

The Indigenous employment gap is widening and we don't know how to fix it

Written by Zoe Staines, Research Consultant; Research Assistant, Queensland University of Technology

The [Closing the Gap](#) framework sought to halve the employment gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, among other targets. But the employment target expired unmet [this year](#).

In remote parts of Australia, the gap has actually [widened](#) since 2011.

Governments have relied on a series of employment programs to tackle the employment gap, but these have not yielded positive outcomes. Before the new program [starts in 2019](#) we need more evidence of what does and doesn't work.

There has been no robust evaluation of the last two employment programs. Evidence of what does work might help us finally start closing the gap.

Read more: [***Australia is missing the Closing the Gap employment target by decades***](#)

Although the median Indigenous income [has improved](#) overall, the income gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is [also growing](#), particularly in remote areas.

This is a concerning trend and does not align with [government narratives](#) around reducing Indigenous disadvantage.

Employment programs

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Since the Community Development Employment Projects scheme began to be rolled back in [2007](#) (before it was later abolished), a series of other programs operated in remote communities.

These have included the Job Network, Job Services Australia, the Remote Jobs and Communities Program and the current [Community Development Programme](#).

The standard approach of these programs has been to increase pressure on jobseekers to participate in “work-for-the-dole” (for example, through increased participation hours), and mete out financial penalties when jobseekers fail to abide by the program rules.

In this way, it's hoped programs can somehow *push* jobseekers into employment.

The four programs are very similar in terms of their modes of delivery, funding structures and core components. However, they also differ in important ways.

For example, although Job Network and Job Services Australia included graduated support for more severely disadvantaged jobseekers, this was removed from the Remote Jobs and Communities Program and Community Development Programme.

Read more: [We're not closing the gap on Indigenous employment, it's widening](#)

Funding for broader community development (to create more jobs) that existed under the Remote Jobs and Communities Program was also dramatically reduced under the Community Development Programme.

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[Many](#), including program providers, participants, Indigenous leaders, and academics, have [argued](#) this approach [oversimplifies](#) the challenges involved in improving remote employment.

For example, employment programs haven't adequately addressed structural barriers to gaining employment, such as the [availability of jobs](#) and the long term effects of poorer [educational](#) attainment, health and well-being.

Nevertheless, robust evidence concerning outcomes and impacts of these recent programs is scarce.

Evaluations of [Job Network](#) and [Job Services Australia](#) were undertaken, but they were not independent, and had methodological problems.

This meant they could not reliably distinguish program effects from other factors that may have also influenced results. Even so, the evaluations only uncovered minimal evidence of positive outcomes.

The subsequent program – the [Remote Jobs and Communities Program](#) (2013–2015) – was not evaluated at all.

More harm than good?

The Community Development Programme (2015–present) has been subject to a number of reviews, including by the [Senate Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration](#) and the [Australian National Audit Office](#).

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These reviews, and other [research](#) and [commentary](#) , have pointed to anecdotal evidence the Community Development Programme has caused harm.

For example, inflexible program rules have resulted in [disproportionate fines](#) being imposed. This has hurt income stability and [food security](#) for some jobseekers, many of whom are already living in circumstances of disadvantage.

An independent evaluation of the Community Development Programme is currently [under way](#) . However, despite the evaluation being planned for completion in [mid-2018](#) , no findings have been publicly released.

The Community Development Programme evaluation design was only developed and signed off between [seven and 10 months](#) after the program was implemented (rather than forming part of the program design).

This contradicts [one of the best practice principles](#) for evaluation in Indigenous affairs. There was also no consideration of the initial design by an evaluation [reference group](#) .

According to the [Department of Prime Minister & Cabinet](#) , the evaluation is supposed to “assess early signs of impact and explore what works for who and in what circumstances”.

However, aside from some information regarding the [types](#) of [data](#) being used, the exact methods used in the evaluation are unclear.

In particular, it's [unclear](#) how or whether the evaluation will be able to isolate the impacts of the Community Development Programme.

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Read more: [*Eight ways we can improve Indigenous employment*](#)

A [new program](#) is planned to replace the Community Development Programme from 1 February 2019. Ideally, the evaluation findings would have been available to inform ongoing consultation.

But most of this consultation has now already taken place.

The Commonwealth government has [committed](#) to improving the evidence base in Indigenous affairs. It has highlighted the importance of achieving greater [transparency](#) in the public release of evaluation reports (in line with similar calls [elsewhere](#)) and also made moves to appoint an [Indigenous Commissioner](#) to the Productivity Commission.

These are positive steps. But the Commonwealth must hold itself to the same standards as it seeks to hold others.

Rigorous, well designed evaluation is important in informing future policy-making, and developing a stronger evidence base for strategies that hold true potential for closing the remote employment gap. Monitoring and evaluation are also important for ensuring programs intended to reduce disadvantage do not, instead, exacerbate it.

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