



'Closing the Gap: An Examination of Government Reviews and Future Plans

[The writer briefly discusses the history and impacts of 'Closing the Gap' initiatives, the outcomes of two reviews, and the implications of the recent announcement regarding a significant funding boost by the Australian government]



In 2005, Tom Calma, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, submitted a 'Social Justice Report -2005' to the then Attorney-General, in which he made five key recommendations' as follows:

Recommendation 1	That the governments of Australia commit to achieving equality of health status and life expectation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-indigenous people within 25 years.
Recommendation 2	That the governments of Australia commit to achieving equality of access to primary health care and health infrastructure within 10 years for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
Recommendation 3	That the Australian Health Minister's Conference agree a National Commitment to achieve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Equality and that bi-partisan support for this commitment be sought in federal Parliament and, in all state, and territory parliaments.
Recommendation 4	That the federal government, in partnership with state and territory governments, prioritise the negotiation with Indigenous peoples of regional representative arrangements. Representative bodies should be finalised and operational by 30 June 2006 in all Indigenous Coordination Centre regions.
Recommendation 5	That the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination, in consultation with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, agree to Guidelines to ensure that Shared Responsibility Agreements comply with human rights standards relating to the process of negotiating SRAs and the content of such agreements.

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1. Social Justice Report No 3-2005 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commissioner

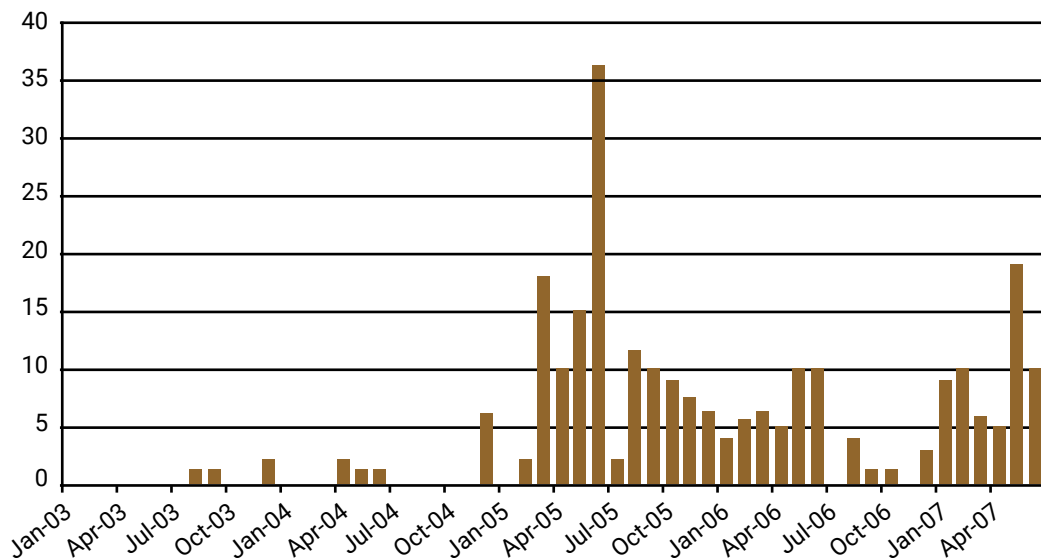
Calma goes on to discuss what are termed 'Shared Responsibility Agreements' (SRA) and notes that, prior to the issue of the 2005 report, there were a number of SRAs' operational in the States and Territories' (see table below)

Summary of obligations agreed in Shared Responsibility Agreements (SRA) to 30 June 2005								
State/Territory	NT	WA	SA	QLD	NSW	TAS	VIC	TOTAL
No of SRAs'	16	22	5	7	16	1	0	67

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Although these SRAs' were initially criticised as being 'as an ineffective and ideologically driven "showpiece" '2 Strakosch points out that their 'governance-building dimensions went without comment'.³ It is these SRAs' that 'retained the regional and community governance-building aims of COAG'⁴. The submission and acceptance of the recommendations' made in the 'Social Justice Report' of 2005 led to a notable increase in the monthly signing of SRA's as shown below. Thus, the structural framework for a range of initiatives, inclusive of 'Closing the Gap', were subsequently established.

Figure 1: SRA signings per month



Source: Data from Federal Government summaries of SRAs and RPAs prepared by the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination. The summaries were available at <<http://www.indigenous.gov.au/sra.html>> but have since been removed. Most can be accessed through the database of the 'Agreements, Settlements and Negotiated Treaties Project' at <www.atns.net.au>.

