



2011 Child Rights NGO Report Australia

Health and health services

While most Australian children enjoy relatively good physical health, the following groups are less likely to realise their right to health: Aboriginal children¹, disadvantaged children, children living in rural and remote areas, children in out-of-home care and children with a disability.

Economic and social disadvantage plays an important role in determining health status. It is critical that the Federal Government address this disadvantage as well as the health problems themselves.

CLOSING THE GAP IN HEALTH OUTCOMES FOR ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

- The infant mortality rate for Aboriginal children is improving, but remains up to three times that for non-Aboriginal children.
- Aboriginal mothers are twice as likely to bear a low birth weight infant compared with non-Aboriginal mothers, and the gap is widening. Babies born with a low birth weight are at a greater risk of dying during the first year of life and are prone to ill health during childhood.
- The rate of hearing loss conditions for Aboriginal children is more than three times the rate of non-Aboriginal children. An estimated 30 per cent to 80 per cent of Aboriginal children of school age suffer from some hearing loss.
- Almost one in seven Aboriginal Australians report being unable to see a doctor when needed.

Australia has recognised the health disparity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children and Australian governments have provided \$1.6 billion under the *Closing the Gap* strategy to address the gap in life expectancy between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. However, this is marred by a lack of a comprehensive, long-term plan of action and the lack of a genuine partnership with Aboriginal peoples.

¹ Throughout the NGO Report, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are referred to as 'Aboriginal children.' The authors acknowledge the diversity in culture, language, kinship structures and ways of life within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and recognise that Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples retain their distinct culture, irrespective of whether they live in urban, rural, regional or remote areas of the country.

GENERAL HEALTH ISSUES

- In 2009 almost a quarter of children between 5 and 17 years were overweight or obese.
- Australia is still failing to meet the target immunisation rate of 90 per cent.
- There needs to be better accessibility to dental services for children.
- Australia must address the concerning trend of increasing rates of sexually transmitted infections.

Recommendation: Australia should establish mother and baby clinics throughout Australia, in consultation with local Aboriginal peoples, so that every Aboriginal mother has access to a clinic.

Recommendation: A long-term, comprehensive plan of action should be developed to achieve equality in health status and health services for Aboriginal children by 2030 under the framework of *Closing the Gap*. This must be done with the full participation and partnership of Aboriginal children and their communities and representative bodies.

Recommendation: Australia should support the implementation of the *Standards for the care of children and adolescents in health services* and the *Charter for children and young people's rights in healthcare* and use these as examples of best practice to be applied in all policy development.

Recommendation: Australia should support the implementation of mandatory training in child rights for all health professionals as recommended by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health.

Recommendation: Australia should increase education programs amongst secondary school students about sexually transmitted infections, and increase efforts to promote protected sex.

For more information see the full *Listen to Children* report go to www.childrights.org.au



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Mental Health

Mental health is a massive issue that has been ignored too long in a country that is meant to be at the forefront of medicine - 18 YEAR OLD GIRL, PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

The increase of mental health problems in Australia continues to be of great concern with the latest national study on mental health in children revealing that the most prevalent burden of disease among children from birth to 14 years (almost one quarter of the burden of disease) and young people 15-24 years (almost half) was attributed to mental disorders.

While one in four young people experience a mental disorder, over 70 per cent do not seek help. Better understanding and funding support are required for alternative models of service delivery that provide more effective access and support for children in their different stages of development.

MENTAL HEALTH IN DISADVANTAGED GROUPS OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Particular groups of children are at higher risk of mental health problems. These include Aboriginal children, children from newly arrived, refugee and migrant backgrounds, same-sex attracted, gender questioning or gender diverse young people, young carers, children with a disability and children in rural, regional and remote areas.

Effective access to health services and better community education on tolerance and support for diversity and mental illness is crucial in addressing this disadvantage.

Recommendation: Australia should undertake further consultations with children and young people for the development and implementation of better outcomes in mental health.

Recommendation: Australia should invest in early intervention services, training and development of teachers, health professionals and others who work with children and young people.

YOUTH SUICIDE

- Suicide deaths still comprise a much higher proportion of total deaths for young people relative to older groups.
- In 2008 almost a quarter of all male deaths aged 15-24 years were due to suicide.
- Aboriginal youth suicide rates are estimated to be three to five times higher than those for non-Aboriginal young people.
- Inability to access suicide intervention and prevention programs continues to be a problem for remote Aboriginal communities.
- The system employed to monitor suicidal youths or youths at risk of suicide across Central and Western Australia is inadequate.
- The Australian Bureau of Statistics has not reported suicide for people under the age of 15, which is likely to result in the under reporting of suicide deaths. Other sources indicate an increase in suicides in children under 14-years-old in some Aboriginal communities.

Recommendation: Australia should provide for better research, support and evaluation of suicide prevention programs for children and young people.

Recommendation: Australia should improve data collection and reporting on attempted and completed child and youth suicides.

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