



14 April 2010

This Q & A factsheet is part of a series Reconciliation Australia is producing aimed at informing the community and stimulating conversations about the issues that affect us all.

Closing the Gap – Life Expectancy

On 11 February 2010, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd presented his annual Close the Gap report card, reflecting on how far we have come in our efforts to “close the gap”. What does “close the gap” mean? What does the life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians have to do with reconciliation? Here are some straightforward answers to these questions and more.

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1. What does “close the gap” mean?

The phrase “close the gap” is often used in the context of Indigenous issues but it specifically refers to the gap in health and life expectancy. It is also more generally used to refer to the inequalities that exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Following Prime Minister Rudd’s Apology to the Stolen Generations, the Government made a pledge to lead a national effort to close the life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Prime Minister Rudd stated:

It is indeed an obscenity that in this prosperous nation, Indigenous males die on average at the age of 59—18 years earlier than non-Indigenous males. And Indigenous females only live to 65 on average—compared to 82 for non-Indigenous

females... While the mortality rate of Indigenous Australian babies is declining, it remains at more than 12 for every 1000 live births—a rate nearly three times that of non-Indigenous infants.

2. What is the life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians?

In 2009 the Australian Bureau of Statistics released updated figures indicating that the average life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is around 11 years. Previously it was thought that the gap was around 17 years, however new calculation methods show that 11 years is a more accurate figure. These ABS figures reveal that the life expectancy of Indigenous men is 11.5 years lower than for non-Indigenous men, while the life expectancy of Indigenous women is 9.7 years lower than for non-Indigenous women.

These figures represent the *average* life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. In fact, in some areas of Australia the gap may be significantly higher for particular groups of Indigenous Australians.

3. How is the life expectancy gap determined?

The new methodology used by the ABS for measuring Indigenous life expectancy matches death records with census data. The accuracy of this method depends on whether Indigenous people are positively identified both in the census data and in death records.

Obtaining accurate death records for Indigenous peoples is problematic as it relies on a third party to correctly identify the deceased's status as Indigenous. Professor Ian Ring advises the Close the Gap coalition steering committee on this issue and argues that 26 percent of Indigenous deaths are not matched with a census record. This means that the latest figure of 11 years still lacks some accuracy.

Previously the ABS has released life expectancy figures for Indigenous Australians based on experimental estimates. The figure has moved from 20, to 17, to 11 years due to the use of various methodologies and is not meant to show an actual improvement in the life expectancy of Indigenous people.

4. Why is there such a big life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians?

The cause of the life expectancy gap is deeply embedded in a number of social determinants. Indigenous Australians face a number of basic disadvantages in comparison to non-Indigenous Australians; these disadvantages have negatively affected the life expectancy of Indigenous Australians.

Indigenous disadvantage has been consistently tracked by the Productivity Commission since 2002 when the first [Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage](#) reports were commissioned. The Productivity Commission's research suggests *young child mortality*, *disability* and *chronic disease* are the most significant factors affecting Indigenous life expectancy. These factors are caused by poor living conditions, a lack of safe and supportive communities, restricted education and training opportunities, and lower economic participation which in turn contribute to lowering Indigenous life expectancy.

For example, rheumatic heart disease is almost nonexistent in the developed world however it still affects around three percent of Indigenous Australians. Indigenous Australians are eight times more likely than non-Indigenous Australians to be hospitalised for rheumatic heart disease and nearly 20 times as likely to die from it.

The United Nations report *The State of the World's Indigenous Peoples* reinforces this notion of inequality, arguing that Indigenous peoples experience disproportionately high levels of maternal and infant mortality, malnutrition, cardiovascular illnesses, HIV and other infectious diseases.

The Australian Medical Association has described the gap in Indigenous health as “both a symptom of, and a contributor to, the cycle of poverty in Indigenous communities”.

