
1 Introduction

This is the fifth report in the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage series. It has been informed by ongoing consultations with Indigenous people, governments, academics and service providers.

In April 2002, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) commissioned the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision to:

produce a regular report against key indicators of Indigenous disadvantage. This report will help to measure the impact of changes to policy settings and service delivery and provide a concrete way to measure the effect of the Council's commitment to reconciliation through a jointly agreed set of indicators (COAG 2002, see appendix 1).

The first edition of *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators* was released in November 2003. A second edition of the report was published in July 2005, and a third in June 2007. Following the issue of an updated terms of reference, a fourth edition was published in July 2009. All four editions have been widely welcomed and generally well received, and there has been widespread endorsement of the vision embodied in the report of 'a society where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should enjoy a similar standard of living to that of other Australians, without losing their cultural identity' (CAR 2000).

Many factors bear on change. A key message from consultations with Indigenous people is that the efforts of governments acting alone would not be enough to overcome Indigenous disadvantage. Fundamental, long term change will require concerted action on the part of governments, the private sector, the general community and, not least, Indigenous people themselves.

Based on the best available information, the report has provided depth to constructive debate about how to tackle Indigenous disadvantage, amongst Indigenous organisations, governments and public sector agencies, non-government organisations and many individuals.

In this report, the term 'Indigenous' is used to describe Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people of Australia. While the Steering Committee acknowledges the diversity of Australia's Indigenous peoples, most of the available data on Indigenous people are for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people combined. A small amount of data showing outcomes for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait

Islander people separately is in chapter 12. Section 3.1 contains more specific definitions and more detailed information on the Indigenous population.

1.1 Not just another statistical report

COAG nominated two core objectives for the *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators* report. The first is to inform Australian governments about whether policy programs and interventions are achieving improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The second is to produce a report that is meaningful to Indigenous people.

This report therefore aims to be more than a collection of data. It does not seek to replicate what is being done elsewhere — numerous reports and academic publications have been produced containing statistical information on Indigenous Australians, and many service areas have developed comprehensive suites of performance indicators. This report provides a practical tool for government agencies and Indigenous organisations. A whole-of-government, outcome focus encourages thinking beyond existing policy frameworks and government service agency boundaries.

The ultimate goal of this report, outlined in the ‘priority outcomes’ (see chapter 2), is that Indigenous people will one day enjoy the same opportunities as other Australians, while maintaining cultural identity. The *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* framework underpins a strategy to achieve this vision.

The information in this report provides policy makers and Indigenous people with a high level view of the current state of Indigenous disadvantage, and draws attention to where things need to change if the priority outcomes are to be achieved. The report focuses on factors that ultimately cause disadvantage; where evidence, logic and experience suggest that targeted policies will have the greatest impact. Over time, editions of this report are tracking where governments have had an impact on Indigenous disadvantage — and where work still needs to be done.

Data limitations, and a desire to keep the report to a manageable size, mean that much of this report concentrates on outcomes for Indigenous Australians at the national and State and Territory level. National and State/Territory averages do not reveal the different outcomes experienced by different groups of Indigenous people. Some Indigenous people experience no disadvantage compared to non-Indigenous people, while other Indigenous people are highly disadvantaged. The report recognises the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and experiences, and acknowledges that disadvantage may come in different forms for those who live in urban, regional and remote areas. Some data sources permit more

detailed disaggregation, which can help identify the underlying causes of disadvantage and demonstrate the complex interactions of socioeconomic factors that contribute to disadvantage for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Analysis of multiple disadvantage in chapter 13 goes some way towards exploring these interactions.

Implementation of the framework

The report is influencing how governments address Indigenous disadvantage. Elements of the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage framework have been adopted by some jurisdictions, and even individual Indigenous communities, to produce more disaggregated information to meet their specific needs. Implementation of the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage framework by each government is summarised in appendix 2.

Indigenous organisations can use the report's indicators to monitor their own outcomes, and to hold governments to account. The Close the Gap Campaign draws on many of the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage report indicators to hold governments accountable for achieving Indigenous health equality (box 1.1.1).

Box 1.1.1 Close the Gap Campaign for Indigenous Health Equality

In April 2007, 40 of Australia's leading Indigenous and non-Indigenous health peak bodies and human rights organisations joined forces to launch a campaign to 'Close the Gap' on health inequality.

