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Sisters Inside Inc. is an independent community organisation which exists to advocate for the human rights of women in the criminal justice system

Select Committee on Measuring Outcomes for First Nations Communities
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
By email: measuringFNoutcomes.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Secretariat

Re: Measuring Outcomes for First Nations Communities

Sisters Inside welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Select Committee on Measuring Outcomes for First Nations Communities.

About us

Sisters Inside

Established in 1992, Sisters Inside is an independent community organisation that advocates for the collective human rights of criminalised, incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women, girls, trans and gender-nonconforming people and their families nationally and internationally. For more than 30 years we have offered support and services to criminalised and incarcerated girls and the children of parents in prison in Queensland. Our frontline experience working with children in the criminal legal system and removed by the family policing system, and those who have also subsequently been criminalised as adults, makes us uniquely placed to provide insights into these systems. We are an abolitionist organisation and reject the use of violent carceral practices that find their origin in colonial patriarchal oppression. We believe prisons are inherently and intentionally criminogenic and violent institutions, which repeat patterns of violence, social control and sexual assault and entrench the subjugation of those most vulnerable and disadvantaged in society.

Our Submission

Sisters Inside acknowledges the devastating impacts of colonisation on the Aboriginal communities and families we work with. We recognise the ongoing effects of colonial carceral regimes on the lives of Aboriginal people and the decades of resistance and freedom fighting in pursuit of liberation—freedom for Black bodies, Black lands, and Black waters. We understand that in order to support sovereignty and self-determination, one must support the abolition of colonial carceral regimes of oppression and violence—regimes that are killing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Sisters Inside takes seriously our responsibilities as an organisation working in this space, ensuring we are representative of the aspirations of the Aboriginal staff who lead our organisation, those who work for our organisation, and those we work beside and support within our services. It is for this reason that we have seen the Closing the Gap program as largely ineffective. The ongoing regression in Closing the Gap targets—particularly in the rates of suicide, the number of Aboriginal children in

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out-of-home care, adult incarceration rates, and the proportion of children developmentally on track when commencing school—demonstrates the structural failure of the framework itself.

As Professor Chelsea Watego has powerfully argued, *Closing the Gap* targets centre whiteness as the standard to which Aboriginal people are measured, rather than acknowledging the strength, resilience, and sovereignty of First Nations people. The framework does not confront the structures of colonial violence and systemic racism that underpin the disparities it seeks to address. As Watego (2018) writes:

"If you have worked in Indigenous health you would be all too familiar with the discourses of 'Closing the Gap' and 'compliance' which remind us that the Black body is to be regulated and remedied by the health system."¹

Watego goes on to argue that the problem is not Black failure, but the unrelenting imposition of white norms and expectations upon Black lives, which are already thriving in ways that are not recognised by the state.

The reliance on carceral solutions—including the over-policing and incarceration of Aboriginal adults and children—continues to exacerbate these issues. We know that imprisoning our people does not create safer communities; it destroys them. The vast overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care is directly tied to these same systems of surveillance, policing, and forced removal that have continued since the era of the Stolen Generations.

Rather than focusing on punitive and state-controlled interventions, genuine progress will only come from supporting Aboriginal-led solutions that are grounded in community control, cultural strength, and self-determination. This means shifting resources away from systems that criminalise, punish, and remove our people and instead investing in community-based initiatives that prioritise healing, care, and collective well-being.

Terms of Reference:

a. The ways in which the targets are funded

Sisters Inside's critique of the way *Closing the Gap* targets are funded is that the funding structures often reinforce colonial power dynamics rather than supporting true self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. For example:

¹ Watego, C 2018, *Moving Beyond the Frontline: The power and promise of an Indigenous Health Workforce*, Indigenous X, https://indigenousx.com.au/moving-beyond-the-frontline-the-power-and-promise-of-an-indigenous-health-workforce/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

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Short-Term, Project-Based Funding

Much of the funding for Closing the Gap targets is tied to short-term, project-based grants rather than long-term, sustainable investment in Aboriginal-led solutions. This approach undermines stability and prevents communities from building enduring programs that address systemic issues like incarceration, out-of-home care, and suicide rates. For an organisation like Sisters Inside, this means we spend a significant amount of time and human resources applying for funding, acquitting funding, and constantly recruiting staff due to the short-term nature of project-based funding. This instability affects the women and girls we work with, as programs may not be consistently available in the long term, impacting trust and engagement. It also creates insecurity for Aboriginal staff employed in these programs, who deserve stable, long-term employment rather than precarious short-term contracts. As an organisation, this affects our ability to engage in long-term service planning and strategy development.