1. *Ibid*

2. *A Reconsideration of the Political Significance of Shared Responsibility Agreements* Elizabeth Strakosch, *The University of Queensland Australian Journal of Politics and History: Volume 55, Number 1, 2009, pp. 80-96.*

3. *Ibid*

4. *Ibid*

The formal establishment of the 'Closing the Gap' strategy was marked by the signing by all Australian Governments' of the 'COAG Close the Gap Statement of Intent' from March 2008 onwards. Ten years on, a decade's review of the 'Closing the Gap' made direct reference to its fundamental conclusions and recommendations with the term 'reset' in its title, 'A Ten-Year Review: Closing the Gap Strategy and Recommendations for Reset'. But why a 'reset'? Let's first all examine what the review refers to as the 'Close the Gap Statement of Intent Implementation Report Card'. The following tables address two key dimensions of the strategy: firstly, 'Process Commitments' targeting 'evidence-based planning'; in partnership with indigenous people and; measuring and reporting on these efforts. As the 'Report Card' concludes that although there was 'in effect, no plan in the Indigenous health space (NATSIHP was only a Framework that

needed a substantial implementation plan', that even when such a plan was developed, '[it was] a robust plan but [had] no resources attached to it'.¹ The report also adds that 'Closing the Gap Strategy was not developed on a basis of partnership', although conceding that the 'National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan (NATSIH) Implementation Plan' contains 20 health goals or targets.² The review of the second dimension entitled 'Subject Matter Commitments' similarly concludes that 'more funding and workforce is required to make a significant difference to Primary health Care (PHC)' and that 'a dedicated health infrastructure plan is urgently needed'³. The review spent time and resources developing what they refer to as 'Resetting the Closing the Gap Strategy'; our next area of examination. So, let's look at each of the six recommendations made by the review. They are as follows:

Recommendation 1	Refreshed strategy is co-designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders
Recommendation 2	Australian governments reinvigorate the 'architecture' for a national approach
Recommendation 3	Expand on maternal /infant health programs & focus on chronic disease
Recommendation 4	Targets or measures should be agreed by indigenous leaders and governments
Recommendation 5	The National Health Plan Implementation Plan is funded by the Federal government
Recommendation 6	The Health infrastructure and Housing Plan implemented by end of 2018

1. *A ten-year review: the Closing the Gap Strategy and Recommendations for Reset 'The Close the Gap' Campaign Steering Committee February 2018*

2. *Ibid*

3. *Op.Cit.*

PROCESS COMMITMENTS

EVIDENCE BASED-PLANNING FOR PROGRESSIVE REALISATION OF RIGHT TO HEALTH SUBJECT MATTERS...

- Up until the 2015 NATSIHP Implementation Plan, there was, in effect, no plan in the Indigenous health space (INATSIHP was only a Framework that needed a substantial implementation plan).
- The Implementation Plan is a robust plan but no resources attach to it. Piecemeal implementation is occurring incidentally through the IAHP.
- The Mental Health and SEWB Framework is robust but needs an implementation plan and resources strategy.
- Health infrastructure planning is still required.

... IN PARTNERSHIP WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

- Closing the Gap Strategy was not developed on a basis of partnership.
- The establishment of the SAG and then IPAG in 2016 formalised a health planning partnership between the Federal Government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at the national level.
- The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Forums provide a mechanism or jurisdictional planning fora and have a generally good track record.
- The capacity of PHNs to plan in partnership with Indigenous communities and AOCHSs is not clear.

WITH TARGETS AND ACCOUNTABILITY FOR IMPLEMENTATION

- The COAG closing the gap targets have been useful for focusing government attention and, to a degree, effort.
- The NATSIHP Implementation Plan contains 20 health goals or targets.
- There has been little attention paid to input and equality of opportunity targets including expenditure targets.

SUBJECT MATTER COMMITMENTS

HEALTH SERVICES

- There has been far too little progress in the fundamental task of identifying and filling service gaps.
- More funding and workforce required to make a significant difference to PHC.
- While ACCHS have seen some additional funding through the Closing the Gap Strategy, there have been missed opportunities to support their expansion as significant funds have gone to mainstream Services without good reason.
- Significant barriers in mainstream services remain for Indigenous people, including longterm structural and institutional racism.
- Strategies 1A and 1B of the NATSIHP Implementation Plan provide a systematic approach to achieving equality of opportunity in relation to ACCHSs and mainstream health services but require implementation.

HEALTH INFRASTRUCTURE

- Significant resources have been invested and improvements have been reported. However, continuity in, and more, funding and stability in policy is needed if these improvements are to be sustainable, and able to support and be leveraged to promote important cross-sector and other partnerships and service capacity.
- A dedicated health infrastructure plan is urgently needed if preventable admissions and deaths are to be drastically reduced.

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS

- While significant attention has been paid to employment and education a greater breadth of determinants including racism and their connection to health should be better integrated in to the NATSIHP Implementation Plan.
- More focus than the IAS is needed and this may eventuate through the second Implementation Plan development process.
- The recognition of the contribution Cultural determinants and culture can make to health has been recognised but implementation policy and resources towards these components remains a challenge.

Source: A ten-year review: the Closing the Gap Strategy and Recommendations for Reset 'The Close the Gap' Campaign Steering Committee February 2018.