Close the Gap calls on all levels of Australian government to put in place firm targets, funding and timeframes to address health inequalities, including providing equal access to primary health care for Indigenous Australians within 10 years.

In March 2008, the Australian Government (with bipartisan support) and Indigenous health leaders signed a Statement of Intent to work together to achieve equality in health status and life expectancy between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians by the year 2030.

The signing of the Statement was the culmination of a two-day Indigenous Health Equality Summit attended by more than 100 experts across the Indigenous and mainstream health sector and related fields. The Summit developed working targets and benchmarks to be used to close the gap in Indigenous life expectancy by 2030.

In 2010, the Close the Gap Steering Committee published its Shadow Report assessing Australian Government progress in closing the gap (CGSCIHE 2010). The Shadow Report noted the role of the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage report in monitoring progress, however, the focus of the Shadow Report was on suggesting how the gap could be closed rather than providing data on outcomes.

Source: AHRC (2009, 2010)

1.2 Origins of the report

The origins of this report can be traced back to the final report of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation's report, *National Strategies to Advance Reconciliation* (CAR 2000), which called on all governments to report annually against measurable program performance benchmarks. In its response, COAG acknowledged the unique status of Indigenous Australians, and agreed that 'many actions are necessary to advance reconciliation, from governments, the private sector, community organisations, Indigenous communities, and the wider community' (COAG 2000; appendix 1).

In December 2000, the then Prime Minister wrote to the Ministerial Council for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (MCATSIA), requesting it to develop its action plan on reconciliation to include performance reporting strategies and benchmarks. A framework was developed by early 2002, which identified three priority areas for action, headline indicators and strategic change indicators (SCRCSSP 2003b). Following the commissioning of the *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* report in 2002, the MCATSIA work formed the basis of extensive consultations to develop the framework for the first report.

The Australian, State and Territory governments conducted consultations within their jurisdictions. Officials representing MCATSIA and the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission consulted within their organisations, and the Chairman of the Steering Committee and the Secretariat held discussions with Indigenous people and their organisations, and officials and researchers across the country. In August 2003, COAG endorsed a revised framework, incorporating feedback from the consultations.

Consultation has continued following the release of each report. The outcomes of each round of consultations and their influence on the content of the report have been summarised in each edition of the report, and two reports on specific consultations have been produced (SCRCSSP 2003b; SCRGSP 2007b).

Recent COAG developments

In December 2007 and March 2008, COAG agreed to explicit targets for improving the lives of Indigenous people (COAG 2007, 2008a),¹ and in November 2008

¹ In December 2007, three targets were agreed (closing the life expectancy gap within a generation, halving the mortality gap for children under five within a decade and halving the gap in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade). Three further targets were agreed in March 2008 (all four year olds in remote communities access to early childhood education within five years, at

established the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA), which was last revised in early 2011 (COAG 2011). The NIRA provides an integrated framework for the task of Closing the Gap, setting out the policy principles, objectives and performance indicators underpinning Closing the Gap and the specific steps governments are taking to meet the targets (see box 1.2).

Box 1.2 The Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage report and the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA)

The COAG Reform Council reports annually to COAG on progress against the NIRA. The first of these reports was published in 2010 (COAG Reform Council 2010).

The Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage framework is aligned to the NIRA and consequently the data in the two reports overlap. However, the NIRA is specifically focused on progress against the targets in the agreement, and comparisons of outcomes by State and Territory.

The Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage report has a broader focus; and includes more indicators than the NIRA. The Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage report also includes available time series data that predate the NIRA baseline of 2008, and, where State and territory data are not available, reports available information on outcomes at the national level.

The Steering Committee liaised with jurisdictions and COAG committees to align the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage framework with the COAG targets and the NIRA (COAG 2011). COAG agreed to the new framework at its meeting in November 2008 (COAG 2008a) and the then Prime Minister wrote to the Chair of the Steering Committee with new terms of reference for the report in 2009 (p. XXVI).

The Steering Committee conducted a broad round of consultations following the release of the 2009 report, to gather feedback on the alignment, and to inform the structure and content of the current and future reports. Most participants were very supportive of the OID report and the revised framework, with few suggestions for change.

least halve the gap for students in year 12 attainment or equivalent by 2020, and halve the gap in employment outcomes within a decade) (COAG 2007, 2008).

