

## **INQUIRY INTO OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE**

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## **INQUIRY INTO CLOSING THE GAP – OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE**

Bennelong and Surrounds Residents for Reconciliation are aware that the causes of Indigenous disadvantage are many and that the task of overcoming this disadvantage will be both complex and costly. That said, we strongly believe that it is imperative that this task be taken up by the whole Australian community and pursued with the utmost vigour.

We wish to address only two of the terms of reference for the inquiry and to offer some suggestions that the Standing Committee on Social Issues may like to follow up in conducting its research into this important issue.

Among other things the Standing Committee on Social Issues was asked to “inquire into and report on: . . .the impact of the following factors on the current lifetime expectancy gap: . . .(ii) health and wellbeing (iii) education”.

In 2007 a report entitled *Dropping off the Edge: the distribution of disadvantage in Australia* was written by Professor Tony Vinson, from the University of Sydney for Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services Australia (<http://www.catholicsocialservices.org.au/node/976>).

*Dropping off the Edge* was the third in a series of reports written by Professor Tony Vinson on this issue. While the first two reports, in 1999 and 2004, mapped social disadvantage in New South Wales and Victoria only, the third looked at entrenched disadvantage nationally.

The report examined postcode areas and measured these in terms of a number of factors that are associated with disadvantage. These factors included:

- Long Term Unemployment,
- Low Income,
- Early School Leaving,
- Unskilled Workers,
- Low Birth Weight,
- Confirmed Cases of Child Abuse,
- Psychiatric Hospital Admission,
- Criminal Offence Convictions,
- Serious Child Injuries.

The report found that in every state a few postcodes were “massively over-represented” in terms of these factors associated with disadvantage. “In NSW: just

1.7% percent of all postcodes account for 12.5% of the top 40 rankings of indicators of disadvantage - a more than seven-fold over-representation.”

While these findings relate to the Australian population as a whole two features of the report would appear to have significance for the inquiry into Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage.

First, the factors used in this study to measure disadvantage are the same as those used to argue that a gap exists between the lifetime expectancy of Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people in Australia.

Second, when the most disadvantaged postcodes in NSW are examined, for example Brewarrina, Bowraville, Kempsey, Mount Druitt, Walgett, these are also postcodes with a high proportion of Indigenous Australians.

Where the *Dropping off the Edge* report found a strong association between incidences of disadvantage and certain postcodes the report can also be seen to highlight an association between Indigenous communities and disadvantage. Therefore, the findings and recommendations of this report have great significance for any inquiry into overcoming Indigenous disadvantage.

While the *Dropping off the Edge* report deals with a very sobering aspect of Australian society, an important feature of the report is its positive outlook. It sees that inroads can be made into overcoming social disadvantage “if we have the right level of will joined to the correct programs targeted to the right locations.” (<http://www.catholicocialservices.org.au/node/976>)

Two of the recommendations of the report appear to have particular relevance for overcoming Indigenous disadvantage. These are in the areas of health and education:

### Health

- \* Concentrating on the early years of life, including post-natal outreach services, parenting support programs, childhood diagnostic services and adolescent health services.

### Education and Training

- \* Aiming to raise educational attainment by improving early education programs, pre-school attendance, improving primary schools and provide financial incentives to attract experienced and successful teachers to the most disadvantaged schools.
- \* Guaranteeing three and four year old children living in areas that fall within the 10 per cent most disadvantaged localities in each state/territory 18 hours per week of free preschool to support a good start to formal education.
- \* Support for projects which combine personal support, attention to educational deficits and skills development for disengaged young people.

(<http://www.catholicocialservices.org.au/node/976>)

There are many examples of work in the areas of Health and Education that have been mentioned in the published submissions to the Inquiry.

One example the submission from the Public Health Association of Australia (submission No 8) refers to *Success Stories in Indigenous Health*; published by Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation. One of the successes in this document is the “Mums and Babies Program” being conducted by Townsville Aboriginal and Islander Health Services which focuses on health care and education for Indigenous mothers and their babies. This is a program that would appear to be worthy of further investigation.

The submission from the NSW Department of Education and Training (Submission No 13) makes reference to a wide variety of programs that have focused wholly or partly on supporting Indigenous children. An independent assessment of this list of programs will be necessary and will clearly be time-consuming.

"While we recognise that there are many other areas in "Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage", Bennelong and Surrounds Residents for Reconciliation urge the Inquiry to investigate two of the most important of these. These are health and education of Indigenous mothers and their babies, and the provision of preschool education for Indigenous children. There is ample evidence of the advantages of preschool education for children in general, but if Indigenous children in a relatively affluent area are getting proportionally less preschool education than their non-Indigenous peers (which the Northern Sydney Aboriginal Social Plan 2007-2011 reports on p 58) ) then we would argue that this is an important area to examine and an area that we ignore at our long term peril.

the acid test of our commitment to the fair go will be the earlier support given to disadvantaged three-year-olds. There is also a strong financial reason for taking the proposed action: the cost of salvage operations . . . is extremely high.

(Tony Vinson, Sydney Morning Herald 26/1/08)