



Strong Culture, Strong Youth: Our Legacy, Our Future



Close the Gap Campaign Report 2023



CLOSETHEGAP

Community Summary

Executive Summary



In 2022 the Commonwealth Government released the Closing the Gap Annual Report. This is the first Report since the 2020 National Agreement on Closing the Gap (National Agreement) was signed. Central to the development of the National Partnership was the inclusion of the Priority Reform Areas. While implementation of the National Agreement continues, unsurprisingly the most recent data confirms that despite improvements across the health sector, health outcomes remain comparatively worse for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.ⁱ

The Campaign reaffirms that the inclusion of the priority reform areas, set the pre-conditions to achieve socio-economic targets and provide the potential to drive generational change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia. A fundamental principle of the National Agreement is to create measurable improvements in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. It is a whole of government responsibility to create systems reform, that shares decision making power with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This is essential to achieving health equity and equality.

The Campaign supports the Uluru Statement from the Heart, and the National Voice as vehicles for partnership and self-determination to achieving practical health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. The Truth-telling and Treaty elements are critical to the healing and social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and communities. They serve as a foundation for healing intergenerational trauma and restoring a greater sense of collective control. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership continues to create opportunities for success, but there must be a concerted effort to create an enabling environment for change to deliver meaningful outcomes. When viewed through this lens, the full implementation of the Uluru Statement from the Heart: its Voice, Treaty and Truth elements, can be understood as a vehicle to closing the gap.ⁱⁱ

Furthermore, to meet the targets in the National Agreement there must be a focus on the social and cultural determinants of health.ⁱⁱⁱ The approach reflects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples'

understanding of health as social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB), the inherent links between physical and mental health, and the health of connections to family, community, Country and spirituality. This SEWB is inseparable from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural law, values and perspectives, healing practices and traditions designed to strengthen collective identities and cultural continuity.^{iv} As observed:

Cultural Determinants originate from and promote a strength-based perspective, acknowledging that stronger connections to culture and Country build stronger individual and collective identities, a sense of self-esteem, resilience, and improved outcomes across the other determinants of health including education, economic stability and community safety.^v

Our 2023 report *“Strong Culture, Strong Youth: Our Legacy Our Future”*, documents, through eight case studies, organisations and individuals work in communities to enrich the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and youth. One of the most encouraging aspects of these case studies is the way in which they detail and have drawn on self-determination to address some of the most important issues identified in the communities they work with. Many showcase the leadership of a new generation of hands-on activists, while others demonstrate how a focus on young people’s key concerns and aspirations can be a powerful engine for positive change. Importantly, they draw attention to the essential role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led decision-making and self-determination in shaping a vision of health and wellbeing built upon a strong cultural foundation.

ⁱ [sector-strengthening-plan-health.docx \(live.com\)](#)

ⁱⁱ Howse, G. 2011, *Legally Invisible—How Australian Laws Impede Stewardship and Governance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health*, The Lowitja Institute, Melbourne.

ⁱⁱⁱ E. Verbunt, J. Luke, Y. Paradies, M. Bamblett, C. Salamone, A. Jones & M. Kelaheer 2021, Cultural determinants of health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, *International Journal for Equity in Health*, 20(1):181. doi: 10.1186/s12939-021-01514-2

^{iv} K. Arabena 2020, *‘Country Can’t Hear English’: A Guide Supporting the Implementation of Cultural Determinants of Health and Wellbeing with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, Karabena Publishing, Melbourne, p.15.

^v Ngijare Brown 2014, *Cultural Determinants Roundtable: Background Paper*, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne. Available at: <http://www.lowitja.org.au/sites/default/files/docs/Cultural-Determinants-Roundtable-Background-Paper.pdf>.

Recommendations

The Close the Gap Campaign continues to advocate for health equity, equality and improved life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. Without large-scale systemic institutional reforms this cannot be achieved at a national level.

In recognition of this, we call on Australian governments to implement, in full, the following recommendations:

Theme ► The Uluru Statement from the Heart

Recommendation

Australian governments implement in full the Uluru Statement from the Heart, including:

- a A First Nations Voice enshrined in the constitution.
- b Establish a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.
- c Adopt a national policy platform underpinned by truth telling, recognising our shared history as a nation.

Theme ► United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Recommendation

Australian Governments negotiate in good faith with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities in all matters regarding the adopting and embedding of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs, and in Australian law, regulations, policies, and administrative practices. This includes the definition of human rights in the *Human Rights (Parliamentary Scrutiny) Act 2011* (Cth).

Theme ► Raising the Age of Criminal Responsibility

In line with international conventions and empirical evidence regarding childhood development.

Recommendation

All Australian governments immediately raise the age of criminal responsibility from 10 years to 14 years of age.

Theme ► Gender Equity and Justice

Advance First Nations gender justice and equality and ensure that the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls are secured.

