

# Australia: Aboriginal disadvantage widens under Rudd government

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Eighteen months ago Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's nationally-televised apology to the Stolen Generations was hailed by the corporate media as a "turning point in Australian indigenous relations". Rudd's speech was followed by various pledges that his Labor government would "close the gap" between indigenous and non-indigenous health, infant mortality rates, education, housing and employment.

According to the Productivity Commission's recent *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage (OID)—the Key Indicators 2009* report, the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians is either static or widening across 80 percent of social statistics.

The biennial report, which was released at this month's intergovernmental Council of Australian Governments meeting in Darwin, measures 50 indicators of social disadvantage. Productivity Commission chairman Gary Banks admitted that at least 50 percent of the available data was not reliable enough, making it difficult to conclude whether any progress had been made at all.

Rudd immediately declared that the findings were "devastating" and said his government would "redouble and treble our efforts to make an impact.

"It is unacceptable and it requires decisive action," the prime minister told the media.

Rudd's concerns are bogus and designed to cover up the fact that the growing gap between indigenous and non-indigenous people is a direct result of Labor's policies.

The Rudd government not only backed the former Howard government's Northern Territory (NT) "intervention", which included compulsory income management of all Aboriginal welfare and pension recipients, suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act (1975) and the seizure of Aboriginal controlled land but in the face of growing Aboriginal opposition extended these punitive measures.

## Housing

The Productivity Commission correctly reports that overcrowded, poor housing impacts on all aspects of health and well-being, including school attendance, domestic violence, child abuse and substance abuse.

While the OID report claims that indigenous over-crowding has declined from 31 percent to 27 percent, indigenous people are still 5 times as likely as non-indigenous people to live in overcrowded housing. The worst figures are in the NT, where 65.9 percent of indigenous homes are overcrowded.

In 2004, the Aboriginal community of Wadeye reported an average 16

occupants per house, with one residence recording 22. Most houses averaged three bedrooms, giving an average occupancy rate of approximately 5 people per bedroom.

During last year's sorry speech, Rudd launched a federal commission for housing and called for a bipartisan "war cabinet" to overcome the crisis in Aboriginal housing. But not one new house has been built for indigenous people in the NT during the last 12 months. The Rudd government, moreover, announced late last year, in a fundamental assault on democratic rights, that new housing or refurbishment could only proceed if Aboriginal communities signed over their land to the government via 40- or 99-year leases, or could prove that they were "economically viable". Three communities signed such leases with the Howard government in 2007 but no new houses have yet been built in these settlements.

In fact, the NT indigenous housing crisis has intensified to such an extent that last weekend Aboriginal residents from Ampilatwatja, 325 kilometres north-east of Alice Springs, walked off their community. The residents have established a protest camp to draw attention to the disastrous state of their housing. Residents, some living in tin-sheds, described septic tanks that regularly overflow, spilling raw sewerage into their houses and onto the streets, and causing serious illness.

## Life expectancy

The 2002 Productivity Commission report revealed a 17-year life expectancy gap between indigenous and non-indigenous women and 20 years between indigenous and non-indigenous men.

While the latest OID report estimates that the life expectancy gap is 10 years for women and 12 years for men, these estimates do not necessarily prove that the gap has narrowed. It could well be that the new figures reflect more accurate mortality data and better methodologies.

Whether the new figures are more accurate or not, there still remains at least a 10 year gap in life expectancy. In Canada—a country with a similar history of European colonisation—the difference in life expectancy for indigenous females is 6 years and 8 years for males, and in New Zealand the gap is 8 years for females and 9 years for indigenous males.

## Sexual abuse

The OID report notes that the number of substantiated notifications for child abuse or neglect has doubled for indigenous children. Indigenous children are six times more likely to be abused than non-indigenous

children, up from four times as indicated in 2003 data. In addition, 41 out of 1,000 indigenous children are subject to care and protection, compared with 5 out of 1,000 non-indigenous children.

The rising number of child abuse reports is partly due to the increased policing of Aboriginal communities since the NT intervention and stricter government reporting regulations. But the government response to child abuse has not been to boost funding for more social workers and child protection employees, or to establish adequate health and counselling facilities, but to bolster police numbers.

