

Money stream has done little to enrich life for Aborigines

by Brian Robins

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A NEW report shows the state government has made limited progress in improving the lives of indigenous Australians, despite continued heavy spending on a variety of remedial programs. In areas from child neglect and abuse, education and health, through to incarceration and recidivism, the situation facing indigenous Australians in NSW is worse than it was a few years ago according to the Two Ways Together Report on Indicators, which compared progress for indigenous Australians.

Though Aborigines are staying in school longer, NAPLAN education surveys show that they lag their peers in several areas. With year 3 literacy and numeracy, 16 per cent of Aboriginal students were at or above proficiency, compared with 45 per cent for all other students. By year 5, this had fallen to 5 per cent compared with 28 per cent for non-Aboriginal students. "The data indicate that there was a significant gap in the achievement of Aboriginal students in NSW schools in both reading and numeracy," the report noted. Cases of child neglect and abuse have soared, rising by 71 per cent and the rate of Aboriginal female victims of sexual assault has surged over the past few years, remaining at a multiple of the rate for non-Aboriginal women.

In 2008, non-family violence related assaults of Aboriginal women was 4.3 times the rate for non-Aboriginals and for sexual assault was 3.6 times, the report noted. Incarceration and recidivism rates have risen as well, with young Aboriginal men eight times more likely to appear in a criminal court in NSW than non-Aboriginals of the same age group. The number of Aboriginal adults on remand has risen steadily over the past six years, as has the prison population of Aboriginals.

"The rate of remand or custodial sentences among Aboriginal men is 16.45 times that of non-Aboriginal men," the report noted. "The rate of custodial sentences among Aboriginal women is 27.2 times that of non-Aboriginal women."

Aboriginal children in out-of-home care has surged to 4575 in 2008, the most recent data available, from 2703 in 2004, a 69 per cent rise compared with a rise of 38 per cent among non-Aboriginals. As a result, Aboriginal children account for 31 per cent of all children in out-of-home care, up from 26 per cent five years ago.

The NSW Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Paul Lynch, agreed that Aboriginals are disadvantaged with health, but pointed to the continued high level of funding in areas such as health (\$180 million over four years), early childhood development (\$22 million over five years), and \$15 million to upgrade housing and the like as the government seeks to close the gap. "Overcoming the disadvantage encountered by Aboriginal people requires a consistent and long-term plan," he said.