



THIRRILI

**Submission to the Select Committee on Measuring
Outcomes for First Nations Communities**

On behalf of

Thirrili Ltd

Contact:

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Introduction

Thirrili Limited welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Senate regarding the Closing the Gap targets, focusing on the following key indicators:

- Suicide rates in First Nations communities
- The number of children in out-of-home care
- Adult incarceration rates
- The number of children commencing school, not developmentally on track

This is with reference to:

- the ways in which the targets are funded, measured and evaluated.
- the priority of the targets in the National Partnership Agreement and progress under the National Priority reforms.
- the degree to which current measurements and targets reflect the strengths of First Nations cultures, as opposed to an emphasis on deficit and lack.
- the possibility of incorporating broad ideas about wellness into measurements, with a view to promoting mental, physical, and spiritual health and wellbeing.
- the incorporation of alternative measurements as a complement to existing measurements.
- opportunities for building on and expanding the current Closing the Gap framework.

Thirrili provides culturally safe, trauma-informed postvention support to families and communities affected by suicide and other sudden deaths.

Thirrili works with families who are impacted by suicide. In the past six months, Thirrili has supported families following the tragic loss of more than 95 family members due to suicide or traumatic incidents, providing both emotional and practical assistance. Through the Emergency Relief Fund (ERF), Thirrili has disbursed over \$24,000 from 1 July 2024 to date, helping families manage immediate costs related to Sorry Business, including travel, accommodation, and living expenses. Our efforts align with multiple Closing the Gap targets, particularly those connected to mental health, interactions with the justice system, and educational outcomes. This submission outlines key challenges, successful programs, and targeted recommendations to address these pressing issues, including funding priorities.

Thirrili affirms that addressing these issues requires more than just policy reform—it demands a fundamental shift towards self-determined, culturally grounded solutions that recognise the strengths and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Prevalence and Impact of Suicide

Suicide continues to be a crisis in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. In comparison, the suicide rates among non-Indigenous Australians have stabilised at 11.8 per 100,000 people. In contrast, the rate for Indigenous Australians has surged to 30.8 per 100,000 — the highest ever recorded and a 30 per cent increase over the past five years, with 275 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lives lost to suicide in 2023 (University of Western Australia)¹.

Suicide is profoundly traumatic. The loss of life by suicide is not only an individual tragedy but also a collective trauma that reverberates throughout families and communities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples often experience suicide against a backdrop of historical and intergenerational trauma, as well as ongoing systemic disadvantage. These factors, along with limited access to culturally appropriate health and wellbeing support, can exacerbate the impacts of suicide.

Each life lost to suicide becomes a collective trauma, deeply affecting not only immediate family members but also extended kin, community elders, and cultural networks. This interconnectedness means that the grief and ripple effects extend far beyond the individual, contributing to ongoing cycles of pain and resilience across the community.

Suicide is the leading cause of death among Australians aged 15–24 years (See [Deaths in Australia](#), Leading causes of death). The proportion of all deaths that are deaths by suicide is relatively high among children and young people. This is because people in these age groups do not tend to die from other causes. Data are presented by year of registration, which is not necessarily the same as the year the death occurred (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare)².

In 2023:

- 298 Australian young people (aged 18–24 years) took their own lives.
- 94 deaths by suicide occurred among children and adolescents (aged 17 and below), with the majority occurring in those aged 15–17 (71.3%).
- Deaths by suicide represented 31.8% of all deaths in young people aged 15–17 years and 33.1% of all deaths in those aged 18–24 years – up from 16.5% and 23.9%, respectively, of all deaths in these age groups in 2001.
- In children aged 14 and below, the proportion of all deaths that are deaths by suicide is low compared with the two older age groups. In 2023, deaths by suicide represented 2.0% of all deaths in children aged 14 and below.

The Importance of Postvention Support

Postvention support is a specialised area and is also considered to support suicide prevention and suicide intervention efforts. Postvention is suicide prevention.

