

# Mental health services for Aboriginal Australians inadequate, inappropriate, report warns

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**Photo:** [Dr Tom Calma says three times as many suicides occur in the Indigenous population than in the mainstream. \(ABC News\)](#)

## **Map: NT**

Mental health services for Aboriginal Australians are "both inadequate and inappropriate", and immediate changes are needed to address growing rates of suicide, depression and other mental health issues among Indigenous youth, a new report says.

The [report is part of the Close the Gap initiative](#), launched in 2006 to reduce disparities between Indigenous Australians and the rest of the population by 2031, including mortality rates, education and employment outcomes.

Co-author of the report, Dr Tom Calma, described it as "a slight on the whole of our population to know that almost three times as many suicides occur in the Indigenous population than in the mainstream".

Earlier this year, Prime Minister Tony Abbott acknowledged in a [Close the Gap progress report](#) that Australia was failing to meet many key objectives.

The report released today also highlighted several shortcomings in efforts to improve mental health among Indigenous Australians.

It cited "dramatic" increases in recent years in Indigenous rates of youth suicide, anxiety and depression, as well as cognitive disability and mental health among offenders, and perinatal mental health.

Dr Calma, who is also co-chair of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Advisory Group, said the approach to Aboriginal mental health had been disjointed in the past.

"Money gets put in, but it's stop-start money, it's uncoordinated," Mr Calma said.

**"What we need governments to do is to take a bipartisan approach to addressing mental health."**

Dr Tom Calma AO, Aboriginal elder and social justice advocate

"What we need governments to do is to take a bipartisan approach to addressing mental health and to have a long-term view, not something you can stop and start, which has been happening too often with a lot of health programs and other programs in Indigenous affairs.

"We need to have a more holistic approach and one that has some longevity to it."

Dr Calma praised the Abbott government's "bipartisan focus" to the tackling Indigenous disadvantage.

"We're only just starting and it's really pleasing to note that the current government is picking up on what Labor started with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander National Health Plan, and also for the suicide prevention strategy."

But he said there was a lack of research in the area of Indigenous mental health and suicide, which limits the scope of programs to tackle these problems.

The report said one of the keys to improving mental health outcomes was Indigenous-led programs that empowered people to regain a sense of control over their lives.

Dr Calma said addressing mental health was key to reaching the other Close the Gap targets.

He said improved mental health outcomes would have a flow-on effect to other areas, including reducing high incarceration and substance abuse rates.

Dr Calma said a holistic approach was needed to mental health, especially in Aboriginal Communities.

"We've got to look at the social and the cultural determinants of health... things like overcrowded housing, unemployment, lack of education access or participation," he said.

"That all requires a fundamental shift in the thinking of governments, both state and national governments, to try and provide education and employment that's appropriate."

**"There's too many people in the Northern Territory who are in prison and youth detention who shouldn't be."**

Jared Sharp, North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency

## **FAR TOO FEW RESOURCES TO DEAL WITH PROBLEM: NAAJA**

The report highlighted challenges to address mental health issues in the juvenile justice system, in which Indigenous young people are disproportionately represented, as well as in the Indigenous adult prison population.

Jared Sharp from the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA) agreed that mental health issues were common among Indigenous people in youth detention and prison systems.

"There is a really strong link between mental health and cognitive issues our clients face and involvement in the criminal justice system," he said.

"And unfortunately the Northern Territory has far too few resources in the community, and in our prisons, and in youth detention centres to support people who have mental health or cognitive issues."

He called for a dramatic increase in "culturally appropriate" assistance for people with those issues, and "a massive increase in resources for psychological treatment in the community".

"There's too many people in the Northern Territory who are in prison and youth detention who shouldn't be, who are really dealing with mental health and cognitive impairment issues," he said.

"They're left to the criminal justice system to deal with because resources aren't available in the community."