

Aboriginal deaths in custody highlight continuing injustice



Professor Pat Dudgeon AM

On Saturday morning, March 28, a 26-year-old Aboriginal man was found unresponsive by correctional officers at Darwin Correction Centre in Holtz. The cause of death is yet to be determined; however, the Northern Territory Department of Corrections is treating it as a suicide and has reported the death to the Northern Territory coroner.

This tragedy comes just days after the death in custody of a 25-year-old Aboriginal man in Darwin on the March 24, after allegedly struggling to breathe in the back of a police van. Amnesty International has called for an independent investigation into this young man's death in custody.

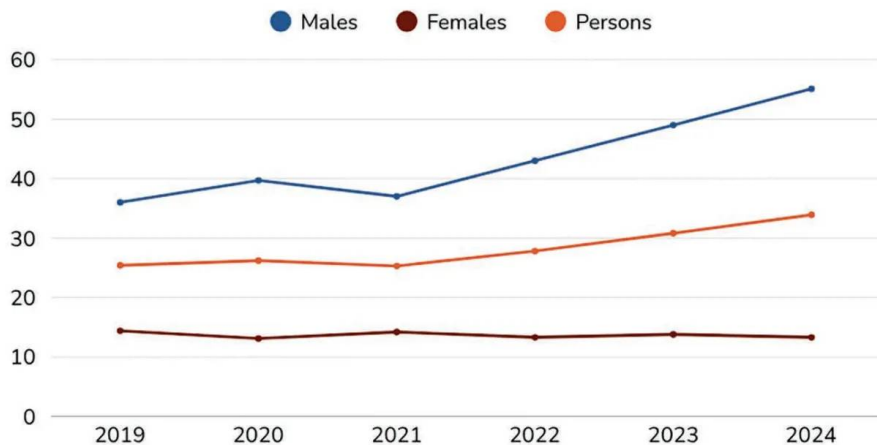
A lack of culturally-safe care in the justice system for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is extremely harmful. In prison, detention and police custody, our people are at a higher risk of experiencing poor physical and mental health.

We are often subject to overt racism and unconscious bias. Staff may act on prejudices, treating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people harshly, or neglecting to provide appropriate care. The absence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff who can speak up for our peoples' needs in prison, detention or custody, contributes to even more harm. Many Indigenous people have called attention to these issues.

Last year, Hannah McGlade, Joselyn Jones, Ee Pin Chang and I wrote about the importance of implementing human rights to prevent deaths in custody.

Last week, the 35th anniversary of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was recognised on the April 15. Since its release in 1991, over 600 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have died in custody. The report outlined 339 recommendations for reform, many of which have not been implemented to this day. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to be over-represented in the criminal

Age-standardised suicide rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples



In 2024, the suicide rate is the highest in the time series at **33.9 per 100,000**.

The 2024 suicide rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was **6.5% higher** than the 2023 rate.

Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics *Intentional self-harm (suicide) deaths 2025*

Infographic of the age-standardised suicide rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in 2024, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Numbers on the left column depict number of deaths by suicide per 100,000.

justice system.

As of the June 30, 2025, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander imprisonment rate was 2,500 per 100,000 adult population Australia-wide.

This represents an 8 per cent increase from the 2024 imprisonment rate and compares to the non-Indigenous rate of 149 per 100,000 adult population in June 2025, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. For the Northern Territory in particular, the imprisonment rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is even higher, at 4,167 per 100,000 adult population as of the June 30, 2025. This is compared to a non-Indigenous rate of 225 per 100,000.

Latest statistics

In the latest Commonwealth Government Closing the Gap annual report released in March 2026, the National Indigenous Australians Agency reported Productivity Commission statistics which show worsening rates of imprisonment and suicide. In 2024, the suicide rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander people was 33.7 per 100,000. This is almost three times the suicide rate for non-Indigenous people (11.3 per 100,000).

These statistics demonstrate a crisis of both imprisonment and suicide rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. They highlight a continuing gap in outcomes between our people and non-Indigenous people, which can be traced back to the continuing effects of colonisation and intergenerational trauma.

To address deaths in custody, we first must address the spiralling imprisonment rate. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need to lead the development of solutions which acknowledge the circumstances of our people and create alternative justice pathways—pathways which do not rely on locking up more people each year.

According to the Australian Institute of Criminology, 33 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people died in custody in 2025, including one death in youth detention. This is the highest recorded annual number

of Indigenous deaths in custody in Australia. Since the 1st of January 2026, nine Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have died in custody. Our criminal justice system is in dire need of improvement, to protect our people from harm.

Recommendations

The Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention (CBPATSISP) has published recommendations on best practice to prevent or reduce Aboriginal deaths in custody. This includes ensuring prisoners have access to culturally safe mental-health support services and increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in healthcare and support services in prisons.

Through our project, Coronial Responses to Suicides of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, recommendations have also been made to reform coronial practices. A key recommendation from this project is to ensure there is accountability to respond to coronial findings, and to take

action to prevent further deaths, including those in custody. You can find out more about this project, our recommendations and best practice on our website <https://cbpatsisp.com.au/>

Through implementing the recommendations set out 35 years ago by the Royal Commission, and through creating space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to lead the development of solutions, we can create alternative justice pathways – culturally safe pathways – and reduce the rates of imprisonment and deaths in custody for our people.

If you or someone you know is struggling, support is available. Contact 13 YARN at 13 92 76.

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