Recommendation

Australian governments, in genuine partnership, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's and girls' representatives implement, in full, the recommendations from the *Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices): Securing Our Rights, Securing Our Future Report*, and support the development and implementation of a National Framework for Action to achieve First Nations Gender Justice and Equality.

“Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, equity and equality is possible to achieve within a generation. But it will take courage, investment and a genuine allyship, with every single one of us having a role to play.”

— Karl Briscoe

Theme ► National Agreement on Closing the Gap

Implementation across the 4 priority reform areas lacks consistent national coordination and is impeding progress to meet the objectives in the National Agreement.

Recommendation

Australian governments, in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, accelerate action and implementation across the National Agreement on Closing the Gap priorities and reform focus areas including:

- a** Ensuring that formal partnerships and shared decision making support Indigenous leadership and cultures, recognising that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must be at the centre of owning and driving the actions needed across policy and the community controlled sector to achieve meaningful outcomes – as per Priority Reform Area 1.
- b** Appropriate resourcing allocated to community-controlled organisations. This must include a commitment to sufficient and sustainable long term (10+ years) needs and placed-based cross-sectoral funding by federal, state, territory and local governments – as per Priority Reform Area 2.
- c** Embed and operationalise the principles of Indigenous data sovereignty and Indigenous data governance. Ensure that governments fund and coordinate a national policy framework and infrastructure that enables the sharing of relevant data – as per Priority Reform Area 3.
- d** Explore best practice across the community controlled sector to address entrenched racism in Australian health care systems. This will ensure that institutions are trauma-informed and culturally safe, and address the explicit needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – as per Priority Reform Area 4.

Affirming the centrality of culture and implementing these cultural determinants into health policy and frameworks will require a shift from top-down, centrally managed planning procedures to participatory, bottom-up, community-driven processes.

In recognition of this, we call on Australian governments to implement, in full, the following recommendations:

Theme ► Suicide Prevention

Recommendation

Accelerate action on, and implementation of, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021–2031, and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan 2021–2031. In recognition of the need for trauma-aware and healing-informed care™, and the work and expertise undertaken by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project, we support in full their key findings and recommendations, as noted in the next recommendation.

Recommendation

A government commitment to ensure that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide prevention activity includes:

- a** Community-specific and community-led upstream programs focused on healing and strengthening social and emotional wellbeing, cultural renewal, and improving the social determinants of health that can otherwise contribute to suicidal behaviours, with an emphasis on trauma informed care.
- b** A commitment to, and a provision for, the evaluation of the activity and the dissemination of findings to further strengthen the evidence-base.
- c** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and related peak bodies and organisations co-designing youth-focused healing programs as a critical component of positive long-term health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

Theme ► Social and Emotional Wellbeing

Address the social and cultural determinants of health through equitable, sustainable, and long-term needs-based funding.

Recommendation

Australian governments, in partnership with the community-controlled sector, develop strengths-based, place-based, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led social and emotional wellbeing initiatives.

Theme ► Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Policy

Recommendation

Australian governments partner with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities to develop, fund and implement an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural policy that:

- a** Complements and reinforces the Revive – National Cultural Policy that respects the centrality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture in the Australian arts, entertainment and cultural sectors.
- b** Asserts the centrality of culture to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- c** Informs investment in cultural governance, maintenance and revitalisation projects, initiatives and activities both for community and nation building.
- d** Provides environmental and heritage protections for sites that are sacred or culturally significant, recognising the impacts on Country, social and emotional wellbeing and the cultural determinants of health.
- e** Improves Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community access to opportunities and resources that support the cultural determinants of their health and wellbeing according to their needs, priorities and aspirations.
- f** Includes cultural knowledge holders in decision-making positions that affect communities.
- g** Establishes a monitoring, evaluation and action-learning framework.

Theme ► Responding to the Climate Emergency

Recommendation

Australian governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities to develop, fund and implement an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander climate change strategic framework that:

- a** Provides resources to develop community climate adaptation plans and risk assessments for climate change.
- b** Support, in partnership, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-owned businesses to lead the development of emergency management plans affecting their communities.
- c** Undertakes research into the specific implications of the climate emergency for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.
- d** Includes housing and infrastructure planning, in regional and remote communities that are particularly vulnerable to extreme weather conditions as a direct result of climate change.
- e** Investigates green policies to reduce Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities' reliance on climate-damaging fossil fuels by way of introducing electrical vehicles and installation of associated infrastructure.
- f** Ensures that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural sites, knowledge, land management and conservation practices are embedded into national climate change mitigation efforts.
- g** Invests in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people to obtain qualifications and training to address:
 - Australia's national response to the climate crisis; and
 - to develop local place-based solutions to community needs.