1.3 The Review of Government Service Provision

The Steering Committee

The Review of Government Service Provision was an initiative of the Prime Minister, Premiers and Chief Ministers at the Premiers' Conference in July 1993 and now operates under the auspices of COAG. The Review is overseen by a Steering Committee, which comprises senior representatives from the Prime Minister's, Premiers' and Chief Ministers' departments, and Treasury and Finance departments in the Australian, State and Territory Governments, and observers from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). It is chaired by the Chairman of the Productivity Commission, which also provides the Secretariat.

The Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Working Group

The Steering Committee is advised on production of this report by a working group comprising representatives from the Australian, State and Territory governments, as well as observers from the ABS and the AIHW. The Working Group was originally convened by Gary Banks, the Chairman of the Steering Committee and the Productivity Commission, and since 2004 has been convened by Commissioner Robert Fitzgerald of the Productivity Commission.

Other Review reports

The Review undertakes three other major exercises for COAG:

- the annual *Report on Government Services*, now in its sixteenth edition. This report provides information on the efficiency and effectiveness of, and equity of access to, mainstream government services in the areas of education, justice, emergency management, health, community services and housing. Since 2003, the Review has published a separate Indigenous Compendium of information relating to the delivery of mainstream services to Indigenous people, drawn from the Report on Government Services (SCRCSSP 2003a; SCRGSP 2004–2011)
- annual reporting of performance information relating to National Agreements between the Australian Government and the states and territories to the COAG Reform Council, including the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (SCRGSP 2009, 2010). National Agreements include a mix of outcome measures and indicators of the performance of services

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- a biennial report on expenditure related to Indigenous Australians.² The Indigenous Expenditure Report estimates government expenditure on both Indigenous-specific and mainstream services related to Indigenous people. The first edition was released on 28 February 2011 (IERSC 2010). The report is aligned with the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage framework, potentially enabling expenditure to be linked to high level outcomes.

1.4 References

- AHRC (Australian Human Rights Commission) 2009, *Close the Gap: Indigenous Health Campaign*, http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/health/index.html, accessed 30 July 2010.
- CAR (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation) 2000, *National Strategies to Advance Reconciliation*, Sydney.
- CGSCIHE (Close the Gap Steering Committee for Indigenous Health Equality) 2010, *Shadow Report on the Australian Government's Progress Towards Closing the Gap in Life Expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians*, <http://www.oxfam.org.au/resources/filestore/originals/OAus-CloseTheGapShadowReport-0210.pdf>, (accessed 30 July 2010).
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- 2002, *Communiqué*, Meeting 5 April 2002, Canberra.
- 2007, *Communiqué*, Meeting 20 December 2007, Canberra.
- 2008a, *Communiqué Meeting 29 November 2008*, Canberra.
- 2011 *National Indigenous Reform Agreement*, Canberra (http://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/national_agreements.aspx, accessed 14 May 2011).
- COAG Reform Council 2010, *National Indigenous Reform Agreement: Baseline Performance Report for 2008-09, Report to the Council of Australian Governments*, Sydney.
- IERSC (Indigenous Expenditure Report Steering Committee) 2010, *2010 Indigenous Expenditure Report*, Productivity Commission, Canberra.
- SCRCSSP (Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision) 2003a, *Report on Government Services Indigenous Compendium*, Productivity Commission, Canberra.
- 2003b, *Draft Framework for Reporting on Indigenous Disadvantage: Report on Consultations*, Productivity Commission, Canberra.
- SCRGSP (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision) 2004–2011, *Report on Government Services Indigenous Compendium*, Productivity Commission, Canberra.
- 2007b, *Framework for Reporting on Indigenous Disadvantage: Report on Consultations 2006*, Productivity Commission, Canberra.

² The Indigenous Expenditure Report was originally overseen by a separate Steering Committee, with secretariat support from the Productivity Commission. In February 2011, COAG endorsed the inaugural report, and agreed to transfer responsibility for future reports to the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision.

— 2009 *National Agreement Performance Information 2008-09 National Indigenous Reform Agreement*, Productivity Commission, Canberra.

— 2010 *National Agreement Performance Information 2009-10 National Indigenous Reform Agreement*, Productivity Commission, Canberra.