INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

Background

Indigenous people face disadvantage on a number of fronts, disproportionate to non-Indigenous people and at all stages of life. A holistic model of service provision that acknowledges past injustices as well as building on individual and community strengths will begin to address the disparity that currently exists.

There are some pertinent data that highlight the disadvantage that Indigenous people face on a number of fronts. Health, and education and employment are three social indicators that Aboriginal young people fare particularly poorly in.

- The average life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is around 11 years. Although the ABS argues that the new methodology for measuring Indigenous life expectancy, which matches death records with census data, is more accurate, some 26% of Indigenous deaths are not matched with a census record. This means that the latest figure of 11 years still lacks some accuracy.

- Rates of overweight and obesity have steadily increased for Indigenous Australians in the last decade from 51 to 60%. Indigenous Australians are nearly twice as likely to be obese as non-Indigenous Australians.

- In 2008, the gap in child mortality meant that 205 of 100,000 Indigenous children died before the age of five, compared to 100 non-Indigenous children - a difference of more than 100. Indigenous children are twice as likely to die before the age of five than non-Indigenous children.

- The National Preschool Census 2009 showed that overall enrolments for Indigenous children are very low. In 2008 only 1,749 Indigenous children living in metropolitan areas were enrolled in preschool, compared with 2,420 in provincial areas and 2,364 in remote areas.

- Only 63.4% of Indigenous Year 5 students were at or above the national minimum standard for reading compared to 92.6% of their non-Indigenous counterparts.

- In 2008, the Indigenous employment rate was 53.8% compared to 75% for the non-Indigenous population. There was considerable variation between the states and territories: the gap was 34 percentage points in the NT and only 9 points in the ACT.[1]

The Commonwealth Government has primary responsibility for Aboriginal affairs, and a range of strategies are being pursued to address disadvantage through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). However, WACOSS argues that the State Government should also play a complementary role in supporting healing and reconciliation initiatives, beyond the priority 'closing the gap' measures.

---

[1] Russel, Dr L. and Wenham, Dr S. (2010). *Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage: Progress towards an important goal*. See http://www.menzieshealthpolicy.edu.au/other_tops/pdfs_pubs/closinggapjul10.pdf

Healing Centres

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation is an Indigenous-run, national not-for-profit organisation. It was established in 2009 to support community-based healing initiatives to address the traumatic historical legacy on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of colonisation, forced removals and other past government policies. It aims to provide practical and innovative healing services, with a particular focus on Stolen Generation members and their families.

The Healing Foundation focuses on three main areas:

- Capacity building – identifying and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing initiatives, at the community level and in response to community needs, by providing funding and capacity development.
- Healing promotion, education and training – facilitating the promotion and education of healing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their communities, including skills training in the prevention and treatment of trauma, and fostering a supportive public environment for healing.
- Research and evaluation – contributing to an evidence-base for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing through community-driven and culturally-appropriate research and evaluation. [2]

The Australian Government has provided funding of $26.6 million over four years to 2013-14 to assist the establishment and operation of the Healing Foundation. However, Aboriginal organisations have suggested the funding level nationally is too low to make a meaningful impact, and that a state contribution would strengthen capacity.

Community development

Community organisations across the State are delivering successful employment, health and wellbeing and education programs to Aboriginal communities where there is a high level of disadvantage. Just some examples include the Dare to Dream Girls' Initiative (David Wirrpanda Foundation), the Plan 2Day 4 2Morrow Initiative (David Wirrpanda Foundation), the Indigenous Family Violence Project (UnitingCare West), and the Personal Helpers and Mentors Program (Community First International). The programs are delivered across metro, regional and remote locations. While a number of programs receive ad-hoc project funding, in a number of cases it is due to end soon. A commitment is needed from State and Federal governments in order to ensure that successful programs continue to be delivered.

Other issues

Housing

Aboriginal West Australians face multiple disadvantages, many of which are associated with inadequate housing. Correspondingly, Aboriginal people make up a significant proportion of the demand for social housing. Safe, affordable and appropriate housing is foundational if we are to achieve improved outcomes for Aboriginal people in areas, such as health, education and employment.

---

[2] See http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/indigenous/progserv/engagement/Pages/aboriginal_and_torres_strait_islander_healing_foundation_.aspx

The National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing has seen investment in a greater number of houses in regional WA. This has been a critical first step in increasing access to affordable housing.

The NPA on Remote Indigenous Housing gives the States and the Northern Territory responsibility for ensuring provision of standardised tenancy management and support for all Indigenous housing in remote areas. This is consistent with public housing standards of tenancy management including through, where appropriate existing service providers.[3]

WACOSS is concerned at reports through its regional consultation that the tenants of the new housing constructed under the agreement have not been linked to appropriate tenancy support and life skills programs. The Supported Housing Assistance Program (SHAP) is a free service to Department of Housing tenants who are having problems maintaining their tenancy. Independently run Non-Government Organisation providers are engaged to help tenants develop their knowledge, skills and capacity to meet their tenancy agreement obligations.

Such programs are run by community service providers in a number of metropolitan and country areas. However, there are a number of critical regional gaps where these services are not currently available, particularly in remote towns.

WACOSS urges the State Government to align the delivery of tenancy support and in home practical support programs to the areas where the construction of new housing is being undertaken. All prospective tenants of new houses should be offered living skills support training as part of tenancy management. Issues associated with Indigenous housing in regional WA are discussed further in Part 2 of this Issues Paper.

Reconciliation Council

In conjunction with a sustained investment in vital social services for Aboriginal people across the state, WACOSS recommends that a state reconciliation council is established. This should operate in close collaboration with Reconciliation Australia, the national peak body responsible for promoting reconciliation. WA is the only State that does not have a centralised reconciliation body. We believe this undermines the social capital of the goodwill that exists in business, community organisations, the Indigenous network and the wider community.

[3] National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing, p.6.