In terms of Recommendation 1,

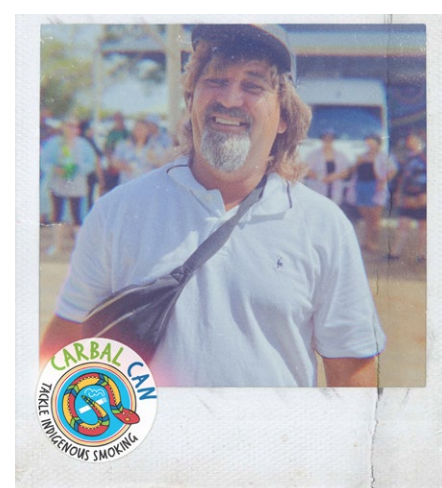
the report points that there should be a tripartite design group comprising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and the Federal and State and Territory governments. Acknowledging that time is needed for the process to be effective we are also reminded that *'Australian governments must be accountable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for its effective implementation'*¹. The second recommendation, although addressing the necessity for a framework comprising governmental agreements, inclusive of funding, also points out that milestones should be identified and reported on *'against national and state/territory targets'*². It is the third recommendation which resonates with indigenous communities' *because it focuses on 'delivering equality of opportunity in relation to health goods and services and in relation to health infrastructure (housing, food, water)'*³. The final two recommendations are an elaboration on the previously addressed 'planning' and 'costing'.

Progress against the targets

Target	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	TAS	NT	ACT	AUS
Child mortality (2018)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	
Early childhood education (2025)									
School attendance (2018)									
Literacy and Numeracy (2018)									
Year 12 or equivalent (2020)									
Employment (2018)									
Life expectancy (2031)		—		—	—	—		—	

When we fast-forward to 2020,

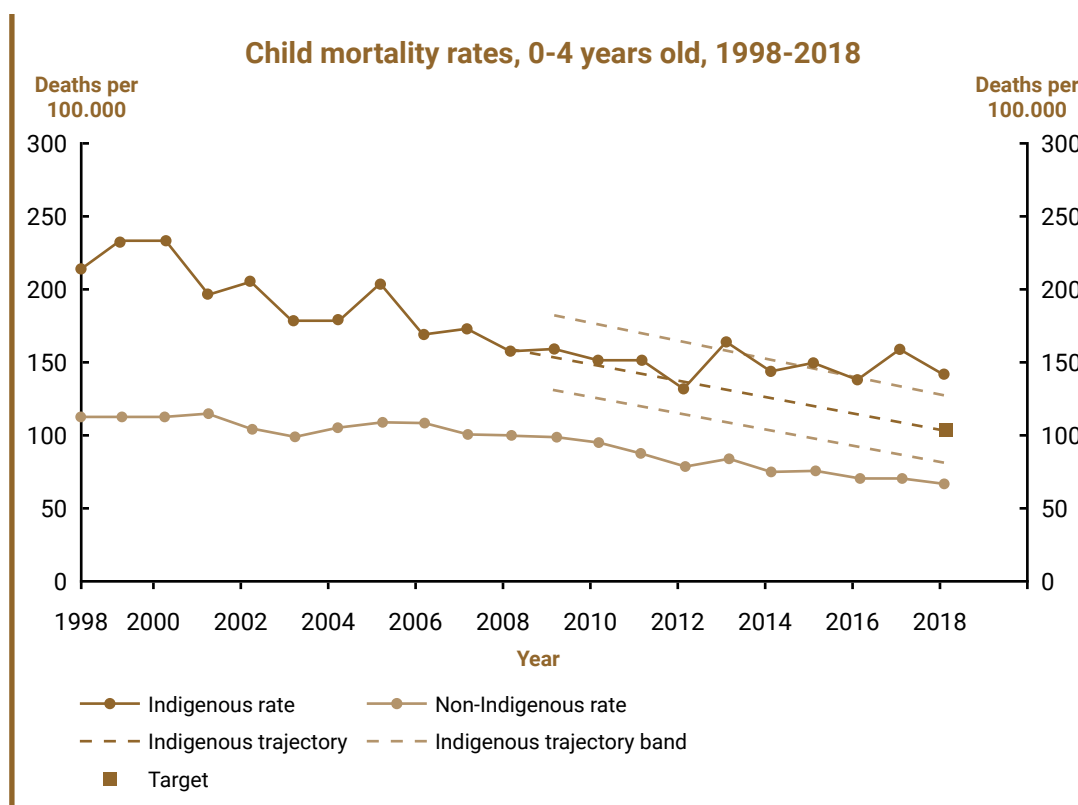
it is pleasing to note that the Australian Government has immediately addressed the need for a consultative framework with the Prime Minister stating that *'in March 2019, I entered into the Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap, a landmark agreement to work together to develop the new Closing the Gap framework. It's a commitment by the Commonwealth, all states and territories, the Australian Local Government Association and the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations'*⁴. The report also confirms that areas of concern, raised in both the 2005 and 2008 report recommendations, specifically health, education, and employment, had been addressed. The following table summarises the progress against the targets.