Effective, community-led solutions require time and consistency—building trust with communities cannot be rushed. Organisations need to be present, consistent, and accountable over time to develop meaningful relationships. Sisters Inside is fortunate to have been working in this space for three decades, allowing us to build strong community ties, but longer-term funding would significantly enhance program planning and sustainability across the sector.

Government Control and Bureaucratic Barriers

Funding is controlled by government agencies, requiring Aboriginal-led organisations to compete for resources in a system designed by and for non-Indigenous institutions. This creates unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles, forces compliance with Western governance models, and limits the ability of communities to implement culturally appropriate solutions.

For an organisation like Sisters Inside, which is Aboriginal-led and has been working with criminalised women and girls in Queensland for more than three decades, we have an established track record of successful working relationships and service provision. However, the women and girls we work with require intensive, long-term support that cannot be delivered through high caseloads or rigid, compliance-driven service models. Our work is relational, not transactional. It requires a lower staff-to-woman ratio and intensive service support to meet women where they are, walking alongside them rather than imposing top-down interventions.

We are led by the aspirations of the women and families we work with, and our outcomes often look different from what funders typically expect. For instance, success might not look like immediate employment or education enrolment—it might mean a woman finally feeling safe enough to reach out for support, regaining custody of her child, or securing stable housing after years of displacement. These are victories on their own terms, reflective of the needs and self-determined goals of the women, rather than rigid performance metrics imposed by funders.

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To do this work effectively, we need the flexibility and trust from funders to operate in ways that centre the lived realities and aspirations of the women we support. We need brokerage funds that allow us to respond to immediate and urgent need—whether that be securing emergency accommodation, travel for a woman to reunite with her children, or legal costs to fight unjust policies. Most importantly, we need time. Building trust and rapport cannot be rushed, particularly for women who have experienced criminalisation, violence, and systemic neglect.

This work must be culturally responsive and embedded in Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing. It does not align with a Western model of compliance, surveillance, and punitive intervention—it is anti-carceral and decolonial. In Aboriginal communities, healing is relational; it is about kinship, accountability through care, and long-term, sustained connection. A decolonial approach recognises that Western funding structures are rooted in colonial control, maintaining power over Aboriginal communities rather than enabling true self-determination. To disrupt this, Aboriginal-led organisations must be trusted to lead their own solutions, without imposed measures that serve the interests of the state over the needs of the people.

If the Closing the Gap targets are to be met in any meaningful way, funding must be redirected away from carceral, punitive responses and into Aboriginal-led, community-driven solutions. This means structurally rethinking how funding is allocated—not as short-term, restrictive grants, but as long-term investment in the sovereignty, autonomy, and expertise of Aboriginal communities. A decolonial approach to funding means relinquishing government control over Indigenous lives and ensuring that Aboriginal-led organisations have the power and resources to determine the best pathways for their own communities, free from the constraints of colonial bureaucracy.

Disproportionate Funding to Mainstream (Non-Indigenous) Organisations

Despite *Closing the Gap's* stated commitment to Aboriginal self-determination, a significant portion of funding continues to flow to large, mainstream service providers rather than Aboriginal-controlled or led organisations. This perpetuates the same colonial structures that have failed First Nations communities for generations. Aboriginal-led initiatives that do receive funding are often underfunded, overburdened, and forced to operate within restrictive government frameworks that do not align with community needs or ways of working.

As an Aboriginal-led organisation that works with criminalised women and girls, Sisters Inside argue that funding should be prioritised for Aboriginal community-controlled and Aboriginal-led organisations that can demonstrate decolonial and anti-carceral approaches in both service provision and organisational structure. This means rejecting funding models that prioritise compliance, surveillance, and punishment over care, healing, and community-led solutions. Too often, funding is directed towards organisations and institutions that uphold colonial violence—policing, prisons, child removal systems, and carceral “diversion” programs that simply expand the reach of the criminal legal system rather than dismantling it.

