



Australian Government
National Indigenous
Australians Agency



NIAA

National Indigenous Australians Agency submission to Senate Select Committee on Measuring Outcomes for First Nations Communities

Inquiry into Measuring Outcomes for First Nations Communities

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Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

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Contents

Introduction.....	3
The National Agreement on Closing the Gap.....	3
Governance of the National Agreement.....	4
Role of jurisdictions.....	5
Role of the National Indigenous Australians Agency.....	6
Processes for setting priorities in Partnership under the National Agreement.....	6
Closing the Gap Targets.....	7
Priority Reforms.....	7
Targets and Outcomes.....	7
Measuring and Reporting.....	7
Additional and Refreshed Targets.....	9
Existing funding sources and mechanisms/processes.....	10
Targets in Question.....	10
Priority Reform 4 and Government-held Data.....	13
Attachments.....	15



Introduction

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap is a shared responsibility. The Agreement requires all levels of government to work in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations to drive progress. While NIAA provides coordination and strategic leadership, the success of Closing the Gap depends on collective action, accountability and collaboration across all jurisdictions and parties to the Agreement.

The submission responds to the Select Committee's inquiry into the current regression of Closing the Gap targets, namely the number of children in out-of-home care, adult incarceration, suicide rates and the number of children commencing school who are developmentally on track, with specific reference to:

- a) The ways in which the targets are funded.
- b) The ways in which the targets are measured and evaluated.
- c) The priority of the targets in the National Partnership Agreement and progress under the National Priority reforms.
- d) The degree to which current measurements and targets reflect the strengths of First Nations cultures, as opposed to an emphasis on deficit and lack.
- e) The possibility of incorporating broad ideas about wellness into measurements, with a view promoting mental, physical and spiritual health and wellbeing.
- f) The incorporation of alternative measurements as a complement to existing measurements.
- g) Opportunities for building on and expanding the current Closing the Gap framework; and
- h) Any other related matters.

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap

The [National Agreement on Closing the Gap](#) represents a landmark commitment to transforming the relationship between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It was signed in July 2020 by the Commonwealth Government, all state and territory governments, the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peaks (the Coalition of Peaks) and the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA). The National Agreement establishes a structured, collaborative approach to improving life outcomes for First Nations peoples through shared decision-making, genuine partnerships and accountability at all levels of government. As outlined in Clause 6 of the National Agreement:

'The Agreement also stems from the belief that when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a genuine say in the design and delivery of services that affect them, better life outcomes are achieved. It recognises that structural change in the way Governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is needed to close the gap.'

The National Agreement is the only comprehensive national policy framework that outlines a unified approach to improving outcomes for First Nations people across the life course. However, the Agreement itself is not a

funding mechanism or funding agreement, rather, it sets out the goals and commitments that all parties negotiated and agreed upon, and must work towards using the resources and levers available to them.

At its core, the objective of the National Agreement is to overcome the entrenched inequality faced by too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people so that their life outcomes are equal to all Australians.

The Agreement sets out a clear and measurable path to achieving this goal through:

- **Four Priority Reforms**, which are the foundation of change. These reforms are critical, as they fundamentally shift how governments work with First Nations people, embedding genuine partnerships, decision-making and self-determination into policy and practice.
- **Seventeen socio-economic outcomes**, which reflect key areas where progress is needed to improve the lives of First Nations people.
- **Nineteen targets**, which are tools for measuring progress against socio-economic outcomes and, ultimately, the success of the Priority Reforms.

Governance of the National Agreement

The National Agreement is a shared national responsibility, requiring accountability, commitment and action from all parties to the National Agreement. It demands coordinated action across all levels of government and the Coalition of Peaks.

The National Agreement provides the structure for both nationally coordinated and locally tailored efforts, ensuring that First Nations communities across different jurisdictions receive support that is responsive to their needs. Achieving the Agreement's goals requires leadership and joint action from all governments and the Coalition of Peaks, a body made up of more than 80 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled peak and member organisations across Australia. The Coalition of Peaks is foundational to the National Agreement, with their lead convenor co-chairing the Joint Council governing the National Agreement alongside the Commonwealth Minister for Indigenous Australians.

