Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander incarceration remains a critical
Reconciliation priority

Moving toward the fulfilment of Reconciliation goals requires urgent attention toward the
overrepresentation of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders in Australian prisons, a major health justice
issue costing billions each year and harshly impacting upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners,
their families and communities.

A new report released during 2017 National Reconciliation Week outlined how the grossly high numbers of
Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders held in custody is costing nearly $8 billion annually, a cost which is
forecast to grow to $20 billion per year by 2040 without immediate intervention.

The social and health costs are equally severe for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners who
constitute a significant portion of Australia’s overcrowded prisons housing near 40,000 inmates, despite
their comprising only 3% of the national population. The majority of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders
in custody are vulnerable young males under 25, forming over a quarter of the national adult prison
population and over half the number of people in youth detention.

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) urges the Australian Government to address this
inequality as a critical public health and social justice issue which also carries an enormous economic
burden.

Summer May Finlay, Acting Vice-President for Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders on the PHAA Board
said, “We need to examine the causative factors which have resulted in the appalling numbers of Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islanders currently in custody, which means facing the deep and longstanding social
inequalities and injustices experienced by all Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders”.

Ms Finlay continued, “The historic Uluru Statement of the Heart announced this week called for the full
enshrinement of an Aboriginal and Torres Islander representative body in the Australian Constitution to
allow for their self-determination and for a formal treaty process to be established, and in this same spirit
we ask that the Government take immediate action against the unacceptable discrimination Aboriginals
and Torres Strait Islanders currently face within our justice system”.

“The extreme social, health and economic inequalities experienced throughout our Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander communities and which Reconciliation goals aim to alleviate will only persist and worsen
with the continued failure to address the incarceration issue”.

Despite ongoing research and reviews including the official inquiry into Aboriginal deaths in custody, there
has been negligible progress on reducing the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
incarcerated, who continue to suffer reduced health and wellbeing as a result of their unfair treatment, in
addition to related financial stress, numerous barriers to education and employment and inadequate
accommodation.
The PHAA strongly advocates for the self-determination of Australia’s First Peoples in accordance with the Uluru Statement as a foundation for mitigating the contributing social and economic factors to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander incarceration rates, thus serving as a primary preventive measure.

It is similarly important to invest in early intervention programs, promote cultural awareness, and to provide a higher level of care for Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders currently in custody and throughout the reintegration phase in order to limit recidivism.

For further information/comment:
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