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We would like to see a decisive shift away from funding institutions that surveil, police, and incarcerate Aboriginal people. Instead, investment must be directed toward organisations that operate from a framework of self-determination, community accountability, and abolitionist principles. This is not simply about redistributing funds—it is about fundamentally rethinking how funding is structured and ensuring that Aboriginal communities are resourced to build and sustain their own solutions, free from the interference of colonial systems.

While *Closing the Gap* is framed as an initiative to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Sisters Inside are concerned that funding is still flowing into punitive and carceral systems, including policing. Across Australia, police receive significant government funding under the banner of “community safety” and “justice reinvestment,” yet much of this funding is directed towards increasing surveillance, intervention, and control over Aboriginal communities rather than addressing the root causes of disadvantage.

For example:

- Justice reinvestment funding has, in some cases, been allocated to police-run programs rather than to Aboriginal-led community initiatives.
- Youth crime prevention initiatives often involve partnerships with police rather than prioritising grassroots, community-led responses that centre care, healing, and support.
- Diversion programs are sometimes administered by police and court systems rather than by Aboriginal organisations, reinforcing state control rather than enabling communities to develop genuine solutions that support people to avoid incarceration.²

Any *Closing the Gap* funding that is directed towards policing contradicts the stated goal of reducing incarceration rates and undermines the self-determination of Aboriginal communities. The continued resourcing of police and justice departments—while Aboriginal-led organisations struggle for stable funding—reinforces the systemic oppression and criminalisation of Aboriginal people.

If governments are serious about Closing the Gap, they must commit to divesting from punitive systems and reinvesting in Aboriginal-led, decolonial, and anti-carceral solutions. This means ensuring that funding supports community-controlled organisations that provide care, advocacy, and long-term support—rather than institutions that have historically inflicted harm.

Failure to Address Structural Causes

Funding under Closing the Gap often focuses on service delivery rather than systemic change. In addressing incarceration rates, funding frequently goes toward policing, surveillance, and so-called diversion programs rather than investing in Aboriginal community-led solutions, housing, education, and economic security—factors that actually reduce contact with the criminal legal system. This narrow approach ignores the root causes of Aboriginal incarceration and fails to challenge the systems driving these crises.

² Productivity Commission, Review of the National Agreement of Closing the Gap January 2024, Study report: Supporting paper, Australian Government, Vol. 2, p. 305

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The recent actions of Queensland's LNP government exemplify how "tough on crime" rhetoric continues to drive policies that disproportionately target Aboriginal people, particularly our children, while ignoring the deep structural issues that fuel criminalisation. The LNP's "adult crime, adult time" legislation is a prime example of this, as it builds on the manufactured crisis around youth crime—a crisis that has been politically exploited for electoral gain. Instead of addressing the root causes of criminalisation, such as poverty, overcrowded housing, and systemic racism, this legislation further entrenches mass incarceration and perpetuates the cycle of injustice faced by Aboriginal communities, especially our children.

The state government's approach, which criminalises Aboriginal children at disproportionately high rates, is in direct opposition to the goals outlined in *Closing the Gap*. The push for policies that escalate the incarceration of Aboriginal children demonstrates a disregard for the principles of justice, human rights, and equity. Queensland, like the Northern Territory, has shown how such punitive policies harm Aboriginal people and perpetuate a system of colonial control over their lives. Aboriginal children in Queensland, much like in the NT, are disproportionately arrested for minor offences that would not result in police contact in wealthier, non-Indigenous communities. These children are then pipelined into the carceral system, where their lives are further damaged by institutional violence, the loss of family, and the trauma of imprisonment.

The focus of the *Closing the Gap* framework must shift away from supporting policies that strengthen carceral systems and instead prioritise structural transformation. The Queensland government's current trajectory of enacting harsher policies for Aboriginal children only exacerbates the cycle of criminalisation. These policies lock more children in prison and further entrench Aboriginal disadvantage without addressing the underlying systemic issues that drive crime.