1. *Op. Cit*
2. *Op. Cit*
3. *Op. Cit*
4. *Closing the Gap Report 2020' Prime Minister's Forward*

What was happening in the health space at the close of 2020?

It is gratifying to note that between 2008 and 2018 'Indigenous child mortality rates have improved (by 7 per cent)¹ The graph below clearly demonstrates the downwards trend of indigenous child mortality rates between 1998 and 2018.



1. *Ibid*, page 16
2. *Ibid*, page 28

As the report points out:

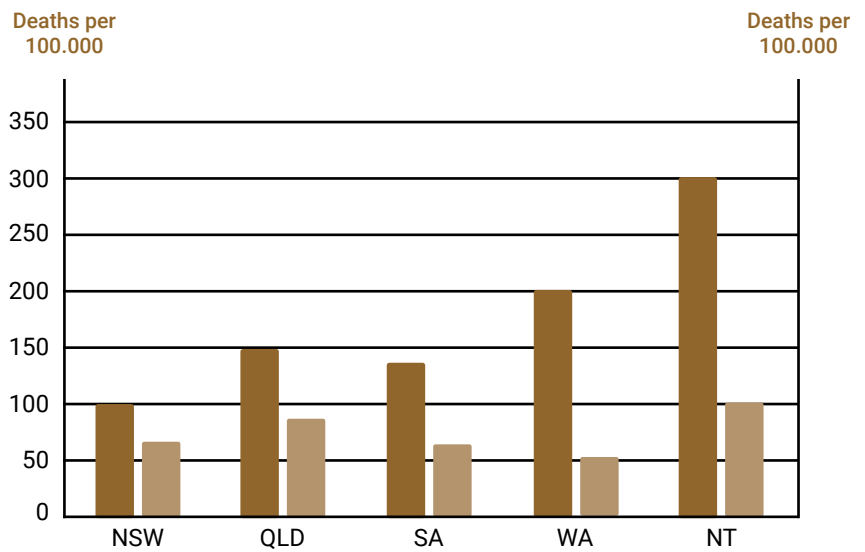
'Of the five jurisdictions with Indigenous mortality data of acceptable quality, the Northern Territory continued to have the highest Indigenous child mortality rate (305 per 100,000) over the period 2014 to 2018. The gap was also largest in the Northern Territory (209 per 100,000). New South Wales had the lowest Indigenous child mortality rate with 95 per 100,000.²

The following graph, which presents the above data, identifies, unfortunately, that there is still a significant gap in child mortality rates between non-indigenous and indigenous communities. This gap presents across all jurisdictions' but is accentuated in both the Northern Territory and Western Australia -both having high remote and rural communities compared to the other jurisdictions.



Figure 1.2

Child mortality rates, by jurisdiction, 2014–2018



Source: Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2019, National Agreement Performance Information 2018-19. Productivity Commission: Canberra.

■ Non-indigenous
■ Indigenous

The area of education is analysed in terms of the following: early childhood education, school attendance, literacy and numeracy, and year 12 attainment. When looking at the data regarding ‘early childhood education’ there is good news. As the report points out ‘the target to have 95 per cent of Indigenous four-year-olds enrolled in early childhood education by 2025 is on track.’¹ The news gets better, because according to the report, in 2018 86.4% of indigenous children were enrolled in early childhood education, ‘higher than the agreed trajectory point for 2018 to reach the target by 2025’² However there are perceived barriers to indigenous children’s participation, as follows:

1	Out Of Pocket Costs,
2	A Limited Awareness of Services,
3	Administrative Complexity,
4	Lack of Transport or Locally Available Services,
5	Poor Child Health,
6	A Perception That the Child Is Too Young To Participate,
7	A Lack of Confidence In The Value Of Early Education Services Or
8	Fear Of Racism and Judgment