The National Agreement is supported by a governance architecture that facilitates partnership between all parties in shared decision-making policy development. The governance framework is critical to upholding all parties' commitments to work in partnership in alignment with Partnership Agreement Objectives (Clause 13) and Principles (Clause 14). Under the governance framework, no single party may make changes to the Targets or Priority Reform Areas. Indeed, the Joint Council Terms of Reference require parties to engage in consensus decision-making through equal participation and agreement on an outcome or course of action. The Closing the Gap Governance Diagram can be found at **Attachment 4**.

Joint Council on Closing the Gap

The Joint Council is the primary decision-making body of the National Agreement and is co-chaired by the Minister for Indigenous Australians and the Lead Convenor of the Coalition of Peaks. It meets at least twice annually to monitor the performance and implementation of all parties' actions under the National Agreement. The Joint Council includes Indigenous Affairs Ministers from all Australian governments, 13 members of the Coalition of Peaks, and the President of the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA). See Terms of Reference at **Attachment 5**.

Partnership Working Group

The Joint Council is supported by the Partnership Working Group (PWG), which meets approximately every 6 to 8 weeks and is responsible for driving the implementation of the Partnership Agreement and the National Agreement. PWG is co-chaired by the NIAA Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and the Lead Convenor of the Coalition of Peaks. It is attended by senior officials from all Australian governments and representatives of the Coalition of Peaks. See Terms of Reference at **Attachment 6**.

Policy Partnerships

Policy Partnerships are a shared commitment under Priority Reform One, formed to progress work on discrete policy in the areas of justice, social and emotional wellbeing, early childhood care and development, housing, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. The Commonwealth in partnership with the Coalition of Peaks are also currently progressing two more policy partnerships, a Data Policy Partnership, and a First Nations Economic Partnership. They drive First Nations community-led outcomes and accelerate progress on the National Agreement outcomes and targets in their sectors by bringing together all jurisdictions and representatives from the Peaks. The Partnerships also include independent First Nations members with relevant policy and sector expertise. They make policy recommendations to all governments through Joint Council to improve outcomes against their relevant targets in the National Agreement. The non-binding recommendations may be national or specific to a jurisdiction. Actions to respond to relevant recommendations are included in each jurisdictions' annual implementation plans. As they evolve, Policy Partnerships are also exploring taking on a formal accountability role for overseeing progress made under the relevant associated Sector Strengthening Plan, which are a national framework for joined-up delivery of actions that will build strong community-controlled sectors to deliver Closing the Gap services and programs under Clause 45 of the National Agreement.

Role of jurisdictions

Jurisdictions, being the Commonwealth, state, territory and local governments, play a crucial role in achieving Closing the Gap targets by embedding the Priority Reforms and driving targeted actions within their respective areas. Each jurisdiction is responsible for implementing policies and programs that align with the National Agreement and ensuring that their efforts contribute to measurable progress. In addition to work progressed through Policy Partnerships, jurisdictions and entities continue to partner collaboratively with First Nations peak bodies, communities and organisations to design and deliver programs in all socio-economic outcome areas.

Jurisdictional governance arrangements

Jurisdictions are responsible for establishing their own internal governance mechanisms in relation to Closing the Gap, in addition to participating in Joint Council, Partnership Working Group and Policy Partnerships.

Commonwealth governance mechanisms include the Commonwealth Implementation Joint Working Group and Commonwealth Secretaries Board.

- The **Commonwealth Implementation Joint Working Group (JWG)** convenes Commonwealth Deputy Secretaries (or equivalents) of 16 Agencies across the Commonwealth and nominated representatives from the Coalition of Peaks. See Terms of Reference at **Attachment 7**.

- The **Commonwealth Secretaries Board**, chaired by the Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, also has responsibility for the implementation of Priority Reforms across the Commonwealth. The Board consists of Secretaries of all Australian Government Departments, the Australian Public Service Commissioner, and the NIAA CEO. The Secretaries Board responsibilities for the Priority Reforms are supported by subcommittees including the Partnership Priorities Committee, Digital and Data Committee, and Chief Operating Officer (COO) Committee. **Attachment 8** illustrates a Commonwealth Implementation Governance Diagram.

Role of the National Indigenous Australians Agency

The Executive Order that established NIAA gives the Agency a number of functions, including “to lead and coordinate the development and implementation of Australia’s Closing the Gap targets in partnership with Indigenous Australians”. This entails a dual role supporting the National Agreement partnership, and advising the Minister for Indigenous Australians on the National Agreement and supporting the Minister as Co-Chair of the Joint Council.

NIAA provides a central coordination point for the National Agreement via its role as Secretariat for the partnership governance arrangements (Joint Council, Partnership Working Group, Joint Working Group). It also supports work with state and territory governments, local government and First Nations partners to drive collective effort.

NIAA’s role in advising and supporting the Minister for Indigenous Australians requires the agency to coordinate, lead and report on the Commonwealth’s effort to implement the National Agreement and close the gap, using our influence across the Commonwealth and working closely with the Coalition of Peaks and Commonwealth agencies to identify improvements, accelerate efforts, develop implementation plans and monitor progress.

NIAA invests in and delivers programs through the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) to align with targets. NIAA delivers on these various roles through partnerships and engagement across the Commonwealth, states and territories, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and leaders.

NIAA is also responsible for the Annual Review and Implementation Plan (ARIP), which reports on progress against Closing the Gap targets for the previous year and outlines strategic priorities for the year ahead. However, NIAA does not report on data. This is the role of the Productivity Commission (PC), which, as outlined in the ‘Closing the Gap Targets’ section below, gathers data and maintains a Closing the Gap Information Repository through which they provide updates multiple times a year.

Processes for setting priorities in Partnership under the National Agreement

While the National Agreement policy framework does not set out a prioritisation of socio-economic outcomes and targets, the Joint Council has a key role in driving a shared focus on priority actions that will have the greatest impact for First Nations people. The Joint Council and PWG forums provide the mechanism for strategic discussions on key shared policy challenges and critical, cross-jurisdictional decision-making, in addition to discussing progress on specific measures in the National Agreement. The Minister for Indigenous Australians, in

partnership with the Lead Convenor of the Coalition of Peaks as Co-Chairs of Joint Council, have elevated the need to hold these strategic discussions on policy areas where the targets are going backwards or have not changed since the baseline data was measured. In addition, the Joint Council has agreed a strategic forward work plan centred around the Priority Reforms and those actions that will see full implementation of National Agreement Commitments. Priorities are also progressed through the Policy Partnerships, which make recommendations to all parties on specific policy areas.

For individual government departments, priority setting is typically focused on the specific targets within their portfolio of responsibility. For example, the Department of Health is primarily concerned with health and wellbeing-related targets. Each department is responsible for driving change in its area of expertise and allocating resources accordingly.

Closing the Gap Targets

In December 2016, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to refresh the Closing the Gap agenda ahead of the tenth anniversary of the agreement and four of the (then) seven targets expiring in 2018. In 2018, a Special Gathering of prominent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians presented COAG with a statement setting out priorities for a new Closing the Gap agenda. The statement called for the next phase of Closing the Gap to be guided by the principles of empowerment and self-determination, and deliver a community-led, strengths-based strategy that enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to move beyond surviving to thriving.

Priority Reforms

The 4 Priority Reforms are central to the National Agreement, and focus on changing how governments work with First Nations peoples by embedding their perspectives and knowledge into policies and programs. These interlinked reforms must be progressed together to achieve the objectives of the National Agreement and ensure tangible outcomes for First Nations communities.

Each Priority Reform is accompanied by specific actions and measures outlined in the Australian Government Annual Implementation Plan (**Attachment 1**). Achieving these reforms requires collective responsibility across all governments and agencies, investing time and resources to build trustworthy partnerships, strengthen community relationships, and establish governance frameworks to support the necessary actions and commitments.