It is clear that current policies under *Closing the Gap*—funding short-term, project-based programs—have done little to dismantle the structures that keep Aboriginal people trapped in cycles of criminalisation and imprisonment. The funding allocated toward criminal legal initiatives often sustains the very systems that exacerbate harm, like police-run "diversion" programs. Such approaches fail to challenge the racial capitalism at the heart of mass incarceration, where Aboriginal bodies are over-policed and incarcerated, feeding into industries that profit from the suffering of Aboriginal people.

For Queensland's *Closing the Gap* efforts to be meaningful, there must be a decisive shift away from investing in police, surveillance, and imprisonment. We call for the following structural changes:

- **Move funding out of the carceral system:** Redirect resources away from prisons and police into Aboriginal-led, community-controlled solutions. This includes funding for cultural healing programs, community-led justice models, and initiatives that address the social determinants of crime such as housing, education, and economic security.
- **End the use of carceral diversion programs:** Funding should no longer be used to support police-led diversion programs under *Closing the Gap*. Instead, these funds should be redirected to anti-carceral, decolonial, and Aboriginal-led initiatives that focus on healing, education, and cultural revitalisation.

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- **Address the systemic causes of criminalisation:** We need long-term investment in solutions that address the root causes of criminalisation, including poverty, housing insecurity, and systemic racism. We must prioritise structural reforms to eliminate these causes rather than simply managing the symptoms.
- **Hold governments accountable:** Governments must be required to report on whether their policies are supporting or undermining the *Closing the Gap* targets. This includes assessing the impact of new laws like the “adult crime, adult time” legislation on incarceration rates and Aboriginal communities.

Ultimately, the focus of *Closing the Gap* must shift from temporary solutions to a long-term commitment to dismantling the carceral system and addressing the colonial structures that perpetuate harm. Aboriginal communities are not the problem—they are the solution. We know what works: community-led justice, cultural revitalisation, and a systemic approach to healing and justice that doesn’t rely on incarceration. Until we move beyond punitive measures and truly invest in community-led alternatives, *Closing the Gap* will remain a hollow promise.

b. The ways in which the targets are measured and evaluated

“The big solution we are told ... is “data”. Data is offered both as a priority reform as well as a strategy in and of itself. Each Closing the Gap target is outlined in a table that lists how they will be monitored. We are not offered a sense of the complexity of the problem being addressed, or even a strategy. Instead, we are told what data should be collected in relation to the goals.” Watego (2020)³

While the *Closing the Gap* targets are positioned as a pathway to reduce the disparities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, their effectiveness and the ways in which they are measured demand critical scrutiny.

The *Closing the Gap* framework has been heavily criticised for failing to meaningfully engage with Aboriginal perspectives. The very structure of the targets reflects a colonial approach that imposes Western standards of success without considering the lived realities of Aboriginal peoples. Targets like those in *Closing the Gap* risk reinforcing colonial structures by measuring success through metrics that are not necessarily reflective of Aboriginal values, cultures, or ways of life. Instead of centring Aboriginal leadership and self-determined success, the targets are defined in ways that do not address the systemic, cultural, and historical violence that underpins the continued oppression of Aboriginal peoples.

Further, the evaluation frameworks for these targets lack transparency and consultation with Aboriginal communities. The Indigenous governance structures that might be capable of providing more culturally informed assessments of progress are sidelined in favour of quantitative measures that fail to capture the nuances of Aboriginal experience. As noted by many Aboriginal scholars, these frameworks largely ignore the significance of community-led initiatives and self-determination. The

³ Watego, C 2020, The ‘new’ Closing the Gap is about buzzwords, not genuine change for Indigenous Australia, *The Conversation*, 31 July

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focus on numbers and statistics is a narrow way of thinking about social justice and outcomes for Aboriginal people. The gap is not just a gap of numbers; it is a gap of lived experience, resilience, and cultural integrity.