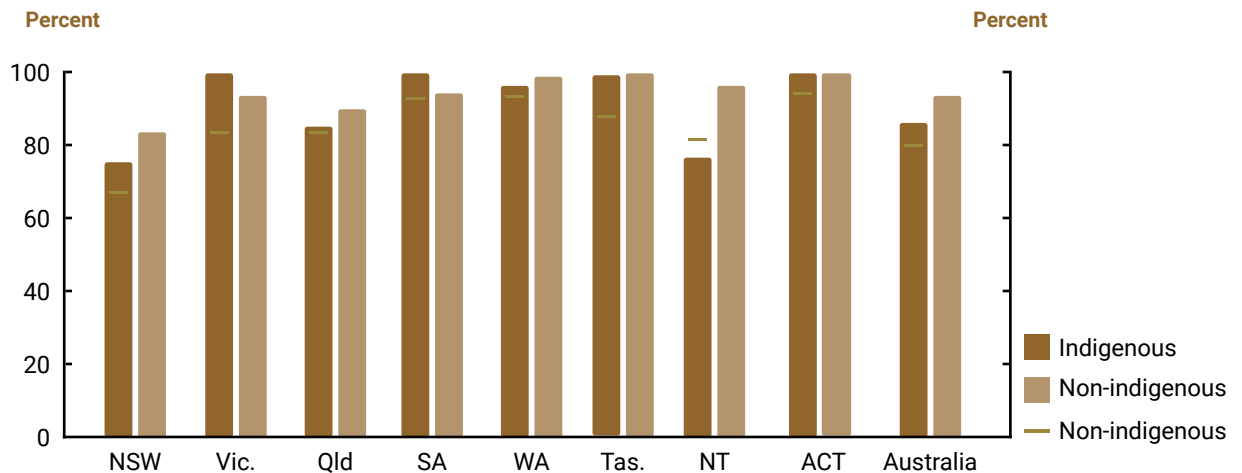
1. *Ibid*, page 24
2. *Ibid*, page 24

When examining the early childhood education by jurisdiction in the following graph it is clear that the only jurisdictions in which indigenous enrolment rates exceed that of non-indigenous is Victoria and South Australia. However, it should be noted that the larger states such as Queensland and Western Australia, despite the predominance of remote and rural indigenous communities, just about reached parity between indigenous and non-indigenous enrolments. In terms of the 'remoteness' factor the report actually acknowledges that 'indigenous early childhood education attendance rates tended to decrease with increasing remoteness'¹ Interestingly this happens to be one area of parity between the indigenous and non-indigenous enrolment rates because as the report observes 'the non-Indigenous rates were fairly similar across remoteness areas.'² This observation is clearly illustrated in the graph entitled 'Attendance rates, by remoteness, 2018'.

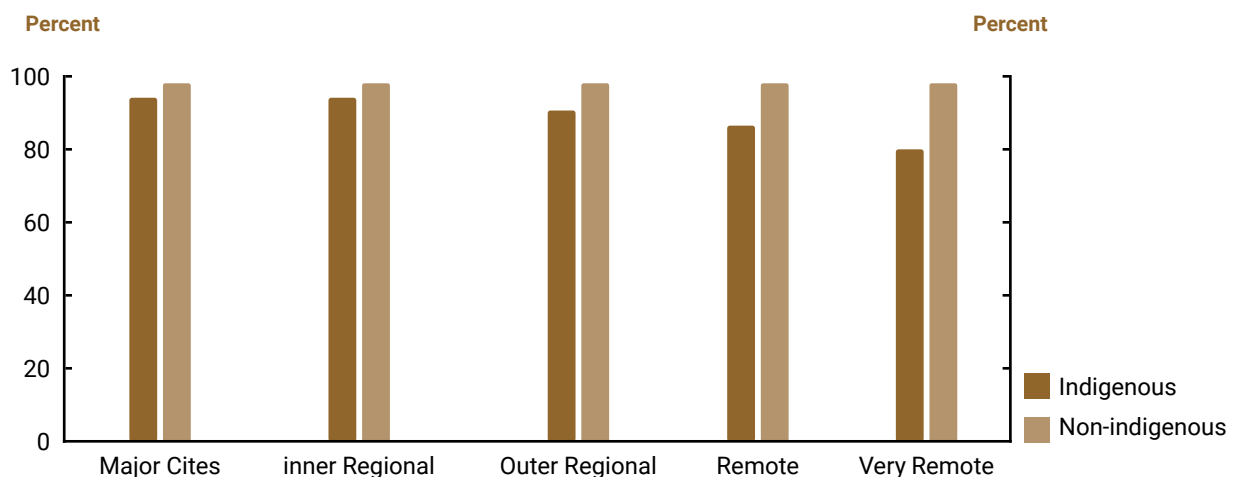
1. *Ibid*, page 29

2. *Ibid*, page 29

Early childhood education enrolment rates, by jurisdiction, 2018



Attendance rates, by remoteness, 2018



When it comes to school attendance, although the targets were not met by 2018, the report concedes that ‘School attendance is associated with a range of interrelated and complex factors such as”

1

Parent’s education levels,

2

occupation and employment status have been linked to school attendance

3

Where students live,

4

their socioeconomic status and

5

their mobility (measured by new school enrolments) has also been associated with school attendance.¹

I think that we can all agree that attendance rates are reasonably important but once they are actually attending -then what? Hancock is adamant that ‘regular school attendance has been associated with improvements in NAPLAN outcomes at the individual and school level’² . Furthermore , given the vital educational foundations laid down in the early years it should come as no surprise that ‘evidence from Queensland suggests poor school attendance during the early years has a greater impact on student performance than during later years’ exemplified by the fact that, based on 2009 NAPLAN results, ‘the effect of attending school for 95 per cent of the time or less (10 or more days absent) on reading outcomes was estimated to be around 2.1 times greater for Year 3 students compared with Year 9 students’³ Once again, we cannot escape the ‘remoteness factor’, with the report reminding us that ‘nearly three in five Indigenous children (aged 5–16 years old) in the Northern Territory lived in Very Remote areas’.⁴