Targets and Outcomes

The National Agreement outlines 19 national socio-economic targets across 17 outcome areas, focusing on critical aspects such as health, education, employment and housing. These targets were collaboratively developed by Australian Governments and the Coalition of Peaks to address key factors influencing life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The selection process aimed to create specific, measurable goals to monitor progress and ensure accountability over the next decade.

Measuring and Reporting

Measuring the targets and reporting on planning, actions and progress against the National Agreement occurs through different mechanisms.

Productivity Commission

Chapter 7 of the National Agreement outlines the requirement for the Productivity Commission to maintain a Closing the Gap Information Repository to measure and evaluate progress of the National Agreement. This repository serves as an accountability mechanism, tracking both the socio-economic targets and Priority Reforms. The repository includes a publicly accessible dashboard that provides up-to-date data on key indicators, as well as an Annual Data Compilation Report, which offers a more detailed analysis of trends and progress. The dashboard is updated two to three times a year as data becomes available to the Productivity Commission. The next update is scheduled for March 2025.

The Commission does not collect new data; instead, it compiles information from existing sources, such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics and jurisdictional agencies. States and territories, which often have primary responsibility in areas like health and justice, contribute data relevant to specific targets, such as suicide. The availability of data differs across the Targets; for some there can be a significant time lag of up to several years.

The requirement for the Productivity Commission's independent oversight and accountability of progress against the targets is outlined in clauses 116-117. In addition, there is the requirement for the Productivity Commission three yearly review outlined in clauses 121-124.

Funding of \$10.1 million over 4 years from 2020-21 and \$2.6 million per year ongoing from 2024-25 has been provided to the Productivity Commission to perform this role.

Closing the Gap Annual Report and Implementation Plan

Chapter 9 of the National Agreement requires government parties to publicise information on their progress on the Agreement and their Implementation Plans through annual public reports. Jurisdiction reports are tabled in their relevant parliament to improve public oversight and increase accountability. The Australian Government's Annual Report and Implementation Plans are drafted in partnership with relevant peak organisations. They are public documents which provide specific information on past progress and priorities for the coming year, and are tabled in the Australian Parliament annually.

The Australian Government's 2024 Annual Report outlined progress on the 143 actions listed in last year's implementation plan, of which 50 were expected to be completed in 2024. The Australian Government's 2025 Implementation Plan outlines 194 specific commitments across all socio-economic targets and Priority Reforms for delivery in 2025. Growth in the number of actions and commitments over the years reflects the evolution of the National Agreement out of the establishment phase into the implementation phase.

It is important to note the Australian Government's Closing the Gap Annual Report does not provide an update of the data on progress towards the socio-economic targets. Where progress on targets is provided this is drawn from the Productivity Commission dashboard and data compilation report as required in Clause 118a of the National Agreement.

Jurisdictions are also accountable for tracking and reporting their progress. Each government party is required to establish formal partnerships with First Nations representatives and integrate Closing the Gap commitments into their strategic planning.

Party	Report
Coalition of Peaks	2025 Implementation Plan
Australian Local Government Association	2023 Closing the Gap Annual Report
Australian Capital Territory	ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement 2019-2028
New South Wales	Closing the Gap 2022-24 Implementation Plan
Northern Territory	Closing the Gap Implementation Plan 2023-2024
Queensland	Queensland Closing the Gap Annual Report, Snapshot Report, Implementation Plan and Partnership Stocktake 2023
South Australia	Closing the Gap Implementation Plan 2024-26
Tasmania	Closing the Gap Tasmanian Implementation Plan 2021-2023
Victoria	The Victorian Closing the Gap Implementation Plan 2021-2023
Western Australia	WA Government Closing the Gap Implementation Plan 2023-2025

Additional and Refreshed Targets

The National Agreement states that parties may agree to vary or add additional targets. Any new or updated outcomes are to be developed in partnership and agreed upon by all parties, following the procedures outlined in Section 11A of the Agreement.

Target 9b was introduced to further address key areas that needed more focused attention.

