation;
- active involvement of Indigenous communities in every stage of program development and delivery in order to build genuine, collaborative and sustainable partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and build capacity within Indigenous communities;
- collaborative working relationships between government agencies and other relevant organisations in delivering services and programs, acknowledging the

interrelatedness of key social and economic determinants across multiple life domains for Indigenous Australians;

- valuing Indigenous knowledge and cultural beliefs and practices that are important for promoting positive cultural identity and social and emotional wellbeing for Indigenous Australians;
- clear leadership and governance for programs, initiatives and interventions. This includes commitment from high-level leadership of relevant organisations and agencies to the aims of reducing Indigenous disadvantage and addressing determinants of health and wellbeing;
- employing Indigenous staff and involving them fully in program design, delivery and evaluation, and providing adequate training, where necessary, to build capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff;
- developing committed, skilled staff (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) and providing diversity and cultural awareness training;
- adopting a strengths-based perspective that builds and develops the existing strengths, skills and capacities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; and
- clear plans for research and evaluation to identify successful aspects of programs, provide a basis to amend and improve, demonstrate success and build an evidence base to justify allocation of ongoing resources.

NEXT STEPS IN OUR JOURNEY

With four of the existing Closing the Gap targets expiring in 2018, the Australian Government is working with the states and territories and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to refresh the Closing the Gap agenda.

In December 2016, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) committed to working together, and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, to refresh the agenda with a renewed focus on collaborative effort, evaluation and building on what works in each jurisdiction. In June 2017, COAG welcomed a strengths-based approach that supported Indigenous advancement.

There is a shared view among governments, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the wider community that we need to do better. But more than this, there is a view we need to move beyond addressing inequalities in education, employment and health and ask what needs to be done to create a thriving and prosperous environment in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can choose to pursue the lives they value for themselves, their families and their communities.

Australian governments are committed to working with Indigenous Australians to develop an agenda that reflects their diverse needs, strengths and aspirations. Importantly, there is a recognition governments do not hold all the levers for change and that the refreshed agenda can only succeed through genuine collaboration between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, governments, and the non-government and private sectors.

[1] The latest target data presented in this report is for 2016, with the exception of the school attendance and the literacy and numeracy targets (which relate to 2017).

[2] National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN).