

Australian “Closing the Gap” report reveals worsening conditions for Aboriginal youth and workers

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The latest annual government “Closing the Gap” report, produced by the pro-business Productivity Commission, shows a further deterioration in the economic and social conditions affecting indigenous workers and youth under Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s Labor government.

This follows a scathing report by the Commission in February which warned that the Closing the Gap agreement, which is meant to improve these conditions, was on the verge of failure. It criticised the government for “weak” actions and “unfulfilled promises” in critical areas.

The most recent data evaluates 15 of the agreement’s 19 socio-economic targets, covering areas such as life expectancy, health and wellbeing, employment, education and training, land and sea rights, housing, incarceration, family safety and internet access. Of the 19 indices monitored, only five are on target, even by the limited and narrow goals set.

Regardless of successive governments’ token official apologies for injustices against Aboriginal people, and the Labor government’s posturing of concern during its failed indigenous Voice referendum campaign, four key areas are not only stagnating but worsening.

Adult indigenous incarceration rates continued to rise significantly in 2023, reaching 2,265.8 per 100,000, up by 114.7 per 100,000 from the previous year. This data alone indicates the real federal and state Labor governments’ response to the social crisis, which is to adopt more punitive law and order measures.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide rates continue to rise, with the latest data showing a rate of 29.9 per 100,000 people. This is a substantial increase over the past two years under the Albanese government. Suicide was the leading cause of death for indigenous people aged 15–39 in 2022.

Those aged 35–44 years had the highest rate of suicide—52.3 per 100,000. That was almost five times the rate of 10.8 per 100,000 for non-indigenous people.

Despite the 2008 parliamentary apology by the Rudd Labor government to the “Stolen Generations” of Aboriginal children removed from their families, the over representation of indigenous children in out-of-home care is increasing. In 2023, the rate was 57.2 per 1,000 children, up from the 2019 baseline of 54.2. The involvement of child protection agencies was reported as “worsening.”

Last year’s rate was 12.1 times higher than for non-indigenous children. In Victoria, the rate was even more extreme at 102.9 per 1,000, or 22.5 times the rate for non-Indigenous children.

Recently, a South Australian report revealed that Aboriginal newborns are increasingly taken from their mothers immediately after birth. These removals, planned by child protection agencies during the mothers’ pregnancies, have been carried out without the mothers’ prior knowledge. Last year, the state’s Department for Child Protection removed 105 babies under one month old, with about a third being Aboriginal and most removed before they were a week old. This inhumane practice is creating further inter-generational trauma for Aboriginal communities.

Overall, the life expectancy gap between indigenous and non-indigenous people will not meet the target of zero by 2031. In 2020–2022, non-indigenous males were expected to live 8.8 years longer than indigenous males. Non-indigenous females had an 8.1-year advantage over indigenous females.

Life expectancy for indigenous males was just 71.9 years and 75.6 years for females. Over the past 15 years since the Closing the Gap program was launched, only small improvements have been made, with indigenous male life expectancy increasing by 4.4 years and female life expectancy by 2.5 years.

This is not just an issue of indigenous disadvantage. The dire situation for the Aboriginal population, the most marginalised and disadvantaged section of the working class, is occurring amid the Labor government’s austerity measures against all working people.

This government is presiding over the steepest decline in living standards for the working class in decades, advancing a corporate agenda, further cutting real wages and social services, while lowering taxes for the wealthy and spending billions on war preparations.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) research has found a significant correlation between poverty and suicide across the population as a whole. From 2001 to 2022, suicide rates were notably higher in the most disadvantaged areas. In the poorest areas, the suicide rate was more than double that of wealthier areas.

The Closing the Gap report understates the impact of this broader inequality. The devastating issue of Aboriginal children taking their own lives goes unreported in the data. Earlier this year,

a coronial inquest investigated the suicides of 13 Aboriginal youth, aged 10 to 23. Tragically, this included a 10-year-old girl, her 13-year-old sister, a 12-year-old, a 16-year-old boy and a 17-year-old. These deaths occurred over a four-year span in the remote Kimberley region of northern Western Australia (WA), which has one of the highest suicide rates globally. In April, the media reported the suicide of another 10-year-old WA Aboriginal boy, who was in foster care.