Target 9b – By 2031, all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households:

- i. Within discrete Aboriginal to Torres Strait Islander communities receive essential services that meet or exceed the relevant jurisdictional standard,
- ii. In or near a town receive essential services that meet or exceed the same standard as applies generally within the town.

Targets are subject to ongoing review and may be refreshed in alignment with Clause 84 of the National Agreement. Any changes made to the National Agreement must be agreed by all Parties. Parties agree to regularly review the level of ambition of the targets as parties are committed to stretching beyond a business-as-usual approach in order to accelerate improvements in life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. There is currently a focus on reviewing Target 3, with a working group progressing the refresh.



Existing funding sources and mechanisms

While there is a collective responsibility to the National Agreement across portfolios within governments, there are different lead agencies within governments responsible for each of the targets according to their policy areas of expertise and responsibility. Funding to implement policies and programs to address the targets is sought and managed by different portfolios through many different funding packages across all governments and detailed in governments' published budget papers. The outcomes and targets themselves are not funded under the National Agreement.

The jurisdictions' Annual Reports and Implementation Plans provide transparency and accountability on the funding and investment for actions aligned to the National Agreement socio-economic outcomes and targets. The Annual Reports and Implementation Plans are similarly structured by Outcomes and Priority Reforms, detailing the actions against each, assisting stakeholders to compare and analyse across jurisdictions.

Targets in Question

Target 4: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thrive in their early years

Target 4 was selected based on strong evidence that high-quality early childhood education significantly improves long-term developmental outcomes. Data for this target is sourced from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), which assesses children's development when they begin full-time schooling. The 2018 baseline and 2031 target year were set to track progress, though AEDC data is collected every 3 years, with 2030 being the closest reporting year. National consistency in data collection was a key factor in selecting this target, ensuring reliable measurement of progress.

Extensive research, including the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children, highlights the profound impact of early childhood education and care on cognitive and developmental outcomes. Studies show that early intervention between birth and five years, and particularly from birth to three years, is critical in shaping a child's social, cognitive and emotional development. First Nations stakeholders have consistently advocated for culturally responsive early childhood care, emphasising the need for strong cultural connections, school readiness, and long-term success.

The [National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy 2022 – 2032](#), developed in partnership with SNAICC - National Voice for our Children, provides a coordinated framework for government and community action to improve early childhood outcomes. Additionally, the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership (ECCDPP) supports genuine partnerships between First Nations representatives and government agencies. With 15 agreed priority areas (and a 16th to be agreed in early 2025), ECCDPP works to increase First Nations children's participation in quality early childhood programs, supporting multiple Closing the Gap targets.

In 2024, activities progressed by the Commonwealth include an expansion of the Connected Beginnings Program to support a total of 24,800 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from birth to school age at 50 sites across the country. In 2025 activities to address Target 4 continue, including through the allocation of \$16.6 million in core funding allocated support the ongoing operations of SNAICC – National Voice for our Children over four years from 2024-25. Additionally, work will be progressed to replace the Child Care Subsidy Activity Test, and from January 2026, families caring for a First Nations child will be eligible for 100 hours of subsidised early childhood education and care each week.



Achieving Target 4 will have cascading benefits for other outcomes, including school engagement (Target 5), higher education participation (Target 6), youth employment (Target 7), economic participation (Target 8), child protection system reduction (Target 12), and improved social and emotional wellbeing (Target 14). The focus on high-quality, culturally safe early childhood education is essential in setting a strong foundation for First Nations children to thrive.

Target 10: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are not overrepresented in the criminal justice system

Reducing the overrepresentation of First Nations peoples in the criminal justice system is a critical step toward creating safer communities and improving long-term social outcomes. Preventing unnecessary contact with the justice system helps individuals stay connected to their families, communities, and culture, reinforcing their cultural identity and overall wellbeing. Achieving this target also reflects a commitment to justice systems that value and respect First Nations culture, law and lore.

This target directly responds to First Nations community priorities, aiming to address systemic factors contributing to high incarceration rates. These include social and emotional wellbeing, education engagement, stable housing, economic opportunities, and mental and physical health. Tackling these underlying causes will have the greatest impact in reducing incarceration and supporting preventative approaches rather than punitive measures.

