

Impact of Stolen Generations on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and Communities

The Stolen Generations refers to a dark and painful chapter in Australia's history when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were forcibly removed from their families and communities particularly between 1910 and the 1970's. The primary motivations behind the policy of forced removal were based on misguided notions of assimilation and the belief that Aboriginal cultures were inferior to western cultures. The Stolen Generations had a profound effect on Aboriginal people which are still felt today.

The Stolen Generations

In 1909, the Aborigine Protection Board (the Board) was given authority by the government to control the lives of Aboriginal people. The Board's scope included the power to remove Aboriginal children from their families and communities if the Board deemed, they were being neglected. By 1915, the Board was able to remove children without proving they were being neglected to the court, a power it retained until 1940. After 1940, the Board was renamed the Aboriginal Welfare Board and had to again prove Aboriginal children were 'neglected' or 'uncontrollable' before removing them from their homes. The removal of children by the Aboriginal Welfare Board continued until the end of the 1960s, when the Aboriginal Welfare Board was abolished under the [Aborigines Act \(1969\)](#). These practices were driven by the racist view that Aboriginal children should be assimilated into colonial society. This practice of removing children from their home was particularly targeted at children with fairer skin, with the belief they could be more easily absorbed into colonial society. For Aboriginal people, this was not 'child removal', it was kidnapping.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who were taken, were sent to homes and institutions to be adopted or fostered out to non-Aboriginal families. Many children were forced to act as domestic servants or yard hands in the homes and properties they were taken to, doing unpaid work such as hard farm labour, domestic chores, laundry work, even child minding and caring for the elderly.

For more information about the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the child protection system, see: [History of Aboriginal People and the Child Protection System in NSW](#), and [Who are the Stolen Generations?](#)

“The half-caste is intellectually above the aborigine, and it is the duty of the State that they be given a chance to lead a better life than their mothers. I would not hesitate for one moment to separate any half-caste from its aboriginal mother, no matter how frantic her momentary grief might be at the time. They soon forget their offspring”.

- [James Isdell](#) - Australian politician, [Bringing Them Home Report](#) submission.

Today, some Aboriginal people believe that these practices continue in the current child protection system, due to the disproportionately high number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care (OOHC).

Bringing Them Home Report

On the 11th of May 1995, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) commenced the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their families. [The Bringing Them Home Report](#) was finalised and presented in Parliament on 26 May 1997. The key findings include:

- Nationally, between 1 in 3 and 1 in 10 Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities between 1910 and 1970.
- Indigenous children were placed in institutions, church missions, adopted or fostered and were at risk of physical and sexual abuse.
- Under international law, from 1946 the policies of forcible removal amount to genocide. Policies from 1950, the continuation of distinct laws for Indigenous children, were racially discriminatory.

Despite numerous legal and policy frameworks protecting the cultural rights of Indigenous children, the rate of Aboriginal children in OOHC is almost ten times that of other children and continues to grow. In 1997, Australia was shocked to learn that

Aboriginal children represented one in every five children living in OOHC. Today – nearly 20 years later – they are one in every three (SNAICC, 2024).

The inquiry made [54 recommendations](#) aimed at reparations for the harms of forced removal under the past policies and practices, including:

- Recommendation 3: Reparations be made, consisting of acknowledgments and apologies, guarantees against repetition, and measures of rehabilitation.
- Recommendation 7A: That the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission arrange for a national 'Sorry Day' to be celebrated each year to commemorate the history of forcible removals and its effects.
- Recommendation 9A: That all professionals who work with Indigenous children, families and communities receive in-service training about the history and effects of forcible removal.
- Recommendations 44-53: Are all related to national standards for how Indigenous children should be treated by all bodies that takes legal jurisdiction for them.

Impacts of the Stolen Generations

Each Stolen Generations survivor has their own lived experience about how these policies impacted their lives. For many the denial of family and connection to Country and community has deprived them of their language, their culture, and their sense of identity. Some members of the Stolen Generations have been able to find and reconnect with their family, many have never made it home. Many of the government agencies, religious and welfare institutions responsible for them at the time did not maintain accurate records and for some there are no records available.

The Bringing them Home report found that the consequences of the Stolen Generations had a devastating effect on the children, families, and communities at the time and later in life. [Part 3](#) of The Bringing Them Home Reports provides details the effects that can still be felt by Aboriginal people and their communities today, including:

- The destruction of [cultural links and knowledge](#)
- Loss of [Indigenous identity](#) and sense of belonging
- Loss of [land entitlements](#)

- The trauma of forcible separation from parents
- Intergenerational effects in areas such as [parenting](#), [behavioural problems](#), [use of violence](#), [unresolved grief and trauma](#), and [mental illness](#).

I often used to ask my foster mother who she was, this old lady who would come to the gate, and the answer I always got was, ‘She is some silly old black woman’.

- Confidential evidence 56, Tasmania: man removed 1930s; his grandmother died before he was able to find her. [Bringing them Home Report](#), pg. 184

For more information about the effects of the Stolen Generations, see: [Stolen Generations Demographic Report factsheet](#).

Your Practice

When working with Stolen Generations survivors, their families, and Aboriginal communities in general, it is important to recognise the trauma many people carry, and how this can be reflected in their responses and actions. Triggers for Stolen Generations survivors can include anything that reminds them of their childhood trauma, clinical and institutional environments, any government authority, or language that is used.

It is important to acknowledge the courage, dignity and resilience of Stolen Generations survivors, and Aboriginal communities more broadly. Policies of forced child removal were, and continue to be, resisted by Aboriginal children, families, and communities. The Bringing Them Home reports detailed some of the strategies that families developed to keep their children safely with them. For example, when government authorities patrolled an area, children would often scatter and hide in places designated by their families. Some families fled to isolated places or kept moving ahead of authorities to try and protect their children.

Where possible Aboriginal peoples should be provided the opportunity to work with Aboriginal workers and all workers should have a foundational level of trauma training when working with Aboriginal peoples, especially Stolen Generation survivors.

References

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