

ongoing health problems. Indigenous people die on average 15-20 years earlier than other Australians. Other groups with particular needs also receive support from the government.

## **10. The money doesn't reach the people who need it**

Indigenous programs are fully accountable and tightly targeted with close scrutiny from government, Parliament and the media! Annually some 6000 grants are given to over 1300 Indigenous controlled organizations for medical, housing and legal services and social, cultural and sporting bodies. This ensures Indigenous input bringing services closer to the community and provides both employment and training in management.

### ***Acknowledgements and for further information:***

ATSIC publication "As a Matter of Fact." Commonwealth of Australia 1998

HREOC publication "Bringing Them Home" 1997

PIAC interim report "Moving Forward – Achieving Reparations" 2001

Website [www.atsic.gov.au/fact\\_v\\_myth\\_sheets](http://www.atsic.gov.au/fact_v_myth_sheets)

Aboriginal & Islander Commission of the National Council of Churches in Australia, Sydney

Produced by the Reconciliation Sub-Committee of the South Australian Heads of Christian Churches Committee in conjunction with the South Australian Council of Churches. Phone (08) 8221 6633 email [sacc@picknowl.com.au](mailto:sacc@picknowl.com.au) May 2002

**Copyright: This pamphlet may be reproduced in its entirety with acknowledgements as above.**

## **Debunking the Myths about the Indigenous People of Australia**

The term Indigenous people of Australia applies to people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent.

### **1. Most Indigenous people have problems with alcohol**

While Indigenous people who drink are often publicly visible in fact they have a higher proportion of non-drinkers than the general population (22% to 9%) and a lower proportion of regular drinkers than the general population (33% to 45%). Often Aboriginals are forced to drink outdoors because of discriminatory attitudes of licensees and hotel patrons or because of homelessness.

### **2. Aboriginal people commit more crimes**

Whilst some crimes committed by Aboriginal people, especially teenagers are motivated by a desire to flout authority many offences are breaches of court orders. Aboriginal people have different values and practices to non-indigenous Australians which may disadvantage them in the justice system during police interrogation and courtroom procedures and lead to unjust levels of intervention and sentencing.

### **3. Indigenous people are lazy and cannot hold down a job**

The unemployment rate for Indigenous people is about 26% compared to the overall rate of 8%. A higher proportion of Indigenous people live in remote or rural areas where there are fewer jobs available, added to this fact is the increase in the working age populations of Indigenous people at twice the rate of the general population and the general limited educational opportunities for these young people.

In fact in 2000, about 265 Indigenous communities (over 32 000 people) have chosen to forgo unemployment benefits in order to work on Community Development Employment Projects. In competing in the job market Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people also have to contend with racist attitudes among non-Aboriginal employers.

#### **4. Real Aborigines live in the outback**

The fact is that Aboriginality cannot be defined by skin colour or percentages of Aboriginal blood. The following definition is used under Commonwealth legislation, “An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives.”

The United Nations Working Group uses the following for Indigenous peoples i.e. in Australia people of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, “Indigenous communities are those which having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories and who preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories and ethnic identity as the basis of their continued existence as peoples in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems:”

#### **5. There is no point on dwelling on the past – what is done is done**

In fact many Indigenous people remain affected by relatively recent experiences to which they were subjected because of their Aboriginality. The policy of ‘Assimilation’ for Aboriginal people who were not “full blood” began in 1910 and continued in different forms until the late 1960’s.

A National Inquiry to be conducted by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) was established by the Federal Attorney General in 1995.

The Bringing Them Home Report published by the Human Rights And Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) in 1997 concluded that, in the period from 1910 to 1970 between 10% and 30% of Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities.

Acknowledgement and validation of these recent aspects of Australia’s history is vital to the understanding of the position of Indigenous people in Australian society today.

#### **6. We did not do these things therefore it’s not our concern**

Some people, including politicians and commentators say non-Indigenous Australians of today should not feel guilty for the sins of the past. This is true but equally today’s Indigenous people should not continue to suffer from past actions because the nation has not yet found ways to overcome them.

Basic human rights and personal opportunities should be available to all Australian people regardless of ethnicity. All non-Indigenous Australians benefit from the dispossession of Indigenous people and so have a responsibility for addressing the disadvantage and discrimination suffered by Indigenous people.

#### **7. Saying “sorry” means we admit our guilt**

No so – an apology is about an acknowledgement of pain. As sorrow is expressed the hurting person is able to accept and forgive. The healing process can begin and a better future for all Australian people can be built. This is not one single act but an ongoing process of sharing history to grow in understanding and respect of each other.

#### **8. Saying “sorry” will cost the Government a lot of money**

All State and Territory governments have said sorry yet in fact no monetary compensations have been paid to date. The Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) has recommended a package of ‘reparations’ which includes limited monetary compensation. This is being successfully implemented in other countries such as New Zealand, Canada and South Africa.

#### **9. There is too much money given to Indigenous affairs**

In fact many specifically Indigenous programs are a substitute for programs provided to the rest of the community who take them for granted. Specific programs have been introduced in recognition of the fact that Indigenous people are the most economically and socially disadvantaged group in Australia.

Housing standards in Indigenous communities are way below acceptable levels and often without basic services of power, water and sewerage, resulting in