The over-reliance on data-driven outcomes not only misses the mark in terms of representing the diversity of Aboriginal communities but also perpetuates a system in which Aboriginal voices are undervalued. This can be seen in the continued failures in areas like health, education, and justice, where targets have often been set but have not led to substantial change in the lived experiences of Aboriginal people. For example, the mass incarceration of Aboriginal peoples continues, despite efforts to “close the justice gap”, demonstrating that numerical targets alone cannot address the deeper issues of systemic racism, cultural dislocation, and the colonial violence embedded in these systems. As Professor Chelsea Watego (2020)⁴ states, “there is little to no analysis of the institutions and systems responsible for the production of the racialised disparities Indigenous peoples experience.”

Ultimately, to create meaningful change, there must be a rethink of the way the targets are defined and evaluated. The voices of Aboriginal communities must be at the centre of developing these frameworks. This requires investing in community-driven solutions and measures of success that go beyond quantitative data to include qualitative and culturally appropriate assessments. Aboriginal leadership and self-determined governance models are essential to achieving lasting and meaningful progress.

c. The priority of the targets in the National Partnership Agreement and progress under the National Priority reforms

The ongoing mass imprisonment of Aboriginal people remains one of the most glaring injustices in this country. Despite repeated commitments under the *Closing the Gap* initiative, the imprisonment rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to rise. This is not simply a failure of targets; it is a direct reflection of the systemic racism embedded within Australia’s legal and justice systems. The focus of the National Partnership Agreement and the National Priority Reforms must centre on justice, but in order for these reforms to make a tangible difference, there must be a fundamental shift in how this country understands and responds to justice for Aboriginal peoples.

At the heart of Australia’s mass imprisonment crisis lies the nation’s deep-seated addiction to incarcerating Black bodies, especially those of Aboriginal women and children. This country has a love affair with imprisonment, with Aboriginal people incarcerated at rates far exceeding those of any other group. Aboriginal people make up approximately 3% of the total Australian population, yet they represent more than 30% of the national prison population. This disparity is a direct result of a justice system that operates with a colonial mindset, rooted in racial violence and control. As Aboriginal

⁴ Watego, C 2020, The ‘new’ Closing the Gap is about buzzwords, not genuine change for Indigenous Australia, *The Conversation*, 31 July

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scholars have argued, this systemic oppression cannot be adequately addressed through incremental reforms or targets that ignore the need for transformative justice.

Aunty Vickie Roach, an Aboriginal abolition activist, has been a strong voice against the mass incarceration of Aboriginal people. Aunty Vickie argues that the Australian legal system continues to operate as a tool of dispossession and control, with little regard for the cultural and community-based understandings of justice that have been central to Aboriginal societies for millennia. Aunty Vickie⁵ writes: “My story is the continuing story of all Aboriginal women during occupation, colonisation and genocide. We are in jail for breaking a white man’s law – men who have no right to be making laws on this land at all.”

The National Priority Reforms, while well-intentioned, have yet to deliver meaningful outcomes in the realm of justice. Reform efforts that focus solely on reducing incarceration or improving rehabilitation rates, without tackling the root causes of Aboriginal mass incarceration, are unlikely to succeed. These efforts often overlook the reality that Aboriginal communities are deeply impacted by the legacy of colonisation and that systemic violence, racism, and cultural dislocation continue to shape the lived experiences of Aboriginal people, particularly in relation to the justice system. The justice system’s metrics are disconnected from the everyday realities of Aboriginal peoples' lives, where issues like community safety, healing, and restorative justice are more meaningful than punitive measures.

Until Australia confronts its history and the structural violence that underpins its legal system, true transformation will remain elusive. The problem is not simply one of "reform" but of reimagining what justice can and should look like in this country. Aboriginal communities have long articulated a vision of justice that is based on healing, accountability, and cultural restoration, not punishment and incarceration. These visions of justice must be prioritised, and the focus must shift from punitive measures to community-led solutions that support healing, restore cultural connections, and address the underlying causes of criminalisation.