Alongside the worsening rates of incarceration for adults, the target to reduce the rate of Aboriginal young people in detention by at least 30 percent by 2031 is not on track.

According to a AIHW report, on an average day in the Northern Territory (NT), 1.75 percent of indigenous children aged 10–17 are in youth detention or under “community-based supervision.” This is 44 times the rate at which non-indigenous children are incarcerated.

This year the NT Labor government, with the full support of the Albanese government, initiated two police-state style curfews in the town of Alice Springs after a handful of violent incidents fuelled by the acute social crisis. This underlines Labor’s attitude to Aboriginal youth in particular who are subjected to aggressive over-policing. The NT has almost three times as many police per capita as the country as a whole.

Human Rights Commission reports this year raised “grave concern” at the treatment of children in adult watch houses. One recent media report showed footage of an intellectually disabled, 13-year-old indigenous female handcuffed, naked, covered in her own urine in an isolation cell in a Queensland adult watch house. Such brutalising and criminalising of indigenous children is commonplace. Some children have been held in isolation for up to 30 days.

Social indicators from the latest Closing the Gap report show that the most significant disadvantages are in remote Aboriginal communities. These areas, isolated from major regional centres, often hundreds of kilometres away, suffer from a lack of employment, inadequate education and healthcare services, overcrowded housing, and deprivation of even the most basic necessities, like proper sanitation and clean drinking water.

For years, governments and right-wing think tanks, such as the Centre for Independent Studies, have argued that unless these communities are “economically viable”—meaning profitable—they should be shut down. As a result, these communities have been deprived of resources and infrastructure, effectively pushing them toward closure.

Across the country, nearly 500 remote communities lack clean drinking water, a basic human right. This is despite repeated reports, with governments largely ignoring the issue. Some communities suffer from contaminated water with harmful substances like microbes, bacteria, nitrates, arsenic and uranium.

This has led to poor health outcomes, low life expectancy and the highest rate of suicides. In 2020–22, life expectancy of Aboriginal people in remote areas was five years shorter than in major cities and regional centres.

By contrast, significant advances made were in indigenous land and sea acquisition. Data showed a 7.8 percent increase in the area of land subject to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’

legal rights. The target of 15 percent increase by 2030 on the sea covered by indigenous rights had been met six years ahead of time, involving 113,461 square kilometres as of June 2023.

Land and sea rights acquisitions have been promoted by the Labor government as part of programs to “empower” indigenous business and drive an “entrepreneurial spirit,” as Albanese touted in his speech at the annual Garma Festival in the NT this month.

The Indigenous Procurement Policy, first introduced by the Liberal-National Coalition government in 2015, established annual targets for all government departments to award contracts to indigenous enterprises as “preferred service providers.”

This has led to state and territory governments fast-tracking Native Title acquisitions. In 2022, according to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, about 84 percent of the NT’s coastline has been recognised as owned by Aboriginal communities through Native Title.

As throughout capitalist society, there is a vast gulf between the Aboriginal financial elite, which includes CEOs of land and sea councils, academics, politicians and business operators, and the vast majority of the Aboriginal population, who are among the most impoverished sections of the working class.

The government’s agenda of prioritising indigenous capitalist enterprises was behind Labor’s attempt to insert an indigenous Voice advisory body in the Constitution. The Voice would have been a means of integrating even further the indigenous elite into the state apparatus to further the pro-business program of the Albanese government, as well as its war plans.

Already the 2022 Closing the Gap report disclosed a growing relationship between Aboriginal businesses and the military, with the Department of Defence underlined as one of the largest procurers of indigenous goods and services.

The claim that the Closing the Gap program, launched in 2008 by the Rudd Labor government, would address the injustices of the “Stolen Generations” and overcome the atrocious conditions of most Aboriginal people has proven to be an utter fraud.

The future of indigenous youth and workers is connected to the struggle of the entire working class, indigenous and non-indigenous alike. That requires a unified political fight against the source of the disaster, the capitalist profit system, and for a socialist society.



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