As is assessed via NAPLAN, ‘literacy and numeracy’ are key indicators’ of any child’s progress through the school system. So, in terms of these indicators, it was gratifying to note that the 2020 report concluded that ‘at the national level, the share of Indigenous students at or above national minimum standards in reading and numeracy has improved over the past decade to 2018’.⁵ As far as the States and Territories are concerned, Queensland ticked the most ‘boxes’ -fifty per cent of targets’ in ‘reading’ and a similar outcome in ‘numeracy’ (refer to graph below)

1. *Ibid*, page 34

2. *DETE 2013; Hancock et al. 2013; Ludwig and Luke 2014*

3. *Op. Cit*, page 36

4. *Ibid* page 38

5. *Ibid* page 45

Target outcome for reading and numeracy areas, by jurisdiction, 2018

Target	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	TAS	ACT	NT	AUST
Reading									
Year 3									
Year 5									
Year 7									
Year 9									
Numeracy									
Year 3									
Year 5									
Year 7									
Year 9									

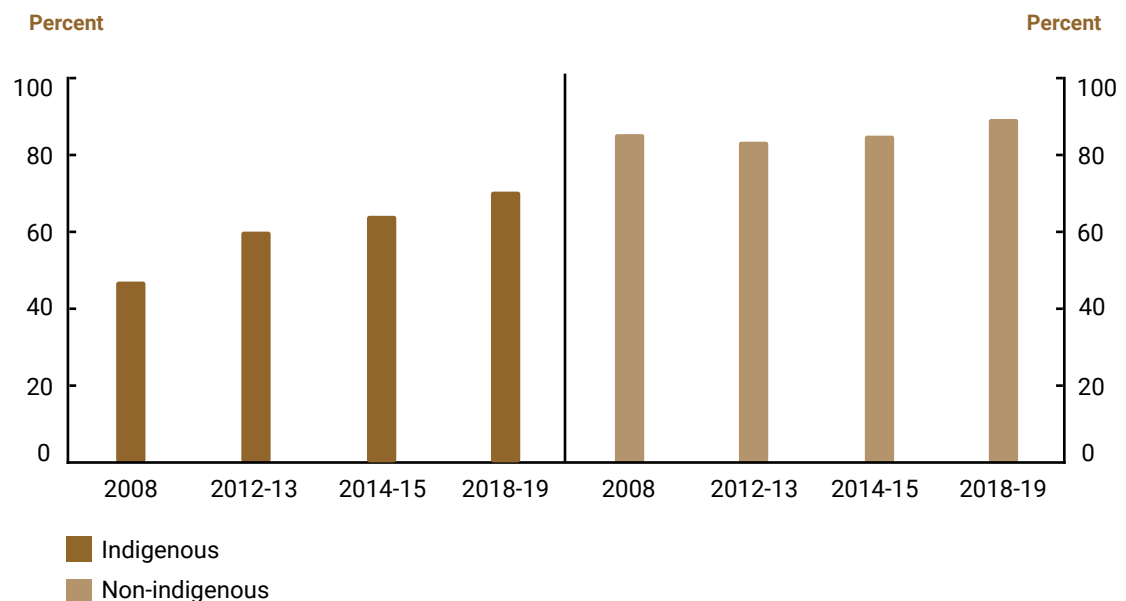
Indigenous

Source: A ten-year review: the Closing the Gap Strategy and Recommendations for Reset 'The Close the Gap' Campaign Steering Committee February 2018.

Similarly, there was good news with regard to 'Year 12 Attainment', with the report announcing that 'between 2008 and 2018-19, the proportion of Indigenous Australians aged 20-24 years attaining Year 12 or equivalent increased by around 21 percentage points'.¹ (refer to graph below)

