

Indigenous jail population has risen due to cuts, Close the Gap committee says

Rates of incarceration and child removal in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have risen, but are not included in Close the Gap targets



Between 2000 and 2013 the number of Indigenous adults behind bars increased by 57%, while the non-Indigenous rate did not change. Photograph: Dave Hunt/AAP

[Helen Davidson](#)

[@heldavidson](#)

Federal government funding cuts to Indigenous services have directly affected rates of incarceration and child removal in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the co-chairwoman of the Close the Gap steering committee has said on the release of an annual report.

The Close the Gap Progress and Priorities 2015 report made a number of recommendations to reduce the inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, including realignment and investment in primary healthcare, and comparing Australian efforts to those of New Zealand, where significant improvements have been made.

The report launched on Tuesday to coincide with the prime minister's annual report card to Parliament on progress made to reduce Indigenous disadvantage, which is [expected to express disappointment at failures in half the key areas](#).

Committee co-chairs Kirstie Parker and Mick Gooda repeated calls for “targets to reduce imprisonment and violence rates [to be] developed, and activity towards reaching the targets ... funded through justice reinvestment measures”.

Parker questioned why setting targets was seen as a legitimate tool in closing gaps in many areas of Indigenous disadvantage, but not in the justice sector. Incarceration rates of Indigenous people are among the world's highest.

“It is a key area that can’t be divorced from everything else that’s happening in our communities,” Parker told Guardian Australia.

“We can’t understand why it’s accepted that setting a target is a useful exercise in all of these other areas and then leave [justice] to basically fall through the cracks.”

Close the Gap and numerous other Indigenous groups have been calling for justice targets for a number of years. Gooda has stated previously that [a better job is done of keeping Indigenous people in prison than in school](#).

The prime minister, Tony Abbott, and Indigenous affairs minister, Nigel Scullion, have both repeatedly [backed away from commitments to establish justice targets](#). Scullion confirmed in November the government would not set targets because “action” was needed instead. Abbott instead pointed to the advancement strategy of [getting children to school, adults to work and making communities safer](#).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are incarcerated at a rate 15 times higher than non-Indigenous Australians. The rate is 24 times the non-Indigenous population among young people.

Between 2000 and 2013 the [adult Indigenous imprisonment rate increased 57%](#), widening the gap, as the non-Indigenous rate showed no significant change.

Cuts to justice bodies and advocacy groups such as the north Australian Aboriginal justice agency and the national legal service resulted in multiple closures of frontline services.

It was “inaccurate” for the government to continue to say there was no impact on frontline services, and “to say it would only impact on advocacy as though there’s nothing wrong with that”, Parker said.

“Advocacy is not a dirty word, these are the organisations that stick up for our communities, that bring about reform of bail laws for example, or the adoption of much smarter, more humane practises like justice reinvestment. That’s what advocacy is.”

“If there is a repeat of last year’s budget there will be considerable pain in our communities,” Parker said.

Funding woes are also affecting the “skyrocketing” number of children being taken from homes through childcare and protection agencies.

“We’re seeing more of our kids being removed now than at any other time in history,” Parker said. “These are the very direct impacts of budget cuts and not having our organisations within our communities.”

A 2014 report found Indigenous children were [10 times more likely](#) to be placed in out of home care, which advocates say is leading [towards another stolen generation](#).

Parker said investment in families and communities was insufficient.

“We need to be working with them so they are in better shape. You see in Aboriginal families ... problems encountered are less in the order of abuse and more likely to be around neglect. Neglect is something that is heavily fuelled by poverty.”

In its report the committee called for clearer articulation of the federal government’s leadership of Council of Australian governments (Coag) efforts after the expiry last year of the national partnership agreement on improved Indigenous outcomes.

“We wouldn’t say the government has stepped away from closing the gap – in fact one of the things we are most heartened by is this has remained a bipartisan quest,” Parker said.

However “in absence of any formal framework for pursuing the agenda on closing life expectancy and health gaps we are fearful the issue is not receiving the attention that it has received and deserves to receive”.