

Mind the gap: Indigenous lives improving, but too slowly

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Ahead of this weekend's 2020 Summit academics from The Australian National University are warning research shows significant changes need to be made to Indigenous affairs policy to 'close the gaps' but the "narrative of failure" that dominates discussion on the area is unfounded.

The research undertaken by ANU academics Professor Jon Altman, Director of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research and an attendee at this weekend's summit, Fellow Dr Boyd Hunter and Research Fellow Nicholas Biddle has used, for the first time, available census data to chart likely timeframes for 'closing the gaps' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Among the findings are:

- Census data from 1971-2006 shows improvement in most social indicators, including percentage of people employed in the private sector, percentage with a post-school qualification and percentage who have never attended school. With current trends and policy, the 'gaps' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in these areas will be closed within 35 years.
- In other areas, such as male and female life expectancy, median income and unemployment rate, the gaps aren't closing at all. Some measurements, based on current trends and policy, will take 2000 years before the gaps are closed.

- An examination of recent governments has found that the latter half of the Howard years (2001-2006) was more effective at ‘closing the gaps’ than either the first half (1996-2001) or the Hawke / Keating years of 1991-1996.

Lead author of the report Professor Altman said that the findings show that the picture on the successes and failures of Indigenous affairs policy is much more complex than widely thought.

“Using key indicators to measure employment status, income status, household size and home ownership, education and health status, we found that most socioeconomic outcomes are better now than 35 years ago. These results are at odds with the narrative of failure around Indigenous policy,” he said. “For other variables, including labour force participation, median income and home ownership our estimates indicate that closing the gaps will take much longer. For a number there is a divergence in outcomes, suggesting that the gaps will never close without significant policy changes.”

Professor Altman said that some big questions needed to be addressed at this weekend’s summit to put the country on the right road to closing the gaps. “The summit needs to address questions such as is there a need to confer commercially-valuable property rights alongside land and native title customary rights? And how do we learn from the successes of the past 35 years that have delivered much progress, but too slowly to meet national expectations?” he said.

The full paper and statistics are available here:
www.anu.edu.au/caepr/ClosingTheGaps.pdf

Source: Australian National University

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