

MEDIA RELEASE

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children Paying the Price of Government Inaction

The latest data from the Australian Institute of Health and Wellbeing (AIHW) on Closing the Gap targets shows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are paying the price while governments continue to drag the chain on progressing much-needed reforms.

The data reveals only one-third of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are developmentally on track and that governments have made zero improvement in the continuing over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in juvenile justice and child protection systems across Australia.

Catherine Liddle, CEO of SNAICC, said it's time Australian governments uphold their side of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

“This update from the AIHW is the latest in a string of reports showing that governments have largely failed to fulfill their commitments under the National Agreement, highlighting a lack of fundamental change and the persistence of "business-as-usual" approaches,” Ms. Liddle said.

“Worsening targets around our children’s readiness for big school and the alarming disparities they still face in Australia’s justice and child protection systems are not a failing of the National Agreement or the Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCO).

“In fact, the examples where we are seeing positive change in early childhood education settings is guided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership.

“This is the result of the backseat approach we are seeing from governments, which is delaying the critical changes which need to happen across the board to see improvements on the Closing the Gap targets.

“While we are pleased to see that Target 3 around preschool enrolment is on track, the fact our children are not developmentally ready for school shows there is more work to be done.

“This becomes increasingly important when we consider the whole lifespan of our children, with studies showing that early childhood education and care interventions are key to reducing the rate of juvenile offending and increasing evidence on the crossover of children entering OOHC and being involved with the juvenile justice system.

“To close the gap, governments must honour their commitments and empower Aboriginal-led solutions to drive policy reform and service delivery. Without urgent change, the cycle of disadvantage will continue.”

Background

AIHW Data:

- Target 4 (developmental readiness) is worsening. In 2021, based on the Australian Early Childhood Development Census (AEDC), only 34% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were assessed as being developmentally on track compared with 56% of non-Indigenous children.
- Target 11 (reducing the rate of youth in detention) has not seen improvement. In 2022–23, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth were 27 times more likely to be in detention than their non-Indigenous peers. On average 84% of First Nations children in detention at any given time during this period were unsentenced.
- Progress towards target 12 (children in out-of-home care) has gone backwards. The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OOHC rose significantly, from nearly 18,000 in June 2019 to around 19,800 in June 2023.

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For all media queries, please contact Charlie Bowcock on 0417 042 308 or media@snaicc.org.au.