A number of historical events have also played an important role in affecting Indigenous life expectancy. Various events have affected Indigenous life expectancy, including land dispossession and the Stolen Generations (see [Apology to the Stolen Generations](#)). The psychological trauma and grief of this separation has had significant consequences for the health and wellbeing of the Indigenous Australians affected and their families.

5. What goals have been set around closing the gap?

The Council of Australian Governments has set six targets in an attempt to reduce the disadvantage faced by Indigenous Australians and close the life expectancy gap:

1. Halve the mortality gap between Indigenous children and other children under age five within a decade;
2. Provide access to early childhood education for all Indigenous four-year olds in remote communities within five years;
3. Halve the gap in literacy and numeracy achievement between Indigenous students and other students within a decade;
4. Halve the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in rates of Year 12 attainment or an equivalent attainment by 2020;
5. Halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade;
6. Close the shameful gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a generation.

6. Have any improvements in life expectancy been achieved in recent years?

Improvements have been recorded in areas which contribute to Indigenous life expectancy. In March 2010, Professor Ian Anderson of the National Indigenous Health Equality Council announced that Indigenous child death rates are improving and may in fact halve by 2018. Improvements have also been seen in employment data—with the percentage of Indigenous people employed growing from 43 percent to 48 percent between 2001 and 2006.

Nevertheless, certain factors contributing to life expectancy have worsened. For example, Irene Fisher, CEO of the Sunrise Health Service, claims that many health problems such as anemia and malnutrition have worsened and figures on substance abuse and domestic violence have also increased.

The 2009 *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* report also revealed disappointing progress. Since 2003, Indigenous child abuse has worsened, and the rate of substantiated notifications for child abuse or neglect has more than doubled since 1999-2000. Other data suggests that Indigenous people are hospitalised as a result of domestic violence at a rate 34 times higher than non-Indigenous people and imprisonment rates for Indigenous women and men has increased by 46 and 27 percent respectively.

The [Australian Reconciliation Barometer](#), released in 2009 by Reconciliation Australia, reported that 92 percent of Australians believe the life expectancy gap should be a government priority. The Barometer also revealed the need for an annual accountability framework, with only 35 percent of Australians believing that programs to address Indigenous disadvantage have been successful. These attitudes, amongst others, have encouraged the Australian Government to devote greater attention to achieving improvements. As a result, almost \$1 billion of the 2009-2010 budget has been allocated to improving Indigenous health, a significant increase compared to previous budgets.

7. Aren't all Australians treated equally when it comes to health services?

Many Australians believe that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians are treated exactly the same when using health services. In fact, as the Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association has found, access to primary health care services continues to be a barrier for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The 2007 Australian Medical Association Report Card on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health attributes this to financial, geographic, personal and cultural barriers that work against the delivery of an effective health system for Indigenous Australians.

In 2006, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare found that while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were more likely to be hospitalised than other Australians, they were less likely to receive a medical or surgical procedure while in hospital. This could be due to a number of factors including communication and language difficulties, institutionalised racism, geography and presentation late in the course of illness.

8. What is the life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in other countries?

Recent statistics released in the United Nations Report *The State of the World's Indigenous Peoples* indicate that Australia and Nepal have the world's worst life expectancy gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. The gap in New Zealand is around 11 years lower for Indigenous people, while in the United States, life expectancy is 2.4 years lower for Indigenous people. In Canada, the difference in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is 8.1 years for males and 5.5 years for females.

9. What can you do to help "close the gap"?

Each year, milestones and anniversaries such as National Close the Gap Day and NAIDOC Week see hundreds of events taking place in schools, workplaces, shopping centres, community halls, churches and public spaces throughout the country as people celebrate and raise awareness of issues facing Indigenous Australians. These events also help to encourage the government and other groups to continue taking positive action in closing the gap. National Close the Gap Day Coordinator Gary Highland has urged the public to

continue to participate in national events such as these to mount pressure on the government to ensure that their commitments are achieved by 2030.