

By its nature, “closing the gap” inadvertently places non-Indigenous Australians above First Nations people and sets outcomes of non-Indigenous Australians as the gold standard. Although it is important to understand the relative and disproportionate disadvantage that First Nations people experience in Australia, the closing the gap narrative continues to perpetuate deficit discourse and encourages the benchmarking of First Nations outcomes against non-Indigenous Australians.

This deficit-driven process of benchmarking has become increasingly prevalent in First Nations-focused research, where the research problem is often described by the relative gap between First Nations people and non-Indigenous Australians. In many cases, highlighting the gap provides little value to the research, and only persists to promote deficit discourse — by continually defining the gap, we continually emphasise the deficit.

Progress towards equity for First Nations people has been slow, stunted and non-existent in many of the Closing the Gap target and priority reform areas.<sup>2</sup> In light of this, the importance of moving away from the deficit narrative surrounding First Nations outcomes is being increasingly recognised.<sup>3</sup> Driving high quality research in genuine partnership with First Nations people is key to driving real change. As such, it is critical that researchers, reviewers and journals play their part in shifting the deficit narrative.

Defining the research problem is integral to effective dissemination of research findings and attraction of funding. For health research, this often means defining rates of disease morbidity and mortality. These statistics are seldom positive but provide important context to research studies. Shifting the deficit narrative in First Nations health research should not mean that important, but negative, statistics are omitted from the story; rather, researchers should remain cognisant of the deficit narrative that comparison of First Nations outcomes to non-Indigenous Australians perpetuates, and should seek to only compare outcomes where it is absolutely pertinent to the context of the study.

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## Defining the gap, emphasising the deficit

**TO THE EDITOR:** The Australian National Agreement on Closing the Gap is an undeniably important piece of political infrastructure.<sup>1</sup> The new approach, outlined in the 2020 National Agreement, vows to achieve First Nations equity by recognising the strength of, and empowering, First Nations people, communities and organisations.

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- 1 Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. National Agreement on Closing the Gap. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2020. <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement> (viewed Oct 2024).
  - 2 Productivity Commission. Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap: study report. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2024. <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/closing-the-gap-review/report> (viewed Oct 2024).
  - 3 Fogarty W, Lovell M, Langenberg J, Heron MJ. Deficit discourse and strengths-based approaches: changing the narrative of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing. Lowitja Institute, 2018. <https://www.lowitja.org.au/resource/deficit-discourse-strengths-based/> (viewed Oct 2024). ■
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