

Ten Years

What does 10 years look like to an average Australian adult? Opportunity to travel widely, starting a new job, completing a university education, learning a new skill or watching grandchildren grow up perhaps? More importantly, what does 10 years look like to a child? Looking forward to Christmases, birthdays, going on holidays or visiting uncles, aunts and grandparents? To put a decade into perspective, in the past 10 years the world has seen amazing advances in science and technology in the mapping of the human genome, the introduction of 3-D printers, exploring Mars and the emergence of stem cell treatments. From an Australian perspective the past 10 years has seen six Prime Ministers, the rise and fall of Pauline Hanson and Clive Palmer as political forces, passionate debate on same-sex marriage, multiple changes in the primary health care landscape and ongoing arguments about the effect of global warming and climate change.

Ten years can slip by very quickly, unless you are discussing someone's life. Ten years is the average life expectancy gap between Australia's First Peoples and non-Indigenous Australians.¹ Even more disappointingly, you can increase this to approximately 14 years for Indigenous men and 12 years for Indigenous women if you live in Western Australia or the Northern Territory.² While the gap in life expectancy has reduced slightly over the past 10 years,³ improvements have not been enough for an Indigenous grandparent to see one additional birthday of a grandchild. This health disparity is mirrored in other key social indicators where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders account for 27% of the total Australian prisoner population;⁴ have unemployment rates over 16%;⁵ account for significantly lower high school attendances;⁶ and household incomes around 38% lower than that of non-Indigenous households.⁶ All of these factors impact on the health and welfare of Indigenous Australians. What would it take to reduce this disadvantage to one significant section of our community? The problem isn't just about funding, it's about political will, apathy in non-Indigenous populations and lack of coordinated approaches across a wide range of government agencies to addressing the social determinants of health. The question is why shouldn't our First People's have the same opportunities as everyone else; to have the same education, job and health opportunities as the non-Indigenous population?

What would the approach in this country be if there was suddenly a 10 year reduction in life expectancy of the non-Indigenous population? Would there be the political will to address this as a matter of urgency? Equally, would there be a different policy approach if non-Indigenous household incomes

reduced by \$280 a week on average;⁶ or less than half of 16 and 17 year olds attended secondary school?

Policymakers and agencies need to work collectively to develop positive, community-driven solutions to increase school participation, work opportunities and reduce poverty. Priority needs to be directed towards the indigenous youth to increase education levels, support trade and tertiary education and create realistic job prospects. Reducing poverty, increasing self-sufficiency and improving healthy lifestyles are key to longer productive lives. At the same time, health and social support services need to provide equitable access to culturally appropriate services to address and manage dental health, chronic disease management, mental health and disability services.

The 'Closing The Gap' public awareness campaign has also been drawing attention to Indigenous disadvantage for 10 years.⁷ 'Closing The Gap' should be more than a throwaway slogan or hollow words. The intent of 'Closing The Gap' should remind us constantly of the importance of equality in the education, employment and health outcomes for Indigenous Australians and continually drive policy makers and the broader community to do more to make this happen in our generation, not the next. Australia has the ability, if it chooses, to address these wicked health and social issues. Let's allow Indigenous children to have at least 10 extra years with their parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents.

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References

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