¹ University of western Australia <https://www.uwa.edu.au/news/article/2024/october/alarmed-rise-in-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-suicide-rates#:~:text=While%20suicide%20rates%20for%20non,lost%20to%20suicide%20in%202023.>

² AIHW <https://www.aihw.gov.au/suicide-self-harm-monitoring/data/populations-age-groups/suicide-among-young-people>

Thirili has often worked with families who have lost children to suicide and families who have lost parents or caregivers to suicide. Sadly, research indicates that children who lose a parent to suicide face a significantly increased risk of experiencing mental health challenges, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and suicidal ideation. One of the largest studies led by [Johns Hopkins Children's Center](#), reported that losing a parent is a catalyst for suicide for the bereaved child.

Additionally, a parent losing a child to suicide was twice as likely to end their lives by suicide. This body of evidence underscores the importance of providing targeted, culturally safe postvention supports and interventions to help mitigate the long-term adverse effects on children and adults who have experienced such profound loss. There can be critical windows for support, which is why postvention supports are so critical.

Linkages between suicide, incarceration, and trauma

The high rates of suicide among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples cannot be considered in isolation from broader systemic factors, such as incarceration and intergenerational trauma. Research consistently shows that the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in the criminal justice system links directly to historical and ongoing dispossession, racism, and forced removals, all of which contribute to cycles of trauma and disadvantage. Incarceration itself increases the risk of suicide, both during imprisonment and after release, due to the compounded effects of isolation, disconnection from family and culture, and a lack of adequate mental health support and reintegration services support.

Additionally, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who find themselves in the justice system often carry histories marked by childhood trauma, family breakdown, and institutionalisation. The removal of children into out-of-home care, frequently without culturally appropriate support, continues these cycles by increasing vulnerability to mental health challenges, additional contact with the justice system, and eventual incarceration. Tackling these interconnected issues requires a holistic approach prioritising cultural healing, community leadership, and justice reinvestment strategies. By focusing on these aspects, we can work towards lowering incarceration rates and mitigating its devastating effects on individuals, families, and communities. This approach supports improved outcomes for those directly impacted and strengthens community resilience and self-determination.

Regression of Key Closing the Gap Targets

1. Suicide Rates in First Nations Communities

Targeted interventions and suicide rates among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people remain disproportionately high. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), in 2022, the suicide rate for First Nations people was **27.9 per 100,000**, compared to **12.1 per 100,000** for non-Indigenous Australians (ABS, 2023)³. Contributing factors include intergenerational trauma, systemic discrimination, and inadequate culturally safe mental health services.

Example of a program working well:

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/intentional-self-harm-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people>

- The **Indigenous Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Clearinghouse** (funded through the CTG framework) is working towards improving data collection and service coordination to reduce suicide rates.
- **Thirili's Indigenous Suicide Postvention Service** provides crisis support, community capacity-building, and culturally grounded responses to grief and loss.

2. The Number of Children in Out-of-Home Care

The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care (OOHC) continues to rise. As of 2022, First Nations children were **10.5** times more likely to be in OOHC than non-Indigenous children (AIHW, 2023)⁴. This systemic issue perpetuates cycles of family disruption and cultural disconnection. Cultural continuity has a link with decreased young First Nations suicide rates.

Example of a program working well:

- **Family Matters Campaign** (led by SNAICC)⁵ promotes culturally appropriate early intervention and family support models to keep First Nations children safe within their families and communities.
- **Aboriginal Community-Controlled Child Protection Services** in several states provide early intervention and culturally safe care models to prevent removals.

3. Adult Incarceration Rates

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics from 30 June 2023 to 30 June 2024, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners increased by **15% (2,019) to 15,871**. The age-standardised imprisonment rate increased from **2,266 to 2,559** prisoners per **100,000** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adult population.

At 30 June 2024:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners accounted for **36%** of all prisoners
- **90% (14,270)** of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners were male, **10% (1,605)** were female
- the median age was 33.6 years

Example of a program working well:

- **Justice Reinvestment Initiatives** in NSW and the ACT have demonstrated success in reducing incarceration rates by redirecting funds into community-led programs that tackle the social determinants of justice system involvement.
- **The Maranguka Justice Reinvestment Project** in Bourke, NSW, has lowered youth offending by **38%** by focusing on education, employment, and social inclusion.

4. The Number of Children Commencing School Not Developmentally on Track

⁴ AIHW <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/child-protection-australia-2021-22/contents/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-children/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-children>

⁵ SNAICC <https://www.snaicc.org.au/resources/family-matters-report-2023/>

According to the 2021 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC)⁶, **42%** of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains compared to **21.8%** of non-Indigenous children. Early childhood education programs must be strengthened with culturally embedded learning approaches.