Target 10 also contributes to broader community safety and wellbeing by reducing the disruptive effects of imprisonment on families and communities. High incarceration rates can weaken social structures, increase intergenerational disadvantage, and contribute to ongoing cycles of crime and poverty. Reducing imprisonment helps maintain family bonds and strengthens community resilience.

First Nations communities have long advocated for culturally appropriate justice interventions, which this target reflects. Addressing the underlying causes of crime and investing in culturally safe mechanisms such as justice reinvestment, diversion programs and community-led initiatives are key to achieving this goal. By embedding these approaches, the justice system can move towards genuine partnership with First Nations peoples, ensuring responses are effective, fair, and aligned with cultural needs.

The National Justice Reinvestment Program and Justice Reinvestment in Central Australia Program aim to prevent and reduce Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contact with the justice system in a particular place or community. Since the opening of both Programs in September 2023, there are now 27 community-led justice reinvestment initiatives. Of the 26 that opened in 2024, 9 are in Queensland, 6 are in Western Australia, 6 are in the Northern Territory, 2 are in New South Wales, 2 are in South Australia and one is in Victoria. The Programs enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and leaders to come together to identify local solutions to local issues. Using strengths of community, cultural knowledge and stories to measure progress over time, it offers a way for communities to drive those solutions through improved collaboration and partnership with governments and other service providers to positively impact Target 10.

The Justice Policy Partnership (JPP), established in 2021, provides a mechanism for all levels of government and First Nations organisations to come together on this topic. Its purpose is to reduce the over-representation of First Nations people in Australia's criminal justice systems as both victims and offenders. Its members meet quarterly and include Commonwealth, state and territory governments, representatives from the Coalition of



Peaks, and First Nations justice experts. Noting justice policy is primarily a responsibility of states and territories, the partnership approach is important to ensure accountability of all justice agencies to meet the justice targets in a way that aligns with the Priority Reforms and delivers integrated solutions that address the diverse needs of First Nations peoples.

Target 10 is measured using an age-standardised rate per 100,000 people, tracking the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults in legal custody. The numerator represents the number of First Nations people aged 18 and over in adult corrective services custody as of 30 June each year, while the denominator reflects the total First Nations adult population on the same date. This data is sourced from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, specifically the Prisoners in Australia and Estimates and Projections, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians datasets. Progress is assessed annually by comparing each year's data to the baseline year, 2019.

In 2024, the Commonwealth invested \$4.2 million for additional community safety patrols in Alice Springs and remote communities. The patrols divert First Nations people away from contact with police and provide transport to safe places. Additionally, the Standing Council of Attorneys General agreed to a new \$3.9 billion National Access to Justice Partnership 2025-30. This is the largest investment from the Commonwealth in legal assistance ever. It includes funding for the delivery of legal assistance services by Domestic Violence Units, Health Justice Partnerships and Specialist Elder Abuse Units, delivery of Family and Advocacy Support Services, Custody Notification Services, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services providing legal assistance services to family members in coronial inquiries and supporting expensive and complex cases, and legal assistance services in family law matters per the Family Law Program under the National Legal Assistance Partnership 2020-2025, delivered by Community Legal Centres and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service. Across 2025, the Commonwealth will continue to progress activities to address Target 11, including delivering \$6.78 million funding support for 4 additional justice reinvestment initiatives in First Nations communities within Central Australia.

Target 12: Children are not overrepresented in the child protection system

Reducing the number of First Nations children in out-of-home care minimises disparities across child protection systems and ensures fair treatment for all children. It keeps First Nations children connected to their families, communities and country, strengthening their cultural identity and leading to improved long-term outcomes.

Target 12 is informed by the voices and needs of First Nations families and communities. It emphasises culturally appropriate care for First Nations children and supports their identity and social and emotional wellbeing, aligning all aspects of the child's wellbeing with the community's holistic view of knowing, being and doing.

