

# Closing the Gap: Scott Morrison to push new approach as report finds little progress

**Early childhood enrolment slips to 86.4%, while 49% Indigenous employment rate compares to 75% for non-Indigenous**

**Sarah Martin** *Chief political correspondent* Wed 12 Feb 2020



Prime minister Scott Morrison has been in talks about a new approach to Closing the Gap that would see greater involvement of Indigenous people. Photograph: Mick Tsikas/AAP

The prime minister, Scott Morrison, will argue on Wednesday that a new approach is needed to address Indigenous disadvantage as the latest Closing the Gap report finds little progress has been made on five of seven targets, including life expectancy and child mortality rates.

Following on from pledges in 2019 to “refresh” the Closing the Gap targets, Morrison will tell parliament that the latest report does not accurately reflect the progress that is being made on the ground, where on all measures “things are better than they were”.

He says the Closing the Gap process has reinforced “the language of failing and falling short” and masked the “real progress” being made.

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*“The targets don’t celebrate the strengths, achievements and aspirations of Indigenous people. They don’t tell you what’s happening on the ground, or stirring under it (and) they don’t tell you how realistic or achievable these targets were in the first place,”* Morrison is expected to say on Wednesday, according to extracts of his draft speech.

*“We must be careful not to adopt a deficit mindset ... Because on almost every measure, we have made progress.”*

The 2020 report card – the 12th report since targets were set in 2008 – finds that just two of the seven targets designed to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians have been met, with four of the targets having expired in 2018.

According to Wednesday’s report, the two areas that are on track are early childhood education attendance and year 12 attainment for Indigenous Australians aged 20 to 24.

But while the target to have 95% of Indigenous four-year-olds enrolled in early childhood education by 2025 was achieved in 2017, the latest report card shows this has slipped backwards to 86.4% in 2018, compared to 91.3% of non-Indigenous children.

The report card also notes that attendance in inner regional areas is almost 17% higher than the lowest attendance rate in very remote areas.

There has been little progress against the other five targets, which include employment, school attendance, life expectancy, child mortality rates and literacy and numeracy.

A key target to halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under the age of five within a decade is not on track, with a slight improvement in the mortality rate for Indigenous children outpaced by the improvement for non-Indigenous children, which has caused the gap to widen.



The report flags the need for further research to understand why an improvement in some of the major health risk factors for child mortality have not translated to improved mortality rates.

School attendance data shows that the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is evident from the first year of schooling and has not improved over the past five years.

The majority of Indigenous students attended school for an average of just over four

days a week, with attendance rates worsening during secondary school.

Attendance rates for Indigenous students in 2019 were around 82% compared to 92% for non-Indigenous students. Attendance fell from around 85% in primary school to just 72% by year 10, with the rates worse in remote areas.

On the measure of literacy and numeracy, the target to halve the gap in reading, writing and literacy has still not been met, but the report notes “improvements”.

Employment targets have also been missed, with the Indigenous employment rate stable at 49% compared to 75% for non-Indigenous Australians. Over the past decade, this is a slight improvement of just 0.9 percentage points.

The life expectancy target, which aims to close the life expectancy gap by 2031, is also not on track. The report card notes that in 2015-2017, life expectancy at birth was 71.6 years for Indigenous males, which was 8.6 years less than non-Indigenous males, and 75.6 for Indigenous females – 7.8 years less than non-Indigenous females.

In response to the findings, which show little improvement on the 2019 report, Morrison will say that there are “shortcomings” in the reporting process that was set up by Kevin Rudd in 2008 and agreed to by the states through the National Indigenous Reform Agreement.

“Despite the best of intentions, investments in new programs, and shared bipartisan goodwill ... until recently Closing the Gap was never a partnership with Indigenous people,” Morrison is expected to say on Wednesday. “We believed we knew better. We don’t.”

Last year, the Coalition announced it would embark on a shake-up of the Closing the Gap targets, and has been in negotiations with a group of community-controlled peak Indigenous organisations – known as the Coalition of Peaks – to develop a new national agreement.

The structure and targets of the new agreement are set to be finalised by April before being considered by Coag.

While acknowledging that the country has not made as much progress as it should have, Morrison will say the new approach will be to “do it differently by working together”.

“By going from good intentions and sky-high aspirations, to local, practical action that’s driven by local leaders and local needs with clear accountability and responsibility and a clear line of sight to the community,” Morrison will say.

“I’m very hopeful that a new approach that’s more locally-led and more collaborative will take us much further than the top-down, one-size-fits-all, government-led approach ever could. We know that when Indigenous people have a say in the design of programs, policies and services, the outcomes are better – and lives are changed.”

The minister for Indigenous Australians, Ken Wyatt, said the slow progress demonstrated the need to adopt a new approach to Closing the Gap.

*“Key to this is shared accountability and shared responsibility – governments, Indigenous Australians and their communities and organisations,”* Wyatt said ahead

of the report's release.

*"We are committed to continue working with Indigenous Australians to optimise outcomes over the life course, and we have issued a call to all governments to continue to work together on national priorities for collective action and supporting local communities to set their own priorities and tailor services to their unique context."*

The change in direction on the targets comes after peak bodies met with Morrison and several senior ministers in January, expressing support for "priority reforms" that will see greater Aboriginal involvement in decision-making and service delivery at a national, regional and local level.

There was also a commitment to making sure "all mainstream government agencies and institutions undertake systemic and structural transformation to contribute to closing the gap".

Following the meeting, the government committed \$1.5m for a data project to develop regional profiles of Closing the Gap targets to support evidence-based policy and decision-making by Indigenous communities.