Example of a program working well:

- **Aboriginal-led Early Years Programs**, such as the **Aboriginal Child and Family Centres (ACFCs)**, offer holistic early learning that integrates cultural identity and family support.
- **Deadly Kindies (QLD)** encourages early childhood participation while incorporating First Nations languages and traditions.

Measuring Holistic Wellbeing in the Closing the Gap Framework

Current CTG measurement approaches often rely on deficit-based indicators. While statistical tracking of health, education, and justice outcomes is essential, more culturally responsive methodologies should be integrated, such as:

- **Incorporating Strength-Based Wellbeing Indicators:** Measuring the wrong metrics can lead to unintended summations and consequences. Wellbeing should be measured holistically, including cultural connection, community belonging, and spiritual health.
- **Embedding Indigenous Data Sovereignty:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led organisations should control, translate and interpret data to ensure its relevance and accuracy.
- **Prioritising Longitudinal Impact Assessment:** Short-term funding cycles limit the ability to measure sustained community transformation.

Recommendations

Thirili strongly supports the recommendations outlined in this submission, which highlight the urgent need for culturally safe, community-led approaches to suicide prevention, justice reinvestment, and early childhood development.

As the leading national provider of postvention support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families affected by suicide and other sudden deaths, Thirili has witnessed firsthand the devastating impact of systemic disadvantage, intergenerational trauma, and the continued overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in child protection and criminal justice systems. The rates of suicide in our communities, particularly among young people, remain unacceptably high. Without urgent and targeted action, these disparities will continue to grow. As noted earlier, when postvention efforts are not carried out in a culturally safe manner, within critical timeframes, the risk for additional harm to family members is significantly heightened.

This submission also wishes to preface "[The Elders Report into Preventing Indigenous Self-Harm and Youth Suicide](#)," compiled in 2018. This report talks about the importance of culture, need for culturally appropriate supports and healing.

⁶ AEDC <https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2021-aedc-national-report>

Thirrili affirms that addressing these issues requires more than just policy reform—it demands a fundamental shift towards self-determined, culturally grounded solutions that recognise the strengths and resilience of First Nations peoples. We urge the Australian Government to prioritise:

1. **Expand funding for community-led, strengths-based programs** that demonstrate effective outcomes in suicide prevention, child welfare, justice reinvestment, and early childhood development.
2. **Commitment from the Australian Government** to agree on a **four-year rolling funding commitment** for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led suicide prevention, postvention, and community-based healing programs.
3. **Integration with Closing the Gap Targets:** Funding must be aligned with **Closing the Gap Target 14** (reducing suicide rates) and linked to broader investments in mental health, justice reinvestment, and early intervention strategies.
4. An **initial \$400 million investment over four years** to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led suicide prevention and postvention services, with a commitment to annual **indexation** and additional funding based on need.
5. **Shift towards Indigenous-led data governance** to ensure meaningful measurement of holistic wellbeing indicators.
6. **Improve accountability mechanisms** within the CTG framework to ensure genuine co-design and shared decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
7. **Strengthen investment in early intervention and diversionary initiatives** to break cycles of disadvantage.
8. **Investment in justice reinvestment strategies** that divert Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples away from the prison system and towards culturally safe support networks.
9. The Australian Government fully implement **Priority Reform Three** of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, ensuring that **government institutions are culturally safe and free from racism**. Achieving meaningful progress on suicide prevention, incarceration rates, child protection, and early childhood development requires a fundamental shift in how government services engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

Thirrili's recommendations are strongly supported by evidence from the Productivity Commission, the Closing the Gap framework, and frontline experience.

The time for incremental change has passed—urgent, decisive action is needed now. The persistent overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in suicide, incarceration, and child protection statistics is not merely a policy failure; it represents a national crisis that requires a radical shift in approach. Solutions from our communities are rooted in culture, strength, and resilience. However, lives will continue to be lost without sustained investment, genuine partnership, and accountability from the government.

Thirrili calls on the Australian Government to honour its commitments, move beyond symbolic gestures, and implement bold, structural reforms that put self-determination at the core.