

# CLOSE THE GAP

POLICY BRIEF • MARCH 2021

## Leadership and Legacy Through Crises: Keeping our Mob safe CLOSE THE GAP CAMPAIGN REPORT 2021

### Introduction

Since 2010, the Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee has developed an annual report on action that needs to be taken to achieve health equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We often repeat our recommendations, and we remain steadfast and persistent in the expectation that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing will be respected and understood. The time for governments to deliver has long passed.

The *Leadership and Legacy Through Crises: Keeping our Mob safe* report presents solutions and showcases the leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities, youth and organisations throughout critical health crises in 2020.

The report features strengths-based examples in addressing the most complex of challenges. These include climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the increasing need for social and emotional wellbeing services in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as a result of these events, and pre-existing effects of colonisation and inter-generational trauma.

### The need for strengths-based approaches

It is the position of the Close the Gap Campaign to adopt a strengths-based approach to our annual report, focusing on strengths and success told through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices.

In this report we apply this strengths-based lens to understand and analyse what has worked in response to the recent crises, and what can be learnt in planning for future crisis prevention and response.

This approach is not a denial or oversight of the external obstacles and restrictions imposed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people—such as systemic racism, short-term funding cycles and poor infrastructure—nor of the dire inequities which exist between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians. Rather, it is a rejection of deficit-based policies and culturally unsafe systems that reduce Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities to a ‘health problem’ to be solved. This approach reflects an understanding that investing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led solutions is the most effective way to improve health outcomes for Australia’s First Peoples.



# Recommendations

## Structural reform

**The events of 2020 only serve to reinforce the need for large-scale systemic reform and a paradigm shift in our approach to truly empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We call on governments to:**

1. Fully implement the Uluru Statement from the Heart and a constitutionally enshrined First Nations Voice.
2. Commit to long term (10 year +), needs-based and coordinated cross-sectoral funding from Commonwealth, state and territory governments for the full implementation of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, the refreshed National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan and other supporting plans.
3. Take a preventative and rehabilitative approach through justice reinvestment to child and adult incarceration, in order to address the continued over-incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and adults. This is a source of ongoing trauma and a long term health concern
4. Raise the age of criminal responsibility immediately and nationally, from 10 years old to 14 years old, to be in line with international conventions and empirical evidence regarding childhood development. No children of any age belong in prison.
5. Establish a fully funded, monitored and evaluated national strategy to effectively respond to the systemic racism exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, 2019–20 bushfires response and the Black Lives Matter movement.
6. Fully implement the recommendations in the landmark Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices): Securing Our Rights, Securing Our Future report. These are recommendations for key structural, policy and legislative reforms to embed and sustain over the long term alternative models and approaches that enhance the lives of First Nation women and girls.

7. Develop a whole of government Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural policy that affirms the centrality of culture to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing, and informs investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural governance, maintenance and revitalisation projects, initiatives and activities.

## Strengths-based, community driven approaches to crisis adaptation and response

**Crisis response planning is an inherent capability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander communities who often face distinctive health challenges in crisis situations. Strengths-based, community-driven responses work best to deliver health and wellbeing for the unique cultural, geographic and socio-economic needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities faced with crises such as natural disasters or pandemics. We call on governments to:**

8. Evaluate and report on successful policy and program structures, partnerships and funding arrangements implemented in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak which empowered Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community leaders to respond effectively to the pandemic. Such evaluation must inform future crisis responses and the reforms required for more effective day-to-day agreement-making and funding systems.
9. Invest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce development and service delivery solutions, including the actions under the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan 2021–2031. Growth of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce, with a focus on local solutions, is essential to increasing access to care including to maintain service continuity and meeting needs during times of crisis.

10. Invest in data development at the local level to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with access to place-based data to effectively respond to crises situations and conduct ongoing health planning consistent with Indigenous Data Governance and Sovereignty principles and Priority Reform Four in the National Agreement.
11. Embed flexible funding models that allow for rapid responses, partnerships and collaboration and surge capacity support to Aboriginal community controlled organisations during times of natural disaster or crisis.
12. Review national emergency response and recovery programs to ensure the specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are included.
13. Effectively respond to the climate emergency and invest in mitigation, prevention and adaptation planning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Including:
  - I. resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to develop climate adaptation plans and risk assessments for climate change
  - II. ensuring that Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOS) and Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) lead the development of emergency management plans affecting their communities
  - III. research into the specific implications of the climate emergency for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
  - IV. housing and infrastructure planning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, particularly in remote communities, to manage extreme heat conditions and other extreme weather events due to the climate crisis to mitigate negative health effects
  - V. adaptation and mitigation strategies to manage food and water security in regional and remote communities, including the rising cost of food, and the potential impact on food and pharmaceutical supplies due to a loss of flora and fauna
- VI. ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural knowledge, land management and conservation practices are embedded into national climate change mitigation efforts
- VII. ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and, in particular young people, have a leadership role in Australia's national response to the climate crisis and implementation of the Paris Agreement
14. Establish greater environmental and heritage protections for sites that are sacred or culturally significant, recognising the impacts on Country, social and emotional wellbeing and the cultural determinants of health, for example from events such as the destruction of Juukan Gorge.
15. Support strengths-based, place-based, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led social and emotional wellbeing initiatives that address the social and cultural determinants of health through equitable, needs-based funding. Including:
  - I. prioritising truth-telling and healing processes to strengthen the resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and youth and to stop the ongoing impacts of racism and intergenerational trauma
  - II. supporting and implementing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led healing programs as a critical component of the post-crises recovery
  - III. increasing the numbers and capabilities of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health workforce
  - IV. ensuring mainstream services are culturally safe and accessible to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to provide mental health support to the specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in response and recovery programs.

# The legacy of strengths-based solutions

As the oldest living civilization on Earth, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have taken care of the health and wellbeing of their Country and communities for more than 65,000 years. The ways of knowing, being and doing that have enabled that longevity is a legacy that has been passed down by their ancestors, that will be passed onto the next generations.

There are many achievements to be celebrated in the work by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations in response to the many challenges of 2020. Empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders to provide the solutions for lasting health and wellbeing outcomes needs to be the legacy of 2020.

A paradigm shift in health policy and planning is needed and should be based on the strengths and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations. 2020 has demonstrated that significant reform through strengths-based community-led action can be achieved when there is matching political will to support it.

**The message from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is clear and simple:**

Value our cultures. Engage our leadership. Share your power and let us lead decisions about matters that affect us. We will not fail. This is the legacy that will live on through our children.



Copies of this report and more information are available to download at <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/publications> and <https://antar.org.au/resources/issue/83>