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Inquiry into over-incarceration of First Peoples a welcome step

National advocacy organisation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights, ANTaR, today welcomed the Federal Government's announcement of an inquiry into the appalling incarceration levels for First Peoples in Australia.

The inquiry has been tasked to the Australian Law Reform Commission which will examine the factors leading to the over representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the prison system, and consider reforms to reduce that representation.

ANTaR National Director Andrew Meehan said that the announcement is welcome but he emphasised the need to engage with First Peoples representatives on the terms of reference, including to consider extending them to look at prevention of family violence.

He also noted that the inquiry should not hold up taking action on the clear recommendations in the Change the Record Blueprint for Change, and the 339 recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, many of which have not been implemented.

"The over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is nothing short of a national emergency. 25 years ago when the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was undertaken, the rate of incarceration of First Peoples was seven times that of other Australians - it is now 13 times the rate," he said.

He noted that incarceration rates are even worse for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who can expect to be locked up at 26 times the rate of other young people, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who are incarcerated at 30 times the rate of other women.

“No Federal Government can sit back and watch this crisis continue to spiral out of control, as it has for the last 25 years,” he said.

Mr Meehan said ANTaR and many others had been crying out for Federal Government action in this area for years so the inquiry was a positive step in the right direction.

“Law reform is an important part of the picture, but we also need to see a national commitment made, with a goal set to reduce the unacceptable rates of incarceration – it is a national issue requiring urgent federal leadership,” he said.

He noted that positive approaches such as justice reinvestment should be supported to shift the focus away from building more prisons towards prevention, diversion and early intervention.

ANTaR is a foundational member of the Change the Record Campaign and is dedicated solely to supporting the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and working to educate the wider community, shape public opinion, and speak up for justice, rights and respect for Australia's First Peoples.