

Real efforts to close the gap must prioritise action on Indigenous imprisonment

The Law Council of Australia has welcomed the Prime Minister's national 'Close the Gap' statement, while emphasising that urgent action on Indigenous imprisonment is fundamental to achieving inroads on health, education, employment, and mortality.

Law Council President Stuart Clark AM said rates of Indigenous imprisonment are among the worst in the developed world and should feature on the Council of Australian Government's (COAG's) 'Closing the Gap' agenda.

"We should be in no doubt that Indigenous imprisonment represents a rapidly deepening national crisis," Mr Clark said.

"When the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody shocked the nation 25 years ago, Indigenous people were being imprisoned at seven times the rate of the broader population. Today it's 14 times. The rate of imprisonment of Aboriginal people has increased by over 57 per cent since the year 2000, and women and children are the fastest growing cohort.

"The link between disadvantage, crime, and imprisonment is already well established among criminologists. The link between adverse health outcomes and imprisonment has recently been highlighted by the Australian Medical Association. What is lacking is genuine intergovernmental commitment and cooperation toward addressing this fundamental problem."

Mr Clark said the Law Council's Indigenous Imprisonment Symposium, held in December 2015, had identified a range of concrete steps that could be taken.

"We need urgent reform on laws that drive the disproportionate rate of Indigenous imprisonment. This includes imprisonment arising from fine defaults and minor traffic infringements. We also need to look at the adverse affect of mandatory sentencing and parole policies.

"Consistent data on youth detention is simply unavailable. On any given day, it is not possible to accurately determine how many people are entering and leaving the prison system. Nor is there sufficient capacity to evaluate the effectiveness of programs to ensure they do not return there.

"This is a national crisis, requiring national leadership. The Law Council is calling on COAG to prioritise this issue, as a fundamental element of the "Closing the Gap" response."

Michael Hartmann, Director of Communications

P. 02 6246 3715 // M. 0438 081 968

E. michael.hartmann@lawcouncil.asn.au // www.lawcouncil.asn.au

Anil Lambert, media contact

M. 0416 426 722

E. anil@hortonadvisory.com.au