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Closing the Gap data shows significant progress still needed to help people flourish: Jesuit Social Services

Data released last week by the Productivity Commission, monitoring progress under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, shows that significant work is still needed to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. A national and coordinated approach will remain critical in closing the gap and allowing all people to flourish, says Jesuit Social Services.

“The Annual Data Compilation Report released last week shows that just four out of the 17 Closing the Gap targets are on track to be met, and the gap is actually widening in a number of significant areas including adult incarceration rates, deaths by suicide and the rates of children in out-of-home care,” says Jesuit Social Services CEO Julie Edwards.

“We agree with Minister for Indigenous Australians Linda Burney that these figures are incredibly disturbing. It is clear that more work needs to be done to improve life outcomes and opportunities for current and future generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.”

Ms Edwards says that while the report puts into sharp focus the significant challenges that require tailored, targeted and long-term support, it also confirms some positive progress being made including a reduction in the rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in detention.

Across Australia in 2020-21, the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people aged 10–17 years in detention on an average day was 23.2 per 10,000 young people, a decrease from 31.9 per 10 000 young people in 2018-19.

“We are cautiously optimistic that the Closing the Gap target of a 30 per cent decrease in the youth detention rate by 2031 is on track. We know that the impact of youth detention on children and young people is profound, that the majority of children in the youth detention system are themselves victims of abuse, trauma and neglect, and that children should be supported to connect with family, education and culture in the community,” says Ms Edwards.

“Jesuit Social Services will continue to advocate to State and Territory Governments for the age of criminal responsibility to be raised from 10 to 14. Primary school aged children belong in the classroom, not in prison. Raising the age would be an important step in ensuring this target remains on track to be realised.”

Ms Edwards says the report highlights the importance of the empowerment and self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to support improved outcomes.

“It is imperative that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and community-controlled organisations are supported and funded to identify and implement what is needed to give their communities the best opportunities to thrive. The work of the Coalition of Peaks in co-designing the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap has been an important step towards this.

“With tailored support and targeted investments, we hope to see improvement across all Closing the Gap targets to allow all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to flourish.”

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