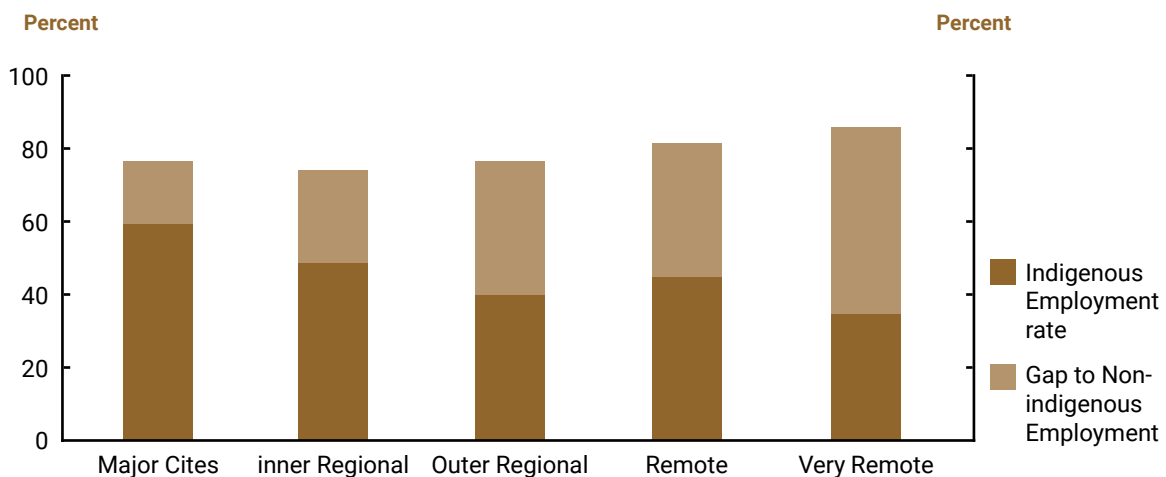
1. *Op.Cit.* page 57

National Year 12 or equivalent attainment rate, 20-24 year olds, 2008-2019



But what happens after the completion of school? Do these success indicators translate into meaningful employment opportunities? Well, the answer to this question is both 'yes' and 'no'. Although conceding that 'over the past decade (2008–2018), the employment rate for Indigenous Australians increased slightly' -the 'Yes' part of our original question, there is, also the fact that 'the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians was widest in Remote and Very Remote Australia'¹ -the no part of the question. It is this remoteness factor which clearly impacts the employment rate gap (15–64-year-olds). As the graph below clearly shows, there is a step-by-step increase in the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous employment, commencing with 'Major Cities' at about a 15% gap, leading to the 'Very Remote' at a much greater gap of over 50%.

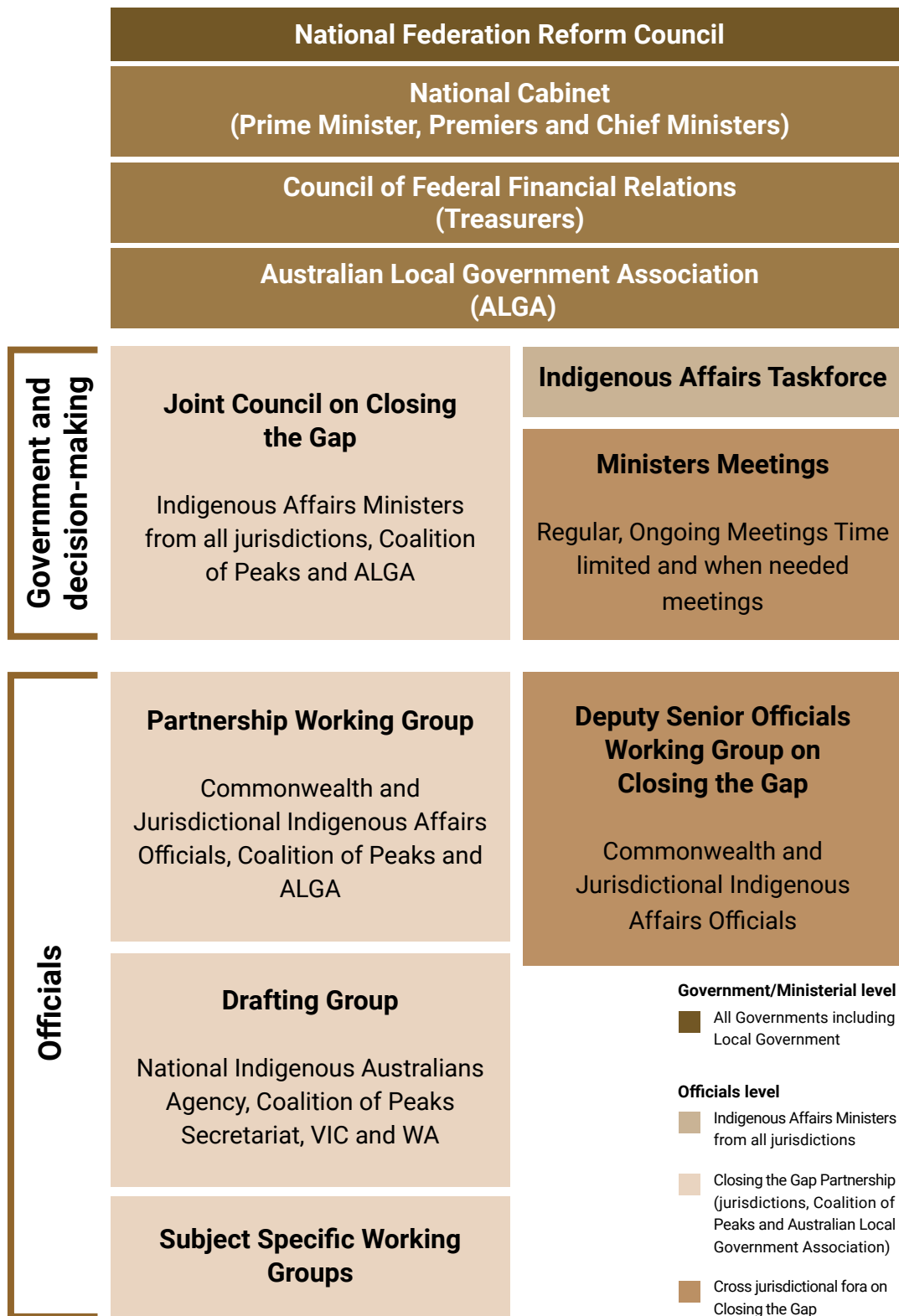
Employment rate gap, 15-64 year olds, by remoteness, 2018-19



