

## **Productivity Commission slams lack of policy evaluation as Indigenous incarceration soars**

By Fergus Hunter November 17 2016

The Productivity Commission has delivered a scathing indictment of the failure to evaluate programs aimed at tackling Indigenous disadvantage, saying it helps explain mixed results in critical areas, including soaring rates of incarceration and self-harm in Aboriginal communities.

The latest *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* report shows a 77 per cent increase in imprisonment of Indigenous adults since 2000 and a 56 per cent increase in hospitalisation from self-harm attempts over the last decade but more positive results in infant mortality, year 12 attainment, participation in further education, employment, and native title recognition.

Since 1998, the mortality rate among 0-4 year olds went from 217 to 159 per 100,000. The proportion of Aboriginal 20-24 year olds completing year 12 or equivalent increased from 45 per cent in 2008 to 62 per cent in 2014-15. The proportion of adults in full-time work went from 54 per cent in 2002 to 63 per cent in 2014-15.

Some measures remained stagnant: 22 per cent of Indigenous people experienced real or threatened family violence in the last 12 months, youth detention remains at 24 times the non-Indigenous rate and rates of Indigenous language learning and speaking are unchanged.



*Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion visit the Yalata Anangu School in South Australia last month. Photo: Alex Ellinghausen*

"The overall takeout is that it remains a very mixed report card. It reveals some very positive trends but it also shows some wellbeing outcomes have stagnated or worsened," Productivity Commission deputy chair Karen Chester told Fairfax Media.

"Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage in a comprehensive way across all measures of wellbeing, from our perspective, will remain elusive unless you have rigorous evaluations of Indigenous policies and programs."

Of 1000 Indigenous-specific initiatives, the commission - backed by all governments - could only find 34 properly evaluated and effective case studies. They concluded that stronger evaluations also need to be released publicly.

"We can't feign surprise that we're not improving against all of these wellbeing indicators if we haven't actually looked at what we're spending money on and if Indigenous Australians are getting bang for buck," Ms Chester said.

Further confirmation of Indigenous incarceration as a national crisis comes shortly after the government announced an inquiry that received a mixed reception. Labor frontbencher and Yawuru elder Patrick Dodson also hit out recently at Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion's "appalling" ignorance on issues in the justice system.

The Productivity Commission report prescribed a formula for delivering good policy:

- Understanding which wellbeing indicators feed into what outcomes
- Ensuring four common success factors are considered - co-operation. between government and Indigenous people, a "bottom up" community approach, good governance and ongoing government support
- Robust, transparent, systematic evaluation.

The commission only found improvement in three of the seven Closing the Gap targets, with one stagnant and three showing unclear results.

Examples of successful programs have been highlighted. These include the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience, which has been found to strengthen engagement, aspiration and a sense of identity, and South Australia's MoneyMob Talkabout, which improves financial management skills.

The national Health for Life program increased birth weights of Aboriginal babies and Students Hairdressing Integration Education has improved school attendance and behaviour among year nine girls in Geraldton, WA.

The Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage steering committee is made up of representatives from all Australian governments, the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, the Bureau of Statistics and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

"They've signed off on this report and [better evaluation of policies and programs is] the key takeout from it," Ms Chester said.