The NT Labor government last year, for example, only committed to lift the number of child protection workers in the Territory by 23 over the next five years. Alice Springs, NT's second largest city, has only three child protection workers!

## **Income, education and health**

The OID report notes that the gross household income of an indigenous family is \$398 per week, 65 percent of a non-indigenous median income. It points out that the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous literacy and numeracy levels remain static or have worsened.

The proportion of indigenous 19-year-olds who finished their high school studies in 2007 was only 36 percent, compared with 74 percent for their non-indigenous counterparts. School attendance for indigenous students is still extremely poor, particularly in remote and very remote areas.

The OID report admits a lack of reliable data on the number of children attending pre-school. It has no figures on the numbers of Aboriginal children in remote communities—where English is not the first language—or the detrimental impact of Labor government cuts to bilingual education in indigenous schools.

Last week the Western Australian government axed school nutrition programs that provide breakfast and lunches for Aboriginal children in remote communities. The programs, which are jointly funded by state and federal governments, are seen as critical to school attendance, capacity to learn and an important preventative measure against chronic disease.

On health, the OID points to horrendous rates of disability and chronic illness in indigenous communities. The indigenous hospitalisation rate for potentially preventable acute conditions is 2.3 times the rate for non-indigenous people and 6.4 times for preventable disease.

The death rate for Aboriginal people is 9 times higher than for non-indigenous for those with diabetes, 6 times higher for people with cervical cancer, 4 times higher for those with kidney disease and 3 times higher for those with digestive disease. Infant mortality rates are 3 times those for the non-indigenous.

Indigenous people were hospitalised as a result of domestic violence at a rate 34 times higher than non-indigenous people. Overall, the need for medical support and health carers is twice that for non-indigenous people.

The report notes rising alcohol and drug abuse and an increase in self-harm hospitalisations, particularly in the NT, where the rates are 4 per 1,000 for indigenous people and 1 per 1,000 for non-indigenous. It states that self-harm and suicide in indigenous communities are influenced by complex factors related to social disadvantage, history of dispossession, removal from family and racial discrimination.

## **Imprisonment and juvenile detention**

One of the OID's most alarming figures is the increase in imprisonment and juvenile detention rates, with Aboriginal people 13 times more likely to end up in jail than non-indigenous Australians.

The imprisonment rate for indigenous women and men has increased by 46 and 27 percent respectively in the past nine years. The indigenous juvenile detention rate has increased by 27 percent and indigenous youth are 28 times more likely to be detained than non-indigenous youth.

In the NT, 83 percent of prisoners are indigenous, an overall increase of 23 percent over the last year and the largest increase of all states and territories. This figure is a direct by-product of the NT intervention and the social dislocation it has created.

The OID report notes the direct relationship between indigenous poverty, unemployment, lack of access to social services, low education and crime. One of the strongest correlations is between alcohol abuse and imprisonment.

Last month the media highlighted the imprisonment rate in the NT as the third highest in the world relative to population, the Australian rate is just behind that of the US. In 2007, the NT prison system was described in a report by Michael Levy, John Podmore and Richard Harding, the former head of Western Australia's Custodial Services, as a "forbidding" and "repressive" system that had few alcohol, drug and sex offender programs.

The NT prison survey also slammed the lack of mental health screening for prisoners. The only attempt at analysing a new prisoner's mental state was a "smiley faces" test, where prisoners were asked to look at a series of smiling or frowning faces and then identify how they felt upon entering prison.

While Rudd and other government politicians feign concern about the Productivity Commission figures, their policies guarantee that the levels of social inequality revealed in the report will only widen.

After the OID report was tabled, this month's COAG meeting, which was chaired by Rudd, proposed to spend \$46 million to improve data collection and to develop an indigenous food security program, involving a licensing scheme that would ensure remote stores could only sell nutritious goods. The meeting passed over in silence the issues of providing decent paying jobs, proper housing, adequate healthcare and education facilities, not to speak of the necessary income to purchase "nutritious goods".



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