Australia’s ongoing failure to grapple with its colonial past and present is not just an oversight—it is a deliberate refusal to dismantle the systems that allow for the mass incarceration of Aboriginal people. If we are serious about closing the gap in justice, we must address the colonial structures that continue to disproportionately harm Aboriginal people. Reforms that do not acknowledge or confront this colonial legacy will not lead to real change. Until we fundamentally and structurally change the way this country operates, mass imprisonment will continue to devastate Aboriginal communities.

d. The degree to which current measurements and targets reflect the strengths of First Nations cultures, as opposed to an emphasis on deficit and lack

⁵ Roach, V 2024, Aboriginal women and the revolving door of the prison system, Archer Magazine, April 16

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The current measurement frameworks and targets under *Closing the Gap* are deeply rooted in a deficit-oriented approach that fails to reflect the strengths, resilience, and cultural foundations of First Nations peoples. Instead of recognising the richness of our cultural traditions, community bonds, and ways of being, these frameworks emphasise "lack" or "shortcomings" when compared to the settler colonial standards of whiteness. This is particularly evident in the treatment of First Nations mothers, especially those returning from prison, and the ways in which the child stealers⁶, continues to separate families based on racialised assumptions of deficiency.

Aboriginal mothers returning from prison face immense barriers to reunification with their children. The dominant view of Aboriginal mothers within the child welfare system is shaped by a deficit model that fails to acknowledge their strengths, resilience, or the profound cultural ties that bind them to their children. These mothers are not viewed as whole, capable, or deserving of the opportunity to care for their children based on their lived experience and cultural knowledge. Instead, the focus is on their criminalisation, pathologising their past, and judging them based on an assumed inability to parent through the lens of a white, middle-class standard. This lack of acknowledgment of their strengths and the potential for healing within their own families and communities is reflective of the larger framework under which the *Closing the Gap* targets are set.

This deficit view is not isolated to child welfare but is mirrored in the broader *Closing the Gap* targets, where First Nations people are measured against Western, white norms. The targets use whiteness as a benchmark, implying that the only acceptable measure of success is one that mimics the dominant culture. When Aboriginal people do not conform to these standards—whether in terms of education, health, or justice—their lives and cultures are viewed as lacking. This reinforces colonial frameworks that displace our ways of knowing, being, and relating to the world. The problem, therefore, is not with the targets themselves, but the assumption that Aboriginal peoples should be measured by a white, Western standard that erases the cultural identities and practices.

Aboriginal people, particularly Aboriginal mothers, should not be held to a standard that denies the value of their cultural practices, their connections to community, and their systems of care and family that have sustained them for millennia. This failure to recognise strengths and resilience reflects a larger societal issue where First Nations cultures are continuously judged as deficient, and any deviation from colonial norms is perceived as a problem to be fixed.

The focus on deficit is not just an academic concern; it is a lived reality for many Aboriginal families and individuals. These deficit-based frameworks continue to enforce the notion that First Nations people should aspire to a life defined by Western norms, including pathways through the justice system, health care, and education. Until the *Closing the Gap* targets are reframed to recognise the strengths and resilience of First Nations cultures, particularly the cultural knowledge that First Nations women carry about family, healing, and care, true progress will remain elusive. As Larissa Behrendt

⁶ Child Welfare System

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(2016)⁷ states: “It’s not that we don’t know what will work; we do. There is something profoundly distressing and frustrating about this prevailing narrative of “evidence-based policy” and then its implementation (or lack thereof). It is this gap between well-designed policy and its application that needs to be closed.”

e. 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 broad ideas about wellness into measurements under *Closing the Gap* has the potential to reshape the way we view the health and well-being of Aboriginal peoples and communities. However, any attempt to promote mental, physical, and spiritual health must be rooted in a decolonial, non-carceral framework and guided by the aspirations and lived experiences of Aboriginal people. We must reject the colonial standards and frameworks that have historically pathologised and criminalised our communities, and instead focus on what true wellness looks like through our cultural lenses and connection to Country.

For Aboriginal people, wellness is not simply the absence of disease or the Western medical model of health; it is deeply intertwined with the land, culture, and community. Wellness is about the restoration of balance between mind, body, spirit, and Country. It is about reclaiming our rightful place in the world and rebuilding the systems that have been impacted by colonisation. This includes healing from the generational trauma caused by dispossession, forced removal from land, and ongoing systemic violence.