Enough of the past-rather what of the future? In July 2021, as a result of the previous 'Closing the Gap' reviews and their continuing recommendations for government-communities' collaboration the federal government announced a \$1.1 billion 'Closing the Gap Implementation Plan'. The following month the Herald reported that 'the country's top Indigenous organisations have applauded the federal government's \$1.1 billion Closing the Gap implementation plan, but warn underfunding of programs and services remains the biggest challenge ahead'². But what does the plan consist of? Is it just a regurgitation of previous plans? Or is it a genuine 're-look' at the issues and concerns previously addressed but, quite frankly, yet to be adequately dealt with. However, it must be fully acknowledged that previous plans and programs, although not achieving the pre-determined key performance indicators, were implemented with both passion and commitment. The examination of the following combination governmental and indigenous organisations' chart is impressive to say the least. If, the collaboration is as effective as is expected then this plan has a real opportunity to actually 'Close the Gap'.

1. *Ibid*, page 65

2. *The Herald*, Cameron Gooley, August 5th 2021



Source: Commonwealth Closing the Gap Implementation Plan 2021

But what of the plan itself? The intended 17 outcomes are impressive, to say the least. They are as follows:

Outcome 1	People enjoy long and healthy lives	Target 1	Close the Gap in life expectancy within a generation, by 2031.
Outcome 2	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are born healthy and strong	Target 2	By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies with a healthy birthweight to 91%.
Outcome 3	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are engaged in high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years	Target 3	By 2025, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in Year Before Fulltime Schooling early childhood education to 95%.
Outcome 4	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thrive in their early years	Target 4	By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children assessed as developmentally on track in all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) to 55%.
Outcome 5	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieve their full learning potential	Target 5	By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (age 20-24) attaining year 12 or equivalent qualification to 96%.
Outcome 6	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reach their full potential through further education pathways	Target 6	By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25-34 years who have completed a tertiary qualification (Certificate III and above) to 70%.
Outcome 7	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are engaged in employment or education	Target 7	By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth (15-24 years) who are in employment, education or training to 67%.
Outcome 8	Strong economic participation and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities	Target 8	By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25-64 who are employed to 62%.
Outcome 9	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned with their priorities and needs	Target 9	By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in appropriately sized (not overcrowded) housing to 88%.
Outcome 10	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are not over-represented in the criminal justice system	Target 10	By 2031, reduce the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults held in incarceration by at least 15%.
Outcome 11	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are not over-represented in the criminal justice system	Target 11	By 2031, reduce the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (10-17 years) in detention by at least 30%.
Outcome 12	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are not over-represented in the child protection system	Target 12	By 2031, reduce the rate of over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care by 45%.
Outcome 13	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and households are safe	Target 13	By 2031, the rate of all forms of family violence and abuse against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children is reduced by at least 50%, as progress towards zero.
Outcome 14	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy high levels of social and emotional wellbeing	Target 14	Significant and sustained reduction in suicide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people towards zero.
Outcome 15	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people maintain a distinctive cultural, spiritual, physical and economic relationship with their land and waters	Target 15	By 2030, a 15% increase in Australia's landmass subject to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's legal rights or interests. By 2030, a 15% increase in areas covered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's legal rights or interests in the sea.
Outcome 16	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages are strong, supported and flourishing	Target 16	By 2031, there is a sustained increase in number and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages being spoken.
Outcome 17	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to information and services enabling participation in informed decision-making regarding their own lives	Target 17	By 2026, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have equal levels of digital inclusion.

So, how will we be informed of the success or otherwise of the plan? Specifically, how will the targets be reported on? remembering that there are 17 of them across a range of areas. The Federal Government fully acknowledges the importance of not only reporting the re-assurance that the indigenous communities require to see that their health and socio-economic issues are being dealt with currently and, hopefully, for perpetuity.



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- The Herald, August 5th 2021
- Commonwealth Closing the Gap Implementation Plan 2021