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# 1 Introduction

In April 2002, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) commissioned the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision to:

produce a regular report against key indicators of Indigenous disadvantage. This report will help to measure the impact of changes to policy settings and service delivery and provide a concrete way to measure the effect of the Council's commitment to reconciliation through a jointly agreed set of indicators (COAG 2002, see appendix 1).

The first edition of *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators* was released in November 2003. A second edition of the report was published in July 2005, and a third in June 2007. All three editions have been widely welcomed and generally well received, and there has been widespread endorsement of the vision embodied in the report of 'a society where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should enjoy a similar standard of living to that of other Australians, without losing their cultural identity' (CAR 2000).

The report has led to constructive debate amongst Indigenous organisations, governments and public sector agencies, non-government organisations, and many individuals — both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Based on the best available information, the report has provided depth to the discussions and improved the potential for practical solutions to entrenched problems.

This is the fourth report in the series. It has been informed by ongoing consultations, and by recent developments in COAG's approach to addressing Indigenous disadvantage.

## 1.1 Not just another statistical report

COAG nominated two core objectives for this report. The first is to inform Australian governments about whether policy programs and interventions are achieving improved outcomes for Indigenous people. The second is to produce a report that is meaningful to Indigenous people.

Therefore, the *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators* report aims to be more than a collection of data. This report does not aim to replicate what is being done elsewhere — numerous reports and academic publications have been produced

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containing statistical information on Indigenous Australians, and many service areas have developed comprehensive suites of performance indicators.

This report is both visionary and strategic. Its vision, outlined in the ‘priority outcomes’, is that Indigenous people will one day enjoy the same opportunities as other Australians, together with strong cultural identity. The Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage framework underpins a strategy to achieve this vision.

The information in this report provides policy makers and Indigenous people with a high level view of the current state of Indigenous disadvantage and draws attention to where things need to change if the priority outcomes are to be achieved. The report focuses on the underlying factors that ultimately cause disadvantage; relying on experience, evidence and logic to identify areas where targeted policies will have the greatest impact. Over time, editions of this report are tracking where governments have had an impact on Indigenous disadvantage — and where work still needs to be done.

The report also provides a practical tool for government agencies and Indigenous organisations. The report’s whole-of-government, outcome focus encourages agencies to think beyond their existing policy frameworks. Governments and agencies are encouraged to incorporate the report’s indicators into their own monitoring and evaluation. However, the report acknowledges that many factors bear on change. A key message from consultations with Indigenous people was that the efforts of governments acting alone would not be enough to overcome Indigenous disadvantage. Fundamental, long term change will require concerted actions on the part of governments, the private sector, the general community and, not least, Indigenous people themselves.

Data limitations, and a desire to keep the report to a manageable size, mean that much of this report concentrates on outcomes for Indigenous Australians at the national and State and Territory level. However, the report recognises the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and experience; and acknowledges that disadvantage may come in different forms for those who live in urban, regional and remote areas. Some information has been reported separately for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people, and some has been disaggregated by remoteness. Elements of the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage framework have been adopted by some jurisdictions, and even individual Indigenous communities, to produce more disaggregated information to meet their specific needs.

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## Implementation of the framework

The report is influencing how governments address Indigenous disadvantage. Implementation of the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage framework by all governments is summarised in appendix 2.

Indigenous organisations can use the report's indicators to monitor their own outcomes, and to hold governments to account. The Close the Gap Campaign draws on many of the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage report indicators to hold governments accountable for achieving Indigenous health equality (box 1.1.1).

### Box 1.1.1 Close the Gap Campaign for Indigenous Health Equality

In April 2007, 40 of Australia's leading Indigenous and non-Indigenous health peak bodies and human rights organisations joined forces to launch a campaign to 'Close the Gap' on health inequality.

Close the Gap calls on all levels of Australian government to put in place firm targets, funding and timeframes to address health inequalities, including providing equal access to primary health care for Indigenous Australians within 10 years.

In March 2008, the Australian Government (with bipartisan support) and Indigenous health leaders signed a Statement of Intent to work together to achieve equality in health status and life expectancy between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians by the year 2030.

The signing of the Statement was the culmination of a two-day Indigenous Health Equality Summit attended by more than 100 experts across the Indigenous and mainstream health sector and related fields. The Summit developed working targets and benchmarks to be used to close the gap in Indigenous life expectancy by 2030.

Source: AHRC (2009)

## 1.2 Background

The origins of this report can be traced back to COAG's response to the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation's report, *National Strategies to Advance Reconciliation* (CAR 2000). The final report of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation called for COAG to agree on a framework for all governments (and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission) to set measurable program performance benchmarks and annually report performance against those benchmarks. In its response, COAG acknowledged the unique status of Indigenous Australians, and agreed that 'many actions are necessary to advance reconciliation, from

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governments, the private sector, community organisations, Indigenous communities, and the wider community' (COAG 2000; appendix 1).

In December 2000, the then Prime Minister wrote to the Ministerial Council for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (MCATSIA), requesting it to develop its action plan on reconciliation to include performance reporting strategies and benchmarks. A framework was developed by early 2002, which identified three priority areas for action, headline indicators and strategic change indicators. This framework formed the basis of extensive consultations undertaken by the Steering committee in developing the framework for the 2003 edition of this report. The Australian, State and Territory governments conducted consultations within their jurisdictions. Officials representing MCATSIA and the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services consulted within their organisations, and the Chairman of the Steering Committee and the Secretariat held discussions with Indigenous people and their organisations, and officials and researchers across the country.