Target 12 is measured as a rate per 1,000 children. The numerator represents the number of First Nations children aged 0 – 17 years in out of home care as of 30 June annually, while the denominator reflects the total First Nations child population on the same date the data is sourced from the Australian Bureau of Statistics in the Australian Institute of Health and welfare. The baseline year for this target is 2019, with progress assessed annually by comparing each year's data to the baseline.

In 2024, the Government continued to address Target 12 through various initiatives, including the establishment of a legislated and independent National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People to advocate for the rights and interests of First Nations young people. Across 2025, the



Government will progress several initiatives, including the release of the national child placement minimum standards to reduce the overrepresentation of First Nations children and young people in child protection systems.

Target 14: Significant and sustained reduction in suicide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people towards zero

The social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is foundational to their physical and mental health. SEWB is a holistic concept that includes family, community, culture, spirituality, identity, and connection to Country, alongside basic needs, education, employment, and autonomy. While SEWB and mental health are distinct, a decline in SEWB is linked to an increased risk of self-harm and suicide. Tragically, suicide disproportionately affects First Nations peoples, accounting for 5.3% of all deaths in 2021 (compared to 1.8% among non-Indigenous Australians). Suicide rates in young First Nations people are more than double that of their non-Indigenous peers.

To address this crisis, the SEWB Policy Partnership, a key initiative under Priority Reform 1, enables governments to work alongside First Nations leaders, communities, and practitioners. This partnership focuses on improving social and emotional wellbeing, enhancing mental health services, and reducing suicide rates. A major goal is the development of culturally responsive tools to measure and strengthen First Nations SEWB, ensuring policies and services are tailored to community needs.

The [National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Strategy 2025 – 2035](#) was developed in partnership with First Nations peoples, government agencies, and stakeholders to drive significant and sustained reduction in suicide rates. Additionally, [the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021 – 2031](#), developed through genuine First Nations leadership, prioritises mental health and suicide prevention as key areas for action. These frameworks empower communities, embed cultural knowledge into policy, and aim for a future where First Nations people thrive in all aspects of life.

In 2024, there were more than 200 enrolments and 60 completions in the First Nations Health Worker Traineeship Program, helping address workforce shortages and delivering more culturally safe services closer to home. In 2025, an additional \$24.7 million has been allocated to support First Nations social and emotional wellbeing and mental health responses and increase the number of First Nations psychologists by up to 150, improving access to culturally safe mental health care.

Priority Reform 4 and Government-held Data

The goal of Priority Reform 4 is to ensure that First Nations peoples have access to, and the capability to use, locally relevant data and information to set and monitor their own priorities for Closing the Gap. By strengthening Indigenous data sovereignty and ensuring data is accessible, useable and transparent, communities can drive their own development and hold governments accountable for progress.



An overview of the mechanisms for data collection by the Productivity Commission are outlined in the summary of Targets and Outcomes above. The Australian Government Closing the Gap Annual Report also includes the most recent data on the Targets from the Productivity Commission's Closing the Gap Information Repository.

Additionally, information and data about programs delivered through the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) is available through NIAA's commissioned evaluations of IAS programs. The extensive evaluation program has seen around 70 activities completed since 2017-18. Many of these are complex and comprehensive evaluations, covering large programs such as the Community Development Programme and the Remote Schools Attendance Strategy.

The evaluations are overseen by an external Indigenous Evaluation Committee to provide quality assurance and guidance. The IAS Evaluation Framework, Evaluation Work Plan, and evaluations themselves are publicly available on the NIAA website.

Data landscape and Data improvement

The Australian Government, states, territories, local governments and service providers collect data about First Nations peoples through interaction with government administration and services, and through surveys, only some of which are First Nations specific.

The Australian Government acknowledges there are gaps and deficiencies with the quality and availability of data on First Nations people. The data sources for the Closing the Gap targets do not provide a complete picture for First Nations peoples' experience, use of services or outcomes. Improving the quality of Indigenous identification across all relevant datasets continues to be a priority in order to provide more complete information.