Incorporating these holistic understandings of wellness into national measurements means recognising that the connection to Country is fundamental to our well-being. Country is not just a place; it is the foundation of our identity, our spirituality, and our resilience. The *Closing the Gap* framework must prioritise the return of land to Aboriginal peoples, the restoration of our cultural practices, and the strengthening of our communities. Only then can we truly begin to heal and address the broader measures of wellness that go beyond physical health and extend into the mental and spiritual domains.

To achieve this, measurements of wellness should be built around the concept of land sovereignty and cultural resurgence. Survival is tied to the survival of culture and to connection to land. Without land, there is no cultural wellness, and without cultural wellness, there is no true health. It is through this lens of cultural revitalisation that we can measure and promote wellness.

Furthermore, Aboriginal people have always known and practiced forms of healing that are holistic in nature, which may be viewed as alternative to Western medical models but are in fact rooted in millennia of knowledge. These practices—whether they are healing ceremonies, connection to Country, or community support structures—have been proven to be effective in promoting wellness.

⁷ Behrendt, L 2016, Indigenous kids are still being removed from their families, more than ever before, *The Guardian*, 13 Feb

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The incorporation of these cultural practices into health and wellness measurements must not only be a matter of respect but a recognition of the lived realities and strengths of Aboriginal peoples.

A key to achieving this decolonial framework for wellness is the inclusion of Aboriginal-led governance and decision-making. The process of incorporating wellness into measurements should not be dictated by the state or settler institutions but should be designed and led by Aboriginal communities, Elders, and knowledge holders. The involvement of these community leaders ensures that any targets or measurements reflect what we know to be true about our people, our culture, and our connection to Country.

It is also critical that these approaches are non-carceral. The history of imprisonment and surveillance of Aboriginal people cannot be ignored when considering wellness. The carceral state, which continues to target Aboriginal bodies, particularly women, has caused profound harm to our communities. As we push for wellness and healing, we must dismantle systems that continue to criminalise and punish rather than support and heal. Transformation within this space must move away from punitive measures and toward transformative practices that focus on community well-being and collective healing rather than punishment.

To truly reflect Aboriginal wellness in the *Closing the Gap* measurements, there would be a need to centre principles of Country first—cultural revitalisation, land back, and the restoration of spiritual practices—and a commitment to a non-carceral, decolonial approach that places healing, connection, and sovereignty at the heart of the journey toward wellness.

f. The incorporation of alternative measurements as a complement to existing measurements

The incorporation of alternative measurements into the Closing the Gap framework is critical, particularly when considering the complex and multifaceted realities of criminalised women and girls. At Sisters Inside, we work directly with Aboriginal women and girls who are incarcerated or have been criminalised, and we see firsthand how the current metrics often fail to capture the true successes and resilience of these women. Many of these women face systemic barriers that are rooted in colonialism, racism, and gendered violence, and as a result, mainstream measures of progress, such as rates of recriminalisation or employment outcomes, do not fully account for the broader context of their lives.

Alternative measurements would be invaluable in capturing the nuanced and often unacknowledged successes of our work. For instance, when we work with women to regain custody of their children, rebuild their relationships, or re-establish cultural practices, these milestones often go unmeasured in the current framework. Traditional metrics are limited to outcomes that are defined by the carceral state—such as whether a woman is in or out of prison—rather than recognising the importance of healing, community connection, and cultural resurgence.

By integrating alternative measurements that capture success in other ways, we can move beyond the deficit-based approach and better reflect the real, transformative changes that are occurring within

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these women's lives. For example, we might look at how well women are able to reconnect with their families, restore relationships, and create pathways to healing after the trauma of incarceration. These measures would not only celebrate the strength and resilience of these women but would also provide a more holistic view of success that encompasses mental, emotional, and spiritual health, which is central to our work at Sisters Inside.

Furthermore, alternative measurements could help track the success of non-carceral approaches to justice. At Sisters Inside, we provide support that addresses the root causes of criminalisation—such as racism, poverty, trauma, and systemic violence. Measuring the effectiveness of transformative justice processes, community-led programs, and cultural healing practices could provide critical insights into how these approaches contribute to the well-being and success of criminalised women and girls. This would help shift the focus away from punitive measures and toward understanding how community-driven support structures can offer better outcomes for Aboriginal women and girls.

