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NT Fails on Youth Detention in Closing the Gap Report

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The Productivity Commission’s 2025 Closing the Gap report reveals only four of 19 targets are on track, with the Northern Territory (NT) performing worst, particularly in youth detention, drawing sharp criticism from the Australian Human Rights Commission.

The Productivity Commission’s Annual Data Compilation Report (ADCR), released on July 30, 2025, paints a grim picture of progress in addressing disparities faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, with only four of 19 Closing the Gap targets on track. The Northern Territory stands out as the least successful jurisdiction, regressing on eight

targets, including youth detention, as reported by ABC News. The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) has sharply criticized the NT government, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Katie Kiss stating that the territory’s approach “ignores expert advice,” exacerbating human rights concerns.

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap aims to reduce the detention rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth aged 10–17 by 30% by 2031, from a 2018–19 baseline of 31.9 per 10,000. However, the NT’s rate remains alarmingly high at 43 per 10,000 in 2022–23, compared to the national target of 22.3 per 10,000, according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). Nationally, the youth detention rate for Indigenous youth rose to 29.8 per 10,000 in 2022–23, showing no progress from the baseline. The Productivity Commission attributes this to “tough-on-crime” policies, such as the NT’s recent Youth Justice Act changes, which critics argue prioritize punishment over prevention.

Commissioner Selwyn Button emphasized the need for early intervention, stating that governments cannot “arrest their way out of this issue” and should invest in programs addressing root causes like poverty and health disparities. The AHRC echoed this, advocating for diversion programs like BushMob in Alice Springs, which supports at-risk youth through cultural engagement. In contrast, the NT government defended its policies, with Corrections Minister Gerard Maley asserting that new laws respond to “community concerns” about youth reoffending, per ABC News.

With 94% of NT youth detainees being Indigenous in 2022–23, the territory’s punitive measures, including reinstating spit hoods, have drawn condemnation for undermining Closing the Gap commitments. The report underscores the urgent need for evidence-based reforms to reduce Indigenous youth incarceration.