

Measuring Outcomes for First Nations Communities

**PeakCare's Submission to the Senate Select
Committee on Measuring Outcomes for First
Nations Communities**

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INTRODUCTION

PeakCare Queensland is pleased to submit our recommendations to the Senate Select Committee on Measuring Outcomes for First Nations Communities. We commend the Committee's commitment to examining and improving the measurement of outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We are deeply concerned about the regression of Closing the Gap targets on the rates of suicide, the number of children in out-of-home care, adult incarceration and the number of children commencing school who are developmentally on track. We believe there needs to be significant changes to the way government funding is directed and the methods with which success is measured, and as such, our submission focuses on two key recommendations:

Recommendation 1: We urge the government to direct funding towards prevention and early intervention initiatives. By investing in equitable access to early childhood education and care, mainstream and allied health and family supports early in children's lives, we can reduce the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children entering out-of-home care, mitigate youth justice involvement (thereby reducing adult incarceration), and address educational disengagement.

Recommendation 2: It is essential to adopt Indigenous evaluation principles in assessing the effectiveness of interventions targeted at improving Closing the Gap outcomes. This means developing and implementing culturally relevant metrics. By using evaluation frameworks that reflect Indigenous perspectives and priorities, we can ensure that the outcomes measured are truly reflective of community wellbeing and success.

We believe that these recommendations will provide a strong foundation for improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, and families, including achieving the Closing the Gap targets that are subject to this inquiry.

ABOUT PEAKCARE

PeakCare is a not-for-profit peak body for child and family services in Queensland, providing an independent voice representing and promoting matters of interest to the non-government sector. Across Queensland, PeakCare has more than 100 members including small, medium, and large local, state-wide and national non-government organisations which provide prevention and early intervention, generic, targeted, and intensive family support to children, young people, families, and communities. Member organisations also provide child protection services, foster care, kinship care and residential care for children and young people who are at risk of entry to, or who are in the statutory child protection system and youth justice systems.

A large network of associate members and supporters also subscribe to PeakCare. This includes individuals with an interest in child protection, youth justice and related services, and who are supportive of PeakCare's policy platform around the rights and entitlements of children, young people and their families to safety, wellbeing, and equitable access to life opportunities.

PEAKCARE'S SUBMISSION

Recommendation 1 – direct funding towards prevention and early intervention to reduce the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are in out-of-home care, involved in the youth justice system, requiring mental health supports and disengaging from education.

PeakCare believes early intervention and prevention strategies are critical in reducing the risk of vulnerable children entering costly tertiary systems and widening the gap in key areas such as out-of-home care, incarceration, health, mental health and educational engagement. In all our submissions and public statements, we consistently highlight that early detection of issues impacting on children and families can prevent situations from escalating and improve outcomes, not just for the individual child or family, but also reduce long-term pressure on tertiary support systems. Communities are best placed to understand the strengths and needs of local families and children. Community co-design and stewardship of delivery empowers communities through culturally responsive services that respond to the unique contexts of each place. They also build on the diversity and strengths of children and families.

The New South Wales Government Brighter Beginnings: The First 2000 Days of Life Framework, found investing in early childhood intervention programs produces a return on investment of \$13 for every \$1. Children who develop within nurturing environments are more likely to become happy and productive members of society. The evidence is clear; early intervention is smart investment (PeakCare Election Commitment, p. 8).¹

The Queensland Family and Child Commission Child Death Review Board Annual Report for 2023-24 found that, the Board received several cases where three select characteristics were noted.² These were: presence of domestic and family violence, methamphetamine use and housing instability. Of these cases 56 per cent had domestic or family violence, 27 per cent had use of methamphetamine and 20 per cent had housing instability. The growing impact of these factors on the safety and wellbeing of children is undeniable.

PeakCare believes in using evidence-based research that supports the return on investment in utilising and applying early interventions through health, education, child protection and housing to support families. Investing in upstream and prevention-focused programs and system improvements prevent children's exposure to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) associated with poverty, complex homelessness, cognitive and physical impairments, and other adverse outcomes later in life.

What we have seen from the Productivity Commission's Closing the Gap data is that we continue to be unable to make any significant or real change in improving the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait children³. With only five of 19 targets on track and of particular concern was the increase in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in detention and no improvement in child removal rates. Targets for criminal justice, youth justice, child protection and suicide prevention have either remained unchanged or worsened.

