

National mood for change on Indigenous incarceration must be seized by COAG

The Law Council of Australia has called on the Federal and State Governments to act on Australia's disastrous rate of Indigenous imprisonment, following recent positive steps in the Northern Territory and Western Australia.

Earlier this week, the Northern Territory Government announced plans to set justice targets, to halve the rate of Aboriginal imprisonment by 2030, while Western Australia will establish a new 1800 hotline for Aboriginal prisoners in Western Australia, which will help to reduce instances of self-harm and suicide in custody.

Law Council of Australia President Stuart Clark AM called on the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) to seize the opportunity for intergovernmental action.

"Australia's Indigenous incarceration rates represent a national crisis. Justice targets and an intergovernmental strategy on imprisonment and community violence must be on the agenda at the next COAG meeting," Mr Clark said.

The Northern Territory is now the second jurisdiction to introduce justice targets, following the ACT in 2015.

"The ACT and Northern Territory governments are to be commended for having the foresight to adopt these measures. There is now every reason for the States to follow suit and for the Federal Government to show some leadership on this issue through COAG.

"Disproportionate rates of Indigenous deaths in custody are a direct result of disproportionate imprisonment. Therefore, while the custody hotline in Western Australia is commendable, it is essential that concerted action is taken to bring down the rates of imprisonment, violence, crime and recidivism.

"Indigenous people represent just 2.5 per cent of the population, but 27 per cent of the prison population. Indigenous children represent 50 per cent of those in juvenile detention. This cannot be allowed to continue.

"Until governments commit to targets and genuine, evidence-based measures, Indigenous incarceration will continue to grow," Mr Clark said.

"Western Australia and the Territories have taken steps in the right direction. It is time for the Federal Government and other States to stand up and be counted on this issue and commit to clear and unambiguous intergovernmental targets and strategies to achieve them," Mr Clark concluded.

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