Following the release of the 2003 report, and again following the 2005 and 2007 reports, the consultation process continued. The outcomes of each round of consultations and their influence on the content of the report have been summarised in each edition of the report, and two reports on specific consultations have been produced (SCRCSSP 2003b; SCRGSP 2007b).

## **Recent COAG developments**

In December 2007, COAG agreed to explicit targets for improving the lives of Indigenous people, and established the Working Group on Indigenous Reform (WGIR) to make progress towards achieving these targets (COAG 2007).<sup>1</sup> The working group is chaired by the Australian Government Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and comprises senior officials from each jurisdiction.

The WGIR developed a Closing the Gaps framework to support the achievement of COAG's Indigenous targets. This framework had many similarities to the 2007 Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage report. In the interests of an integrated approach to Indigenous reporting, the Chair of the WGIR wrote to the Chairman of

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<sup>1</sup> In December 2007, three targets were agreed (closing the life expectancy gap within a generation, halving the mortality gap for children under five within a decade and halving the gap in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade). Three further targets were agreed in March 2008 (all four year olds in remote communities access to early childhood education within five years, at least halve the gap for students in year 12 attainment or equivalent by 2020, and halve the gap in employment outcomes within a decade) (COAG 2007, 2008).

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the Steering Committee in August 2008, requesting that the Steering Committee work with the WGIR to align the WGIR and OID frameworks. Following consultation between the WGIR and the Secretariat for the Review, the WGIR endorsed an aligned framework in October 2008, and COAG agreed to the new framework at its meeting in November 2008 (COAG 2008).

To the casual reader, the framework for this report may not appear very different to that in previous reports. However, the Steering Committee is conscious that these changes to the framework require further consultation with Indigenous people and their organisations, to ensure that the report continues to be ‘of relevance to all governments and Indigenous stakeholders’. The Steering Committee has planned a broad round of consultations following the release of this report, to gather feedback on the changes, and to inform the structure and content of future reports.

## **1.3 The Review of Government Service Provision**

### **The Steering Committee**

The Review of Government Service Provision was an initiative of the Prime Minister, Premiers and Chief Ministers at the Premiers’ Conference in July 1993 and now operates under the auspices of COAG. The Review is overseen by a Steering Committee, which comprises senior representatives from the Prime Minister’s, Premiers’ and Chief Ministers’ departments, and Treasury and Finance departments in the Australian, State and Territory Governments, and observers from the ABS and AIHW. It is chaired by the Chairman of the Productivity Commission, which also provides the Secretariat.

### **Review reports**

The Review undertakes three major exercises for COAG:

- the annual *Report on Government Services*, now in its fourteenth edition. This report provides information on the efficiency and effectiveness of, and equity of access to, mainstream government services in the areas of education, justice, emergency management, health, community services and housing. Since 2003, the Review has published a separate Indigenous Compendium of information relating to the delivery of mainstream services to Indigenous people, drawn from this report (SCRCSSP 2003a; SCRGSP 2004–2007a, 2008, 2009)

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- the two-yearly *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators* report, which reports on outcomes for Indigenous people and, unlike the report on Government Services, does not focus on specific services
  - annual reporting of performance information relating to National Agreements between the Commonwealth and the states and territories to the COAG Reform Council, including the National Indigenous Reform Agreement. National Agreements may include a mix of outcome measures and indicators of the performance of services.

### *Indigenous Expenditure Report*

The Productivity Commission also provides the Secretariat to a separate COAG Steering Committee with responsibility for producing an annual report on expenditure on services to Indigenous Australians. This report focuses on government expenditure on both Indigenous-specific and mainstream services used by Indigenous people.

### **The Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Working Group**

The Steering Committee is advised on production of this report by a working group comprising representatives from Prime Minister's department and Premiers' and Chief Ministers' departments, as well as observers from the MCATSIA, the ABS and the AIHW. The Working Group was originally convened by Gary Banks, the Chairman of the Steering Committee and the Productivity Commission, and since 2004 has been convened by Commissioner Robert Fitzgerald of the Productivity Commission.

## **1.4 References**

- AHRC (Australian Human Rights Commission) 2009, *Close the Gap: Indigenous Health Campaign*, [http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social\\_justice/health/index.html](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/health/index.html), accessed 14 April 2009.
- CAR (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation) 2000, *National Strategies to Advance Reconciliation*, Sydney.
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- 2002, *Communiqué*, Meeting 5 April 2002, Canberra.
- 2007, *Communiqué*, Meeting 20 December 2007, Canberra.
- 2008, *Communiqué Meeting 29 November 2008*, Canberra.
- SCRCSSP (Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision) 2003a, *Report on Government Services Indigenous Compendium*, Productivity Commission, Canberra.

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— 2003b, *Draft Framework for Reporting on Indigenous Disadvantage: Report on Consultations*, Productivity Commission, Canberra.

SCRGSP (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision) 2004–2007a, 2008, 2009, *Report on Government Services Indigenous Compendium*, Productivity Commission, Canberra.

—2007b, *Framework for Reporting on Indigenous Disadvantage: Report on Consultations 2006*, Productivity Commission, Canberra.

