

MEDIA RELEASE

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Smarter, safer approach to justice critical to closing the gap

A group of leading Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, community and human rights organisations meeting in Sydney today have called for national leadership to address the crisis levels of incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and create safer communities.

The call comes after the community-driven Close the Gap Steering Committee recommended in its 2015 Progress and Priorities Report that the Australian Government broaden targets under its Closing the Gap Strategy to include reduced imprisonment and violence rates.

Speaking on behalf of the group meeting today, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services Chairperson Shane Duffy said it was essential that the Federal Government took a leadership role in addressing the crisis.

“The rates of incarceration for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are currently at epidemic levels,” Mr Duffy said.

“Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are now 14 times more likely to be in jail than non-Indigenous people. This is an unprecedented crisis requiring an urgent national response.”

The National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples is represented at today’s meeting by its Co-Chair Kirstie Parker, who said momentum was building around the nation for states, territories and the Federal governments to work together in a coordinated manner to address the issue.

“We’re at grave risk of losing a generation of our people to the criminal justice system and creating less safe communities, unless national action is taken,” Ms Parker said.

“The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) must consider this issue as a matter of priority and work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives to reach agreement on a targeted approach to incarceration and violence.”

The group noted that the safer communities ‘building block’ of the COAG Closing the Gap Strategy was the only area that did not incorporate specific targets.

“This is where clear targets on lowering incarceration and violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people would sensibly be incorporated,” Mr Duffy and Ms Parker said.

The group also noted previous commitments to justice targets by all sides of politics, as well as emerging justice reinvestment alternatives in both NSW and South Australia – reiterating the importance of a nationally coordinated approach.

Today's meeting acknowledged this day (13 February) as the seventh anniversary of the 2008 National Apology to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, especially members of the Stolen Generations.

"We are intensely aware of the impact that past removal practices continue to have on our people, including those experiencing incarceration," said Mr Duffy and Ms Parker.

"Of the 99 people whose deaths were investigated by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC), 43 were found to be members of the Stolen Generations."

"While the National Apology was a milestone for Australia and offered an opportunity for fundamental truth-telling and some healing, the watershed 1997 *Bringing them home Report* also recommended reparation, compensation, education and awareness, and support for members of the Stolen Generations."

"We join Stolen Generations advocates in calling for implementation of all of the Inquiry's recommendations."

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The group includes:

- Australian Council of Social Service
- Amnesty International Australia
- ANTaR
- First Peoples Disability Network
- Human Rights Law Centre
- National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services
- National Congress of Australia's First Peoples
- National Family Violence and Legal Prevention Services Forum
- Oxfam Australia