The redirection of funding towards prevention and early intervention includes:

- Increased targeted funding for community-based early intervention programs that identify and support at-risk children and families

¹ https://peakcare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/PeakCare-Election-Commitments-2024_V1.0.pdf

² <https://www.qfcc.qld.gov.au/board/publications>

³ <https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard#new>

- Enhanced First Nations-led local support networks to deliver timely, holistic services, including practical supports, mental health and family counselling
- Funded support structures enabling closer collaboration among health, education and community-controlled organisations to ensure streamlined early intervention, keeping families together
- Investment in capacity building, cultural capability development and specialised training for professionals in child protection and youth justice to ensure high-quality, consistent early support and culturally safe ways of working
- Expanded justice reinvestment initiatives, putting local communities at the centre of crime prevention activities
- Recognising the knowledge, expertise and community connections of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations in designing and delivering culturally appropriate services and funding them appropriately.

As per our Election Commitments Submission on behalf of Queensland's Child and Family Sector, investment in prevention and early intervention mitigates risks and empowers families to thrive, thereby preventing future involvement in the child protection and justice systems. We also call for the provision of a 'pathway to prosperity', focused investment in early intervention and prevention programs that address the root cause of disadvantage, with a clear and direct impact on the 0-5 cohorts and families of these children so that every child can 'thrive by five'.

Recommendation 2 – Use Indigenous evaluation principles to measure meaningful outcomes

PeakCare advocates for the meaningful evaluation of Closing the Gap measures using Indigenous evaluation principles.⁴ Adhering to these principles will allow us to move beyond the measurement of quantitative outcomes into a deeper understanding of the impact and solutions.

Relationships are central

At PeakCare, we believe that relationships form the cornerstone of any meaningful evaluation. Our past submissions have reiterated that building and sustaining trust with community members is not an initial step but an ongoing process. Building ongoing, respectful relationships ensures that evaluation processes are both responsive and relevant. Relationship-based engagement not only builds trust but also ensures that evaluative processes are informed by lived experience.

Culturally responsive and community driven

PeakCare's submissions demonstrate a clear commitment to ensuring that evaluation processes are designed and led by the communities themselves. In our submissions, we have emphasised that evaluation should reflect local traditions, values, and priorities. This community-driven

⁴ <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/jr/eiaer-eaame/approaches-approches.html#:~:text=Guiding%20principles%201%20Relationships%20are%20central%20Relationships%20are,...%208%20Ensuring%20appropriate%20timelines%20and%20resources%20>

approach ensures that the outcomes measured are those that matter most to First Nations peoples.

Regarding out-of-home care, First Nations children are removed from their families at a rate of 57.2 per 1,000 — 12.1 times that of non-Indigenous children. Referring to the national rates of child removal, Ms Catherine Liddle, CEO, SNAICC said:

"The cost of this lack of action is directly felt by our children, who continue to be removed from their families at unprecedented rates, who continue to be vastly over-represented in the youth justice system."

"If we keep going on this trajectory, we are never going reverse the trajectory of our children entering out-of-home care and continuing on a path to youth detention and adult incarceration," she said.

"To be absolutely clear, these are not the failings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or culture. These are fairly and squarely the failures of the systems that impact us the most being built without us, to work against us."⁵

Informed by lived experience

Data and statistics are enriched by the power of personal narratives. At PeakCare, we understand that individual stories demonstrate the impact of our systems on people that numbers alone cannot capture. An example of this is in our 'Young People's Voices' Report, which contains key statistics about the youth justice system alongside quotes from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in youth detention centres about how the system has impacted on their lives.

Strengths-based perspectives

A strengths-based perspective shifts the focus from deficits to the strengths within First Nations communities. By focusing on what our communities do well, solutions can build on those successes. We must decolonise evaluation by dismantling frameworks rooted in deficit and external control.

Trauma-informed approach

Historical and intergenerational trauma has left profound imprints on First Nations communities. Recognising these impacts is critical to developing meaningful evaluation practices. A trauma-informed evaluation acknowledges the impacts of colonisation, forced separation, and systemic discrimination while ensuring that the process does not re-traumatise participants. This principle ensures that all evaluative efforts are conducted with care, empathy, and respect for lived experiences.

Appropriately resourced

Quality evaluation requires adequate resourcing. PeakCare calls for dedicated funding, realistic timeframes, and support structures that allow for thorough, reflective, and participatory evaluation processes.

⁵ <https://nit.com.au/31-07-2024/12819/only-5-out-of-19-closing-the-gap-targets-on-track-to-be-met>

CONCLUSION

PeakCare advocates for greater government funding towards prevention and early intervention, to reduce the pressure of tertiary systems such as out-of-home care, incarceration, and mental health systems. To effectively measure the Closing the Gap targets, we strongly advocate for evaluation methods that are culturally informed and driven by community wisdom.

We thank the Senate Select Committee for its commitment to this critical inquiry.

Yours sincerely,



Mr Thomas Allsop
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