Case Studies and Feature Articles



2023 Case studies

Gumbaynggirr Giingana Freedom School ▶ www.giinganaschool.org.au	Language keeps culture strong
Youth Verdict ▶ www.youthverdict.org.au/who-we-are	In the fight for a future, youth voice speaks loudest
BlaQ Aboriginal Corporation ▶ blaq.org.au	Being our authentic selves
Impact of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project (ATSISPEP) ▶ www.atsispep.sis.uwa.edu.au	Listening to youth is key
Maranguka Justice Reinvestment Project in Bourke ▶ maranguka.org.au/2020/04/30/bourke-a-beacon-of-hope/	Delivering on justice, one day at a time
Rekindling Youth Program, Bangarra Dance Theatre ▶ www.bangarra.com.au/community/rekindling-youth-program/	Dancing up a storm, in both worlds
Aurora Education Foundation's High School Program ▶ aurorafoundation.com.au/our-work/high-school-program/	Learning to love learning
Naytive Mentorship Program ▶ diydg.org.au/naytive-mentorship	Connecting youth through music

Feature Articles

Uluru Statement from the Heart – Indigenous Youth Dialogue	Uluru Youth Dialogue that was established to inform and involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth about the Uluru Statement from the Heart ▶ ulurustatement.org/about-us/uluru-youth-network
Celebrating our allies	Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTAR) ▶ antar.org.au
	Fred Hollows Foundation ▶ www.hollows.org/au/what-we-do/indigenous-australia
A Voice to Parliament – Close the Gap Campaign	▶ www.closethegap.org.au/media-releases/

Cultural Determinants and 2023 Thematic Areas

Theme	Cultural determinants from the Mayi Kuwayu study	Case studies
Share Knowledge	Self-determination and Leadership – facilitates leading or, at a minimum, involvement in decision making at individual, family, community, organisational and political levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gumbaynggirr Giingana Freedom School Youth Verdict
	Family, Kinship and Community – knowing and being part of the community, with its responsibilities and obligations, and the perception of oneself	
Cultivate Community	Connection to Country – related to identity, attachment with the physical environment, a sense of belonging, and of spiritual relationships and responsibilities to look after and maintain Country	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> BlaQ Aboriginal Corporation Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project Maranguka Justice Reinvestment Project
	Indigenous Language – verbal, written and body language as a vehicle for expressing culture and teaching it to others including transmitting cultural knowledge to the next generation	
Cherish Wisdom	Indigenous Beliefs and Knowledge – concepts of relational identity, spirituality and cultural traditions, as well as healing, traditional medicines and gendered knowledge systems and practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rekindling Youth Program, Bangarra Dance Theatre Aurora Education Foundation's High School Program Naytive Mentorship Program
	Cultural Expression and Continuity – expressing attitudes, beliefs, customs and norms in the form of artefacts, symbols, dances, songs, art and ceremony, storytelling, language, family relations, sharing of food and celebrations, and representation of values	

Cover photography

The images featured on the cover were contributed by the organisations featured in the *Close the Gap Campaign Report 2023*, which can be found at www.closesthegap.org.au/ctg-annual-reports/.

Close the Gap Campaign Alliance Group Members

- 1 Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of New South Wales
- 2 Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia
- 3 ANTaR
- 4 Australian College of Emergency Medicine
- 5 Australian College of Midwives
- 6 Australian College of Nursing
- 7 Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine
- 8 Australian Council of Social Service
- 9 Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association
- 10 Australian Human Rights Commission (Secretariat)
- 11 Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association
- 12 Australian Indigenous Psychologists' Association
- 13 Australian Medical Association
- 14 Australian Physiotherapy Association
- 15 Australian Student and Novice Nurse Association
- 16 Beyond Blue
- 17 Black Dog Institute
- 18 Cancer Council of Australia
- 19 Community Mental Health Australia
- 20 Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives
- 21 CRANApplus
- 22 Expert Adviser – Alcohol and other drugs, Professor Pat Dudgeon
- 23 Expert Adviser – Epidemiology and public health, Professor Ian Ring
- 24 First Peoples Disability Network
- 25 Heart Foundation Australia
- 26 Indigenous Allied Health Australia
- 27 Indigenous Dentists' Association of Australia
- 28 Indigenous Eye Health Unit, University of Melbourne
- 29 Kidney Health Australia
- 30 Lowitja Institute
- 31 Menzies School of Health Research
- 32 National Association of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Practitioners
- 33 National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
- 34 National Association of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Physiotherapists
- 35 Professor Tom Calma AO – Campaign founder, former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, and National Coordinator – Tackling Indigenous Smoking
- 36 National Family Violence Prevention Legal Services
- 37 National Heart Foundation
- 38 National Rural Health Alliance
- 39 NSW Aboriginal Land Council
- 40 Oxfam Australia
- 41 Palliative Care Australia
- 42 Public Health Association of Australia
- 43 Reconciliation Australia
- 44 Royal Australasian College of Physicians
- 45 Royal Australian College of General Practitioners
- 46 SBS, the home of National Indigenous Television (NITV)
- 47 The Fred Hollows Foundation
- 48 The Healing Foundation
- 49 The Pharmacy Guild of Australia
- 50 Torres Strait Regional Authority
- 51 Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
- 52 Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Service

CLOSE THE GAP