The success of these alternative measures would also demonstrate the value of culturally specific programs and the importance of Aboriginal women and girls leading the way in their own healing. By supporting women to gain skills in parole advocacy, engage in peer support, and reclaim cultural practices, Sisters Inside is empowering women to define their own path to freedom, healing and justice. These alternative metrics would give visibility to those efforts and highlight how Aboriginal women are taking agency over their lives in ways that go beyond what the traditional legal system can measure.

Ultimately, incorporating alternative measurements into the Closing the Gap framework would allow for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of what success looks like for Aboriginal criminalised women and girls. These measures would complement existing metrics by highlighting strengths, resilience, and cultural restoration, and would ensure that we are not solely focused on outcomes defined by the carceral state, but on outcomes that reflect the deep, transformative work being done by Aboriginal women in the face of immense adversity.

At Sisters Inside, we firmly believe that these alternative measurements would provide a much-needed space for Aboriginal women's voices and experiences to be acknowledged, celebrated, and validated. They would allow us to more accurately track progress in ways that align with our vision of a just and supportive future for all Aboriginal women and girls.

g. Opportunities for building on and expanding the current Closing the Gap framework

While there are undeniable efforts within the *Closing the Gap* framework to address disparities faced by Aboriginal peoples, particularly in areas like health, education, and justice, we must acknowledge that the framework's existing structure and focus have significant limitations, especially from the perspective of an abolitionist organisation like Sisters Inside. The criminalisation of women and girls, particularly Aboriginal women, remains a central issue, and the framework's approach often reinforces carceral policies that we believe do not promote true justice or well-being for our communities.

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The current *Closing the Gap* framework tends to perpetuate the very systems of control and punishment that contribute to the criminalisation and incarceration of Aboriginal women and girls. For example, metrics such as rates of incarceration, “recidivism”, and involvement in the criminal legal system are heavily featured, but they do not address the root causes of criminalisation or the impact of systemic racism, colonialism, and gendered violence. These metrics focus on outcomes within the carceral system rather than asking deeper questions about how we can dismantle the systems that criminalise and marginalise our communities in the first place.

As an abolitionist organisation, we call for a fundamental shift in how these frameworks are developed. Rather than building on the existing model, which ultimately seeks to reform or improve the very systems that criminalise and oppress Aboriginal women and girls, we advocate for a comprehensive reimagining of what justice and healing can look like. True Closing the Gap efforts should focus on decarceration, divestment from punitive systems, and the reinvestment in community-led, non-carceral solutions.

For example, rather than expanding the current framework’s reliance on justice system metrics, there is an opportunity to develop measures that focus on community-led solutions to healing and justice. These could include metrics for the restoration of cultural practices, increased community engagement in justice processes, and the success of community-run transformative justice programs. These could help shift the focus from punishment to healing, allowing Aboriginal women and girls to have their strengths and resilience recognised in ways that do not rely on systems of control.

Furthermore, expanding the framework to prioritise the voices and leadership of Aboriginal women, particularly those with direct experience of the justice system, would be essential. Their leadership in shaping the future of justice for Aboriginal peoples is vital, and the current framework does not sufficiently centre these voices. At Sisters Inside, we see the strength and potential in the women we work with, and we know that justice is best served when communities are empowered to design and implement solutions that reflect their lived realities.

Ultimately, the Closing the Gap framework must evolve to reflect a commitment to ending the criminalisation of Aboriginal women and girls altogether. This means addressing the deep-seated issues of colonial violence, systemic racism, and gendered harm that continue to entrench the marginalisation of our communities. True progress will come not from expanding the current framework within the bounds of a carceral system, but from dismantling those systems and creating space for transformative justice rooted in healing, cultural reclamation, and community-led care.

We urge the Select Committee to critically examine the failures of the Closing the Gap framework and to centre the voices of Aboriginal communities who have long articulated the solutions needed. The work must move beyond statistical targets and state-defined metrics of success and instead commit to dismantling the structures that perpetuate harm while resourcing the solutions that our communities have always known and fought for.

Yours sincerely

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