Data improvement is ongoing and occurs across multiple levels of government and the data governance life cycle: from design and collection, to reporting and reuse. Some of this improvement will be part of regular 'business as usual' activity and others will be as a result of particular projects for the purposes of filling a data gap.

NIAA supports the improvement of data collections, as do other government agencies. For example, NIAA provides funding to the AIHW for the *Developing and Implementing an Adult Corrective Services Data Collection Project*. This project is to develop and implement an adult corrective services data collection, working with both the AIHW and the ABS, and the states and territories. The project addresses the findings of the Prison to Work report, which concluded there is a need for better data collection and data sharing. The collection will also build the evidence base to support efforts for the Closing the Gap adult and youth justice (Targets 10 and 11).

Framework for Governance of Indigenous Data

Coordinating implementation of the Framework for Governance of Indigenous Data (GID Framework) across the Commonwealth is one way NIAA is working to improve the quality and governance of Indigenous data related to Closing the Gap targets. The GID Framework recognises better outcomes are achieved if First Nations people have a genuine say in matters affecting them, including the collection, use, and disclosure of data to inform government policy-making and service delivery.

Implementation of the GID Framework commenced in January 2025. The Framework will guide Australian Government agencies to improve the collection, use and disclosure of data to better serve the aspirations and priorities of First Nations peoples. Though the Framework applies only to the Commonwealth government, it may



also be relevant to data governance practices of States, Territories, and Local Government. The GID Framework will be implemented over seven years. It represents a significant transformation in the way government works, and we expect it will take some time to fully implement across all the Commonwealth agencies. Agencies are at different levels of maturity with regards to data management and their partnerships with First Nations peoples. It is a requirement for each agency to partner with First Nations representatives as they implement the GID Framework.

Indigenous data sovereignty and the Framework for Governance of Indigenous Data

The GID Framework adopts the definitions of ‘Indigenous data sovereignty’, and ‘Indigenous data governance’, as they are given by the Maïam nayri Wingara Indigenous Data Sovereignty Collective. The Framework guides agencies on how to practically implement and embed those areas of data governance where the objectives of the Indigenous Data Sovereignty movement and the Australian Government align.

Data Development Plan

Joint Council agreed the Data Development Plan 2022 – 2031 (DDP). The DDP outlines and prioritises the data development actions under each socio-economic outcome. The DDP is intended to facilitate a richer array of high-quality data sources over the life of the National Agreement. The DDP was developed in partnership by all governments and the Coalition of Peaks, and reflects priority data development items. The DDP includes data development to support all 17 socio-economic outcomes. Specifically:

- Outcome 4 has 11 associated data items,
- Outcome 10 has 10 associated data items
- Outcome 12 has 7 associated data items, and
- Outcome 14 has 10 associated data items

Data Policy Partnership

To address the critical need to progress Priority Reform 4, the Joint Council agreed to establish a Data Policy Partnership (DPP) in July 2024. The intended scope of the DPP will be to consider the scope, roles, responsibilities and resourcing needed to support Indigenous Data Governance and Closing the Gap data development, as well as explore options for establishment of a Bureau of Indigenous Data (BoID) (as recommended by the Productivity Commission Review of the National Agreement) and report back to the Joint Council with their recommendations. The DPP is also intended to support Indigenous data development, governance, sharing and sovereignty.

The establishment of the DPP is well underway. In early 2025, the two co-chairs, supported by NIAA, will establish a working group to develop terms of reference (detailing roles, responsibilities, deliverables and membership), and a draft work plan for the first year. These will be provided to the Joint Council for endorsement in mid or late 2025.

Attachments

1. Australian Government Closing the Gap 2024 Annual Report and 2025 Implementation Plan
2. 2024 Commonwealth Implementation Plan Actions Status



3. 2025 Commonwealth Implementation Actions Table
4. Closing the Gap Governance Diagram
5. Joint Council on Closing the Gap Terms of Reference
6. Partnership Working Group on Closing the Gap Terms of Reference
7. Joint Working Group on Closing the Gap Terms of Reference
8. Commonwealth Implementation Governance Diagram

