

Indigenous disadvantage getting worse in mental health and incarceration

Despite efforts to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, Productivity Commission says some areas are getting worse

By Helen Davidson in Darwin

Thursday 17 November 2016

Australia's efforts to combat Indigenous disadvantage are continuing to see declining outcomes in mental health, family violence, and incarceration, the Productivity Commission has found.

The commission's biannual report, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage*, has measured the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people since 2000. The data helps inform Australia's progress on its closing the gap targets, agreed to by the council of Australian governments (Coag) in 2007 and 2008.

Among the new findings in the 2016 release were continued gains in some indicators, including early childhood health and education but further declines in other areas.

The proportion of Indigenous adults reporting high or very high psychological distress rose to 33% in 2014-15, more than triple the proportion for non-Indigenous adults. Hospitalisation rates for intentional self-harm increased by 56% in the 10 years to 2014-15. The commission's previous report in 2014 had found the suicide death rate was double that of non-Indigenous Australians.

Advocates have called for a royal commission into the high rates of suicide among Indigenous Australians, which has been labelled a "humanitarian crisis". Estimates suggest it accounts for at least 5.1% and up to 10% of all Indigenous deaths.

Between 2002 and 2014-15, the rate of family and community violence remained largely unchanged, at 2.5 times the rate for non-Indigenous adults. Risky alcohol use was lower than in 2008 and remained in line with 2002 rates.

In the 10 years to 2014-15 the rate of Indigenous children on care and protection orders increased from 21 per 1,000 to 58, more than nine times the rate of non-Indigenous children.

The report also found the adult imprisonment rate had risen steadily, increasing by 77% in the 15 years to 2015.

While the rate of Indigenous juveniles in detention had dropped, it was still 24 times higher than for non-Indigenous youth.

A separate royal commission into the protection and detention of children in the NT began this year, and last month Indigenous leaders cautiously welcomed the announcement of a federal inquiry into Indigenous incarceration rates. However many including the Labor senator Pat Dodson noted few of the 339 recommendations of the 25-year-old royal commission into Indigenous deaths in custody, had been enacted.

The Productivity Commission also found improvements, including continued declines in the mortality rates of children. Among infants less than a year old mortality rates more than halved from 14 to six deaths per 1,000 live births.

A key closing the gap target is to see the mortality rate of all children under five halved by 2018.

Some educational outcomes also improved, with the proportion of 20 to 24-year-olds having completed year 12 or above rising from 45% to 62% since 2008.

The rate of 17 to 24-year-olds participating in post-school education, training, or employment also increased from 32% to 42% from 2002 to 2014-15.

The report also measured indicators of cultural value, finding more than half of responders reported feeling proud of Indigenous culture, and more than 80% regarded it and Indigenous history as important.

The rates of people learning an Indigenous language remained similar to 2008 levels, with the highest proportion among children aged three to 14. In remote and very remote areas 50% spoke an Indigenous language, compared with 16% overall.

Recent years have seen a concerted push to maintain, revive, and rescue endangered Indigenous languages, of which the vast majority are considered endangered.

Between 2002 and 2014-15 the proportion of Indigenous people recognising traditional homelands increased to 74%. By February 2016 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people collectively owned or controlled 16% of Australian land, the vast majority in very remote areas.

Homeownership rates among Indigenous people also increased, bucking the trend of non-Indigenous Australians, and rates of overcrowding decreased across the board, including from 63 to 49% in very remote areas.

The report included evaluations of “things that work” to support its indicator statistics, but noted a small number of case studies to draw on reflecting “a lack of rigorously evaluated programs in the Indigenous policy area”.

“If we are to see improvements in outcomes we need to know which policies work and why. But the overwhelming lack of robust, public evaluation of programs highlights the imperative for Indigenous policy evaluation,” said the deputy chair of the commission, Karen Chester.

The principles and practises underpinning successful programs included flexibility in design and delivery, community involvement, emphasis on building trust, a well-trained and well-resourced workforce, and continuity and coordination of the services, the report found.